THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

FAY WELDON

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THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

THE WAGES OF SIN

Oh, 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 supposed 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 Hoptoot, 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.

The sin of envy: envying Flora's looks, and making her dust an already dusted sideboard. Mahogany—veneered, but sealed with polyurethane and very, very shiny.

The sin of pride: despising Hilary because she had a too-large bosom (by Natalie's standards) and frog eyes.

The sin of sloth: not bothering to know what was going on in Harry's life, heart and bank account; asking Pauline to deliver her groceries, instead of collecting them herself. Pauline was older than Natalie and had a harder life.

The sin of gluttony: buying smoked salmon for dinner. Scottish, not Canadian. Twice the price, and pity the poor fish! Followed up by chicken. Horrid white stringy stuff, from a mangy bird which lived and died in a box.

The sin of avarice: underpaying Flora on Harry's instructions. The less she paid Flora, the more pairs of shoes Natalie could buy. Natalie loved shoes: they were her extravagance. She owned eighteen pairs, and fifteen of these had high heels, so when the hard times came she had only three for getting about in, and two of those were sandals.

And the special sin of splashing the poor.

You may not know about this one: it's a modern sin. It's what happens, say, on the School Run. If you're driving the children to school on a rainy day and you pass too close to the mothers and children who don't have cars, who have to walk, and you drench them with the mud of your passing. We are here in this world to be scavengers: to pick up the dregs and dust of creation and save what's possible and render it back to the Almighty, not to hang about carelessly, adding to the mud, the trouble and confusion. We are meant to be salvagers, not wreckers.

Natalie had sinned badly that morning, taking her children to school (private, of course), driving too close to Sonia, an unsupported mother, who, with Edwina (four), Bess (five) and Teresa (six), filed along the busy road in the rain, as close in to the prickly hedge as they could, for fear of sudden death on their way to a school (not private, of course) which all three children hated, but which the law obliged them to attend. Natalie simply didn't see them: she didn't even notice they were there.

Alice, Natalie's little girl, noticed. Alice said, "It's raining. Why don't we give them a lift?"

Ben said, "You're so stupid, Alice. We don't give lifts to people like that."

But Natalie just said, peering through a misty windshield, which neither wipers nor defogger at full blast would clear: "Do be quiet, children," without actually hearing a word they were saying. In her defense, it was a nasty morning for driving, but that is not the kind of excuse the Prime Mover likes to hear. He, after all, sends the rain. He worked in his mysterious way, and Sonia helped. She looked after the retreating five-door Volvo Estate. (Of course it was a Volvo. What else?) Jax the Alsatian, the Harrises' dog, looked back at Sonia and grinned. Even the dogs of the rich live better than do the new poor. The dogs ride; the poor walk, or go by bus. There are very few buses anymore in the countryside. The rich don't take them. That means buses don't, on the whole, make profits. So they have to be subsidized. But who's going to subsidize them? The rich, who don't need them or use them? Ho, ho!

"God rot her," said Sonia aloud. "Rich bitch!" Sonia had been born a nice round pleasant thing. Her life and times had turned her sour, so now she could deliver a curse or two, effectively. God heard. God sent his pun-

ishment on Natalie. Or was it the Devil? He forgave her other sins, but got her for this one. Natalie committed the sin of carelessly splashing Sonia. Sonia cursed her. Misfortune fell on Natalie. Cause and effect? Surely not. Let's just say coincidence, and remind ourselves that the trouble at Harrix and in the Harris household long predated this particular event. Except of course God may send his punishments retrospectively. We may all of us be being punished *now* for sins we are about to commit. Time may not be as linear as we suppose.

"What have I done?" asked Natalie, pretty white sinful hand, used to exploring Arthur's chest hairs, to her mouth. She addressed the universe as much as Hilary.

Well, as I say, the wages of sin! There's no telling. The day Natalie Harris splashed Sonia with mud was the day Harry Harris left for work in the morning and did not return home, ever. Some sins are obviously worse than others.

THE PLEASURES OF ADULTERY

Pleasure I said, pleasure I meant. Adulterate means to spoil, to pollute. It also contains the sense of dilution by poison. It's dropping a spot of cochineal into the white icing sugar and water mix and watching the color spread—great streaks of vile red circling out with the first stir from that single central drop, gradually easing and diluting as you work into bland universal pink. So what (to change the metaphor, while keeping it domestic) if it's like a blind tumbling right off its roller when you tug, bringing down with it in a cloud of dust every concept of honor, dignity, integrity, fidelity or trust you ever had! So what if you can't raise the blind, and have to stay in the dark forever! It's worth it. That's what I think.

Rot you, I said to Natalie. Rich bitch! Rot you, I, Sonia, cursed her. And her world fell down, clatter, clatter, clatter. Good!

There, I have blown my cover. The "I" who speaks to you is Sonia. In my quest for sanity and self-improvement I do my docile best, as instructed by my psychiatrist, to objectivize myself and see myself as others see me—that is to say in the third person—when and as I enter into Natalie's story. In Chapter One I reckon I just about succeeded. But "The Pleasures of Adultery" have clearly been too much for me: in my excitement I have revealed all. Well, let's get on. The tale is about Natalie, not me. A writer's exercise in ego reduction! I do apologize for the "Good!" at the end of the previous paragraph. One

should wish no one harm. But it's what I felt, so there it stays, unedited.

The first thing Natalie did after Hilary left in dudgeon was go see Arthur. It was her afternoon for visiting, anyway. Thursday. Arthur's wife Jane went to one of the local schools to "hear reading" every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon between 2 and 3:30. Not much time, you might think, for Natalie and Arthur to do what they liked to do and still have time for a little talk about this and that, and a courtship ritual or two. A murmur in the other's ear about life, love, happiness, remorse, the state of their own and the other's soul. That, if you ask me, is the main pleasure of adultery. Not the sex, but the painful, pleasurable examination of the psyche, that acknowledgment of sin which accompanies the sex. Marriage declines into What's for dinner? Who's going to pay this month's mortgage? Is buggery okay for you? When all we really want to think about is God and eternity. Guilt brings us nearer to God. Natalie, Mrs. Tippy-toes, trit-trotting on her little high heels into Arthur's shop (she wore absurd shoes for someone living in the country: as if her natural habitat was Bond Street), was doing her best to get nearer to God.

You believe that? You'll believe anything.

Arthur specialized in old English oak and Oriental antiquities: a peculiar mixture but one which worked well enough in Eddon Gurney. His wife Jane dusted and cleaned up, and when Arthur was out kept shop. Sometimes, when she was really angry and upset by Arthur, she would drop and break something and there'd be a few hundred pounds down the drain. Arthur looked on it as a kind of tax he had to pay to the God of Marriage. He fucked, she dropped. It was inevitable. He sighed but did not scold. It kept the

balance between them. Jane would clean the little back room behind the shop; smooth the covers on the chaise longue, shake out the pillows, vacuum and straighten the rag rug, polish the iron grate in which, in winter, Arthur liked to keep a coal fire going. It was in this room that Arthur did his books and added up his tax, and where he retired when customers came in he couldn't stand the look of. Jane had a pretty good idea this was where he brought his women, but she cleaned and dusted it all the same.

Jane and Arthur lived above the shop. They had an excellent view of the stone walls of Gurney Castle. Jane was a little, pretty, anxious woman: she jumped if anything startled her. She was too thin: she looked as if a harsh word would make her snap in the middle. Arthur was tall, big, broad, serene, handsome. A villain: of course he was a villain: but his chest was large enough for at least two or three troubled women to lay their heads upon—it seemed wasted otherwise. What could Jane do? She couldn't not go out, ever, for fear of what Arthur would do in her absence. She did try for many years to leave the house unexpectedly, to keep altering her shopping-visiting routine, as those who live in danger of kidnapping do, but a pattern kept emerging even in her unpredictability. Or else it was that Arthur could read her mind? She'd say on a Wednesday evening she was going to stay overnight with her mother, who needed cheering up. On Thursday lunchtime she'd come back and there was just that *feel* in Arthur's back room: a butterfly hair clip under the rag rug: once a pair of bikini pants stuffed in a Venetian punch bowl—

"They must have been there when I bought it—overpriced anyway," was all Arthur said.

So really she gave up. She took up the Tuesday and Thursday work at the school—unpaid of course, but someone has to hear the beginners, and the teacher sure as hell doesn't have the time, what with thirty or so little faces staring up in every class; and Jane and Arthur had no children of their own, and Jane loved children, loved them—and took some comfort from the fact that Arthur always made love to her on Tuesday and Thursday nights. Sex begets more sex. Made love, I said, not fucked. Arthur loved his wife. Otherwise he might not have bothered to torment her so and she'd have been an altogether plumper and younger-looking woman, who warmed her hands by the fire and laid her head on Arthur's chest. Jane wondered who it was who visited. She had thought it might be Natalie Harris but when Natalie asked her and Arthur to dinner at Dunbarton, out of the blue, she decided it couldn't be. If she was Arthur's secret woman she wouldn't have the nerve.

Wouldn't she just!

Anyway, that Thursday afternoon Natalie went into Arthur's shop in quite a state. Now Natalie was very much alone in the world. Both her parents were dead. Her father had been in the Air Force: he'd been forty when she was born, her mother thirty-five. The family had moved from one air-force base to another throughout the world. Her father had died of bone cancer: nothing to do, the authorities swore, with the fact that he was on the maintenance side of the air-force business, and his speciality the nuclear-missile-carrying capacity of conventional aircraft. And God knows what his fingers had dabbled in since 1946, or what warning bells and flashing red lights he had ignored in the pursuance of his duty.

Be that as it may, he was dead by fifty-five and his

wife died of throat cancer fairly soon after. Natalie seemed healthy enough; just parentless and friendless. She'd been to twelve schools throughout her childhood, and childhood friends just hadn't had a chance to stick. She was halfway through secretarial college when she was sent for work experience to temp at Harrix, then assembling not home computers but digital watches, in East London. Harry took her out a few times and then proposed, and she accepted. It had not even been a good secretarial college. Natalie could arrange flowers and man the front office, but she couldn't take shorthand or type. Or was it wouldn't? She was bright as a button, pretty as a picture and just plain stunned: hit hard on the head by loss and loneliness. If now, unloved by Harry, she laid her head on Arthur's chest, who was to blame her? Not me: all I blame her for is splashing me on the way to school that morning. That I do find hard to forgive. Even orphans should take a look at the world outside and notice what's going on.

"I suppose *you* can't pay my wages?" Hilary had asked that Thursday morning when the wages of sin announced their intention of getting paid, and Natalie had shaken her head. How? Hilary had looked around the dream kitchen, and slid her foot over the parquet floor, and raised her eyebrows, just a little.

"It's not just your bad news," observed Hilary. "It's all our bad news. Sixteen of us working up there at Harrix, not counting Marion Hopfoot, who never does a stroke anyway, and no wages for two weeks. Some of the men with mortgages! And if this job goes, where are any of us going to find another one? You know what it's like, around here."

Natalie pondered.

Natalie said, presently, "The last thing Harry said to me this morning was that he'd see me at six-thirty. So I'm just going to carry on as usual, and at six-thirty this evening he'll turn up, and explain everything."

"You are a fool!" Hilary had banged on a kitchen cupboard as she spoke, and the cups and plates inside trembled. "Of course he's not coming back. The petty cash is empty. I rang the bank: he went round to collect the wages all right, first thing, and he had to argue and fight for them, from what I hear; then he just disappeared. He's gone. Done a bunk."

"There's no need to get so excited," said Natalie. "If the bank's proving so difficult, he's probably changed to another. My husband is always changing banks. In fact I expect that's where he's gone. To Bath, or Bristol. He'll be back!"

"You're mad!" said Hilary, banging away, bosom bouncing. "We had a half-a-million-pound order coming in, and he borrowed on the strength of it, and then the order didn't come through. No bank's going to look at him after that. Mrs. Harris, I repeat, your husband has *done a bunk.*"

"Um," said Natalie politely, and Hilary had left, without so much as being offered a cup of anything. Natalie had run out of instant coffee. Not surprising. These days it costs one pound ninety-five pence the jar. Monstrous! How hard it is to keep the mind off minor irritations even when major disasters threaten. Natalie bathed, changed into her best slip and panties, and walked all the way up to Arthur's to save petrol. But somehow not even the walk relaxed her.

"Nat-Nat," said Arthur, drawing the unusually stiff-limbed but silkily clad Natalie into his back room. "It's

been a long long time since Tuesday." His suit was agreeably warm, and smelled of Antiquax, the best polish available for real wood. Natalie laid her head briefly upon his chest, in a kind of obeisance to past pleasures. But then, surprising herself as much as him, she drew back and away.

"I can't," she said.

"Time of the month?" he asked. "I don't mind." He didn't either, unlike Harry, whom menstruation made nervous.

"It's not that," she said. "Just perhaps we shouldn't go on doing this."

"Is it having Jane and me coming to dinner tonight? Is that the matter?" he asked. "You mustn't worry. I won't give you away."

"That's nothing to do with it," said Natalie. And it wasn't, though it should have been. How many meals have *you* taken, do you think, when there's been something going on between your partner and A. N. Other that you haven't known about? Don't to this day? What winkings, glimmerings and nudgings? Doesn't bear thinking about. Could quite put you off your food.

"What, then? Hubby hot on the trail?" He was concerned. He had kind, thoughtful eyes, for a villain. He made love beautifully, gently, commandingly, unerringly and altogether without doubt, as it were, as to his capacity for his pleasure or his partner's—though always, of course, in something of a hurry in case his wife came back.

"I don't think so," said Natalie, but she did wonder. Perhaps Harry had found out, taken offense, taken off. What then? But she couldn't admit it; nor could she understand the phenomenon of her sexual reluctance. As well take off her clothes now for Arthur as take them off

in Wells Cathedral in the middle of Sunday Service! She was afflicted, in fact, by superstitious dread. If she put another foot wrong the ice might crack; she'd go through, go under, drown. It might indeed be true that Harry was no more, that six-thirty would come and go and he not appear: not a trace of him left behind—except the children, that is. She must reassemble herself in her own head as an ordinary, faithful wife to whom untoward events did not occur. Then surely everything would be all right. Oh yes, wife and mother Natalie, neat and clean, looking out of the mirror back at her complacent self. Smile for the camera, Natalie! Good Natalie! Keep your fingers crossed, not to mention your legs!

You wonder how I know all this? What goes on in one woman's head goes pretty much on in another's, or else why can doctors (male) ask their ritual questions about hormonal levels—viz.: Do you feel murderous *before* your period or after your period, madam?—and feel safe in prescribing dangerous drugs according to your answer?

We are all of us part of one bleeding body, if you ask me.

So Natalie went home from Arthur's with her hair unruffled and her skirt unlifted, leaving Arthur puzzled, but at least able to get on with filling in his tax forms. And as it happened Jane came back from school almost as soon as she'd arrived, the teachers having called a one-day strike in the furtherance of a pay claim, and ventured to surprise her husband in the back room. But she found him just sitting there, all innocence.

Whew!

"I'm mad," Jane told herself. "Paranoid. I need treatment. Why do I have these neurotic fantasies that my husband's being unfaithful to me? It must be something

to do with my relationship with my father." She went to group therapy on Monday evenings. Arthur had a WAEADA meeting at the same time. He was a leading member, along with his friend Angus, of the West Avon Estate Agents, Dealers and Auctioneers.

Unfaithful! What an absurd word—a concept, not the description of an act. Yet it's the concept that does the hurting, not the deed itself. Does infidelity as such matter? Jane going around breaking plates matters; Jane's hair going gray before its time matters; Natalie not caring about the way she makes Jane break plates matters; the way both women use Arthur to reinforce their view of themselves matters. But Natalie leaning her head against Arthur's Antiquax-impregnated jacket and receiving comfort—that matters too, righting scales, and so does the excitement and the thrill of adultery—they *matter.* They're wonderful. Doesn't Natalie's pleasure somehow make up for Jane's grief?

No wonder I, Sonia, am shut up in a madhouse waiting, even as I write, for an injection to stop me twitching and shouting. Trying to establish a moral framework for our existence, to decide exactly who to blame for what, and why, is enough to drive a sane woman mad, and a mad one even madder. In the meantime just accept that though I'm diagnosed as both insane and dangerous, and am a convicted arsonist, my intentions are of the best. My search after truth is absolute. In the telling of this story I am bending over backwards to be fair to absolutely everyone.

So, the wages of sin and the pleasures of adultery now discussed if not quite settled, let's get on with the story.

I'll try and keep out of it, I promise you, except in the third person.

Natalie didn't tell the children anything about the rumor that their father had run off with a beauty queen. She was not that kind of mother. Now me, I used to tell my children everything, because there was no one else to tell and I'm a blabbermouth. This may be part of the reason they've taken the children away from me. People think kids ought to be spared the truth: it really upsets them when they're not. Though I don't see why the mere fact of their childhood should earn them this special concession. What happens happens; and when the bailiffs come what's the use of telling the children it's the rat-catcher? The television goes and the rats stay, and the kids are the first to notice. But that's another story.

What Natalie did, on the way home from Coombe Barrow School, was to pass me, Sonia, filing home with my three little girls, Teresa, Bess and Edwina. And she actually stopped to give us a lift. Too late for me to lift the curse, of course, but better than nothing.

Young Ben was horrified at his mother's act of kindness. Young Ben, at twelve, looked like his father, admired his father and made a special effort to be like his father. He had really enjoyed life in the Gambia, where Harrix had operated when he was small. But then his father had packed up and come home rather suddenly: it doesn't do in some countries to leave too many bills unpaid. Ben had really appreciated swimming pools and servants and the sense of superiority that being white gives a child. (It had just made his mother feel too hot and absurdly pink and sweaty.) Alice had been rather more in favor of coming home. Alice was a softie: she'd wept at the sight of flies crawling over babies' eyes.

"They're not *like* us," Ben would say. "They don't *feel* it. Do shut up, Alice." But she hadn't. Now, back in England, she wept at the thought of battery hens, though she went on eating chicken. What it came down to was that Alice would weep at anything. Some will, some won't. Ben was right: she was a softie.

Now picture the scene, as I try to, impartially. (Practice looking in, my psychiatrist says, on your own life. Not looking out. See yourself as others see you!) Teresa, Bess and Edwina piled into the back seat next to Ben and Alice, and Sonia eased her pneumatic bulk in next to Natalie. Sonia didn't eat more than anyone else. Honestly. It was just depression and unhappiness that made her blow up. (I know what he's going to say even before he says it. "Blow up?" my shrink will say. "Interesting you should use that word. Perhaps what you're talking about is not depression after all, not unhappiness, but rage." Too bad!) Right or wrong, and be that as it may, Sonia, once an eight-stone stripling, was now a twelve-stone bubble. Now let's overhear the conversation.

"This *is* good of you," said Sonia, trying not to sound sarcastic. "I suppose the dog is all right with the children?" Jax, who usually looked steadfastly out of the back of the car, had turned his head to look at the invaders of his territory and was baring his teeth.

"Perfectly all right," said Natalie, her eyes on the road.

"He's baring his teeth," observed Sonia.

"That's only his smile," said Natalie, wondering why she had bothered to pick up Sonia. That "the underpri-