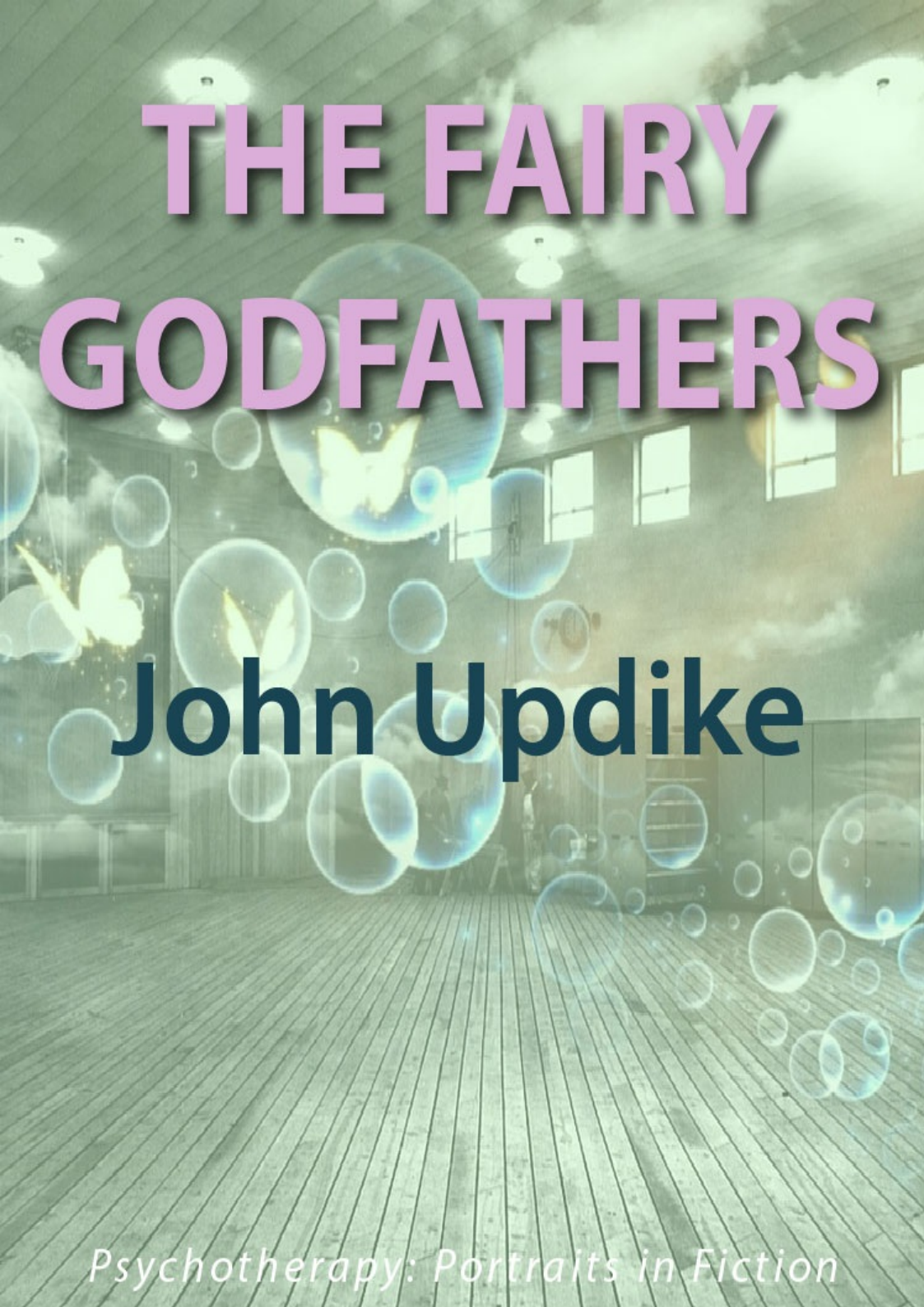
THE FAIRY GODFATHERS
John Updike
Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction

The Fairy Godfathers

John Updike

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Introduction

"The Fairy Godfathers" by John Updike

Patients cast their therapists into diverse and contradictory roles—parent, guide, mediator, healer, friend, confessor, provocateur, spy, voyeur, teacher, guru, advocate, conscience, moralist. Whatever role psychotherapists are assigned, or assume for themselves, their influence is felt between sessions and long after termination; patients create and hang on to multipurpose images of the therapeutic relationship. Sometimes seen as approving, sometimes seen as forbidding, the felt presence of the therapist, in reality and fantasy, shapes patients' perceptions and may give them a tool to use in their relations with others. "The Fairy Godfathers" portrays just how pervasive therapists' influence can become.

The Fairy Godfathers

John Updike

"Oh, Pumpkin," Tod would say. "Nobody likes us."

"That's not quite true," she would answer, her lips going cloudy in that way they had when she thought.

They were lovers, so the smallest gesture of hers flooded his attention, making his blood heavy. He knew exactly whom she meant. He objected, "But they're paid to."

"I think they would anyway," she answered, again after thought. She added, "Oz *loves* you."

"He doesn't love me, he just thinks that my self-hatred is slightly excessive."

"He loves you."

Oz was his psychiatrist. Rhadamanthus was hers. Tod had met Rhadamanthus but once, in the grim avocado hall outside his office. Pumpkin had gone in, as usual, flustered and harried, self-doubting and guilty, and had emerged flushed and smoothed and cheerful. Behind her, on this one occasion, loomed a shadow, but a shadow Tod could no more contemplate

than he could look directly into the sun. He knew that, via her discourse, he dwelt, session after session, within this shadow, and as he took the man's unenthusiastically offered hand Tod had the strange sensation of reaching out and touching, in a sense, himself.

After her next session, Pumpkin said, "He wondered why you wouldn't look him in the eye."

"I couldn't. He's too wonderful."

"He thinks *you're* wonderful."

"The hell he does."

"He does. He loves what you're doing for me."

"I'm ruining your life."

"He thinks my life was very neurotic and I'm incredibly stupid to grieve the way I do."

"Life is grief," Tod said, tired of this conversation.

"He thinks my life was very neurotic," Pumpkin told him, "and I'm incredibly stupid to grieve."

"She repeats herself," Tod told Oz. Oz rustled in his chair and touched the fingertips of his right hand to his right temple. His every gesture, however small, won Tod's full attention. "That doesn't seem to me so very bad," the

psychiatrist said, with the casual power of delivery attainable at only the highest, thinnest altitude of wisdom. It was like golf on the moon; even a chip shot sailed for miles. Oz's smile was a celestial event. "You spend so much of your own energy"—he smiled—"avoiding repeating yourself."

Tod wondered why Oz was so insistently Pumpkin's champion. Through the tangle of his patient's words, Oz seemed to see an ideal Pumpkin glowing. They looked rather alike: broad pale faces, silver hair, eyes the no-color of platinum. Unearthly personalities. Whereas Rhadamanthus, in Tod's sense of him, was subterranean in essence: there was something muddy and hearty and dark and directive about the man. Pumpkin would return from her sessions as from a cave, blinking and reborn. Whereas Tod descended from a session with Oz giddy and aerated, his blood full of bubbles, his brain intoxicated by its refreshened power to fantasize and hope. Oz was, Tod flattered himself, more purely Freudian than Rhadamanthus.

"Oz says," he would say, "I shouldn't mind your repeating yourself."

"Rhadamanthus says," was her answer, "I don't repeat myself. At least he's never noticed it."

"You trust him to hear you the first time," Tod theorized. "He's realer to you than I am. You repeat yourself with me because you doubt that I'm there."

"Where?"

“In the world your head makes. Don’t be sad. Freud says I’m not really real to anybody.” It was seldom out of Tod’s mind that his name in German was the word for death. He had been forty before this had really sunk in.

In those days, their circumstances were reduced. He lived in a room in a city, and she would visit him. From the fourth-floor landing he would look down, having rung the buzzer of admission, and see her hand suddenly alight, like a butterfly in forest depths, on the stair railing far below. As she ascended, there was something sinister and inexorable in the way her hand gripped the bannister in steady upwards hops. After the second-floor landing, her entire arm became visible—in fur or tweeds, in cotton sleeve or bare, depending on the season and at the turn of the third landing she would gaze upward and smile, her face broad and luminous and lunar. She would be coming from a session with Rhadamanthus, and as he embraced her on the fourth-floor landing Tod could feel in the smoothness of her cheeks and the strength of her arms and the cloudy hunger of her lips the recent infusion of the wizard’s blessing. She would go into her meagre room and kick off her shoes and tell him of the session.

“He was good,” she would say, judiciously, as if each week she tasted a different wine.

“Did he say you should go back to Roger?”

“Of course not. He thinks that would be terribly neurotic. Why do you

even ask? You're projecting. You want me to go back. Does Oz want me to go back, so you can go back? He hates me."

"He loves you. He says you've done wonders for my masculinity."

"So would weight-lifting."

He paused to laugh, then continued to grope after the shadow of himself that lived in the magic cave of her sessions with Rhadamanthus. He flitted about in there, he felt, as a being semi-sublime, finer even than any of the approbation Pumpkin reported. "He thinks," she would say, wearily, "one of my problems is I've gone from one extreme to the other. You sound just utterly lovely to him, in the way you treat me, your children, Lulu. . ."

The mention of Lulu did bad things to him. "I am not utterly lovely," he protested. "I can be quite cruel. Here, I'll show you." And he seized Pumpkin's bare foot as it reposed before him and twisted until she screamed and fell to the floor with a thump.

"I think it was her foot I chose," Tod told Oz the next Tuesday, "rather than twisting her arm or pulling her hair, say, because her feet are especially freighted for me with erotic import. The first time I was vividly conscious of wanting to, you know, *have* her, I had dropped over at their house on a Saturday afternoon to return a set of ratchet wrenches of Roger's I had borrowed, and while I was standing there in the hall she came up from the cellar in bare feet. I thought to myself. Goes into the cellar barefoot—that's

great. The only other woman I knew who went barefoot everywhere was my wife. Lulu even plays tennis barefoot, and leaves little toe marks all over the clay. Then, about Pumpkin, at these meetings of the Recorder Society she would wear those dumb sort of wooden sandals that are supposed to be good for your arches, and during the rests of the tenor part I could see underneath the music sheet her little pink toes beating time for the soprano, very fast and fluttery—eighth notes. Soprano parts tend to have eighth notes. And then, the first time we spent the whole night together, coming back from the bathroom, with her still asleep and feeling sort of strange—me, I mean—here she was asleep with this wonderful one foot stuck out from beneath the blankets. She loves to have her toes sucked."

It seemed to Tod that Oz shifted uneasily in his chair, there was a creak that could be leather or a furtive noise of digestion. Tod's weekly appointment came after the lunch hour, and he had a sensation, sometimes, of being engorged by the psychiatrist, of dissolving, attacked by enzymes of analysis. Tod persisted with his pedal theme. "The winter before last, I just remembered, Lulu took the wrong Wellington boots away from the carol sing, and they turned out to be *her* boots, and they were too big for Lulu, which is surprising, since Lulu is taller. *Her* feet, I should say, Lulu's, are quite high-arched, almost like hooves, which is why they leave such marks on the tennis court. When I met her at college, the soles were so tough she could stamp out cigarettes barefoot, as a trick. The third and fourth toes aren't divided all the

way down, and she used to hate to have me mention this. Or anything about her feet, for that matter. Yet she never wore shoes if she could help it, and when we'd walk on the beach she'd always admire her own prints in the sand. For the gap where the arch was." Suddenly the theme was exhausted. "What do you make of it?" Tod asked weakly.

Oz sighed. His platinum eyes seemed to be watering. Tod felt that Oz, gazing at him, saw a deep, though fathomable, well of sorrow—sorrow and narcissistic muddle. "It's a paradox," the psychiatrist said, sadly.

Lulu's attitude toward her own feet, he must mean. Tod went on, "After they swapped the right boots back, Pumpkin said to me at a party that Lulu's had pinched and I had this odd wish to defend Lulu, as if she had been insulted. Even now, I keep wanting to defend Lulu. Against you, for example, I feel you've undermined her, by giving some sort of silent approval to my leaving her. Everybody else is horrified. Everybody else likes Lulu. So do I. She's very likable."

Oz sighed in the special way that signalled the end of a session. "What's that old saying?" he asked, casually. "If the shoe fits. . ."

"What did he say?" Pumpkin asked anxiously, over the telephone. She had had a bad day, of crying children and unpayable bills. Roger was bombarding her with affidavits and depositions.

"Oz attacked Lulu," Tod told her. "He implied she was a shoe I should

stop wearing."

"That's not an attack, it's a possibility," Pumpkin said. "I'm not sure you're quite sane, on the subject of Lulu."

"I'm as sane as you are on the subject of Roger."

"I'm quite sane on the subject of Roger. Rhadamanthus says I was all along, only I doubted my own perceptions."

"I've always liked Roger. He's always been very sweet to me."

"That's one of his poses."

"He loaned me his ratchet wrenches."

"You should hear him go on about those ratchet wrenches now. He calls them 'those wretched ratchet wrenches.' "

"Who do you trust more on the subject of Roger—me who's met him or Rhadamanthus who hasn't? I say he is *sweet."* Whence this irritability and unreason? Tod couldn't understand himself. Once, when Pumpkin had wavered and it seemed she might go back to her husband, he had been in agony. His heart had turned over and over in jealousy like a lump of meat in a cauldron of stew.

"Rhadamanthus," Pumpkin answered, to a question he had forgotten asking.

"He thinks you're his princess," Tod snapped. "He thinks I sully you, no doubt."

"He thinks you're *beautiful,"* she said, infuriatingly.

"Who *are* these men anyway," Tod countered, "to run our lives? What do you know about *them!* Are *their* marriages so great, that they should put ours down? From the way Oz's stomach burbles I think he has an ulcer. As to your guy, I didn't like the shifty way he shambled out the door that time. He wouldn't look me in the eye. What do you two *do* in there anyway?

Pumpkin was crying. "Go back," she said. "That's what you're saying to me you want to do. Go back to Lulu and have pinchy feet." She hung up.

But the next time he saw her, after her Thursday session with Rhadamanthus, the psychiatrist had told her that wasn't what Tod had meant at all: he meant that in truth he loved her very much, and she loved him. She felt all smooth and plumped-up on the fourth-floor landing, and inside his room she kicked off her shoes and told all that had been disclosed in the cave of knowing.

They seemed, sometimes, as they moved about the city enacting their romance, gloves on the hands of giants, embodiments of others' hopes. They had no friends. They had children, but these they had wounded. Tears glistened about them like the lights of the city seen reflected in the square pool beside the round white table of an outdoor restaurant. In the museums,

tall stainless-steel constructs probed space to no clear purpose, and great striped canvases rewarded their respectful stares with a gaudy blankness. In movie houses, her hair tickled his ear as pink limbs intertwined or Sherlock Holmes stalked through the artificial mist of a Hollywood heath. They liked revivals; Esther Williams smiled triumphantly underwater, and Judy Garland, young again, hit the high note. Outside, under the glitter of the marquee, ice glistened on the brick pavements, and chandeliers warmed the bay windows of apartments whose floors and furniture they would never see. They were happy in limbo. At night, sirens wailed lullabies of disasters that kept their distance. Traffic licked the streets. Airplanes tugged snug the blanket of sky. They awoke to find it had snowed through all their dreaming, and the street was as hushed as a print by Currier & Ives—the same street where in spring magnolias bloomed first on the sunny side and then, weeks later, on the side of constant shade. They walked enchanted, scared, unknown but for the unseen counsellors whose blessings fed the night like the breathing of stars. Then the world rotated; the children stopped crying, the pace of legal actions slowed, the city lights faded behind them. They bought a house. He built bookshelves, she raised flowers. For economy's sake, they stopped seeing psychiatrists. Now when she said to him, "You're beautiful," it came solely from her, and when he answered, "So are you," it was to quell the terror that visited him, stark as daylight, plain as the mailman. For Tod was death and Pumpkin was hollow and the fair godfathers had vanished, taking with them

the lovers' best selves.