

The Aga was the last straw, Sasha thought. Fair play, she admitted its sense of style, that perfect combination of duck egg blue enamel and chrome. She thought that it would look at home in the kitchen, keeping her warm on the coldest day. She was sure that there were people who would enjoy manipulating its multiple ovens and strange hot plates and using it to cook actual food. It's just that she wasn't one of those people.

There are people who would love to live in a renovated farmhouse, with stone flagged floors, original beams, inglenook fireplaces with log burners, stairs that creak and floors that tilt. A house that the estate agent called *Quirky*, with a capital Q. She wasn't one of those people either.

She looked out of the farmhouse window, at the endless rain, and thought that she didn't want a herb garden, or chickens, or to learn how to make compost. What she wanted was out. Because it wasn't just her any more.

It is said that if you put a frog in a pot of water, and slowly bring it to the boil, the frog will die, having sunk into a happy stupor as the water heats, never identifying the moment when pleasure turns into danger. It is a metaphor for the way we are gradually seduced into accepting the unacceptable, one tiny step at a time. Sasha thought *I am that frog*.

She was living in someone else's dream and she couldn't escape. Quite literally. She had no job, no money, no friends, and her family were on the other side of the country and thought she didn't like them. And every night Piers came home and told her how lucky she was, and how much he wanted her to enjoy their wonderful life together.

Plop. The frog is dropped into the pan. Piers was a very attractive and charming man. He had never given a satisfactory explanation of what he did for a living, but it provided a flat in Kensington, a Lexus for days out, and suits that fitted so well that they must have been made for him. Sasha remembered how he came in to the restaurant where she worked, day after day, flirting with her, leaving huge tips and always, always, asking her for a date. Her co-workers said she was crazy to keep turning him down, and maybe she was, but why would someone like him want to go out with a girl from the Welsh Valleys? She supposed that she was pretty enough, if you liked tall and skinny. In the end, she asked him.

“Why do you keep asking me out? We’ve nothing in common, and no one’s going to mix me up with posh Chelsea girls. You can take the girl out of the Valleys, but you can’t take the Valleys out of the girl.”

“That’s why,” he said, and she agreed to a date. Sasha had been swept off her feet, loving the theatre, the opera, the ballet, the exhibitions, the walks in the parks, she saw a side of the city that she had never expected to see, and it was dazzling. Piers was generous, introduced her to all his friends and never, ever, talked down to her. He told her that he loved her energy. He said it lit up the room. The heat under the frog began to rise, but in a good way, like a warm bath.

“Let’s go shopping and get you something fabulous to wear at Covent Garden,” he would say, and they’d hit Regent Street rather than Primark, and he’d wait patiently outside the changing rooms, chatting with the shop assistant until the choice had been made and it was time for a

lovely tea and a glass of bubbly. Sasha had never met a man who thought shopping for women's clothes was a better way to spend a Saturday afternoon than watching football with 12 cans of lager and a load of mates. If his ideas about 'something fabulous to wear at the Covent Garden' were not quite the same as hers, she could live with it. He was paying after all.

Sasha found herself spending more and more nights at Piers's flat. She loved his spacious rooms, overlooking the residents' garden. She hung her new clothes in his wardrobe, and made an effort to get home before him and make the dinner. With the benefit of hindsight, she could see how his expression would change if she suggested a night out with her friends, or a visit to her family. It wasn't as if she was miserable spending time with Piers, so time passed and contact with her old life stretched thinner and thinner, until lots of it broke.

He proposed on a warm spring day in Paris as they sat on the banks of the Seine, watching the tourist boats go by. Of course she said yes.

"Let's get married straight away," he said "I hate long engagements, and all that wedding planning going on for years, and a room full of great uncles we don't recognise, and a cheesy first dance. Let's just have you and me and two witnesses off the street. That's real romance."

In her heart, Sasha had wanted a traditional wedding, first dance, great uncles and all. But the appeal of the two of them, getting married in a bubble of their own *was* romantic. Her mother didn't see it the same way, and she wished her sister had been beside her. The first intimations of steam began to bubble up from the base of the pan, but the frog thought it would cool down

soon.

She carried on working. It was “only” a waitressing job, but Sasha liked talking to people, making sure they were enjoying themselves, being busy, spending time with the chefs and picking up how things were done in a professional kitchen. She had a lot of bounce, learned quickly, and people liked having her around, would take the time to show her the tricks of the trade. Piers said he had enough money for them both, but she liked being able to buy him a present now and again, and there are things no woman wants to ask her husband to pay for. She stopped doing evenings, because that was their time together.

Until Piers saw the advertisement for the farmhouse.

“Look at this!” he said “I could pay the mortgage off here and still have enough money to buy a place in the country...four bedrooms, original features, two acres, outbuildings, kitchen diner... oh Sasha, we could have such a good life somewhere like this... you wouldn't have to work...”

So there she was. She tried to argue. She tried to say that she was happy in London, and even left for a while to go back to Wales. But in the end it was just easier to agree. Piers loved her and he loved the farmhouse and he told her that they could have a family and live there forever, safe from the rest of the world. Wasn't that what everyone wanted? She had magazines full of exactly that lifestyle. Of course it was what she wanted. A house in the country, a rich, handsome, and generous husband and a family of her own.

“Isn't it beautiful my darling?” he would say every morning, looking out over the fields, as Sasha made his breakfast.

“You wait until the babies are born Sasha. Imagine them playing outside in this wonderful place! I'm going to build a tree house next summer.”

Except that it had started feeling like a cage. She hadn't left the house on her own for months. They had no close neighbours. She couldn't drive, and when she asked for lessons, Piers said he would take her wherever she wanted to go. She'd tried the long walk into the nearest village for the WI. She wasn't made welcome. There were no buses. The pot of water was getting very hot, and the frog wondered if it had the strength to leap out, or whether it would be easier just to lie here and float...

Piers drove to the station and got the train into London every morning. If she asked to go with him, there was always a good reason for saying no. The train was going to be busy, he had to work late, there was something she needed to do at home. He started ordering things so she had to be there to sign for them. He asked for more complicated dinners so she had to spend the day preparing food. He thought home-made bread would be lovely, and ordered ingredients and books. Ditto home-made yoghurt, pickles and marmalade. One day, a lorry turned up.

“Where do you want this polytunnel then love?” The driver asked, as his mate started to unload.

When Sasha rang Piers, he was thrilled that it had arrived so quickly, and assumed she would be

too. He spent the evening with a seed catalogue.

“Piers, please. Who's going to plant and look after all this stuff? Are you expecting me to start farming now?”

“Don't be silly darling,” he said “this is only a few vegetables and herbs. You'll enjoy doing it, and think of the lovely food you will be able to make. It will be so exciting eating things we've grown ourselves! We should get chickens, and maybe one day, even a pig...we should think about bees.”

Her despair must have shown.

“Sasha my love, what is it?”

“I don't want chickens Piers. Or a pig, or bees, or to grow vegetables. We used to go out, and see people, and dress up, and have fun. Let's go back to London, I hate it here.”

He never hit her. He didn't have to. He just talked. He told her that she was wrong, that she was so lucky to have a beautiful home, in such a safe and peaceful place, and no worries about money, and to be loved to distraction by him. He told her that he only went to work in horrible, dirty, violent, London to give her these things and to please her. He said that if she wanted to go out, she only had to ask and he would take her, in fact he'd book a table somewhere nice for this weekend, and then we could come home and make babies, and they would be happy forever. But

if she wasn't ready for chickens, that was fine. The frog floated and tried not to think about cool water and lily pads.

“Let's just get the polytunnel going and worry about chickens later.”

By the end of the evening she almost believed that they were happy.

A week later, the Aga arrived, and the installers were booked. Piers was over the moon.

“Every farmhouse kitchen needs an Aga,” he said leafing through a pile of Aga themed cookery books. “We can make anything we want with this.” By which he meant Sasha could make anything he wanted.

The next week Piers had to go to the New York office.

“Which is good in a funny kind of way,” he said “I'll be stuck in New York, so you'll have time to really master the Aga without me here to distract you.”

He left very early the next morning, and the frog gathered all its courage and leapt.

As soon as she knew Piers was on the plane, Sasha cancelled the installers and hit the internet. Then she started making phone calls.

“I have a brand new, four oven electric Aga, duck egg blue, still on its pallet. I need it gone by Wednesday, and I’m only interested in cash.”

The first couple of people she spoke to clearly suspected It was stolen, but she got a buyer and a good price at the third attempt.

Sasha made some more calls, and then carefully wiped the search history from the computer.

By Wednesday lunchtime the Aga was in the back of an anonymous-looking truck and Sasha was carefully counting out a very large pile of used notes.

She asked the driver and his mate where they were going. Because without their help she was in for a long walk.

“Customer in Bristol, ” they said, which was better than she could have hoped.

“Is there room for another one in your truck? I've got a friend in Bristol.”

She had no idea what they made of her strange behaviour, but she had made them laugh while they got the truck packed, so they said yes, They dropped her at a taxi rank by the station and she waved them off. Then she pulled her suitcase into the ticket office and bought a single to somewhere called Cwmcoed.

Two hours later, she knocked at the door of a small terraced house, and when it opened, she threw her arms around the woman who stood there.

“I’ve left Piers. I sold his stupid cooker for a shed-load of cash while he’s in New York. And I’m pregnant.”

“Good stuff. Bring your suitcase in and I’ll put the kettle on.”

The frog shuddered. “Would you mind if I had a cold drink instead?”

