

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

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COUNTRY

F A Y W E L D O N



**A KING PENGUIN
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KING PENGUIN

THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

Born in England and raised in New Zealand, Fay Weldon received an M.A. in Economics and Psychology from St. Andrews University in Scotland, then turned to writing film scripts, plays, short stories, and novels. Her books include *The Cloning of Joanna May*, *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, *The Leader of the Band*, *The Shrapnel Academy*, *Puffball*, and *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (now the film *She-Devil*). She lives in London and in Somerset with her husband and two of her four sons.

THE WAGES OF SIN

O h, the wages of sin!

Natalie Harris sinned, and her husband Harry left for work one fine morning and didn't come back.

The morning was fine only temporarily. You know what those mornings are, just before the rain sets in? Bright and glittery around the edges; altogether too bright for safety, with a pale blue sky arching much too high above, and beyond the arch heaven knows what, God or the Devil. And before you know it black clouds begin to edge up all around the horizon, like muddy water welling from a blocked drain, and close the sky over with cloud, drizzle and depression, and your quivering glimpse of eternity, good or bad, is gone. There's just the bus to catch or the washing-up to get on with. Just such a too-bright morning it was, when Harry Harris left for work and didn't return, leaving Natalie Harris well and truly in the shit, if you'll excuse me.

But well and truly there she was, floundering in the excreta (if the word seems less offensive) the human race spits out behind it as it gallops on in search of profit and diversion. Left holding the baby, what's more—that is to say, the two Harris children, Ben and Alice: not everyone's cup of tea, these two less than innocent mites, and certainly not mine, but Natalie loved them, as mothers love their children, blindly.

It was a Thursday morning. It seemed much like any other. Natalie got up at 7:10. The radio alarm switched

itself on: music and chat came through loud and clear. The Harrises' nice new bungalow, complete with dream kitchen, picture windows and parquet floors, lay in the shadow of the Mendip Mast, that vital, quivery, silver wand which reaches up into the sky, erected by man on the highest spot available, in other words as near as can be to the ethereal god of Telecommunications. And Dunbarton, the Harrises' home, on the outskirts of Eddon Gurney, just eight miles from the Mast and halfway between Wells and Glastonbury, had the full benefit of it.

Harry still lay asleep in the twin bed. He'd been home late the night before. Natalie took twenty minutes washing, dressing, plucking, preening. (The rest of us pull on a pair of jeans and yesterday's sweater: not Natalie.) She let Jax the Alsatian out and Tweeny her little gray cat in. (Cats should be kept in at night: it is brutal to do otherwise, but Natalie didn't know this. How ignorant she was at this stage in her life!) At 7:35 she woke Ben and Alice. They had separate rooms. Alice kept hers tidy and Ben his untidy. At 7:40 she woke Harry and offered him a choice of shirts. (She ironed on Sunday and Wednesday evenings, watching television.) But Harry took his best white silk slimline from the very back of the cupboard and wore that. Natalie was glad when Harry had a shirt, any shirt, on his back. She did not like the texture of his skin. It seemed to her to be too white, too soft, too spotty. They'd been living in the Pipeline Road, Banjul, and there at least, under the African sun, his skin had been brown and tougher and younger.

At 8:35 Harry drove off in his Cortina; Natalie and the children stood on the front porch and waved goodbye. Even Jax the dog sat and stared.

"Don't be late tonight!" said Natalie. "Remember we have people to dinner."

"I'll be back at six-thirty," he said, "on the dot!" and they kissed each other and Harry drove off. How anyone watching would have admired and envied that particular domestic tableau, under the glittery sun.

Mind you, I'm not surprised the Harris household was in trouble. It lived in yet another shadow, being equidistant from the Mendip Mast and Glastonbury Tor. This latter is the solid, ancient hummocky hill which dominates the flatlands in the Somerset Southwest, and from some angles looks like a lady's breast. It's tipped by a crumbling tower, which those who're determined claim looks like that breast's erect nipple. So you could say if you are determined—and many who live round here are—that the Mast was male and the Tor was female: certainly the Mast is modern and the Tor ancient. The Tor transmits as well, if you ask me, though rather fitfully: probably alpha waves from King Arthur's sleeping brain. The great king is buried in the grounds of Glastonbury Abbey, at the foot of the Tor; not dead, they say, but sleeping, to wake in the hour of England's need. And this is it, if you ask me. So the alpha waves have been heating up lately, and he's stirring all right, and what with the Tor transmitting its mystic messages of oneness, allness, wholeness, and so forth, and the Mast streaming out "Dallas," and "Robin Day," it's not surprising the Harris household quivered and shook and broke into little bits. Well, that's about the only excuse I can think of for Harry Harris, who wasn't a bad guy, really. Just panicky about his life and his business, which was failing.

Some said, unkindly, when they heard Harry Harris

hadn't come home but had run off with Miss Eddon Gurney 1978, she with the blonde cloud of hair and the thin lips, how did his wife *know* he hadn't come home? I mean, could she *tell*? And it was true that this ordinary businessman in his Ford Cortina, with his ordinary haircut, suit and tie, this apparently conventional businessman, so conventionally these days into computers, did seem to melt into the background of the village and be what we expect of our neighbors, rather than ourselves—that is to say, to be ordinary, anonymous and under control. He did listen a great deal to Radio 2, however, a station which beams out olden goldies—or is it golden oldies?—and feeds the nostalgic and romantic imagination, daily reviving memories of long-lost youth. This should perhaps have warned Natalie her husband was in love. In love. Ah!

In love with Miss Eddon Gurney 1978. The carnival queen. His secretary. Even village beauties must work, these days.

Picture Natalie. Round face, blonde-haired, pretty as a girl in an early Charlie Chaplin movie, with that same blank look of sexy idiocy on her face. It was as if she was born to go around with subtitles: *Help me, save me. Poor little me.* It was how she had been brought up to look; not her fault. And, as it turned out, when faced by disaster she was in fact competent enough. In fact, by the end of the story—or as much of it as I'm in a position to tell—Natalie was looking less like a heroine and more like a call girl, but that's life, isn't it? Carry on a decade or two, or three, and I daresay she'll look like a little old lady. A little old lady or a little old man, that's where all our futures lie. What does it matter? It's what happens on the way that counts.

And listen, Harry Harris not coming home that evening was at least something *happening*, wasn't it! If he had come home, life would have gone on as per usual forever, Natalie dream-walking, Harry sleepwalking, and that would have been even worse than disaster for both of them. Natalie was lucky. It's not everyone's good fortune to have things *occur* in their lives, just like that, out of the blue. No, usually if you want things to change you have to make them change, and most of us don't want the responsibility. So we do nothing and drift on in unsatisfactory situations, waiting for magic, which doesn't happen.

The saving disaster happens in our heads, of course. Don't tell me you've never imagined your nearest and dearest dead or swallowed up or gone: swum out to sea and not come back, the house burnt down or the Bomb fallen. And imagining it is wanting it. Of course, if it really happened—well, pray God or the Devil it hasn't, it won't—if it does your guilt won't make it easier to bear. That's what I mean by the wages of sin.

Whose sin? Harry's? Natalie's? Natalie, let it be said, was having an affair with a certain Arthur Wandle, an antique dealer in the Somerset market town of Eddon Gurney. Arthur Wandle had a well-situated and prosperous shop which nestled just at the foot of Gurney Castle and was much frequented in the summer by tourists. In the winter business was quieter, and Arthur used to like to spend Tuesdays and Thursdays from November through to March, when his wife Jane was helping out at the Junior School, with whoever it was it happened to be. This year it was Natalie.

Natalie dreamed and sleepwalked into the room behind the antique shop and took off her clothes and let

herself be fucked—if you'll excuse my language. Look, everyone knows the word, even the children; and fuck me, and I'll be fucked, and all fucked up—and she was, you see, Natalie was. I use the word advisedly. What do you want me to say? Made love to? She wasn't. Okay, okay, intercourse took place between her and Arthur and very nice too. I'm just making the point it wasn't love: love would have been far more dangerous. Pow! Wham! Into the lives of the settled love comes like a great cosmic screwdriver lifting off the lid of a pot of paint: and before you know it the lid's left off, the paint's skinned over, and no use to anyone. There's a metaphor for you! Miss Eddon Gurney prised off the top of Harry's paint pot all right: Arthur didn't Natalie's. Natalie's paint just stayed there undisturbed, rich, thick and glorious.

Anyway, when Harry Harris didn't come home Natalie's first thought was, oh, this is all my fault. I have betrayed my husband. Another man has entered in where no other man has any right to be. It's all my fault and I am being punished. But of course it wasn't like that at all. Harry Harris had run off with Miss Eddon Gurney, knowing nothing at all about Natalie's Tuesdays and Thursdays behind the antique shop in Eddon Gurney. And if he had known, I really don't think he would have cared.

Now I don't want you to lose sympathy with either Harry or Natalie, especially Natalie (if only because Harry Harris has already vanished—well, as much as the father of a woman's children can ever be said to vanish from her life) because up till then they both of them had been trying to do the right thing, be serious and responsible people. It's just that life gets so *boring*, doesn't it? And there was a kind of hole where Natalie's heart was sup-

posed to be, the kind that nature abhors, and she would have loved Arthur if only she could, and thus sanctified the relationship. Oh, excuses, excuses! Natalie did wrong. Forgive her. She meets her comeuppance the day our story begins. Let that be enough for you.

Harry Harris ran off leaving his wife living in a dream bungalow mortgaged up to the hilt and beyond, no money in the bank and school fees owing. He left her with no job, unqualified and untrained, and with no experience other than as a businessman's wife and mother of two extremely self-centered children, aged eleven and twelve. Would you wish to be in such a position? And would you not think that any woman married to a man capable of doing such a thing would not perhaps be having an affair with someone *nicer* than her husband? Who was *not* capable of so doing? She was—which meant that Arthur, being nicer, had no intention of deserting or abandoning his wife and running off with Natalie when she became, as it were, free. In other words, she just couldn't win.

But there you are. Women who live by the goodwill of men have no control over their lives, and that's the truth of it.

"What do you mean?" Natalie asked Hilary, the receptionist of Harrix, Harry Harris' firm. "What do you mean he's not in? He left for work early so he'd be back early. We have important people coming for dinner."

"I think I'd better come over, Mrs. Harris," said Hilary, thinking she should break the news gently, face to face. On account of how she didn't think Mr. Harris was going to be there for dinner, no matter how many important people had been asked. And thus she did break the news, and little thanks she got for it.

But we're running ahead of ourselves.

Natalie had rung Harry at the office because all of a sudden she was worried. She was worried because when she drove the children to school that morning the school office had called her in and told her school fees for two terms were outstanding. The school secretary had actually come out to the car when she was dropping Ben and Alice off and asked her to step inside for just a minute—

"If you don't mind, Mrs. Harris." Mrs. Harris did mind. Wouldn't you mind? Mrs. Harris wasn't so different from anyone else—neurotic about money. She never balanced her checkbook and hated going into the bank for fear of what she would find out. And if the phone rang behind the counter when she was there, she jumped, imagining it was her financial misdeeds catching up with her, there and then. Mrs. Harris nevertheless smiled politely, listened to the school secretary's tale of loss and woe, shook her head in apparent sympathy and said—

"My husband's changing secretaries: I expect that's it. Files have gotten muddled, or something. I'll ask him to see to it at once. I'm so sorry you've been inconvenienced."

And later Pauline from the delicatessen rode up on her old-fashioned bicycle with the week's order, and pointed out that the Harrises' account now topped the hundred-pound mark and could she take steps to pay?

"Good heavens, my husband must have overlooked it," Natalie said. "I'll make sure it's seen to, Pauline." By this time Natalie was really put out. Harry, she felt, ought to stand between her and these embarrassments.

But it wasn't until Natalie realized that Harry hadn't even left the usual five-pound note to pay Flora the cleaner that she decided to call him at his office.

Pow! Wham! Oh, the wages of sin.

Only five pounds for four hours' work! It wasn't much. But Harry argued that Flora was only eighteen, was an indifferent cleaner—albeit the best that could be found—and that if she was paid more the market would be spoiled for other employers.

How much do you pay your cleaner? If you have one? Or how much are you paid, if you go out cleaning yourself? I tell you, it's not enough. It can never be enough. For his unkindness, for his blindness, Harry Harris deserves to be unhappy with Miss Eddon Gurney 1978, though I don't suppose he will be. Natalie, having consented to paying Flora the sum of one pound twenty-five pence an hour, was an accessory after the fact, an accomplice, but deserved even worse inasmuch as Flora is, politically and in the feminist sense, her sister, her little helpless sister, living as Flora did in a caravan on the site of the council garbage dump, there where the crows wheel and fly. Flora lived with Bernard, who was unemployed. (Unemployment amongst the rural under-25's is reckoned, currently, at around 60 percent.) Flora's heels were downtrodden: it was bad for her young legs; they bowed outward from the knee. Her diet was bad, too, and her clothes were too thin in cold weather. Amazing, really, how beautiful she managed to be, beneath a halo of black, yellow and green greasy spiked hair, solid with hair gel and spray: like an angel ascending, not ever falling. Even Harry had noticed how lovely she was—but not enough not to cheat her: one pound twenty-five pence the hour for washing the flecks of hair from the basin after Harry had shaved; for picking up the Harris children's toys; for wiping the grease from where it accumulated behind the mixer taps of the kitchen sink—you know, that rather sexy dip at the start of the stem?

The wages of sin! Harry sinned; Natalie paid. So did Flora.

Now the section of countryside between the Mendip Mast and Glastonbury Tor is extremely pretty—though, as I say, troubled by the mystic forces I speak of. There are winding country lanes and sudden hills, and sheep graze and cottages nestle and villages drowse, even though around every other bend there's a concrete bunker, a tin barn, a quarry and an intensive pig-breeding unit. The fact is, the heart of the country's rotten: I really believe it is. No wonder Harry sinned. How can a people be better than its rulers? If the rulers put profit and practicality first, how can the people be expected to do better? Take Harry: now the way out of Harry's financial difficulties was flight. The most practical person to fly with was not his wife but Miss Eddon Gurney, who was single, childless and unafraid. Of course he went. It was profitable and practical to do so. Wouldn't you, in his shoes? No? Look at it this way: Harry and Natalie slept together, ate together, had children together; but that was the limit of their intimacy. They exchanged information, not feelings or ideas.

"I've booked the car in for servicing, darling," she'd say, over breakfast.

"Thank you, darling," he'd say, and off he'd go to work. Anyone can talk like that. Why Natalie rather than another? Why stay?

They were helpful and polite to each other, and never quarreled. Why bother? They might even have believed they were happy together, had Harry not discovered himself really quite interested in what Marion Hopfoot, voted carnival queen in 1978, had to say, which was that she was in love with him, and Natalie not discovered herself

in Arthur's arms, rolling off the Victorian chaise longue on to the rather nice rag rug before the little coal fire in the iron grate, intertwined and even more wonderfully energetic on the floor than the sofa. Ah, conversation. Oh, love. Ah, sex. Oh, again, consequences!

The consequence was:

"I'd better come over," Hilary, Harry's receptionist, said, and so she did. She had a pale face and a domed forehead and too-large pop eyes, and a practical manner. Many a man would have followed her to the ends of the earth, had she chosen to go. She knew exactly what to do, and when and how, and would never have dreamed of going. A wonderful gift! She had beautiful breasts too—white energetic domes, cherry-tipped, and these gave her confidence in the world—but Hilary hardly enters the story, she or her chest. She is merely the bearer of bad news, standing in Natalie's dream kitchen—oak-veneered cupboards, brass fittings, wall oven and ceramic hob, and a black-and-white tiled floor recently rather badly washed by Flora. Hilary's waist was tightly belted, the better to show off her figure, and her frog eyes were moist with pity and indignation mixed.

The wages of sin!

"The staff hasn't been paid for two weeks," said Miss Hilary Frog. "Mr. Harris said it was just a cash-flow problem but most of us in computers know where that kind of thing leads. It's a high-risk business, isn't it? If you haven't got the capital, that is—and Mr. Harris hadn't. My boyfriend's father is a friend of the bank manager and he told us that Harrix was seriously underfunded. Then, when he didn't turn up today, and Marion neither—"

"Marion?" Natalie had never heard her name before.

Truly. It's most often a bolt from the blue which strikes down a good wife and mother, especially when she's economically dependent. Don't let me frighten you—unless it's into getting a training and a job. You know what the statistics for these things are? You know how many marriages end in divorce? One in three. And a recent survey shows that a woman's standard of living falls on average by 42 percent after divorce, and a man's actually rises . . . Enough!

"Marion?"

"Marion Hopfoot," said Hilary. "She's his secretary. He's been seeing a lot of her. That is to say, not just in office hours, which would be natural, but after hours as well. Well, you must have known. Oh. No? Oh dear! But Marion told us it was all okay, you knew all about it and didn't mind. And one of the fellers told me you and that antique dealer up by the Castle—but that's none of my business. Well, every marriage is different, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," said Natalie.

"But this morning, when Mr. Harris didn't turn up, and Marion didn't either, we got to wondering and one of the technicians called her home and Marion's mother answered. She said Marion had left a note saying she was running off to Spain with Harry Harris. And it must be true because she'd taken her passport. So everyone reckoned that was that. They called the police because of the unpaid wages."

"Police?" said Natalie.

"And then *you* rang, Mrs. Harris. So I reckon that's that. Sixteen people out of a job, if you don't count Marion Hopfoot."

Natalie sat on the kitchen table, idly swinging her left leg and thinking of Hilary's frog eyes and that Hilary's

bosom was over the top, but unable to take in all that much of what Hilary actually said. She felt like a cobra which has swallowed a donkey and finds it too large to digest and too awkward to spit out. She couldn't somehow make sense of anything.

"There's hardly any petrol in the car," she observed.

"So?" inquired Hilary. Hilary was having to do without two weeks' wages and none at all in lieu of notice, and felt that Natalie was not the only one with troubles. "And I've got no money and Harry doesn't believe in credit cards—not for me, anyhow—though he's got a gold American Express. There's enough petrol for this afternoon, I expect, but how am I going to get the children to school tomorrow morning?"

How indeed? Of such boring problems are tragedies made. Natalie, the perfect mother, the tidy dresser, she who turned up at school every morning with her stockings unladdered and her face properly made up and a pretty little scarf around her neck, bringing out the color of her somewhat blank blue eyes—I tell you, little Mrs. Tippy-toes was sleepwalking, poor thing, and had been for fifteen years or so, ever since she married Harry Harris. Only now she suddenly perceived she might not be able to get to the school gates *at all*. And this, it suddenly came to her, might well be the wages of sin. The first thing a woman who suffers misfortune feels is *guilty*. *My fault*, she is convinced. *Something I did wrong*. She may well be right.

And Natalie had a great deal to be guilty about, when you come to think of it. Consider her sins that very day.

The sin of lust: as envisaged with Arthur. She was looking forward to it. It's as bad to contemplate it as to do it.