

**One Size Fits All
by Fay Weldon**



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*Fay Weldon was born in 1931 and moved from New Zealand to England as a teenager. After a spell in advertising (she coined the slogan Go To Work On An Egg), she became one of Britain's most famous feminist writers. She was first published in 1967 and since then has written many novels (including *The Life and Loves of A She Devil*), five collections of short stories (the latest – “*Nothing to Wear and Nowhere to Hide*”), an autobiography (*Auto Da Fay*), as well as many dramas for TV, stage and radio. Fay is married, has four sons and lives in Dorset.*

Ruth Downie



Ruth is 49 and is a librarian from Milton Keynes. A big fan of Fay Weldon, Ruth enjoys writing and has written a novel based in Roman times. She also enjoys gardening, archaeology and singing in a blues band.

ONE SIZE FITS ALL : FAY WELDON

THE TROUBLE WAS IT DIDN'T. One size did not fit all. People hoped it would, and talked and acted as if it did, but it just didn't. There were always people left out of the loop and she, Ursula, would always be one of them. Fate had presented her with literal evidence of this painful truth on her 28th birthday, when she was ten years into her marriage, and in the accessories department of Bergdorf Goodman, a very select store on Fifth Avenue, New York. There had been a particularly lovely belt on sale, soft Italian leather fastened with an elaborate hand- made silver buckle. The label said *One Size Fits All*. Ursula put the belt around her waist and the ends didn't meet, let alone leave any extra trim to be cut away. The label lied.

"One size fits all regular people", she had realized on that day, "but I am not regular, I do not *belong*. This belt is a symbol of both my strength and my discontent. I do not fit in, I never will. I am an outcast, a size 12, in a city where the lean, glossy- haired, well-exercised women who inhabit it think a size 6 is vast."

Then she'd looked at the price tag. \$1735 dollars. That was absurd. The buckle might be a work of art but it was still just a belt. She went back to the hotel and told her husband David about it, and he said that American women were a different shape to European women, broad shoulders and wide ribcages but with narrow waists and hips, so you'd expect belts on the whole to be shorter than in Europe, where the women tended to be pear shaped. David was in the fashion business.

"You should have bought it," David said, "If you liked it. At that price they'd have made you one up especially. We have more than enough money to spend and it is your birthday." But she couldn't see the point. Better save the money. One day they might be penniless again.

That must have been how long, seventeen, eighteen years ago? Now, aged 44, sat in a state of terror in the departure lounge of Bristol Airport. She was waiting for a flight to Milan, where she would join David for the fashion shows. She was flying economy – why waste money – and had rashly told the girl at check-in that she suffered from fear of flying, expecting sympathy, and the girl had just given her a look which said 'God, you are so pathetic.' It was the One Size Fits All syndrome again: if you weren't like everyone else and drew attention to that fact you were despised.

Her fear of flying, she told friends, was not irrational but on the contrary. It was *not* to be afraid which was peculiar. Those machines were heavier than air: you could not trust them to stay aloft. Her experiences of aircraft had not been good. She'd taken her first flight when she was eighteen as an art student, going on a traumatic family holiday to the Canaries. By the end of the two weeks her parents were no longer together, and had flown home separately. After that there had been marriage to David and babies, and no money, and nowhere to fly to anyway, and then when she was 21 her best friend Allie had died in an air crash. If now she was reluctant to board an aircraft who could be surprised?

For 27 stubborn but satisfactory years she had never gone anywhere by air. But now she had been made anxious, upset, undermined by others, so that the fear of flying to Milan was suddenly less than the fear of what might happen if she didn't. The instructions on the board which until now had said '*Wait in Lounge*' changed to '*Delayed 30 mins.*' There was a rustle of impatience around her, but Ursula was glad. Thirty minutes more life.

She tried to relax her body, un-tense her neck, remember the skills of her yoga class. She realised she had been holding her breath, which didn't help, and now tried to breathe regularly and deeply. What had it been like for Allie, when the flight had plunged downwards? She couldn't get that out of her head. Did you scream? Could you breathe? Ursula had taken in Allie's two small children and brought them up as hers and David's own: relatives usually did that but there were none. So excuse her if she didn't choose to fly. *One-size-fits-all* need not apply. If she saw the check-in girl she might start talking loudly about air crashes. She felt belligerent.

She didn't want to be the one the belt didn't fit. She didn't want to be the reluctant flyer, the one the check-out girl sneers at for a coward and a neurotic. She didn't want to be the one who thought \$1,735 was too much to pay for a belt, when there was more than enough money to go round. She wanted to be brave and generous, the kind of person who didn't feel frightened when she saw a banking aircraft against a city sky scape, who wasn't mean with other people's money, who was in fact like other people. "Poor David," people said, and Ursula knew they said it, "having to put up with a wife like her" because he'd gone and married her when he could have chosen a one-size-fits-all wife, someone more given to personal adornment, someone fashionable, who loved parties and didn't loathe caterers, who didn't wear an artist's smock and make faces at photographers, and helped her husband on in his career.' There were enough women around like that, everyone knew, bright and beautiful and available, ready to wind long arms and legs around any rich, successful man and snap him up.

"All those beautiful women he meets," they'd say, in their one-size-fits-all voices. "The most beautiful women in the world. And still he sticks with her."

"But I don't want you to be like anyone else," said David, if ever Ursula agitated. "I only like you." By 'like' he meant 'love.' She knew that.

A voice regretted that the flight had been delayed. There had been technical trouble with the incoming aircraft. Oh yes, thanks very much. Very reassuring. The thirty minutes was now up to fifty.

They had been married since they were nineteen, and both at art school in Cardiff. He was doing fashion and fabric, she was doing fine art. Now he provided fabrics for all the big fashion houses, was on first name terms with everyone from Donatella to Jean Paul. While David flew about the world growing rich she had four children, two their own and two Allie's, now all grown and gone, and painted portraits in the studio in the garden. She would drop her paint brushes and go by boat and train to be with David when she could, but more and more often she couldn't. Things moved so fast, these days, or perhaps she moved a little more slowly. Her subjects came to her, she didn't have to go to them.

The time they'd been in New York they'd got there in a cruise ship (boats were bad enough – think of the Titanic; size did not guarantee safety- but certainly better than aircraft.) The Paris shows were a doddle these days, thanks to Eurostar - though she had to take tranquilisers for the tunnel part of the journey- and Italy was manageable thanks to the train, but you could forget Hong Kong or Australasia or the new markets opening up in China. David had to go on his own. And he went a lot.

“I think you’re out of your mind,” her mother would say. “Just face the fear, get over it. It’s crippling your life. A man like that, with a bank balance like that could have any woman in the world, and you let him go off on his own!”

“David’s not like that,” was all she’d say. She wouldn’t add ‘he loves me,’ because her mother would just laugh at her. Men! You could trust them no further than you could throw them. Ursula’s mother knew that for a fact and Ursula should know that too. Ursula’s father had followed his fancy where it led him and that was mostly into other women’s beds, and when Ursula was eighteen and on a family holiday Ursula’s mother had finally had enough. Had her daughter forgotten all that?

“David has to go out to work,” she never said to her mother, “and he adores the thrill and fantasy and neuroses of the fashion world, but all he really wants to do in the world is lie in bed beside me where it’s warm and soft, and I quite like painting pictures but it’s the same for me, what we want most in all the world and ever will is each other.”

“Tell me another,” her mother would only say, so why try and explain. Ursula’s mother was a one-size-fits-all person; all men are villains, don’t trust the police, don’t believe your teachers, life itself is a conspiracy against the living.

“I know a good hypnotist,” her mother had said lately. “He specialises in fear of flying. How many times do I have to say this? You need to get out there to be with David. He’s good looking, he’s charming, he’s hetero in a gay world and you’re a fool and growing older.”

Ursula had tried, or gone through the motions of trying. She’d been to counsellors, hypnotists, even been to customer confidence classes run by British Airways and come away more terrified than ever. Seeing the instrument panels had not reassured her one bit. All those winking lights and thousands of little things to go wrong – worse than not knowing, shutting your eyes.

She didn’t have to get on the plane. She had her overnight bag with her. All she had to do was go back through security – they let you do that - and get in a taxi and go home to put herself out of her misery. *60 minutes delay*, the board now said. She was angry with herself and with her friend Frances, whose fault this mainly was. Frances had frightened her. For the first time in her life Ursula lacked trust; Ursula doubted. She was reduced to checking up on David. It had been seedy and horrible and new.

Frances, a fashion journalist, had been dropping hints about Lola Hassenburg, David’s assistant, for the last few months. “But she’s so pretty,” Frances said. “All that red hair and that bosom draping all over his desk. It’s silicone, but men don’t seem to mind. You’ve got to get rid of her.”

“Look,” said Ursula, finally, “David gets to work with all the top models. I am not in competition with them, how could I be? They’re more like race horses than human beings, they’re a really odd shape, they have spotty backs. There’s more to a human being than looks. To him they’re just more colleagues. It’s the same with Lola. She’s a brilliant seamstress and she can read David’s mind and he likes her and she’s very pretty but she’s thick as two planks, has a whiny voice, and he’s got nothing to talk to her about outside the workshop.” “It’s not talking I’m worrying about,” said Frances. “You are the nicest person in the world but I wish you knew how to look after yourself.”

And then just before Milan David had called her and said why didn't she fly out to be with him, there would be a lot of old friends turning up and Ursula had said no she couldn't. But it was strange of him to ask, because suggesting his wife flew anywhere was absurd. She'd called the workshop where they were working late and asked to speak to Lola and someone there said Lola had just flown off to Milan, and then 'woops, sorry!' She called David and said which old friends, give them her love, and had asked casually if Lola was going to be there and he'd said no. So she said well have a good time, see you back home on Thursday, and had called the airport straight away and found a flight to Milan via Schipol. And now she sat in the departure lounge, waiting. And her breathing was all wrong again and palms were sweaty with fear, and she was wondering if Lola and David were booked into the same room, and she needed to find out.

The interesting thing about fear of flying was what exactly it was you were frightened of. She did not mind death one bit. She had brought up four children and painted some good portraits and loved a husband and that was enough. She would hate the crashing, falling, fearful bit Allie had been through, of course, but she was getting older, David would marry again – she would see that as a compliment – he might even have more children and spread his genes a little more widely. They were good genes. The world deserved them. It was not death she had ever feared, it was what would happen when she got to her destination. What would happen on the Canary Isles, what would happen to Allie's children when Allie got to where she was fated to go, what would happen if she went places with David. It wasn't the journey she dreaded it was the arriving. She'd told herself she was the kind of person who didn't fly, who had been brought up in a background where there was no money to fly, flying was what other people did, holidays were what other people took, she was the one size fits all person whom the belt didn't fit, but none of that was true.

What she worried about was what would happen if the plane didn't crash, if she didn't die, if she had to live without David because David was with someone else, like Lola Hassenburg, red hair all over the pillow.

What she saw as trust and faith was folly, and her mother tried to tell her so and Frances too and she wouldn't face it. And if she got on this plane NOW she would finally have to. Of course her palms were sweaty. And now the notice board began to change violently and the *90 mins. delay* was running up numbers and changed to *Now Boarding* and the voice said another aircraft had been flown in from Heathrow and was actually at the gate. And they would soon be on their way. It was a friendly, reassuring voice.

The girl from the check-in desk passed her on the way to the gate, where she would now collect boarding cards, and paused by Ursula and said "You know, we're all more likely to die on the way to the airport than on the flight itself. Don't worry." And Ursula got to her feet.

What happens next? Over to you...

RUTH DOWNIE'S ENDING TO: ONE SIZE FITS ALL

She fastened the seat belt straight away. A card propped in front of her promised a life jacket under the seat. "One-size-fits-all," no doubt. Hardly reassuring. Throughout the safety demonstration the girl next to her sat engrossed in a fat paperback: the sort that was full of betrayal and suspicion, dissecting human misery for public entertainment. Stifling an impulse to snatch it out of the girl's hands and urge her to listen, Ursula tried to imagine herself on a peaceful beach at sunset. Long breakers rolling in with a steady, inexorable rhythm.

The girl had kicked off her shoes. She was wearing pink ankle socks. Lola, Lolita... thought Ursula to the sound of the waves, and suddenly the noise around her got worse and the runway was thundering past the windows. And then it wasn't.

Ursula, still breathing in and out with the waves, looked out and thought:

David must see this all the time. Watching a void opening up between the familiar and the place where you are now. Or perhaps he doesn't notice any more.

Lola wouldn't notice either. Lola wasn't afraid of flying.

How many people had overheard the "woops, sony"? How many people had understood it? Everyone except her, Ursula, the unsuitable wife, exception to the "One-size-fits-all" rule. How many people knew and what did they know?

She jumped as the back of her seat juddered, and then heard the click of tables being lowered. Other people, fellow-survivors of car journeys to the airport, were settling down for the flight.

It was dark by the time she reached the hotel, and it was raining, and she let the taxi drive off down the wet street before it struck her that she didn't know where to go next. But it didn't matter: she saw Lola's red hair through the doorway of the dining room. Heard David's voice rise to the climax of a story, and then the laughter.

She was thinking, they're not alone, then, when she was conscious of someone approaching. She withdrew before he could offer a table for one.

The group of diners could be seen from across the street and yes, some of them were old friends. And yes, Lola was sitting next to David and no, there was no obvious intimacy. And yes, it was ridiculous and pathetic to be standing under a dripping café awning spying on your husband while your shoes leaked and your overnight bag made your shoulder ache and your mother's voice murmured in your head, What did you expect? Of course they won 'I be giving anything away. Not in froitz of all these people.

Ursula groped inside her bag for her phone and stabbed numbers with cold fingers. Moments later she saw David and Lola both look at his pocket, then he flipped open his phone, stared at it, and excused himself from the table.

When he returned she could see him explaining something. She could see it very clearly, because she was now only a few steps away, confident that the people on the other side of the glass could not see out into the darkness of the street.

There was movement around the table. People were shuffling about. Shifting chairs. Making space. Lola remained still, one retaining hand on David's sleeve, looking up at him as if waiting for instructions.

David glanced at his watch and sat down again. Lola said something to him. Ursula, unable to lip-read and condemned to validate her lie about still being in the taxi by wandering about outside for another ten minutes, had no idea what she was watching.

Her eventual entrance set off ripples of how-lovely-to-see-you and what-a surprise and more chair shuffling, and as she sank into the place they had made for her — not next to David — she felt guilty and dirty and wet and wondered if she was the only one who was acting.

As the waiter filled her glass she leaned across and said to Lola, “I didn’t think you were coming?”

“Last-minute change of plan,” said the girl, so coolly that it could have been true. Or, murmured Frances’ voice, well-rehearsed.

Lola’s earrings glittered in the candlelight. Lola frowned while pushing back her shining red hair, as if it were a burden to be so beautiful. It occurred to Ursula that Lola’s voice didn’t sound as whiny over dinner as it did in the workshop.

You ‘ve got to get rid of her, said Frances. It didn’t matter, Ursula realised, what Lola was or was not doing with David. It wasn’t their relationship that was causing the damage. It was the way Ursula looked at it.

David took her upstairs to unpack straight after dinner. She found herself inspecting the contents of the wardrobe and counting the toothbrushes, and feeling the new and unpleasant sensation of shame.

When she emerged from the bathroom David said, “I didn’t think you would come.”

“Why did you ask me?”

“Because I wanted you here,” he said, with irrefutable logic.

Was it some sort of test, she wondered? A sort of flow chart? If wife says yes, welcome wife. If wife says no, sleep with assistant.

She was being ridiculous. His request might have been a carefully casual attempt to help her over her fear of flying.

By the time they went to bed she had almost convinced herself that there was nothing wrong. Until as they lay silently, not touching, he said quietly across the dark space between them,

“Help me. Please.”

Carefully, without moving, Ursula said into the void, “I can’t. And I won’t share. You have to make this decision by yourself”

She travelled home early and alone, barely noticing the flight. She did not want to look like a pathetic wife clinging onto her husband.

On Thursday as she drove to the airport to meet him, she thought of him still up there somewhere in the sky. Bizarrely, she had never worried about David flying before. But now she was conscious of the distance between them. Of all the things that might go horribly wrong.

As she was locking the car her phone rang.

“So,” said her mother’s voice, “How was the trip?”

“Fine.”

“I told you you could do it.”

“You were right.”

“And how’s David?”

“Fine,” Ursula assured her.

Fine was a good word. A “One-size-fits-all” word that pretended to cover everything, even when it didn’t. “Everything’s absolutely fine,” she said.

She could have said, I am disillusioned and ashamed and afraid, but fine was easier. She could have said, My husband is coming home to tell me his decision, but fine was easier than inviting outrage and I told you so and requests for details.

She put the phone away. A plane roared into the air, its fuselage proclaiming Easy/et in orange letters. Flight was like a good marriage, she thought. It happened all the time, but when you looked at all the components separately — air, steel, fuel - you couldn’t work out how. So when it ended in disaster, you shouldn’t be surprised. But people always were.

Above her, a glittering Alitalia jet was screaming out of the sky towards the runway.

Any moment now, Ursula thought, I shall know.