

Sallie Bingham

MENDING

Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction

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Introduction

“Mending” by Sallie Bingham

Individuals experience recurrent transference reactions, perceptions of others that, without the individual’s awareness, are influenced by feelings and responses originally experienced in relation to significant people from the past (usually parental figures). All relationships are a blend of realistic and transference elements. Psychotherapy distinguishes itself by providing patients with ongoing opportunities to work through the transference and eventually experience the therapist as a “real person,” apart from transference distortions.

There is a cliché that women patients invariably fall in love with their male therapists. This so-called love is usually depicted mockingly. Risking intimate exposure of the sexual and romantic feelings stimulated by the therapist’s caring concern may be the first step toward overcoming a chronic sense of alienation. “Mending” portrays, respectfully, the childhood origins, meanings, and consequences of a young woman’s felt need to be loved by her male therapist. We are given a sense of the skill and emotional maturity required to manage and harness the healing potential of what is called the erotic transference.

Mending

Sallie Bingham

On Fifth Avenue in the middle fall, the apartment buildings stand like pyramids in the sunlight. They are expensive and well-maintained, but for me their grandeur stems not from the big windows with the silk curtains where occasionally you can see a maid dusting with vague gestures but from the doctors' names beside the entrance door. Whether those doctors are more magical than the ones who are proclaimed in the windows is one of the puzzles I amuse myself with as I ply my trade up and down the avenue.

My trade is not the trade which might be expected from the height of my red-heeled sandals or the swing of my patent-leather bag. I am, after all, a good girl, a fairly young girl, although I have a few lines and a tendency to wake up at five in the morning. Taxi drivers still comment on my down-home accent, and although for a while I tried to dispel that impression by buying my clothes at Bloomingdale's I have given up the effort.

My trade is doctors, and it is essential. I have a doctor for my eyes and another for my skin; I have a special man for my allergies—which are not crippling—and I also have a specialist for the inside of my head. For a while it seemed that my head was as far as he would go, with an occasional foray down my throat. Finally a choking sensation forced me to cancel my

appointments. I suppose I should not expect anyone to take that at face value. He was a very handsome man; he is still, and it is still painful for me to imagine the man whose lap I longed to sit on presiding behind his profession, gazing with those curious green, unshadowed eyes at the women (why are they all women?)—the young ones, the old ones who hang their coats on his rack and sling their bags beside their feet as they sit down, with sighs, or in silence, on his couch.

My childhood was made to order to produce a high-heeled trader in doctors on Fifth Avenue, although my childhood would never have provided the money. My mother was blond and a beauty, and she had a penchant for changing men. My favorite was a truck driver from Georgia who used to let me ride with him on all-night trips down the coast. Mother didn't approve of that, but it took me off her hands. He would sing and I would doze in the big high cab, which seemed to me as hot and solid as a lump of molten lead—as hard to get out of, too, as I discovered when I tried to open the door. Oh, that truck was ecstasy. That was as close as I could come. My mother lost interest in him when I was six and replaced him with a white-collar worker. She thought Edwin was a step up, but for me, he never had any kind of appeal; he was the first of her men to carry a briefcase, and I learned an aversion then I have never been able to overcome to men who tie their shoes with very big bows and carry cow-smelling leather briefcases.

There were many others after Edwin, but they washed over me and I do

not remember disliking them at all. They did not make much of an impression, as my mother would say; that was left to my first doctor, a personable Cincinnati gynecologist. My mother, who had settled in that town with a railroad man, made the appointment for me. She wanted me to know the facts, and she did not feel up to explaining them. Of course by then I knew everything, as well as the fact that if you turn down a boy, he will suffer from an excruciating disease. I did not really need to know that to be persuaded, since the interiors of those 1950 Chevrolets smelled just like the cab of Ronny's truck.

The gynecologist armed me with a strange rubber disk that flew across the room the first time I tried to insert it. The second time I was successful, but I was never able to find the thing again. It sailed like a moon through the uncharted darkness of my insides, I knew it was not right to have a foreign body sailing those seas, but it took me a month to summon the courage to call the gynecologist. I was so afraid he would be disappointed in me. He rescued the thing the next day as I lay down on his long table; he was disappointed, and the thing had turned bright green.

After that my mother married an Air Force man who was going to be stationed in Honolulu. I still think of her little black boots when I think of brave women leaving for parts unknown. She tripped up the steps to the airplane, an indomitable little mountain climber, with tears in her eyes. The Air Force man was in tears, too, and smiling as though their future lay shining

on the tarmac. There was no room in that arrangement, and so I was farmed out to my mother's only prosperous relative, a hard-working doctor who lives in Greenwich and had the luck to marry my aunt.

I was nineteen, too old to be educated, too young to be employed. It made sense for me to do what I could to help Aunt Janey run her large house. There were people to do everything that needed to be done, but no one to organize them. Often the window washer arrived on the same day as the man who put up the screens, or the children needed to be picked up at friends as Aunt Janey was going to bed with her second cousin. (He was no relative of mine: another briefcase man.) So it was vital to have someone she could rely on to make telephone calls and draw up schedules.

Since I was not being paid in money but in good food and a fine room with roses on the wallpaper, Aunt Janey felt responsible for finishing me. She had been a brilliant woman once, and she still had her books from those days. She wrote my assignment every morning while I started the telephoning. I had to do it before I could do the bills. I can't say the reading meant a great deal to me, but the swing of the sentences—*Jane Eyre*, for example—seemed to carry me out of my ordinary way. I had thought that life was quite plain and obvious, with people coupling and breaking apart like the little snot-colored dots I had seen under the microscope in fifth-grade biology. The only lesson I had learned so far was to stay out of the way of those dots. After I read about blind Rochester's cry, I began to want some of that for my own.

I had not been demanding until then. No one could have complained that I made a fuss over a quick one in the back hall—that was the furnace repairman—or took it more seriously than the roar of the crowd at a construction site. I was never a prude, and my body did not do me that kind of helpful disservice. At home, in the upper South, in the Midwest, in Florida, they talked about boobies or the swing on my back porch. Greenwich is more refined, even New York City is more refined, and the repairman used to praise my eyes. When it came to seeing one of the men twice, I would shy away, not only because I was waiting for the voice across the miles but because I did not want to spend any time with a man who might begin by praising my eyes and then go on to feeling things himself—I did not mind that—but then would expect me to feel things, as well.

In feeling, I was somewhat deficient. It had not mattered before. I could remember the smell of Ronny's cab and glory in it, but I was not able to enjoy the particular flavor of a man's body. A naked man, to me, was like a root or tuber. I can't say I was afraid. But I never could see the gleam, the light before the dawn, the pot at the end of the rainbow when a naked man stood in front of me. It seemed to me that women were seemlier, more discreet, without that obtrusive member I was always called on to admire. I could not touch it without conscious effort, and that showed in my face. For a long time, it did not matter to me, but it mattered to those men. They wanted me to admire, they wanted me to feel something. Even the man who came to prune Aunt

Janey's forsythia insisted that I had to feel. "What's wrong with you?" he complained, when we were lying under the bare branches of the big bush. I knew he was feeling that it was somehow his fault.

I have never wanted to hurt anyone. I have wanted to help, if possible. And so I decided I would stop going out with men.

The trouble was that I wanted a pair of arms. I needed a pair of arms with a pain that even now I can't bring myself to describe. That, of all things, I had carried out of my childhood. When my mother was between men and feeling the ache, she would call me into her bed and squeeze me until suddenly she would fall asleep. I was more the holder than the holdee. It did not matter. The warmth of her thin arms, the wrists hardly wider than milk-bottle necks, the bones as fine as glass splinters, would last me through the next day and the next. Chronic cold was one of my chief complaints. But after she had held me, I didn't even need to button my school coat. I would walk down whatever gray street we were living on in whatever more or less depressed small-city neighborhood in whatever indistinguishable section in the middle of this country with no scarf over my head, no gloves on my hands, and the wind that comes from the Great Plains or the Mississippi or the Rockies or some other invisible boundary lifting the ends of my mouse-colored hair like a lover. Of course the trick was that my mother didn't expect anything of me, except not to wet the bed. She didn't expect me to feel anything in particular or to praise the way she looked in her nylon slip. She

gave me the warmth of her long, skinny arms, and I gave her the warmth of mine, and before I was ten years old, I was addicted.

When the new man moved in, I had to spend the night in my own bed with my fist in my mouth, not because the sounds they made frightened me—they were no more frightening than the chittering of the squirrels in the little-city parks—but because there was no more warmth for me. Mother got into the habit of buying me bunny pajamas and wooly sweaters before she installed a new cousin.

After the forsythia man and my decision to do without men, I started to get cold in the old way. Aunt Janey noticed the gooseflesh on my arms one morning when I brought up her breakfast tray. She made me sit down on the satin blanket cover. “We haven’t had a talk in I don’t know how long.” She was the prettiest woman I’d ever seen—the best, the brightest, with her jewelry box turned upside down on the pillow and her list of the day’s duties, prepared by me, balled up and thrown on the floor. I could think of her only in silly ways—still that’s the best I can do—because when I think of her eyes and the way her lips curled when her second cousin rang the doorbell, I know I will always be lonely for her. So I describe her to myself as a fickle woman who cheated on what my mother (who never had her luck) called, reverently, a perfectly good husband, and fed her children peanut butter out of the jar when I made the mistake of leaving a meal to her, and was happy. So happy. Outrageously happy. She had my mother’s long, skinny arms—the only family

resemblance—and although she very seldom held me in them, I knew she had the same heat. The difference a diamond wristwatch and a growth of fine blond hair made was not even worth thinking about.

(And he, the second cousin, did she make him groan with happiness, too? She used to come downstairs afterward in her Chinese kimono with her pearls hanging down her back, but I never saw much of him.)

We had our talk that morning. It was fall and Jacob the gardener was burning leaves. I insisted on opening the window, although Aunt Janey hated fresh air, and so I was able to flavor her words with the leaf smoke. She told me that I was unhappy, and there was no way I could deny that. So for once she took the pad and the telephone book and asked for the telephone, which had a crook on the receiver so that it could perch on your shoulder. And she began to make me appointments.

She had noticed my teeth, she said between dialings. Was there an implication about my breath? She had noticed that I squinted a good deal over the print in the telephone directory, and so she was sending me to have my eyes checked. She was also not certain that I should be as thin as I seemed to be growing, and so she was making an appointment with her own internist on upper Fifth Avenue. Unfortunately in his office I felt my old enemy, tears rising like an insurrection of moles, like a walking army of termites. When I cried on the leatherette chair, the doctor, who was as friendly as the

repairman my mother had left after six months of too much loving, suggested that I ought to go and see the other kind.

That was all right, too, as far as I was concerned. I was ready to take anyone's advice. It did not seem possible to go through the rest of my life trying to get warmth from the eyes of construction workers; it did not seem possible to go on spreading my legs for men who took it personally that that part—"down there," as my mother called it—had no more feeling than the vegetable it so closely resembles: a radish, fancy cut.

The next waiting room was soft and beige, like the tissue inside of an expensive shoe box, and I could have lain there forever, till the robins covered me with magazine leaves. Of course I had to get up and go and lay myself down when the time came—why this eternal lying?—on an even softer, browner couch in a smaller, safer room. I asked the doctor right away to let me stay forever. He held my hand for a moment, introducing himself, and my cold began to fade. Can it fade from the hand up and will the heart in the end be heated, like a tin pot on a gas burner turned high? I had always assumed that my body warmed up independently and that my heart, at the end, would always be safe and cold. He did not want anything from me—you can't count money in a desperate situation like this—except my compliance, so that he could try and help. And I believed him.

My mother would have said there is no such thing as a disinterested

man; she would have gone on to add that since he had green eyes, he must have other things in view. He did have green eyes, pale, finely lashed, and a pale, tired face. He seemed to have spent himself warming people up. By the second session, I hated the idea of any particle of him going to other people, and I ground my teeth when I passed the next patient—always a woman—in his little hall. I wanted him all to myself and it seemed to me that this was my last chance. My day was flooded with sights I had never seen in my life, views of my lean body folded up on his lap or the back of my neck as I knelt to kiss his feet. I had been cross and mean all my life and now, like a three-year-old with a lollipop, I was all syrup and sunshine. Shame had no part in it. As I went my rounds to the other doctors, letting them fill my teeth or put contact lenses in my eyes, as patiently as I have seen horses stand to be bridled and saddled, I imagined myself in my doctor's arms. Of course he did not respond. How could he respond? He wanted to help and, as he explained, holding me in his arms for a while or even for fifty minutes could not do me anything but harm. It is true that afterward I would never have let him go.

I thought I could push him. After all, other men had always wanted me. So I started to bring him little presents, bunches of chrysanthemums from Aunt Janey's garden, jars of my own grape jelly, poems on yellow paper that would have embarrassed a twelve-year-old. He made me take them all away, always neutral, always kind, always ready to listen, but never won or even tempted. My wishes were making me wild and I wanted to gather myself up

and wrap myself in a piece of flowered paper and hand myself to him—not for sex or compliments, but only to be held by him.

Aunt Janey caught me crying after three months of this and offered a trip to Paris as a distraction. I told her I couldn't go because I couldn't bear to break a single appointment with my doctor; she was taken aback. We had a long talk in the late-night kitchen where Uncle John had been making pancakes. She told me that analysis works but not in that way. "I can understand you wanting to go to bed with him, that's what everybody wants, but I can't understand you letting it get so out of hand."

"I don't want to go to bed with him," I said. "I couldn't feel him any more than I could feel the furnace repairman. I want him to hold me on his lap and put his arms around me."

"Yes, that's childish," she said, tapping her cigarette out.

"If I can't persuade him to do it, I'll die. I'll lie down and die." It was as clear to me as an item on the grocery list.

"You will not die," she said firmly. "You will go to Paris with me and we will shop for clothes and visit the museums and we will find you a nice free man."

"With green eyes and rays around his eyes and long hands with flat-tipped fingers?"

“That I can’t promise,” she said. “But he’ll be free.”

“I won’t go if it means missing an appointment.”

She started to figure how we could leave late on a Friday and come back on a Sunday, but then she saw it was no use and decided to go for a longer time with the second cousin.

So I was left alone for two weeks, except for Uncle John and the children. He was gone most of the time, coming back at night for his ginger ale and his smoked salmon and a spot of conversation before the late news. He wouldn’t let me fix real coffee in the morning; I think, being old and tired, he was afraid of the obligation. (The quid pro quid, my mother called it; nothing was free in her world, especially first thing in the morning.) The two girls spent most of the day in school and when the bus brought them home, I would have our tea picnic ready and we would take it out to the field behind the house. Late autumn by now and not many flowers left to pick, so we found milkweed pods and split them into the air. The little girls sat on my lap, either one at a time or both together, and when I kissed them, their hair smelled of eraser dust. I was in pain because the hours between my appointments were the longest hours of my life, and yet I never saw anything as beautiful as that field with the willows at the far end and the two little girls in their navy skirts and white blouses running after the milkweed parachutes.

By then I had discovered that my doctor had a wife and three children,

and they all loved one another and managed well. More than that he would not tell me, and I was forced to believe him. After all, the owners of pale green eyes and flat-ended fingers tend to find the wives and get the children they can enjoy, the way a girl I met in one of my many schools knew exactly—but exactly—what to say to win a smile, and what flavor of milkshake would bring out the angel in her.

As my mother used to say, “Those that know what they want, get it.” But she had feeling all over her body, not just lodged here and there in little pockets.

Meanwhile my doctor was trying to take the bits and pieces I gave him and string them together to make me a father. I had never known or even asked which one of the cousins was my father, and so I gave him all the pieces I remembered from the whole bunch of them. Ronny and his truck. He had thick thighs that rubbed together when he walked and made him roll like a seafaring man. He liked to hold me between the thighs and comb my hair. Edwin with his briefcase that reminded me of my doctor’s (although Edwin’s was more expensive) and which he once told me, held a surprise. The surprise, it turned out, was my cough medicine. Louis the railroad man who said he would take me with him on the train except that white girls brought bad luck; it was just like in the mines. The Air Force regular who yelped with joy and hugged me the day my mother said she would go to Honolulu.

My doctor wanted to know which one was my father and he proposed that I write my mother and ask. I wrote her because I did everything he even hinted at and I would have as soon slit my own throat. Word came back a week later; she thought I had known all along. My father had been a Kansas boy stationed at Fort Knox one summer when she was working at a diner called the Blue Boar. I remembered then that she had always kept a picture of a big-faced smiling boy on the mantelpiece, when there was one, or on the table by her bed. She said he had been killed in Korea.

My doctor did not try to do much with that scrap. Probably my father never even saw my mother's big stomach; if he had, he might have told her what to do about it, as a farm boy familiar with cows. So we had to start all over again with the scraps and pieces, trying to undo the way my memory simplified everything, trying to get behind the little pictures I wanted so desperately to keep: the shape of men's hands and the ways they had let me down.

We were still at work when Aunt Janey came back from Paris and she made me get on the scales that first evening. I told her the work we were doing was wearing me down; it was like ditch digging, or snaking out drains. She knew I was better, and she told me not to give up now with the end in sight. I wasn't sure what she meant, but I knew I had to keep on. There was some hope for me somewhere in all that. At my doctor's, the sweat would run down my face and I would have to pace the floor because there were months

and even years of my life when all I could remember was the pattern a tree of heaven made when the sun shone through it on a linoleum floor. My doctor thought some of the scraps might have forced me into bed, but I only remember being tickled or chased with the hairbrush or locked in the car while they went into a road house. Nothing high or strange but only flat and cold. Something killed off my feeling, but it wasn't being raped by Ronny or Edwin or any other others. Mother had sense enough to find men who wanted only her.

I told my doctor I believed I had been an ugly, squalling baby who kept my mother up at night, screeching for more milk. That was the only thing Mother ever said about me, and she said it more to criticize herself. She hadn't had sense enough, she explained, to realize I was hungry and to give me more bottles. Instead she slapped me once or twice. That wasn't enough to kill off much feeling, although it is true that if I were asked to draw a picture of myself, I would draw a great mouth.

By then I was almost in despair about getting what I wanted from my doctor, even a kiss or a lap sit or holding his hand. I kept having faith in him, the kind he didn't want, the kind that keeps you from eating and wakes you up at night. That faith woke the saints with visions of martyrdom and woke me with visions of lying in his arms. I kept believing that nature and its urges would triumph over the brittle standards of his profession; I kept believing that his calm attention was the marker for a hidden passion. I also believed

that if he would take me, I would begin, magically to feel. Or lacking that, light up like a torch: joy, like Aunt Janey with her pearls hanging straight down her back.

But he would not.

So for me it was a question of quitting—which of course I would not do, because at least during the sessions I saw him—or of going on with the work, keeping to the schedule, getting up in Greenwich in time to dress and catch the train. It was a question of opening my mind to the terrible thoughts that flashed through it like barracuda through muddy water. It was a question of making connections between one thing and another that did not come from the expression in his eyes—the looks I called waiting, eager, pleased—but from some deep, muddy layer of my own, where the old dreams had died and lay partially decayed.

The result was that I lost what ability I had. The children went back to eating peanut butter out of the jar although I had gotten Aunt Janey to lay in a supply of bread. The little skirts and tops we had bought at Bloomingdale's began to stink with sweat, and I stopped washing my hair. It did not seem possible to stand under the shower and come out feeling alive and new. It did not seem worthwhile even to try.

I didn't care anymore about getting better—that was a sailing planet—but I did care about the little fix of warmth which I got from sitting next to my

doctor. I cared about his words, which were for me and not for all the other women, and after a while I began to care about the things he said that hurt me and seemed at first unacceptable. There were, in the end, no answers. Yet he seemed to see me, clearly, remotely, as I had never seen myself, and he watered me with acceptance as regularly as he watered the sprouted avocado on his windowsill. Is it after all a kind of love? By January, I was back inside my own bleached mind; I knew it the day I went out and bought myself a bunch of flowers.

Aunt Janey washed my hair for me and insisted on new clothes and a trip to Antigua; when I said I would go, she hugged me and kissed me and gave me a garnet ring. Uncle John told me I was looking like a million dollars, and the little girls, who had been scared off by my smell, began to bring their paper dolls again so that I could cut out the clothes. I was still, and always would be, one of the walking wounded; I was an internalized scab, and when I looked at myself in the mirror, I understood why people call naked need the ugliest thing in the world. I broke two appointments with my doctor and went to Antigua with Aunt Janey, and one night, I danced with an advertising man. I was no queen, but I was somebody, two legs, two arms, a body, and a head with a mouthful of choice words. I wouldn't sleep with him because I knew that I wouldn't feel a thing, but the next day we played some fine tennis.

When I came back to New York, the pyramids of Fifth Avenue were no longer shining. The gutters were running with filth and melted snow, and the

doctors' names in the windows and on the plaques were only names, like lawyers' and dentists'. My doctor was on the telephone when I walked in, and I looked at his free ear and knew he would never be mine. Never. Never. And that I would live.