

## **Game Over**

by Ivanka Fear

The box had sat on the shelf since Christmas. Everyone was too busy to take much notice of it throughout the year. Screens took over the minds of Iris' family to the extent that they were nearly oblivious to each other's existence.

Iris and her husband, Tyrone, each on one end of the sofa, had a long list of Netflix series to get through before the holiday movies began next month. They shared the living room with Iris' parents, Clive and Rosemary, who lay in their recliners, laptops on their knees, the former flipping through news headlines, the latter checking out the latest trends in decor. The 'kids' rarely graced them with their presence, cocooned in the basement family room, absorbed in video clips, and posting on social media. Derek and Kelly had an easy time of it, raising their five-year-old son, who amused himself with ipad games. Four generations of tech-savvy, well-educated and very informed, connected individuals inhabited the house.

Iris' eyes flicked from the screen to the bay window where the rain teemed down on a gray Saturday October afternoon. Rivulets of water flowed down the street, and Iris drew her brows together. "Should you check the sump pump? Make sure we don't get flooded?"

Tyrone stayed glued to the screen. "I'm sure it's fine." He rewound to the previous scene, having missed a few seconds of the show. The screen went black.

"What?? You've got to be kidding me!!" Tyrone's voice failed to drown out gasps springing from the easy chairs, and cries of "The internet's down!" from below. He bolted off the sofa. "I'll hook up the generator. We can at least watch T.V."

"No, don't. Why don't we do something else for a change?" Iris suggested. "Together. As a family."

“Like what?” Tyrone stared at his wife as though she’d lost her mind. The family could barely sit together for ten minutes to wolf down a meal, much less agree on a way to pass the time together. “What is there to do without power and the internet?”

Footsteps pounded up the stairs, their son, Derek, heading up the complaints. “What are we supposed to do now? Why aren’t you getting the generator hooked up?”

“Mom thinks we should do something else for a change.”

As six sets of eyes questioned Iris, she scanned the room looking for inspiration. The unopened box she purchased for the family at Christmas caught her attention. “We could play a game.” She rose and plucked the dusty box from the shelf. “How about this one?”

Despite the groans and whines, she set the game on the round, glass coffee table. Removing the cellophane, Iris pulled the lid off the square cardboard box. Unfolding the game board, she commented, “It’s a map of the world. I think the idea is to beat your opponents across.”

Apart from the board, the box held two thick rings, one red and one blue, seven playing pieces, and matchsticks in colours corresponding to the game tokens. An instruction sheet lay folded underneath it all.

Clive and Rosemary extracted themselves from their Lazy Boys and settled on the sofa. “Just like the old days,” Rosemary remarked. “We used to have game nights with our friends when we were young.”

Derek shrugged and grabbed a couple of kitchen chairs for himself and Kelly. “I haven’t played a board game since... well, since I was a kid, I guess.”

Iris’ grandson, Cam, ran his fingers along the board. “What do you press? Nothing’s happening.”

“You have to move the playing pieces across the board yourself,” his dad explained.

“Why?”

“Because... it’s an old-fashioned way to play, that’s why. But it might be fun. Come here,” Derek motioned to the floor beside him. “You and I can play as a team. I’ll show you how it works.” He plopped himself down on the rug, his arm around his son.

Iris unfolded the instruction sheet, and read aloud. “Welcome to the game. Now that you’ve begun, there is no going back. The rules are simple. Each of you must successfully walk across the planet, from start to finish, birth to death, past to future, beginning to end, accumulating points each time you link the global community. No cheating. No shortcuts. Must be played in real time, real life. Technology is forbidden. The game is over when it’s over.” Iris wrinkled her brow. “I don’t understand. There must be more to it.”

Tyrone took the instructions from her. “There’s something on the back.” He turned it over, donned his reading glasses, and read the fine print. “Make your way around the earth. Each right move earns one of your corresponding matchsticks a place inside the blue earth ring. But for every incorrect action, a matchstick must be placed in the red fire ring – the Red Ring of Death.”

“How do we know what a ‘right move’ is?” Kelly leaned over the board, searching for an answer. “There are no spaces on the board. No arrows. I don’t even see the ‘Start’. Nothing.” Tyrone continued reading the rest of the instructions. “Time is of the essence. The clock is ticking. If the game ends before you win, you lose. Failure to win will result in sudden irrevocable death. Ready, set... GO!”

Clive picked up a green Lego-like token. “I’ll start, being the oldest and wisest.” He examined the board. “The objective is to link the global community. If I start here in Toronto, I can go to South America, linking the two continents.”

Clive moved his playing piece as he spoke. The Red Ring of Death lit up, flashing bright and sounding an alarm, as a voice emanated from the plastic. “Incorrect! The jungle of the Darien Gap holds too many dangers. It is impassable. An attempt would be suicide.”

“Oh!” Clive jumped backward, his spine connecting with the back of the sofa. “I didn’t know that. Can’t we fly over it?”

“It says ‘must walk across,’” Iris reminded him.

Everyone stared at the board.

“The world isn’t flat. What if we look at a globe? Maybe that will help,” Rosemary said, heading to the desk and picking up the blue sphere. She scrunched her face as the earth revolved on its axis. “Can we build bridges?” Rosemary placed a gray playing piece on the Bering Strait.

Again, the red ring indicated her answer was incorrect. “No shortcuts! Forfeit a turn.” Derek made an attempt, following up on his grandmother’s suggestion. “Doesn’t it freeze up in the winter?” He placed a white Lego man next to his mother’s token.

A siren blared from the red ring as it lit up. “Incorrect! The currents are too strong. You would be stranded on an ice floe and freeze to death alone.”

“Can we take a boat part of the way?” Kelly asked. She added a blue piece to the Bering Sea.

The red ring vibrated with the shrillness of its sound, and moved across the table toward her, sending her flying off her chair. “Cheater! Cheater! Lose two turns.”

“But…” Tyrone contradicted the Gamemaster and moved his black token next to the others. “If we walk the whole time we’re on the boat, technically speaking, we’re not cheating. We’re following the rules.”

The red light flashed and the warning buzzer shrieked, contradicting Tyrone’s answer. “A ship is a technological advantage. The rules state ‘No technology.’”

Cam picked up a yellow man. “Can I move from here to here?” He slid his token from Toronto down to the state of Florida. “And then… hmm… I don’t know.” A giggle escaped his mouth. “Maybe jump across these small islands?”

For the first time, the blue ring lit up and a musical melody teased their ears, so different from the sound of the Red Ring of Death. “Small moves are acceptable. They lead to big progress. But, the rules state the game must be played in real life, in real time. And time is running out. You need to make your move. Before it’s too late.”

“That’s it!” Iris exclaimed. “We have to move in real life.” She grabbed a coat from the hall closet. “Are you coming?”

“Outside?” Tyrone raised his eyebrows.

“It’s pouring, Mom,” said Derek, shaking his head.

“Can we at least take the car?” Kelly asked.

The red ring indicated that was not an option.

“A little fresh air won’t hurt us. Why, when we were young, we walked everywhere, in all kinds of weather,” said Clive.

Rosemary agreed. “Bundle up, put up your hoods, grab an umbrella. You heard the blue ring – small moves lead to big progress.”

“Are we going on a real-life adventure?” Cam asked.

“You betcha!” Derek ruffled his son’s hair.

Down the deserted street the four generations trod, hands linked, swinging their arms, singing a child’s song. “Row, row, row your boat...”

As they rounded the corner, they joined another family out for a walk in the rain. After greeting each other, they continued together to the main road out of town, picking up a few other family groups along the way.

The sight that greeted them on the two-lane country highway left them standing in shock. “Look, Mom! Everyone’s playing the game!” Cam waved his arms toward the crowd flowing in the same direction.



“What’s going on here?” Tyrone turned to Iris, who shook her head. “Where is everyone going in this weather?” He indicated the darkening clouds overhead.

In response, a bolt of red lightning flashed across the sky.

“It’s climate change,” someone said as they passed. “Global warming is moving across the earth quicker than we realized.”

The crowd quickened its pace as though it could outrun the storm. Iris’ family went with the flow, Cam stomping in puddles that reached his ankles. The singing had long ago been drowned out by the drumming rain.

The movement gradually slowed, a groan sweeping through the mass of people, felt more than heard by the time it reached Iris. “What’s happening?” She tapped the woman ahead of her on the shoulder.

The woman turned around. “They say the road up ahead is gone,” she shouted, to make herself heard to as many people as possible. “Taken out. They can’t get across.”

“Taken out by what?” A collective moan of disappointment rippled past Iris to those who followed. “Do they know what happened?”

“Earthquake!” A disembodied voice shouted.

“Terrorists!” Another answer rolled through the crowd.

“War – we’ve been hit!” A man’s cry carried above murmurs and gasps.

“No, not a bomb. An asteroid!” Someone contradicted him.

As the exodus came to a complete halt, Iris and her family held their arms around each other, forming a small circle.

“Go back! Turn around! Go back!” The group chanted as they began to push each other in an attempt to change direction.

“There’s no going back! It’s against the rules!” Iris cupped her hands and shouted the words repeatedly.

Once she got their attention, a silence crept through the assembly and heads bobbed up and down, showing a general consensus. Slowly, the chanting began again, rising to a crescendo. Only this time, they repeated Iris' words.

Amidst the stalled throng, several people continued shoving through, insisting on going the other direction, not caring whether they knocked over the elderly or the young.

“What do we do now?” Kelly asked. “If we can’t go forward, maybe we should go back.”

Derek hoisted Cam onto his shoulders so he could get a view of what lay beyond the hundreds of heads. “Can you see anything up ahead?”

Cam craned his neck and turned his head from left to right. “A big, wide crack in the road. All the way across. All the way. It doesn’t end.”

As Derek set his son back on the ground, the tolling of the town’s clock tower pierced their ears. Every ten seconds, it tolled, reminding the crowd that time was passing. “Does that mean we lost? The game’s over?” Rosemary’s face fell as her moist eyes moved from one family member to another. “It’s not fair.”

Iris stuck her chin out. “No. The game’s not over until it’s over.” She stood on her tiptoes, scanning the area. “I can’t... see...”

“There’s nothing much to see,” a man behind her shouted. Iris turned and looked up into his face. He was well over six feet tall. “People on the road, a huge abyss ahead. Farms on either side. Oh...and there’s the library.”

The library? Iris had all but forgotten the large new building erected on the outskirts of town many years ago, before ebooks took over print. Telling Tyrone she needed to check something out at the library, she excused herself as she slipped sideways through the drenched crowd.

The librarian stood at her post behind the counter as if expecting her. “Why hello, Iris! I haven’t seen you here for a while.”

“I’m looking for some information,” Iris explained, removing her shoes and hanging her wet jacket on a hook. “Something that moves from the past to the future, beginning to the end, a way to link the global community. The first book written? The most recent? A geography book? A set of rules, maybe?”

“I know exactly what you’re looking for.” The librarian moved through the shelving, Iris following. “Here we go. The Epic of Gilgamesh. Considered to be the first book. There are many similarities to the Bible, including the story of The Flood.” She pointed to the wall of glass, rain pelting the panes, the deluge threatening to seep into the cracks. “We’re lucky to have this. So many books have been banned and burned over time that we’ve lost a part of our past. History has been changed.”

Iris shook her head; it didn’t look old. Surely, the librarian was mistaken. Iris read the back cover. A literary exploration of man’s search for immortality. As Iris opened the book, she noticed a map of the ancient world. “Of course! The world has changed.” She recalled reading something about how at one time, all the continents had been one big continent. He who saw the abyss... The first line resonated with her.

Iris thanked the librarian. As an afterthought, she added, “What a lovely dress you’re wearing.” It wasn’t what she was thinking. The poor woman, plain and slightly overweight, looked ghastly in the red plaid monstrosity that enshrouded her. But, you couldn’t judge a book by its cover.

“Thank you. I was just thinking the same about your dress. It’s beautiful!”

Iris wore her royal blue dress, fitted at the bodice. “Maybe we should switch,” she laughed.



The librarian took her comment seriously and slipped out of her plaid. Changing into the royal blue brought out her eyes and the shape of her figure.

Amazing what a little change can do, Iris thought. She smoothed the red plaid and took the librarian's hand, asking her to join the group assembled outside.

As they met up with the crowd, a series of rumbles echoed through the air. Iris' hands flew to her ears. The clock tower bell continued to toll. Heads turned around to the direction of the noise.

"We're doomed!" Someone in the crowd hollered the words on everyone's mind. "The earth's cracking up!"

Others joined in the surrender, succumbing to defeat.

"No, it's not over! Listen to me!" Iris shouted to the assembly, gesticulating with her arms. "We're already joined!"

"The earth used to be one continent. The global community was already linked! Before the game started," she continued.

"But we're breaking up!" Another voice got the crowd riled up again.

"No!" Iris enlisted her family to shout and draw attention their way. "Listen! Listen! There's a way!"

"We need to remain linked – now and in the future. It's the only way we'll survive. Not just us. But, the only way mankind as a whole will survive."

Cam pointed to the direction where some people had headed earlier. "Shouldn't we go back and get them? Make sure they're okay?"

Heads nodded. Some people turned and went backwards – back for the members of the group who had strayed.

"But the rules..." Tyrone began.

“Need to change,” Iris finished. She led her family back.

Back at the junction of the highway and the street leading into town, the separated group stared at an abyss ahead.

“The road blew up! Right before our eyes. We can’t go back now,” cried one of the women.

“We need to move forward together.” Iris took the woman’s hand in her empty palm.

Following her lead, people linked hands and began the trek to join the larger crowd. No longer static, the crowd had begun to move once again, hands clasped together, a wave of humans intent on continuing forward. When Iris and her family reached the crack in the pavement, they looked from left to right. The fracture in the earth separating them from the people on the other side had no visible start or end, and the watery abyss in between was too huge to traverse.

“It just fell. Right straight across. The lightning hit it when some people went back to get the others.” The tall man pointed at the log wedged from one side of the abyss to the other. One by one, two by two... People helped each other to the other side, the log supporting them as if by magic, bridging the gap.

“Welcome,” voices from across the abyss sang. “That’s quite a big pond between us. We’re glad you could find a way across. We still have a long way to go, though.” As arms reached out to help her family, Iris felt the global link.

“We’re all connected,” she said. “But some things need to change. We’re at risk of breaking the link.”

But it’s not over, Iris thought. Not yet. The game’s not over till it’s over.

And there’s still time to win.