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Miss A was an attractive and vivacious 22-year-old, totally immersed in the wake of turbulent adolescence and the developmental tasks of young adulthood. She behaved somewhat immaturity for her age. She came to her first session dressed as if for a job interview. Although cheerful and highly eloquent, her anxiety to be accepted was immediately apparent. We made contact at a superficial level; she told me of her very high achievements, both sporting and academic, but of no sadnesses or disappointments. She painted an idealised picture of a perfect past but mentioned no close friendships, or any appropriate sexual relationship, although I later learned that her relationship difficulties were her primary reason for coming to me. Still, there was little to indicate, in this initial interview, any serious or deep-seated disturbance. She seemed pleasant, energetic and engaging. I was struck by her ambitions to achieve prominence in the corporate world, verging on grandiosity, but felt that given her past remarkable achievements, and her age, this was understandable.

She was the eldest of four daughters, all quite close in age. Her father was a self-made property developer, her mother an ambitious young courtroom advocate who was preoccupied with establishing a remarkable public career through much of Miss A's early childhood, leaving her in the care of a nanny and a housekeeper. Although Miss A was extremely successful at school and was a champion swimmer, she had some difficulties in finding friends even as a child and was offered an educational psychological consultation by her parents which she refused. At university she made a number of spectacularly unsuccessful relationships, both sexual and social.

Her failure to establish a successful relationship, and her sense of isolation, eventually drove her into therapy. After unsuccessful attempts with a college counsellor, a clinical psychologist and an organic psychiatrist, she found her way to her first analyst. He helped her with her anxiety about her exams, but he chose to address only a selected set of issues as their relationship could only continue for two years, and she made no progress in terms of finding more appropriate relationships. Miss A was keen to establish a similar time-limited relationship with me, but I sensed that her pathology might be more complex than either of

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us understood at that stage, and suggested that she should think more in terms of years than of months.

Within weeks of beginning the analysis, she confirmed my initial intuitions, not in terms of any particular thing that she said or did, but in terms of my overall sense of her communications to me. I had an uncomfortable impression that something about her was not genuine. When she spoke about the remarkable progress that we were making, or how 'good' a particular session was, I was left sceptical or unconvinced. In the countertransference, I felt a certain shallowness after such remarks, and wondered what she was keeping at a safe distance by such idealisation. I also had an uncomfortable feeling of not knowing her as a person, as if our relationship was simultaneously a close and a very distant one.

Two or three months into the analysis, a pattern began to emerge, which clarified this issue considerably. When she felt progress had been made in the session, she would leave my office full of optimism and excitement. She would then report again and again how her 'good mood' would disappear mere hours after the session, to be replaced by strong feelings of self-doubt, which over time intensified into self-disgust. She was plagued by thoughts of being unlovable, talentless and ugly, and by a vision of her life as one of isolation and failure. The inability to sustain good feelings, and the experience of relatedness turning almost into self-hatred, became a significant feature of my work with her. Her deep, and to her hopeless, depression was fairly close to the surface of her superficially vivacious and seductive character.

From the start, I was struck by Miss A's sometimes painfully self-denigrating attitude. It reminded me of a relationship between a cruel authority figure and a submissive, masochistic child, who was unable to appraise reality sufficiently to use it as a protection against such sadistic attacks. I suspected that in some way her early relationship with her parents, of course now internalised, was at the root of these experiences. Although Miss A initially described her mother as her 'best friend', who was devoted to all her children, in fact, because of her work, she was hardly a part of

Miss A's early life at all. Miss A remembers running away from home and crying herself to sleep at night because her parents were not there when she was put to bed by her nanny. She now describes the birth of her siblings as 'catastrophes'.

Her father seems to me to have probably been quite a lot more attentive to Miss A than her mother. She remembers him making a fuss of her, and feels that he preferred her to her sisters. However, his pleasure in her success was an extremely personal one: for example, he would take her to work in order to show off her remarkable intellectual capacities to his colleagues, and her interest in swimming also probably originated in his own thwarted ambitions in a related sport. Miss A, as a child, appears to have submitted to her father's demands of her and accepted these as her own. In many ways, it is difficult to see Miss A's father separately from her sense of herself.

Similarly, Miss A finds it difficult to conceive of me as a separate object. She relies on me heavily for narcissistic supplies. When she feels ashamed or humiliated in social or other situations, she turns to me demanding reassurance and encouragement, and a reaffirmation of her as special and superior. In the transference, too, I am but a part of her, with exactly her interests and priorities. She seems to assume that we

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have read the same books, know the same people and like the same paintings and photographs. She shows little curiosity about my family or circumstances, almost as if she already knew all there was to know. In part also she at times appears to lack the capacity to fully envision me in any context other than with her.

As working on this aspect of her transference proceeded, she increasingly felt an inner emptiness and ignorance of her true identity. She dreamed *of herself as made out of chicken wire, a kind of wire mesh image*. Her association to the famous experiment by Harlow, on monkeys brought up by a wire mesh rather than a cloth 'mother', suggested the early roots of this experience, and felt genuine as it was accompanied by real sadness and a sense of loss. We understood this dream as manifesting a wish to conceal her inner self, so desperately that sometimes she herself loses contact with it. She said quite helpfully that she now realised that for her the goal of the analysis was no longer to find a satisfactory relationship or friends, but primarily to establish a secure and substantial sense of herself. It has also become apparent that she is terrified of giving this true sense of herself direct expression.

Although Miss A can frequently build on my interpretations, apparently quite constructively, I am often wary of her attempts to be 'analytic'. This is not because her efforts are overly intellectual, because genuine emotions often seem to follow, but rather I feel that she is trying to make me submissive and useless, leaving me little to do except agree with her. Increasingly, on these occasions, I challenge her, and indicate my (reverse transference) feeling that she perhaps feels more comfortable controlling the session, leaving me to feel the sense of helplessness that is actually hers. However, I also feel wary of imposing my understanding on her, because that in itself may be a collusive repetition of her past experiences of her father's attempts to dominate her with his own interests. Simple empathy with her feeling of bewilderment, her sense of being at a loss as to how she can please me, seems to be at the moment the most valuable use of this countertransference. I attempt to identify the reasons for her fear of expressing her true feelings. Yet, I still feel uncertain about many of her communications. The interpretations that have the most impact tend to be my saying that she seems to have no sense of self, of an 'I' or 'ME'. She recognises that her current state is like a 'lukewarm bath', where she often refuses to allow either my comments (external stimuli) or her thoughts, feelings and bodily desires to get through to her. Any aspect of her experience of herself which might disturb this state has to be projected out, into me in the transference.

## A session with Miss A

[This is the Tuesday session in the second week following her return from a half-term break when I had been away. In the preceding week she told me that she had not missed me and, if anything, managed better in my absence than she does when I am around. She claimed that she had used the time extremely well and was slightly disappointed that I came back 'too soon'. The day before, she brought material about her repeated childhood injuries. She described for the first time a traumatic hospitalisation. Aged 4, she missed a step and fell down a flight of stairs at her

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father's office, broke her shoulder and arm very badly, and had to have quite painful surgery in order to ensure there was no loss of function.]

She began by talking about a project which she had been asked to undertake as part of her training. The project involved creating a multi-media presentation on the basis of interviews of children about the circumstances in which they

lived. She went into great detail about all the best instruments to use for the sound recording so that you could hear children's voices clearly, and it felt as if Miss A was being very repetitive and superior, and a bit boring. My mind wandered and I could feel that I was about to switch off. I then remembered that, when she described her accident the previous session, she had described her father's visits to the hospital. Although he visited her almost every day, she was resentful that he would merely listen to her complaints about the treatment she was receiving and would do nothing. I wondered to myself if he, like me, had switched off, perhaps unable to bear the child's suffering, and how she must have felt about this when she was in pain and frightened and if there now was a part of her that was genuinely unable to have interest in or feel her pain. I wondered how to suggest, without seeming critical and eliciting a defensive response, my sense that she almost expected to bore me because she wanted to prove that, I, like her father, could not hear her pain and hence all the material about sound recording and hearing children's voices.

She concluded by saying, 'Oh, I know that this is all just terribly boring for you'.

I said, 'I am puzzled about something. I noticed now and at certain other times that you speak to me as if you have no hope of my being at all interested in what you are saying'. She paused and there was quite a heavy silence. She even seemed to stop breathing for a moment. I went on: 'It occurs to me that you are experiencing me at the moment as you said you used to experience your father when he came to visit you in the hospital. I think you are hopelessly used to people not doing anything about what was happening to you. The fact that you're treating me as if I won't do anything about what you are telling me makes me think that you must be feeling in pain or anxious about something which you aren't telling me about'.

She was silent and there was a feeling of sadness in the room. I did not think she was crying but from her movements and breathing I felt that she was very close to it. Eventually she said that she had had a strange dream. She dreamed that *she got into the bath with her clothes on thinking that she was washing them: 'It felt the right thing to do'*. In associating to the dream she wondered, in passing, if the clothes would shrink. I wondered out loud if bringing a dream did not 'feel the right thing to do', but it was, in fact, covering the feelings she was having at this very moment, just like the clothes covered her body in the bath. I also thought (to myself) that the dream seemed to portray her approach to analysis as wanting to be in it, but without taking her mental clothes off. Her anxiety seemed to be that the analysis would diminish or shrink her and indeed she made *me* inferior with her earlier technical discussions.

She said that she thought I was dangerous for her. I was a monster with big eyes and ears. She had a fleeting thought of my chair, brown, rather old and shabby; an analyst like me ought to have a better chair, she said. I thought she was aggressively

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and contemptuously diminishing me in her comments because she herself felt diminished by me. I said that I could understand how angry it made her, that perhaps at the moment she was troubled by thoughts and feelings that she wanted to wash away because they felt so unacceptable and humiliating, that she did not want me to see or to hear them. I was dangerous for her, big eyes and ears, yet shabby and disreputable and she was in danger of being shrunk and diminished by me. She replied that that was not true, that she had learned that I was a sweet person who never got angry and was very careful in the way I used words, and that the thought about me being dangerous just came into her mind because I mentioned her body.

I sensed the seductiveness of her comments about me, and said, 'I think that you are frightened that it is *your* responsibility to keep me sweet, that if you tell me some of the thoughts that come into your mind, particularly sexual or angry ones, it will be *dangerous*'. I thought to myself that the danger probably came not from the sexual thoughts themselves, but from the threats to the imperative to keep things clean and immaculate in the analysis because her real self-image was brown, shabby and unacceptable, and the suffering of that person could not be heard clearly, even by her, and certainly never by me.

Apparently without giving herself time to reflect on my words, she responded, 'You have no business to go away in the middle of term-time'. I said that it sounded as though she *had* minded me being away, but perhaps had been ashamed of feeling this way, which was maybe why she hadn't mentioned it until now. To my surprise she agreed. She said she was bored while I was away; she started to feel depressed, ill and was inexplicably sleepy. 'I could not get myself out of bed, when I knew I did not have to come here. I suppose I must have missed you.' Although I thought that this was partially true, and that she had indeed been at times depressed and unable to use the time of my absence productively, I was less confident that this reaction was due to a sense of loss of me as a person. I thought that, if I had suggested that she might have felt a sense of loss, even if this were partly true, she would have been triumphant in the knowledge that I had mistakenly assumed that she felt attached to me. Therefore I only said, 'I think you still feel angry about my going away because it made you feel that you didn't matter to me; and now you are asking, how could I do this to you?'

She replied with a 'Hmm', and went on, as if changing the subject, to talk about her friend, a successful editor who

had lost his job with a major Anglo-Indian production company. While on the surface she seemed sympathetic, she concluded by saying, rather derogatively, 'How the mighty fall! He is so depressed now he does not even answer the telephone when people may well be pursuing him with new projects and offers'. It became clear to me that what had been so unbearable about my absence was the envious thought that, in her mind at least, I was wanted by somebody whereas she was not, leading to her virtually undisguised, envious retaliatory wish to cause my downfall. I said, 'You know, I think that so often you feel bad about yourself, and sometimes you get quite depressed, because you feel belittled by someone else's success; you feel bad and furious with me for making you feel small'.

She went on to talk about her editor friend's depression. He was sacked by his company because he was a 'troublemaker' who constantly criticised the films they

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were making for being unrealistic and of poor quality—not surprising, then, that they told him to 'take-a-hike'. If he had been nicer to them, he would still be working for the company. I thought that this communication in part referred to herself as a troublemaker who might be in danger of being dismissed. However, her apparent enjoyment of his predicament made me think that this had already been projected on to me in the transference. I said, 'You know, maybe sometimes you feel like telling me to take a hike because I am a troublemaker who is trying to separate the real from the unreal in you. But I believe you are also frightened that, unless you are as you think I am expecting you to be, I might not want to see you'.

She allowed herself to get uncharacteristically angry, showing her immense sensitivity to this theme. 'Sometimes you are full of yourself, and then I don't like you.' She went on, comparing me to the organic psychiatrist she saw for a brief period, Dr Y, and her first analyst, Dr X. Dr Y was like me, an unpleasant mediocre, self-important bald man; he looked and behaved like a gnome and was always serious. Dr X was unlike me: he was bright, erudite, his mind was nimble and he was able to play. I felt that what she perceived as my ability to understand and help her rankled and made her feel vicious. I acknowledged her mood: 'I think you don't want to be serious at the moment because you are frightened it will make you feel unhappy'. She told me that what I was saying made her think of a German film about a suicidal woman; she noted that she and the woman in the film shared the same first name, and she described the bleak storyline.

I said, 'I think it is very painful for you at the moment; you want to escape particularly from the feeling of being angry with me when you also feel depressed and in need of me. So you try and make yourself feel that you are not really involved in your depression, but both of us are watching a film with someone with your name being depressed'. It struck me in writing up that the theme of watching other people and distancing herself was not just apparent within the transference relationship, but also was an actual theme throughout the session: making films about other children, film editors, watching films and her own ambition to be a film producer. It is as if, in her mind, feelings become attenuated in this way, as if in a hall of mirrors, each reflection implying another observer and distancing her more from her feelings.

She was silent for a moment, said 'Yeah' and fell silent again. The silence felt relatively creative so I let it continue for a few minutes. Then she said in a way that seemed to come from quite a real part of her, 'Oh, I don't know. It feels very heavy in here'. She was silent again, then broke the mood by saying brightly, 'I saw a book about coping with depression. Do you know it? Do you think I should buy it?'

I thought that she was trying to evade the painful aspect of the transference relationship, for both herself and for me, and replace the therapeutic relationship with one with which she was far more comfortable, the relationship between the book and its reader, or the film and audience, as well as identifying with me as a reader and perhaps as a writer. I said, 'I think you feel your depression to be such a terrible weight, that you are unsure if either you or I can really get to know it without being crushed under it'.

She sighed, then said that of course she knew that she did not want to change; she did not need me to tell her that. 'Dr Y told me that already three years ago

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and you told me hundreds of times.' (This was an exaggeration, although we had talked about it quite frequently, with her reassuring me that of course she wanted to change—she wanted to be brilliant and famous, who would want to stay like her etc.). Then she continued despondently, 'Books can't help. I have read hundreds. They are not real. You can write anything in a book'.

I said, 'I think you feel you are in a terrible trap. If you feel the analysis is working you feel more real but also more sad, so sad that you might want to kill yourself'.

She went on to say that she had for a moment been aware of the 'ME' inside herself that I have been talking to her about, but now it was gone. When she felt the ME, she also felt suddenly frightened that she was shutting out her life from being lived. She seemed unhappy during all this. I said, 'I think it must feel frightening that your "Me" (the real you) might take over, and you would lose control and be stuck with something which you don't like at all'.

She replied, 'I never told you but since I was a little girl I have always believed that I have everyone trapped and under my control'. She described how she would go to sleep every night with the fantasy that she was immortal and could make people do whatever she wanted just by thinking of it. Sometimes, she had the fantasy that her father gave her a magic wand with which she could turn people into her slaves and get them to do anything she liked. I was very aware that the need to feel absolute, omnipotent control was a reflection of a deeper sense of total absence of control that she might very well have felt when, as a little girl, her mother, overwhelmed with professional and childcare responsibilities, was experienced as being so dramatically unresponsive to her need to be special and cherished. I have a good sense that this material will emerge, perhaps relatively soon, but in the present context I felt that the anxiety surrounding the repetition of this childhood attitude in the transference needed to be addressed.

I pointed out that she often behaved in the analysis in ways that indicated that she still held on to this belief, that she needed to feel that she could totally control me in a very subtle way, otherwise I would be a source of danger.

She said, 'Oh, I know, I even know that you are thinking that I provoked you to say that. But I am pleased that you did not say that the magic wand was the penis I wanted to have—I thought that you would'.

This is what often happens, she double trumps me, maintaining the magical, grandiose thought that she has implanted the thought in my mind and I can only say what she had first thought. At this moment I was not even permitted to have as my own thought the thought that she is controlling my thoughts. I said, 'As I said, you are in a terrible trap. On the one hand, you feel you need to control me by anticipating my thoughts because you are so scared that we might find the "real unacceptable you" which frightens and depresses you. But another part of you is pleased when I say something you didn't expect, because it gives you hope that the analysis will make you into the person you actually want to be'. She responded by saying: 'Oh, stop putting your big foot in it!' Although she seemed to find what I said intrusive and rejecting, there was also a relatively rare spontaneity to her exclamation. I said, 'I think you are very frightened both of the damage and of the possibility of the

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change which could happen here, and that is perhaps why you feel you need to keep control'. She replied, 'I feel frightened of you at the moment'.

When it was time, she got off the couch slowly and walked out looking quite sad.

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