

## Vignette

Michaela, a 25 year old mother of three small girls, had been in twice weekly face to face therapy for two years. After a period of what she came to call *fire-fighting*, which involved managing a constant onslaught of attacks from an external narcissistic parent from whom she had estranged herself, she had begun to use the space to discover more about her own internal state, and the threat of siege she experienced from within. She had begun to notice, in sessions, an internal narcissistic object, whose voice – which resembled the parent’s voice – attacked her every time she allowed herself to believe she had something for herself. She had not, however, realised that this included the very essential element, *life*.

The following session gives an account of ontological guilt which is at the very heart of the echoist’s state. In the last break, she had ordered a candle as part of her weekly shopping delivery. This candle had been the same brand and fragrance as the candle that the therapist usually had burning during Michaela’s sessions. The patient had believed she had ordered it by accident and whenever she lit it during the break she was surprised to be reminded of the familiarity of the therapy room. She had found herself lighting it as a way of calming her mind when she felt anxious. She mentioned this, she said, because the therapist had had a different candle on the week of her return.

The patient arrived one day, wanting to check dates of the next break. The session unfolded as follows:

**Michaela:** Can we just check the dates that you are going to be away and the day and time you have agreed you are going to see me, on the week where I am on holiday during our usual Tuesday session.

*The therapist goes through the dates and times again with the patient and remains curious as to why she is checking them after agreeing them and writing them down just the week before. The patient looks at the candle for a moment and seems emotional and then looks down, quietly.*

Long Silence

*After about ten minutes the therapist catches the patient's eye and looks curiously at Michaela ... the patient looks startled as if she has just remembered she is in the room.*

**Therapist:** You seem startled.

**Michaela:** Sorry. I was miles away.

**Therapist:** I wonder where you were.

**Michaela:** Nowhere really, just in a white space. I don't have much space to myself. It was quite peaceful really.

**Therapist:** So, you feel I have interrupted that quiet space ...

**Michaela:** No. I don't mind at all that you did. I think it was more that you noticed me.

*Silence*

*The patient becomes a little tearful*

**Michaela:** I'm just thinking about how I got into it now, that space. It feels silly to say, but just before I disappeared I had a thought about your candle. But I then thought 'what a stupid thought it is'.... So I shut it down. I'm not sure what went on.

**Therapist:** You had a thought about my candle... that got shut down before it could be spoken... I wonder if we listen to the thought together we might be able to think about why it might have had to be shut down.

**Michaela:** Well you know I said I bought the same candle as your normal candle in the break accidentally, and that since we came back you have had the other candle, but I noticed that you've got this usual one back, the one I said I liked.  
*She is tearful*

**Therapist:** Yes

**Michaela:** Well I had the thought that maybe you have got this candle again that I like... but then I thought that's a stupid thought because I'd be pointing out something you already know, and anyway it might have nothing to do with me, the reason that you bought it... sorry I'm not making sense...

**Therapist:** I think you felt that I had bought that candle because I had heard you say that you liked it. I think you felt that I had thought about you outside the

sessions when I was buying my shopping. That you exist outside this room in my mind. And that your voice has been heard here.

*The patient sobs and sobs.*

**Michaela:** That would then mean that you had done it because I like it and maybe you prefer the other one. What if your other patients don't like it, and they have to suffer it because of me?

**Therapist:** You describe what feels like a guilt for existing at all, for having an impact on the world.

**Michaela:** Yes. I've just realised if I say what I want then I'm really worried about how it affects other people.

*The patient is quietly reflective.*

**Michaela:** I've just been thinking how amazing it is to me, what comes up here. Now that I'm not having to deal with all the events happening outside and we have this space, it is shocking to think what is going on much of the time inside me, and it feels so real. I think that my critical voice shut me down before I even had a chance to speak. And you help me to notice it here. But what if it's going on all the time outside and I'm not noticing it.

*Cries more.*

**Therapist:** Just before you had the thought that you couldn't speak, we were discussing the next break. I think you were reminded of how you had used the candle in the last break. I wonder whether it was a concrete symbol of something you feel you have here with me that you feel the object cannot take from you – the space we have here to think about the object and try to understand its intentions and its constant criticism of you.

**Michaela:** Yes, the candle does symbolise something real. The object *can't* take that candle away and I *can* light it at home whenever I want and watch the flame and smell the fragrance that reminds me of here. It can try to take away my good feelings but it can't take away the candle.

**Therapist:** So, it is a concrete thing that you can hold onto in the break that enables you to know that this relationship is real. And, therefore, it has so much meaning

for you. The object very nearly robbed you of telling me how important it is for you, by taking away the space to think about it with me in this session.

**Michaela:** I've just realised that the white space, that I called peaceful, was peaceful because the object leaves me alone in that space. It's more like being dead really, or not existing at all, but knowing you *don't*.

**Therapist:** I think it is a state the object likes to have you in. Keeping you away from communicating your likes and wishes, or being able to receive anything from anyone else.

**Michaela:** Yes. That's probably why I don't go out to see people. The critical voice is there all the time judging everything I say. I never say what I want to do even if it's where to eat or which film to watch in case someone else wants to do something else.

**Therapist:** If you speak you feel such guilt for existing at all that you are often content to stay in that white space, because it is peaceful. All the feelings you have about imminent threat or break ins are provoked as soon as you exist in a visible way. You risk attack from absolutely anywhere...

**Michaela:** Yes, it's dreadful. It's better not to let anyone know you exist sometimes...

### *Thoughtful silence*

**Michaela:** But here when I do feel real and that I can be myself it's amazing to know I exist. I think that's why I like the idea that you might write about me. It is as if I can have my voice heard as evidence that I exist. I feel validated somehow. That you think my voice is worth hearing ... I met with an old friend of my parents' last week who has also cut off contact with them. She was surprised by all the toys in my house. She said when she used to come to visit my parents when I was a child, there were no toys anywhere, and no evidence that children even existed in our house.

**Therapist:** You had no concrete evidence of your existence.

**Michaela:** I've just realised the importance of the candle. I think my own existence feels so precarious most of the time, and that the candle is concrete evidence of a relationship with you in which I exist.

*She cries a little and then smiles as the session comes to an end.*

