

# THE PATIENT

Barbara Lawrence

*Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction*

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# Introduction

## **“The Patient”** by Barbara Lawrence

Like “The Patient” in Barbara Lawrence’s short story, many of us seek and invariably find some personal flaw that justifies devaluing ourselves or others. Stereotyping the self or others as unlovable and inferior is just one negative expression of the tendency to create categories of people. With the help of his therapist, “The Patient” gradually relinquishes his elaborate scheme for pigeon-holing people, and in so doing achieves greater self-acceptance.

# The Patient

*Barbara Lawrence*

To Alexander's surprise, Dr. Kahmstetter did not pay much attention to the problem of his nose. He was more interested, it seemed, in the kind of people Alexander knew.

Alexander began by describing the Ones. These were the gapers, he said. He found them staring at his nose on buses and trains, their faces signs of aberration. They did not bother him particularly. Did not bother him at all, in fact. If they were his only problem, he would not have come to a doctor. Even the Twos were not exactly what he would call a problem—more disturbing than the Ones, to be sure, since their covert, embarrassed observation carried with it a certain sensitivity. But it was nothing that he could not deal with. Had dealt with quite successfully for years. No, it was neither the Ones nor the Twos. It was the Threes who had finally made his position unendurable.

"The Threes?" said Dr. Kahmstetter.

"The Threes," Alexander explained, "realize that my nose is growing larger, but they never even look at it. They look at *me*."

"Well?" said the Doctor.

“Well,” Alexander told him in an anguished voice, “I am so amazed at their kindness that when I am with them I tremble and behave in such a peculiar way that they cannot possibly enjoy my company. You see,” he continued, suddenly avoiding the Doctor’s eyes, “I know now that I must solve the problem of my nose or I shall never win the love of the Threes.”

“And in the meantime who are your friends?” Dr. Kahmstetter asked him.

“People I detest.” Alexander sighed. “The Fours. They pretend to have all the qualities of the Threes and actually have none.”

“Ah,” said the Doctor.

During his first weeks of treatment, at the suggestion of Dr. Kahmstetter, Alexander stopped measuring his nose and scrutinizing it each morning in a magnifying mirror, and tried instead to take only cursory glances at himself in large, full-length mirrors. It was during this period that he discovered the existence of other patients, most of whom seemed to be Twos and Fours. Some of these he learned, came to doctors because, like himself, they believed their noses were growing larger. Others came because of a fear that their noses were growing smaller. And still others, with undeniably enormous or infinitesimal noses, were taking treatments to persuade themselves that their condition did not matter.

“You see,” Dr. Kahmstetter remarked one day, “it isn’t so much the nose

but why the nose should be this important to anyone. Many people, after all, have far worse problems than an imagined—or even a *really*—large nose, but this does not prevent them from living.”

“I am aware of that,” Alexander said, making a secret, burning note that the Doctor apparently, considered his problem imaginary. “Quite aware of it,” he added sharply, for he had begun to suspect Dr. Kahmstetter of seriously underestimating his intelligence.

“I mention it,” the Doctor said, “only because you yourself have talked of almost nothing else.”

“The fact that I have *talked* about my nose,” said Alexander, “doesn’t necessarily mean it’s my most serious problem.”

“But isn’t that exactly what I was just saying?”

Alexander searched without success for a glimmer of malice or triumph in this remark.

“Isn’t that what we have to examine?” Dr. Kahmstetter added.

Alexander declined to answer.

The more he declined to answer Dr. Kahmstetter, the more time Alexander seemed to spend discussing his problems with other patients. They, he was gratified to learn, were not too disturbed about their condition. Most of them, in fact, considered themselves in a better position than people

who were not patients. This was a point of view he took pleasure in expounding to certain Fours, who smiled uneasily as he did so or sometimes stared pointedly and tastelessly at his nose.

“Let us assume, for example,” he said one afternoon to a young Four with a rather small nose, “that somebody imagines his nose is growing larger.” He paused and looked carefully over the Four’s head. “Or perhaps someone imagines that his nose is growing smaller.” The Four winced slightly. “There *are* people, you know, who believe that their noses are disappearing.”

“Really?” she exclaimed with a bright, fixed smile.

“Yes,” Alexander said. “I have known people to be so obsessed with ideas of this kind that they have gone to doctors for years and years.”

“How astonishing,” the Four said.

“Well, actually,” Alexander told her, “it’s not astonishing at all. The astonishing thing is that anyone could get that upset about a nose.” He raised his head, and his eyes took on the unfocused look of a public speaker. “After all, lots of us may imagine we have something wrong with our nose—may really *have* something wrong, for that matter—but it doesn’t prevent us from living.”

There was a flicker of recognition behind the Four’s bright smile.

“The important thing,” Alexander continued, “is to try to find out why



people get so upset about their nose.”

“How long have you been taking treatments?” the Four asked suddenly, with such unstudied interest that Alexander’s head swung toward her like a falling weight. “I ask,” she said, “because you’ve changed so much in the past few months. You seem less guarded. I have the feeling,” she added shyly, “that you don’t secretly dislike everyone quite so much anymore.”

Was it possible, Alexander asked himself when he was alone again, that the Fours had always been aware of his secret contempt for them? This could hardly be the case, he reasoned, for it was their unawareness, after all, that he hated. But suppose that their unawareness had never existed; what was it, then, that he had been hating?

“Could it be something in yourself that you have been hating?” Dr. Kahmstetter suggested. The Doctor’s observations sometimes struck Alexander as unbearably stereotyped.

Out on the street, he held an imaginary conversation with the Doctor. “If the object of my hatred is myself and not the Fours,” he said with elaborate dignity, “does this mean the Fours are lovable or not lovable?” The fantasy Dr. Kahmstetter seemed to wilt under his scrutiny. “If they are *not* lovable,” Alexander continued, “then there is a reason for my not *loving* them. On the other hand, if they *are* lovable, why haven’t I loved *them* as I have always loved the Threes?” A faintly perceptible smile played around his mouth as he

walked away from the inarticulate Doctor.

That evening, at a supper party, as he tried to catch a glimpse of himself in a full-length mirror, Alexander discovered that he was wearing the same fixed, hypocritical smile he detested in the Fours. He turned to the Four with the small nose, who was standing a short distance away and was watching him with interest.

“The trouble with most people,” he said rather loudly, “is that they condemn in others what they are really guilty of themselves.” The Four’s puzzled expression made him feel a little ridiculous, and he gave her a piercing glance. “You, for example, have a habit of diagnosing people. You told me the other day that I secretly disliked everyone.” “I said you *seemed to* dislike people before your treatments,” the Four protested mildly.

“Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps it is really *you* who secretly dislike everyone?” Alexander said with a twinge of pain, for he was beginning to get a headache.

The Four laid her hand on his shoulder with such delicate compassion that he knew she must have copied the gesture from a Three. “I’ve never seen you so upset before,” she said.

“I should say it was very interesting—very interesting indeed,” Alexander told Dr. Kahmstetter next day, “that a friend who has known me for several years took pains to tell me last night that she had never seen me in

worse condition.”

“It is interesting,” said the Doctor, “but not quite so interesting as the relation that such a depressing statement apparently causes you.”

“But I *am* depressed,” Alexander said. He was very depressed, he assured the Doctor—by this and several other things. People no longer admired him, as they once had. He was losing the wit and authority that had made the Fours seek him out. His nose was just as large as it had ever been. He still had not found a Three to love him, and he had paid nine hundred and ninety-five dollars for treatments since the beginning of the year.

His accusations made only small soundless ripples in the deep well of the Doctor’s patience. Might it not be wiser, Dr. Kahmstetter suggested, to try to understand why it troubled him so to be unpopular with people he professed to despise? Or better still, to concentrate on the *nature* of his hatred for the Fours. Had he any special feeling about his hatred? Had he ever been close enough to it to see what it was like?

He had never actually seen his hatred, Alexander said, but he had felt it often enough. It was a small, sharp stone in his chest. Dr. Kahmstetter seemed especially pleased with this reply.

For the next few weeks, without telling Dr. Kahmstetter, Alexander spent his time trying to examine the stone of his hatred. It was extremely difficult to touch the stone, he found. Occasionally even the thought of

touching it caused his chest to contract in a way that made the effort impossible. The best time to approach the task was when he cared least about succeeding. After a particularly concentrated effort had failed and he was on the point of giving up the whole business in disgust, his chest sometimes relaxed and the stone was miraculously available to him. At last, although each movement filled his body with a thousand shocks, he managed to loosen the stone sufficiently to put one finger behind a corner of it. What he felt there when he did so made him scream with fright.

The stone, he announced, trembling and defiant, when he reached Dr. Kahmstetter's office, was attached to the right side of his heart.

"But how can you possibly say such a thing?" the Doctor asked, with the slightest trace of impatience. Alexander's contention that he *felt* it there did not impress Dr. Kahmstetter. That was just a way of refusing to examine the stone, he said.

"But suppose that the stone *is* attached to my heart and that dislodging it will cost me my life," Alexander insisted.

"In that case," said the Doctor matter-of-factly, "I can be of no help to you."

Alexander had such a glaring pain in his head when he left Dr. Kahmstetter's office that day that he could not remember a word they had said to each other. When he reached home, he went immediately to the

telephone and called the Four with the small nose to apologize for his conduct at the supper party.

It was perfectly all right, she told him. She knew how irritable a headache made one feel and, actually, after thinking it over, she had decided there was some truth in what he had said about her secretly disliking everybody.

It occurred to Alexander as he hung up the phone that he might be falling in love with the young Four.

“It’s the first time, of course, that I’ve ever felt this way about anyone who wasn’t a Three,” he told Dr. Kahmstetter at his next session, pretending not to notice the Doctor’s veiled, approving glance.

“Perhaps you are discovering that people cannot be divided into categories, after all,” the Doctor said with the suggestion of a smile.

Alexander kept remembering Dr. Kahmstetter’s smile and his veiled, approving glance. Once or twice, he even found himself smiling in this same way at the Fours. When he did so, the Fours’ fixed, bright faces became more fixed than ever, but their eyes shot him looks of loneliness and longing that amazed him. On a bus one afternoon, he smiled at a Two who was secretly studying the reflection of his nose in the window. The look that crossed the Two’s face was almost identical with what he had seen in the eyes of the Fours.

Was it possible that the glances he had found so threatening were not really threatening at all? Could all these different faces conceal the same expression? How strange that this had never occurred to him before. The Fours, he remembered suddenly, had never said that they *disliked* his nose. Even the Twos had never looked at his nose with actual malice. Even the Ones, in their numb, fettered way, perhaps yearned to look beyond his nose. And as final, incontestable proof, there was the young Four herself, whose eyes and voice and smile and hands were as sensitive and comprehending as any Three's.

"Perhaps," Alexander said to himself, "you are discovering that people are not divided into categories, after all."

It was five months after their marriage—a year after he had stopped seeing Dr. Kahmstetter—that the young Four made her startling revelation to Alexander. She was extremely casual about it. That was one of the hardest things to forgive her for, really - her total failure to understand his feelings in the matter.

"The trouble with most people," he was saying when it happened, "is that they live by categories."

The young Four seemed rather abstracted, and Alexander went further than he had intended, to capture her attention.

"I myself believed in them once, you know. There was even a time when

I would not have married you unless you had been a Three.”

“But my darling,” his wife said then, smiling in affectionate protest, her voice gentle and amused, “I *am* a Three.”

Knowing how little importance he attached to categories, she could not believe that she had shocked him. Nor could she believe that this aspect of her identity, or the circumstances which explained it, could really fascinate him. One of the things she had always loved most about him, in fact, was his indifference to such matters. Alexander went immediately to call on Dr. Kahmstetter.

“My wife is a Three. Has been all the time,” he said, fighting to control his voice, as he entered the Doctor’s office.

“Yes?” said Dr. Kahmstetter.

“But I don’t know what to do.”

“Do? Why should you do anything?” the Doctor asked.

Alexander’s chest contracted in such a strange way at that moment that he could not utter a word.

“This is exactly what you have always wanted,” Dr. Kahmstetter continued in his kind, cheerful voice. “If I can help you,” he added as Alexander walked mutely to the door, “please don’t hesitate to call on me.”

For several weeks it seemed as if Alexander might never recover the power of speech. And, indeed, this could very well have been the case had he not taken out his measuring tape and magnifying mirror one day and discovered beyond any shadow of doubt that his nose was a sixteenth of an inch longer.

“The trouble with most people,” he said then, with a buoyancy that quite amazed his wife, “is that they don’t trust the evidence of their own senses.”