

# MY LOVE HAS DIRTY FINGERNAILS

JOHN UPDIKE

*Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction*

# **My Love Has Dirty Fingernails**

*John Updike*

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# Introduction

## **“My Love Has Dirty Fingernails”** by John Updike

The roles of therapist and patient are not tightly scripted. In many respects, psychotherapy changes with each new relationship. Like jazz musicians, psychotherapists must be capable of improvising, gracefully. Much of the work of psychotherapy consists of exploring the unique ways in which patients respond to the complexities and ambiguities woven into the therapeutic interaction.

In “My Love Has Dirty Fingernails” the therapist pulls together the unconscious themes of the session with a transference interpretation. But the interpretation is overly theoretical and too lengthy—an attempt to “convince” the patient. The story masterfully recreates the uncertainties and power struggles, and the emotional atmosphere, of a psychotherapy in which a central question is: Who is seducing whom?

# My Love Has Dirty Fingernails

*John Updike*

The man stood up when the woman entered the room, or, to be exact, was standing behind his desk when she opened the door. She closed the door behind her. The room was square and furnished in a strange cool manner, midway between a home (the pale-detailed Japanese prints on the wall, the thick carpet whose blue seemed a peculiarly intense shade of silence, the black slab sofa with its single prism-shaped pillow of Airfoam) and an office, which it was, though no instruments or books were on view. It would have been difficult to imagine the people who could appropriately inhabit this room, were they not already here. The man and woman both were impeccably groomed. The woman wore a gray linen suit, with white shoes and a white pocket- book, her silvery blond hair done up tightly in a French roll. She never wore a hat. Today she wore no gloves. The man wore a summer suit of a gray slightly lighter than the woman's, though perhaps it was merely that he stood nearer the light of the window. In this window, like the square muzzle of a dragon pinched beneath the sash, an air conditioner purred, a little fiercely. Venetian blinds dimmed the light, which, since this side of the building faced away from the sun, was already refracted. The man had a full head of half-gray hair, rather wavy, and scrupulously brushed, a

touch vainly, so that a lock overhung his forehead, as if he were a youth. The woman had guessed he was about ten years older than she. In addition to the possibility of vanity, she read into this casually overhanging forelock a suggestion of fatigue—it was afternoon; he had already listened to so much—and an itch to apologize, to excuse herself, scratched her throat and made her limbs bristle with girlish nervousness. He waited to sit down until she had done so; and even such a small concession to her sex opened a window in the wall of impersonality between them. She peeked through and was struck by the fact that he seemed neither handsome nor ugly. She did not know what to make of it, or what she was expected to make. His face, foreshortened downward, looked heavy and petulant. It lifted, and innocent expectation seemed to fill it. The customary flutter of panic seized her. Both bare hands squeezed the pocketbook. The purring of the air conditioner threatened to drown her first words. She felt the lack in the room of the smell of a flower; in her own home the sills were crowded with potted plants.

“I saw him only once this week,” she said at last. Out of polite habit she waited for a reply, then remembered that there was no politeness here, and forced herself to go on alone. “At a party. We spoke a little; I began the conversation. It seemed so unnatural to me that we shouldn’t even speak. When I did go up to him, he seemed very pleased, and talked to me about things like cars and children. He asked me what I was doing these days, and I told him, ‘Nothing.’ He would have talked to me longer, but I walked away. I

couldn't take it. It wasn't his voice so much, it was his smile; when we were. . . seeing each other, I used to think that there was a smile only I could bring out in him, a big grin whenever he saw me that lit up his whole face and showed all his crooked teeth. There it was, when I walked up to him, that same happy smile, as if in all these months . . . nothing had changed."

She looked at the catch on her purse and decided she had begun badly. The man's disapproval was as real to her as the sound of the air conditioner. It flowed toward her, enveloped her in gray coolness, and she wondered if it was wrong of her to feel it, wrong of her to desire his approval. She tried to lift her face as if she were not flirting. In another room she would have known herself to be considered a beautiful woman. Here beauty ceased to exist, and she was disarmed, realizing how much she depended on it for protection and concealment. She wondered if she should try to express this. "He sees through me," she said. "It's what made him so wonderful then, and what makes him so terrible now. He knows me. I can't hide behind my face when he smiles, and he seems to be forgiving me, forgiving me for not coming to him even though . . . I can't."

The man readjusted himself in the chair with a quickness that she took for a sign of impatience. She believed she had an honest gift for saying what he did not want to hear. She tried to say something that, in its frankness and confusion, would please him. "I'm suppressing," she said. "He did say one thing that if he hadn't been my lover he wouldn't have said. He looked down

at my dress and asked me, in this shy voice, 'Did you put that on just to hurt me?' It was so *unfair*, it made me a little angry. I only have so many dresses, and I can't throw out all the ones that. . . that I wore when I was seeing him."

"Describe the dress."

When he did speak, the level of his interest often seemed to her disappointingly low. "Oh," she said, "an orangey-brown one, with stripes and a round neckline. A summer dress. He used to say I looked like a farm girl in it."

"Yes." He cut her short with a flipping gesture of his hand; his occasional rudeness startled her, since she could not imagine he had learned it from any book. She found herself, lately, afraid for him; he seemed too naive and blunt. She felt him in constant danger of doing something incorrect. Once she had a piano teacher who, in performing scales with her side by side on the bench, made a mistake. She had never forgotten it, and never learned the piano. But as always she inspected his responses conscientiously, for a clue. She had reverted, in their conversations, again and again to this rural fantasy, as if, being so plainly a fantasy, it necessarily contained an explanation of her misery. Perhaps he was, with this appearance of merely male impatience, trying to head her into acknowledgment that she was too eager to dive to the depths. His effort insofar as it was visible, seemed rather to direct her attention to what was not obvious about the obvious. He asked, "Have you



ever worn the dress here?”

How strange of him! “To see you?” She tried to remember, saw herself parking the car, Thursday after Thursday, locking the door, feeding the meter, walking down the sunny city street of bakeries and tailor shops and dentists’ signs, entering the dour vestibule of his building, and with its metal wall-sheathing stamped with fleurs-de-lis, seeing the shadow of her gloved hand reach to darken his bell. . . . “No. I don’t think so.”

“Do you have any thoughts as to why not?”

“There’s nothing profound about it. It’s a casual dress. It’s young. It’s not the identity a woman comes to the city in. I don’t come in just to see you; I buy things, I visit people, sometimes I meet Harold afterward for a drink and we have dinner and go to a movie. Do you want me to talk about how I feel in the city?” She was suddenly full of feelings about herself in the city, graceful, urgent feelings of sunlight and release that she was sure explained a great deal about her.

He insisted, “Yet you wore this quite informal dress to a dinner party last weekend?”

“It was a party of our *friends*. It’s summer in the suburbs. The dress is simple. It’s not *shabby*.

“When you picked it to wear to this party where you knew he would see

you, did you remember his special fondness for it?”

She wondered if he wasn't overdirecting her. She was sure he shouldn't. "I don't remember," she said, realizing, with a flash of impatience, that he would make too much of this. "You think I did."

He smiled his guarded, gentle smile and shrugged. "Tell me about clothes."

"Just anything? You want me to free-associate about clothes in general?"

"What comes to your mind."

The air conditioner flooded her silence with its constant zealous syllable. Time was pouring through her and she was wasting her session. "Well, he"—it was queer, how her mind, set free, flew like a magnet to this pronoun—"was quite funny about my clothes. He thought I overdressed and used to kid me about what an expensive wife I'd make. It wasn't true, really; I sew quite well, and make a lot of my things, while Nancy wears these quiet clothes from R.H. Stearns that are really quite expensive. I suppose you could say my clothes were a fetish with him; he'd bury his face in them after I'd taken them off, and in making love sometimes he'd bring them back, so they'd get all tangled up between us." She stared at him defiantly, rather than blush. He was immobile, smiling the lightest of listening smiles, his brushed hair silvered by the window light. "Once I remember, when we were both in the city together, I took him shopping with me, thinking he'd like it, but he didn't.

The salesgirls didn't know quite who he was, a brother or a husband or what, and he acted just like a man—you know, restless and embarrassed. In a way, I liked his reacting that way, because one of my fears about him, when I was thinking of him as somebody I owned, was that he might be effeminate. Not on the surface so much as down deep. I mean, he had this passive streak. He had a way of making me come to him without actually asking." She felt she was journeying in the listening mind opposite her and had come to a narrow place; she tried to retreat. What had she begun with? Clothes. "He was quite lazy about his own clothes. Do you want to hear about *his* clothes, or just *my* clothes? Next thing, I'll be talking about the children's clothes." She permitted herself to giggle.

He didn't respond, and to punish him she went ahead with the topic that she knew annoyed him. "He was sloppy. Even dressed up, the collars of his shirts looked unbuttoned, and he wore things until they fell apart. I remember, toward the end, after we had tried to break it off and I hadn't seen him for several weeks, he came to the house to see how I was for a minute, and I ran my hand under his shirt and my fingers went through a hole in his T-shirt. It just killed me, I had to have him, and we went upstairs. I can't describe it very well, but something about the idea of this man, who had just as much money as the rest of us, with this big hole in his undershirt, it made me weak. I suppose there was something mothering about it, but it felt the opposite, as if his dressing so carelessly made him strong, strong in a way that

I wasn't. I've always felt I had to pay great attention to my appearance. I suppose it's insecurity. And then in lovemaking, I'd sometimes notice—is this too terrible, shall I stop?—I'd notice that his fingernails were dirty."

"Did you like that?"

"I don't know. It was just something I'd notice."

"Did you like the idea of being caressed by dirty hands?"

"They were *his* hands."

She had sat bolt upright, and his silence, having the quality of a man's pain, hurt her. She tried to make it up to him. "You mean, did I like being—what's the word, I've suppressed it—debased? But isn't that a sort of womanly thing that everybody has, a little? Do you think I have it too much?"

The man reshifted his weight in the chair and his hands moved in the air diagrammatically; a restrained agitation possessed his presence like a soft gust passing over a silver pond. "I think there are several things working here," he said. "On the one hand you have this aggressiveness toward the man—you go up to him at parties, you drag him on shopping expeditions that make him uncomfortable, you go to bed with him, you've just suggested, on your initiative rather than his." She sat shocked. It hadn't been like that. Had it?

The man went on, running one hand through his hair so that the

youthful lock, recoiling, fell farther over his forehead. “Even now, when the affair is supposedly buried, you continue to court him by wearing a dress that had a special meaning for him.”

“I’ve explained about the dress.”

“Then there is this dimension, which we keep touching on, of his crooked teeth, of his being effeminate, feeble in tatters; of your being in comparison healthy and masterful. In the midst of an embrace you discover a hole in his undershirt. It confirms your suspicion that he is disintegrating, that you are destroying him. So that, by way of *repair* in a sense, you take him to bed.”

“But he was *fine* in bed.”

“At the same time you have these notions of ‘womanliness.’ You feel guilty at being the dynamic party; hence your rather doctrinaire slavishness, your need to observe that his fingernails are dirty. Also in this there is something of earth, of your feelings about dirt, earth, the country versus the city, the natural versus the unnatural. The city, the artificial, represents life to you; earth is death. This man, this unbuttoned, unwashed man who comes to you in the country and is out of his element shopping with you in the city, is of the earth. By conquering him, by entangling him in your clothes, you subdue your own death; more exactly, you pass through it, and become a farm girl, an earth-girl, who has survived dying. These are some of my impressions. It is

along these lines, I think, that we need more work.”

She felt sorry for him. There it was, he had made his little Thursday effort, and it was very pretty and clever, and used most of the strands, but it didn’t hold her; she escaped. Shyly she glanced at the air conditioner and asked, “Could that be turned lower? I can hardly hear you.”

He seemed surprised, rose awkwardly, and turned it off. She giggled again. “I’m just being masterful.” He returned to his chair and glanced at his watch. Street noises—a bus shifting gears, a woman in heels walking rapidly—entered the room through the new silence at the window, and diluted its unreal air. “Can’t earth,” she asked, “mean life as much as death?”

He shrugged, displeased with himself. “In this sort of language, opposites can mean the same thing.”

“If that’s what I saw in him, what did he see in me?”

“I feel you fishing for a compliment.”

“I’m not, I’m *not* fishing. I don’t want compliments from you, I want the truth. I need help. I’m ridiculously unhappy, and I want to know why, and I don’t feel you’re telling me. I feel we’re at crosspurposes.”

“Can you elaborate on this?”

“Do you really want me to?”

He had become totally still his chair, rigid—she brushed away the impression—as if with fright.

“Well”—she returned her eyes to the brass catch of her purse, where there was a mute focus that gave her leverage to lift herself—“when I came to you, I’d got the idea from somewhere that by this time something would have happened between us, that I, in some sort of way, perfectly controlled and safe, would have . . . fallen in love with you.” She looked up for help, and saw none. She went on, in a voice that, since the silencing of the air conditioner, seemed harsh and blatant to her. “I don’t feel that’s happened. What’s worse—I might as well say it, it’s a waste of Harold’s money if I keep anything back—I feel the opposite has happened. I keep getting the feeling that you’ve fallen in love with me.” Now she hurried. “So I feel tender toward you, and want to protect you, and pretend not to reject you, and it gets in the way of everything. You put me into the position where a woman can’t be honest, or weak, or herself. You make me be strategic, and ashamed of what I feel toward Paul, because it bothers you. There. That’s the first time today either of us has dared mention his name. You’re jealous. I pity you. At least, in a minute or two—I saw you look at your watch—I can go out into the street, and go buy a cheesecake or something at the bakery, and get into the car and drive through the traffic over the bridge; at least I loved somebody who loved me, no matter how silly you make the reasons for it seem. But you—I can’t picture you ever getting out of this room or getting drunk, or making love, or

needing a bath, or anything. I'm sorry." She had expected, after this outburst, that she would have to cry, but she found herself staring wide-eyed at the man, whose own eyes—it must have been the watery light from the window—looked strained.

He shifted lazily in the chair and spread his hands on the glass top of his desk. "One of the arresting things about you," he said, "is your insistence on protecting men."

"But I wasn't *like* that with *him*. I mean, I knew I was giving him something he needed, but I did feel protected. I felt like nothing when I was with him, like the—center of a circle."

"Yes." He looked at his watch, and his nostrils dilated with the beginnings of a sigh. "Well." He stood and made worried eyebrows. A little off guard, she stood a fraction of a second later. "Next Thursday?" he asked.

"I'm sure you're right," she said, turning at the door to smile; it was a big countryish smile, regretful at the edges. The white of it matched, he noticed with an interior decorator's eye, her hair, her suit, and the white of her pocketbook and her shoes. "I *am* neurotic."

She closed the door. The sigh that he had begun while she was in the room seemed to have been suspended until she had left. He was winning, it was happening; but he was weary. Alone, in a soundless psychic motion like the hemispherical protest of a bubble, he subsided into the tranquil surface of



the furniture.