

Four sessions with Lisa

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Lisa is a thirty-four-year-old patient in her tenth year of analysis, begun because of panic attacks, serious agoraphobia sometimes accompanied by moments of de-personalisation and de-realisation, and, during the sessions of the early years, manifestations of hallucinatory-type phenomena (waking dream flashes rather than true hallucinations) that caused confusional states. She had stopped studying and lived shut up at home with no relationships at all.

Together with analysis (four sessions a week) she had also begun pharmacological treatment prescribed by a psychiatrist-psychoanalyst who followed the analytic work in tandem, with the agreement that this person would deal with every eventual problem outside analysis.

The first years were extremely difficult, even getting Lisa to accept the need for a setting with sufficiently established rules. After some years Lisa finally accepted to lie on the couch, which previously had caused her such unbearable anguish that I had had to accept the face-to-face position (the session after Lisa lay down for the first time, she dreamt she was on a child's slide made of sharp blades cutting into her; it was so agonizingly distressing for her to lose visual contact with me).

During childhood Lisa had been traumatized both by the lack of the most elementary attention from her parents and by the extremely violent intrusions of her seriously psychically disturbed brother. This caused me not a few technical problems: in Lisa's eyes I was always in the wrong whether in deficiency or in excess. For a long time I felt myself to be treading a fine line between Lisa's catastrophic anxiety of being abandoned and her equalling catastrophic anxiety of violent intrusion that alternatively invaded her.

Much work followed, carried out with great commitment, passion and pain even by Lisa, which gradually permitted her to develop a capacity for containing emotions without them expanding the whole field (she had innumerable dreams of flooding, river banks bursting, Venice under water). After a long time she began to go out again, she took up her studies, she got her degree, she got married and began a proper job as a librarian in a high school and then began working as a supply teacher in a training school.

Lisa then had her first child and decided, on discovering she was pregnant (and feeling much more sure of herself and her own mental stability) and in agreement with the psychiatrist who had supported her with drugs, to suspend every pharmacological treatment. (It is interesting to note that this led her to greater acceptance of the analytical setting. For a long time, in sessions, Lisa had needed to take two 'drugs': the first was that I should reply, even incompletely, to her questions; the second was having to 'go over' the session's finishing time, which was often prolonged for a couple of minutes.) Her decision to suspend taking medicine and to respect the setting also marked a new mental birth and a first becoming aware of time within the analysis.

For a long time during the various years of analysis it seemed as though I was dealing with a puzzle where new pieces were constantly arriving, or with a Russian doll that always had a smaller doll inside it.

Now that the analysis with Lisa is probably beginning to draw to a possible close, I find in retrospect connections that I had never been able to see and that can be summarised figuratively:

BOND

In other words, a constant oscillating between attempts at symbiotic fusion (conflict with respect to the setting, intolerance towards any frustration, impossibility to tolerate not having immediate answers to questions or requests) and a type of autistic withdrawal (when frustration was excessive) that led Lisa to collapse into a state of total incommunication with herself and with me, often through the device of pseudo-sessions with many empty words and lacking communication.

For a long time we worked on the symbiotic clods, the breaking up of which was also at the origin of her panic attacks that burst like volcanic eruptions of uncontrollable emotions, and on the autistic type of withdrawal into which she took refuge.

We spent years talking about her ‘brother’ who alternated character disorder evacuations with autistic aspects, which we could only with difficulty describe as how Lisa herself functioned in alternation with her symbiotic functioning.

A significant turning point was reached towards the eighth year of analysis when, after an absence of mine, I found Lisa absolutely desperate, regressed, and incapable of speaking. Slowly she told me that she had been silently desperate and furious for many years because *the door* that is in my waiting room (that communicates with another room that I use as an office) had always been closed.

For several sessions I naturally interpreted this closed door in all possible ways: the exclusion and rage that resulted, my absence, my mental non-availability, and all the metaphors I could think of for ‘closed door’. She also added that if I opened the door it would mean nothing at all because I would have done it only because she had asked me to.

The truly terrible thing in her eyes was that for years I had not *heard* her request. At this point the patient herself realised with amazement that this request (about the open door) had never been expressed; for this reason I had not heard it. She immediately added that if I had been fond of her I would in any case have been able to hear her request even if she had not expressed it.

The day after this session she telephoned me (something that had never happened), saying that she was very unwell and asking if I could ‘see’ her the next day in an additional session (something that I had never ever done!).

I felt we were playing an extremely important round; I succeeded in accepting what for me was a difficult transgression of my setting and I said “Yes”, because I felt that something concrete was about to ‘happen’ that needed a door to be opened (in myself I transformed the closed door of the waiting room into the opening door – outside the usual setting – of my studio). I did this in the belief that if I did not pass through this interpretation-action there would be no possibility of transformation.

The next day Lisa arrived smiling, saying that this time I had “heard” her request even if she had had to express it; she had been sure that I would have answered “No”. It was the first time – so she said – that I had “heard” one of her requests, and she added that up to now it had always been as though a baby was crying desperately and no mother had ever rushed to its assistance. This time the mother had said “**eh**”, she had answered; and Lisa merely asked herself why one answers a call with “**è**” (is), why with a verb? (In Italian when a person is called, it is normal to respond with “eh?” as a sign of rapport, of message received.) The verbal play of “eh” (exclamation of a reply) and the verb “è” (is) lead me to think that “only a mother that responds is a mother”.

We worked through all this on the basis of the work done previously and the fog that had engulfed this maternal transfer ,known‘ from the start but never perceived seemingly lifted.

My action, on which I reflected greatly, might not perhaps have been necessary, but it made the last tunnel fall in a gallery that had been dug out over a long period from both ends.

Now with Lisa we talk of the end of analysis. We are aware that we still have to bring to light the link between the devil of symbiosis and the deep blue sea of autistic functioning, making habitable that area of the bond in which trust in the object is beginning to be recognised.

This work has emotively stabilised Lisa enormously (her dreams are richer and more detailed and are a privileged communicative path and transformation) and her relationship with her husband has become more solid (even if they argue periodically, although gradually this is becoming more containable. Arguments with her husband often reveal something that has not worked in analysis.).

Her second child has recently been born and the possibility/plan of finishing analysis has been accompanying us for several months.

I would now like to propose a flashback and look at two sessions from the third year of Lisa’s analysis:

(The first took place during a period when Lisa was in hospital where she had been given permission to come out to our sessions. Her stay in hospital had been proposed by the psychiatrist in fear that she might be self destructive and to perfect her pharmacological treatment.)

1st session

Still standing in the middle of the studio with a defiant air:

[After having arrived without buzzing the entryphone (we had agreed that she could have a key to the small door on the ground floor of the block where my studio is, located on a very busy street, and that she could use it without buzzing the entryphone in case of a panic attack).]

- If you’re angry with me, tell me straightaway...
- Why should I be?
- Because I opened the small door without knocking.
- You’ll have had your reasons.
- Yes, it was raining and I was afraid my face would be ruined, my lipstick smudge and my hair get wet.
- You were afraid that your makeup would disappear and that an ,ugly face‘ might be seen; perhaps a very angry one.

[With a slightly less combative air she lies down.]

- Yes, I’m angry. You must say something nasty to me, so then we’re equal, for what I said to you yesterday.
- What you said yesterday is what we call “Paolo”. (It is the name of her very disturbed brother. In our vocabulary it also stands for the patient’s functioning, alternately closed or violently incontinent. She had violently insulted me the day before.)
- Yes, but you mustn’t say that; “Paolo” is what I hate most in the world; you can’t say that I’m like that; I don’t want to hear any more about him; he’s hateful. They also told me in hospital that I was aggressive.

- Well, maybe "Paolo" from his point of view has his reasons; he might be like this because he's wounded, very frustrated... like the time of the "boxer". (This is a reference to a childhood memory of her dog which had bitten a cyclist who had run it over and injured it.)

- Yes, I remember, when an animal is wounded it's unapproachable. I feel like someone who's been in the snow, in the cold, and then even tepid water burns you.

- We know, far from here there is snow, coldness, and if you feel me – I don't say affectionate – merely warm, this hurts you; it burns you.

- I don't understand how I feel; it's as though half of me was in a swimsuit, and half in an anorak. I am fond of and I need you and I hate you, no not you. I hate Dr Battaglia, he's terrible. This morning again in the hospital Dr Battaglia said no tranquilisers because it would be covering up a symptom; we have to find the right medicine and I can't stand it any longer without a bit of 'tranquilliser', but I realise he's right too; then I come here and you think differently, you're more understanding. They are two such different places the hospital and here. In hospital mistreatment... violence, misunderstanding, there the doctors are incapable...

- Apparently there are 40 kilometres between me and Dr Battaglia, like from me to the hospital. But I think we can say that you're in hospital so you can also talk about a place where terrible, monstrous, inhuman things happen... I am understanding... available... but Dr Battaglia is like how I feel from another point of view, that is, cruel, who doesn't give you a 'tranquilliser' (the hugs and kisses that you desire) that you yourself at bottom are willing to renounce...

- I understand what you are saying, so my hospital stay is not so useless, it serves a purpose, at least to understand part of me that I don't know, the part you call by that name I don't even want to pronounce (Paolo). But for the rest you haven't understood anything about me: I definitely do not want to give up hugs and kisses, I want them, I must have them... if I don't I'll go mad; I've got to find someone who will hug me... who will kiss me..

- I think you can find me, but in another way, through being together and understanding together; I think you'll have to give up the idea of having those things concretely here.

- I had a dream: there was a mother who had a baby, it was all very cheerful... but in a short time the baby died, she was absolutely desperate... just like me waiting for you finally to be affectionate with me and you are, but I need physical contact, caresses, embraces, what I have never had and what you make me discover that I have never had, I have never desired anything else – you talk about them to me – but you don't give them to me... it's like going to a restaurant and looking at the menu but not being able to eat the food.

- Perhaps I still haven't found the way to make you feel something more alive and truer than a menu; I give you a bit of warmth, this awakens something and I immediately disappoint you.

- No! Don't you understand, I want concrete things, caresses – embraces and I know even the dream says this, I can only cry for what I lose, what I have lost... it's hopeless...

- Well perhaps you're meeting Dr Battaglia now, intransigent, a doctor who ends sessions, leaving you with terrible suffering, just as the pain of lying on the couch was so terrible... and also the happiness of seeing me and straightaway losing me, relinquishing eating me with your eyes.

- Well, I must tell you it's incredible but even in hospital I've seen a room with an analyst's couch.

Some months later, after her hospital stay was ended and she had begun to come to me unaccompanied, this session on a Monday preceded a session I had already told her I could not hold on the following Wednesday. In view of Lisa's symbiotic structure, every change to the setting was always terribly disturbing.

2nd session

- [She curls up on the couch.] Who was the person I met on Friday? He follows me; wherever I go I see him; I go to a concert and he's there; I go to a conference of psychology or psychiatry and he's there; last time he said he was in analysis... I can't stand his presence... he greets everyone... he's always cheerful.... he must be a psychiatry student... or psychology... he might want to do this work... I've already seen him come up here...

- I think you are continuing what you were saying on Friday; perhaps it's the plan that you yourself have, and that has been with you for quite a time, to enrol in psychology once you've finished your degree in philosophy, and also the project to fully accept the idea of really *being in analysis*. I must also tell you that it is Dr X, I will tell you about him so that you aren't caught off guard, if ever you should turn to him. (We had agreed that in periods when neither I, nor the customary psychiatrist, was there during the summer holidays she could have gone to a colleague who was, precisely, Dr X.)

- [She throws herself on the ground... screaming... hitting her head and hands on the floor... rolls over and over... moves around the room.... kneels down in front of the couch.]

- I see that that has upset you.

- How can I trust you; you would have sent me to someone with a face like that... how can I trust you... I hate and detest that person – I understand that it's nothing to do with him, he's probably good and honest, it's me that's upset and not well... I've had nightmares and I wanted to talk to you of this: shut up otherwise I'll smash your studio to bits... Totò Riina (the Sicilian Mafia boss) is nothing compared to me; I was going to cut my cat's throat... I want to kill... these are my nightmares: there was a puppy trying to get to its mother, but there was a sort of sheet of glass between them... then their noses touched... now I thought its mother would lick it and make much of it but instead she took it by the throat and ate it... then on Saturday I had a panic attack; I had gone out with Piero, there was a baby crying, it was terrible... then I dreamt that my whole room was upside down... and lifting up a piece of cloth there were mice and snakes... and then a hospital... they asked me if I was the inspector I said no... and I couldn't park the car... there were people on drips... like dead or alive... people with a hole with a tube for breathing... and then terrible needles they put in like drips... that hurt.

- I think I can recognise myself in the mother who, instead of showing a rush of affection for her puppy, ate it, like I am eating the session on Wednesday, and that I frighten you and make you suffer when I talk: saying "*being in analysis*" (in the sense that the patient wants concrete things from me, not "*being in analysis*"): this infuriates you and makes you cry. And then the room upside down like the week of analysis. You give up being the inspector like when you asked me all the questions and demanded answers... and you meet suffering, the hole of Wednesday.... the intensive care unit and also there my cures that for now resemble even more, just like what I'm saying... the needles that cause fear and pain...

- At Pavia there is a criminal doctor... he's famous, he doesn't care about the pain of others; he's Prof Y who does transplants...

- I think my operating on your feelings makes me similar to Prof Y, and also because I am explanting the session on Wednesday.

Five years later, Lisa has completely suspended the use of drugs because she has decided to have a child and is now in her third month of pregnancy. In the session previous to the one I am reporting, Lisa had spoken of the terror she felt at the idea that anyone knew she was in analysis. I had tried to understand this fear better but in a persecutory crescendo “the elementary school teacher who made her read things that she did not know how to read” had immediately appeared, so I had left off further investigation. She had then spoken of the shame she felt at the idea that her neighbours might see the mess in her house and I interpreted this communication in the transfer. Her husband had then appeared, who, seeing her getting undressed, had said to her “What horrible big legs you’ve got”. The image of an enormous gorilla appeared to me in reverie. In the next session Lisa called her old way of functioning by the name of “Europa”, and her new way without drugs that exposes her to new violent emotive states that no longer belonged to her “Ruanda”. Other characters make up the vocabulary special to this analysis. The session I am reporting is a Monday after I had had to cancel the session on Friday.

3rd session

- I’ve been so bad, panic attacks again... I was terrified... I wanted to run away... but I couldn’t move. I couldn’t go to work... I was in total panic.

- What do you think might have happened to you?

- I really don’t know, something to do with home, I don’t know... not with analysis... my husband away... away from home... a relief because he’s not there... terror because he’s not there.

- There seem to have been confused and contrasting feelings, good feelings because he was absent but also bad feelings because he was absent (for the time being giving up any possible interpretation of the transfer).

- And then I saw two films on the television “Kracatoa East of Java” and “King Kong”, the one in black and white; and I couldn’t sleep at night either.

- It’s as though in certain situations a volcano starts moving, a gorilla, and you flee or remain paralysed, in both cases terrorised. I have the impression that the volcano and gorilla correspond to a series of emotions that you haven’t been able to “read moment for moment” and that arriving all together they terrified you. I thought this was the meaning of your words in the last session about the elementary teacher who forced you to read things that you didn’t know how to read, like I did in insisting on trying to get you to say why it was monstrous that someone knew whether you were in analysis.

- I have the impression now that you haven’t spoken to me like this for a long time, I think you’ve understood me.. that you are close to me... I also had three dreams: in the first I was on the motorway, I had to, going from one place, reach another, but there were flyovers, crossroads, junctions, I couldn’t understand anything any more, I was panicking; in the second dream there was Angela, my maid, who had taken sheets covered in shit to the laundry; I was so ashamed; it wasn’t possible; and then the laundry didn’t clean them; they sent them back dirty; in the third dream there was the countryside and they were cutting a tree down, it was the tree of life, it wasn’t possible, it was excruciatingly painful and yet they were doing it, I was desperate...

- What do they make you think of?
- Nothing. Once I knew how to interpret my dreams, lots of ideas came to me, now no longer, I don't know what to say... it's as though I had got lost in Ruanda, I don't know which way to go..
- I think that after so much Europa in which you understood and helped me, it is important to be in Ruanda; it is here that we've got to introduce an ability to read. Perhaps there really is a need for the elementary teacher. The first dream makes me think of our missing a session: in Europa, "Ah, this analyst of mine really makes me angry, oh well I'll see him on Monday". In Ruanda: it's confusion, paths can no longer be found, or, worse, you're in a jungle you've got to get through from Thursday to Monday.
- This is what I felt, terror and being lost; I recognise myself in this but I really wouldn't know what to add to the second dream, perhaps only disgust.
- The second dream makes me think of the previous session, you show me the things you are ashamed of, you spoke to me of "big legs" (big legs with no grace), the fear that I say you have ugly bits, horrible to see, and for having said that you have never denuded yourself.
- (Interrupting me.) No, this no, this isn't true. These would be mature thoughts these, not from Ruanda, what I feel is different, if only it were shame, embarrassment for what I tell you... it's further away, much higher up, it's the fear and shame itself of my thoughts that I don't express, that I myself don't know and that you can't 'clean' because they are unexpressed.
- Perhaps unexpressed and dirty, inconfessable, and I'm not able to act as a laundry.
- No, even before, for now we don't know what they are, they are thoughts that I still don't know how to express.
- And that they are like shit that can't be cleaned, but perhaps it is shit to be 'analysed', perhaps this terrorises you, the fact that we know that we have to analyse the shit and with it your needs.
- There is something of this, and the tree of life?
- The third dream makes me think that from one point of view we have missed a session, there is disappointment, but from another viewpoint missing the session is "cutting down the tree of life", a catastrophe that involves an eruption of emotions, rage, fury, despair.
- "I don't feel" this.
- Perhaps this is too painful to feel.
- Yes, this time you're right, the interpretation of the teacher is correct. I was thinking that it gave me a bit of relief coming here today; I saw a programme on television where relatives met up again after 49 years... and it made me emotional... I shed tears like now.
- Perhaps it was the emotion for the session of today, time seems to have lasted differently from Thursday to Monday, 49 years..
- No, this time no, that time was different yes. At Pavia if you use the car and there is no traffic in five minutes you are anywhere, in the jungle no, time is different. But what I told you I told you because I felt the emotion of re-finding you and that you re-found me after so much time and this moved me.

- But regarding time tell me, could you have a session with the harsh times of the jungle, 4 hours, 5 hours, 6 hours... answer me though. If you say no, and I know you will say no, I will hate you quite furiously.

- And perhaps you are asking me this precisely to activate hate now that we are about to leave each other, the gorilla with the big legs and the volcano are preferable compared to feeling the need you have for analysis and for me, we are your life, but a task to do at home might be to read what this gorilla is made of, and how much there is of that that you didn't want to hear another time, the pain "for the tree of life being cut down".

Two years later:

4th session (small part of the session)

- Beppe (her husband) has returned, but is leaving soon... The children need set times... to respect rules... and often Beppe doesn't understand this...

I had two dreams; in the first I was at home, my daughter went to the door and didn't ask "Who is it?"; she opened it and a delinquent walked into the house, one of those with bottles of beer, piercings...

I was afraid he would hurt my children... I went to Beppe, I woke him up and he managed to get him out of the house.

In the second dream I was in a train, I was saying to myself as soon as the right moment comes I'll get off...

- What do they make you think of?

- The first of those negative thoughts I have about analysis, about you, if I think you are not a relation, that you are an outsider, that you are not my father, but ONLY my analyst, I can't bear this thought; then I have strengths to count on so as not to ruin the good things I have. The second was about the end of analysis, as soon as I can, I'll get off and then... that's it.

- At the beginning you said that rules and times are important for the children, I think the delinquent was the desire to overturn all the rules, the desire that I am something other than your analyst. If this thought insinuates itself inside you feel it is dangerous, but now even during the weekends you have sufficient strengths not to fall prey to these thoughts. In the second dream it seems as though you must almost run away from analysis, that it is not possible to fix an ending, to know the right moment.

- I know that you are happy to be my analyst, I don't know if I will ever accept this, I would like you to be at least a relative, a friend, a relation to keep on seeing – even when analysis is finished – for the rest of my life.

Let us return now to our days: Lisa is mourning acceptance of the fact that I am ONLY her analyst. Dreams of interrupted telephone lines that are then repaired are frequent and our communication is by now stabilised. Many questions are asked about what it will be like after analysis. Recently she had a dream where there was a first, cold, icy house with frozen bodies; she went towards a second one where there was a killer with a pistol who wanted to kill her, but the police arrived to save her. Finally there was a tiny house, well made but a little cheerless with flowers, she said what a lot of effort to have just a small house even if it did have a steady floor and new walls.

We work through the dreams together both as our analytic course and as mental states that she has crossed: that of frozen emotions, of solitude, of emotional cold, and the mental state of fear in which emotions that are too lively make her feel terribly in danger and persecuted until the police arrive, which Lisa connects up with my having

answered her call and with my answer ,**eh/è**‘. The last dream Lisa says makes her think of all the effort involved in the analysis before arriving at what Salvatore Quasimodo had expressed with great simplicity and humanity: “Everyone stands alone at the heart of the world / pierced by a ray of sunlight / and suddenly it is evening”.

Translated by Harriet Graham