

## THE MAN IN THE BMW

In the past several years there have been many books written describing trauma but not much said about psychoanalytic cure. When people like Henry Krystal and van der Kolk write about treating trauma, particularly PTSD, they circumvent psychoanalytic thinking and talk about body work such as deep message and yoga. Though very useful in the short run with helping anxiety and disassociation, these methods used, like hydrotherapy before psychoanalysis was invented, aren't enduring. Unenduring because of the repetition compulsion.

In this chapter I hope to show how develop an effective long-term treatment of trauma by focusing on the manifest content of dreams, one key metaphor that forms them, and only one or two associations.

The key metaphor always comes as a cliché in the first session and seems to be an incredibly economic way that people have storing the memory and affect of a series of traumas in their brain

Now I'd like to show how by focusing intently on the manifest content of dreams (in this case six) and one or two associations, all embodying the key metaphor, another way of doing treatment can take place. I'll illustrate this by using the dreams of "The Man In The BMW." Ten years ago I presented aspects of this case of John differently and jargonistically to show how a strict resistance analysis of psychosomatosis can be conducted (1997).

Here I'd like to use it as an illustration of what is for me now a more helpful way of working, in keeping with what I've learned about metaphor,

the language that is most connected to the body and, therefore, affect.

John when I first met him was traumatized and affectless, emotionally in neutral a word he used to describe himself in his key metaphor, “I’m a car in neutral.” That metaphor appeared when John told me in the first session what would turn out to be a distorted life narrative that treatment would correct and consequently help bring about psychic change.

In John’s story, his mother was a kind, bookish, and loving woman. His father was simply an alcoholic factory worker who would chase and beat him every night.

John said that those beatings, until he put a stop to them in adolescence, had turned him into “a car in neutral”. He said he wanted my help to get out of neutral: either to revert to being a musician or to go on and find a better job, and to end his fighting with his girlfriend that kept them stuck.

John then unemotionally enumerated into a list of complaints his girlfriend, who had pushed him into therapy, made about him:

“She says I’m totally passive and procrastinating, without any ambition, that I’m always in control of my emotions, that I’m uptight and constipated. And she’s right. I’m already twenty-three and stuck in dink jobs that both of us hate. But I’m also stuck in my relationship with her. We’re constantly battling over who takes in the laundry or who washes the dishes or who calls the phone company or answers the door for Chinese food..”

John went on to compare his being in neutral in the present to a stall he went into in adolescence. Then he was a very promising violinist, the star of a distinguished music

conservatory over a hundred miles from his factory town. However, right after he won an international competition to continue his studies in Europe, he quit the violin and came home only wanting his parents, particularly his father, to tell him they loved him. He never went back to the conservatory but drank and drugged and worked at “dink” jobs in a grocery store and in an industrial plant where his father worked.

For weeks when John attributed everything he had suffered from childhood on to his father’s constant beatings, he deeply moved me emotionally.

But after a while his monotonous *style* of talking about his repeated beatings and its consequences mysteriously began to bore me. I couldn’t grasp how *I* could feel beaten over the head by the mere delivery of his words. I began, though, to understand where my boredom was coming from when John told me his *first dream* which revealed what was missing from his monotonous narrative:

*The First Dream:*

*I am in a sports car I can’t start up, an old car from the late 1960’s, with leather seats.*

The late 1960’s was the time he went into neutral in adolescence. But what were the leather seats about? I would learn where the metaphoric displacement from trauma was in only his second association to “leather.” He described a rare visit home he had taken a couple of years ago where “I saw the leather strap hanging in the attic.”

“What leather strap?” I asked him.

To my astonishment, John monotonously described a short piece of leather

that his *mother* had strapped him with. Then he went on to recount – in a monotone – the history of the strap: How his mother had inherited it from her father who strapped her brother who in turn strapped his son, and then passed it on to *her* who would beat John often.

I sat there dumb-founded. Here John was talking about his *mother* beating him, and he was chatting casually about the strap as if it was a family heirloom.

*Interpretation and the beginnings of narrative change:*

After several months and of much resistance, manifested both in John’s flooding me with content and his boring style, I was able to interpret how he displaced all his buried rage at his “kind, bookish, loving mother” onto his very abusive father.

As the dream metaphor of the leather seat of the car in neutral would repeat itself in the transference and we’d work with it, John’s style, content and narrative would start to change.

Here for example is one of the instances in which this happened:

John had spent session after session raging at me for throwing a light on his feelings about his mother. For months he’d tell me how he wanted to punch me, tear down my books from my bookcase, etc.

Then finally, in one session right after he got a bonus with which he had agreed would pay off a large run-up bill, John marched in with a *spanking* new pair of *leather* boots and wanted me to admire them.

“I asked him, “With the cash flow problems you’ve been complaining about,  
 “ “how did you manage to pay for them?””

“With that bonus that came through yesterday.”

“How come you didn’t use it to pay off my bill?”

Silence.

“How do you expect me to feel?”

John thought about it for a while and then said, “Angry.”

But instead of going on with the active rage he constantly had been expressing, he added, “I expect you to feel that I’m being sneaky.”

“Sneaky?” I asked. “You walked in *showing off* your boots.”

Silence.

“What’s sneaky that you want me to see?” I asked.

“I just had a flash of being eight and stealing money from my mother’s *leather* purse.”

Then he had another memory of being eight. He remembered with some puzzlement how, when he needed money and didn’t want to steal it from his mother, he’d go to his father who would gladly give it to him. Then John told me, with more puzzlement, about warm feelings he was beginning to have toward his father. He talked expressively about how his father not only gave him money but time. He described how from the age of eight on, his father, exhausted after a day’s work, at the ferociously noisy factory, would drive John for two hours to another city to take violin lessons, wait for him, and then drive two hours back.

*The Car Metaphor and Further Change In Narrative:*

So again the car metaphor from the first dream expressed in his spanking leather boots keyed us into a further change in John's narrative.

The simply alcoholic abusive father could also be a warm father

i.e. in John's revised narrative his father's character became more three-dimensional.

Or, as John would say in the very next session:

“What actually happened at home was that my father would come back from the racket in the factory and lie down, saying he was looking for peace and quiet and was just trying to numb out the aggravation with beer.

“But then my mother would start in telling him how I didn't study or clean up or practice. She'd give him a whole list of complaints about me.” (Remember his girlfriend?)

“Then he would he hit me. Or, my parents would get into an argument about how hard she worked in the school library all day and afterwards would have to do all the housework.

“He'd tell her, she at least had quiet with her books.” But then my mother would say, “The least *you* could do would be to come home and *read* a book,’ or help me with my homework instead of passing out. Then if I dared take *my mother's* side, my father would smack me.”

As John continued to revise his life narrative and use it to begin to make life changes, a fourth character emerged in the drama/trauma he had been living: His maternal grandmother. She came up directly in the positive transference.

He said that after two years of working with me he was feeling freer, that he was able to relax in my office as he had at his grandmother's house. He described how amidst the turmoil (which from three to twelve he had partly dealt with by constipation) his life-saving benevolent grandmother was there for him.

In the midst of his complimenting me, John went back to *his first car dream* and told me what his new goal in treatment was. He said, "Now that I'm beginning to get out of neutral, I really want to *move* with this. I want to turn this used car I've been driving into a BMW with leather seats!"

It was at this point that John wanted to increase his sessions and begin using the couch. But once he lay down, he became very anxious, and what came out in his first few sessions on the couch was a fear that he would go crazy and get out of control like his father.

In one key session John remembered two significant traumas at three after telling me this dream in which the metaphor of being in neutral was *implied*:

*The Second Dream:*

*I'm lying down in your office, constipated, and wearing fat boy's clothes. You're sitting behind me. First I can't move, and then I feel the shit in me is going to go out of control. I jump up and run to your bathroom.*

He remembered being three when his father's factory went on out on strike and he had to work in the grocery store.

“One day my father “actually went out of control there. He was crazy, pulling cans off the shelves” (as John had wanted to pull my books down from the bookcase.) “My mother was called. So were the police. Then they took my father away to the mental hospital.”

The symbolic distance the couch created led him back not only to his fear of inheriting his father’s mental illness but the way he learned how to deal with his father “neutrally,” and distantly.

He said, “This distance of me being on the couch reminds me of how the doctor told my mother we should treat my father when they let him out of the hospital. Distant, neutral. When he started to hit me, for instance, I’d say to myself, “You can hit me but you can’t touch me.”

“To stop my crying in the bathroom, my mother would explain to me that Daddy was being mental and to get control of myself. That,” he added sarcastically “was how she was protecting me.”

I thought, that was how he was protecting me at the beginning of treatment with his monotonous, neutral style.”

Then over the next few sessions as we worked with the fat boy dream, John told me more about distance his mother had created, involving abandonment from *him*:

“I’m remembering how when I was three my grandmother got seriously sick. My mother left me constantly to tend to her. That went on and off till I was twelve. Also my brother was born then and all the rest of my mother’s attention went to him. That went on for years,” he said sadly.

“As I got I older, I’d stuff myself on Twinkies, crap like that till I got fat. Also. as I told you, I’d keep my shit in for days, sometimes for a week. Then I’d *lie down in fat boy’s clothes* at the stream beside my grandmother’s house till I could *jump up*, run inside and shit.

*Anal Trauma:*

Months later another *office* reflected in that second key dream came up. It was the family doctor’s office where his mother said she was given another piece of advice:

“She told me that the doctor said she should sit on the bathroom ledge, which she did, waiting for her constipated son to shit on a pink plastic toilet seat. I sat on the seat backwards,” he said defiantly, “and she would wait -- for a long while.”

But after a while, when nothing came out, she would rape John anally – for stalling, for being in neutral – by giving him repeated enemas. Finally after some weeks of memories of enemas *flooding* him with anger, John startled me with the memory of a third trauma at three. He remembered how his mother also would stretch his anal opening because, as *The Doctor* had told her, it was too small and that she had to stretch it.

So in this revision of his narrative, John was presenting a relentlessly invasive mother – a startling yet earlier version of his later leather-strapping mother who now at three would traumatize him both in the bathroom and on the living room couch.

As John brought up more and more details about his colonizing mother he began to make major changes in his life. Or, as he put it, “I’ve stopped walking around with a finger up my ass.” He found a new much better job when he could no longer tolerate being in a masochistic position with an abusive woman superior. And he stopped engaging in toilet battles with his critical girlfriend and tried to get closer to her. But as he stopped the petty power struggles on his end, she got more and more depressed.

Without John to criticize, she fell back on her own problems with work. This led John to wake up and realize how much she actually was using him like his mother. Now that we were about to enter our fourth year of treatment, he broke up with her and got involved with a kind uncritical woman, a kindergarten teacher four years older.

## PART II – THE MANIFEST CONTENT OF DREAMS AND UNCONSCIOUS FANTASIES::

### 1. *The Murderous Little Man:*

Though John was finally out of neutral, he was not yet ready to take command fully of the driver’s seat until we uncovered two unconscious fantasies *attached to his traumas*. To discover them, John first would have to steer us from the anal phase into the Oedipal phase where yet a new trauma would bring with it the fantasy of “The Murderous Little Man”

Fittingly that phase developing between his fourth and fifth years of treatment was keyed in by his third dream of a car in neutral

*The Third Dream:*

*“I’m in a parked car. I’m fucking my best friend’s wife in the back seat, Then I couldn’t face him afterwards.”*

John’s immediately thought, not of his friend, but more potently of me, to a conversation he had that day with an older woman at his *new* job.

“I told her I was in analysis with you, and she took you down a peg.

“She told me she couldn’t understand why I was trying to get help from someone who isn’t a medical *doctor*.”

I thought of the Doctor of his anal phase and wondered aloud why John didn’t defend me now.

He said he felt guilty, and then had this next association:

“This little triangle of the woman at work, you, and me? It reminds me of my mother, my father, and me who she’d call her ‘Little Man.’ Her Little Man! When things got hot between my parents, my mother would tell *me* my father was crazy and bad and, except for me, how unhappy she was.”

“How did you react when things got ‘hot’ like that?” I asked him.

“Sometimes I’d feel good, I got the crazy bastard. But sometimes I’d feel guilty and scared that I’d be *stuck* with my mother, that I’d *actually* become her “little man”. And that *really* terrified me.”

So now on an Oedipal level, as dream of the parked car indicated, he detailed how she would seductively call him at work, “jokingly asking ‘to speak to my boyfriend.’” The self now about to emerge was The Murderous Little Man

tied to an earlier seductive and traumatizing mother.

Or, as the third dream put it:

*“I’m in a parked car. I’m fucking my best friend’s wife in the back seat, and then I couldn’t face him afterwards.”*

This significant dream also led us to the second psychosomatic problem John also had come into with. The first was constipation which by now had cleared up. The second was erectile dysfunction which he had with his first girlfriend and was starting to experience with his new one.

In several sessions in which references to this dream about the parked car came up -- especially *the back seat* -- John brought in dreams of phallic women stabbing him in the back, dreams with knives and rape in them. Finally these dreams led John to remember a detail about his five-year-old past that shocked me, even after all the traumas I had heard.

John told me how as from four or five on, he would keep his father’s knife hidden under his bed for two reasons: One, in case his father went crazy and would try to kill him; two, in case his mother followed through with her threats to cut his penis off if he played with it.

As this memory fully and affectively surfaced, and as we were able to connect it to the traumas of the toilet seat and the leather strap, John suddenly found himself able to overcome his erectile dysfunction and began masturbating frequently and in front of his girlfriend, as if he had found his penis for the first time.

It's rare that a single memory leads to a dramatic psychosomatic change. That's the stuff 1940's movies about psychoanalysis were made of. But it happened, first by John's getting at his rage at his mother which allowed the constipation to clear up. Now it was by his uncapping his rage at her castration threats and feeling his Oedipal desire to *be* "Her Murderous Little Man which helped him clear up his erectile problem – for a while.

2. The Pregnant Man:

But his erectile dysfunction would return a year later when John tried to get his wife pregnant. Or, in the style of his words and his appearance, he tried to "get us pregnant. As he began to talk about "our pregnancy," he gradually put on forty pounds.

After many months of failed attempts, erectile dysfunction and weight gain which kept him from finding his penis, we began to make a breakthrough when John told me *his third dream* – Again, about a car in neutral:

The Fourth Dream:

*"I rented a used car and went with my father and sister to a car dealership. My father was thinking of buying a car. We get ready to leave. We get back in the car I rented. I put the key in the ignition. I notice the key is broken. I look on the seat and see the other half of the key. How am I going to start this car?"*

*"One of the guys at the dealership says he could get the car started without the key. I said, 'That's great thinking. I can get a hold of some Krazy Glue and put*

*this key back together with Crazy Glue.’ I was concerned: Would it hold? Would it be strong enough once I started? Would I be able to turn it off?”*

John’s first association was to the used car, like the “old car” of his very first dream. Of the used car he said this:

“My father was like a used car, never right after he got out of the hospital. My father was the other half of the key. As a kid I remember driving to my Dad’s hometown. The sister in the dream is my *father’s* sister. There was something weird about her. She was mentally incompetent – maybe it runs in the family. She couldn’t stick to a topic. She’d *race* from one thing to another. My father talked like this too. My mother kept cutting him off when he talked. He was labeled as *crazy*. I believed for so long my father was just crazy. If I separate from my mother, what am I left with but my crazy father? He’s the Crazy Glue in the dream I’m trying to get myself going with. Despite all the work we’ve done here, “I have these fears about what kind of father I’ll be, and also what if my child winds up with his family’s genes?”

Over the next few months as John both verbalized his anxieties about his potency and retraced the first part of treatment, he got both a firm sense of security about what he had accomplished and rehabilitated yet a fuller picture of his father. His father in his narrative now became not just a crazy person whose genes would doom John’s prospective progeny but also the Crazy Glue with which John could hold himself together.

As we worked with many aspects of this dream and similar ones following it, John lost his weight, his erectile problems disappeared and he and his wife

“got pregnant.”

But as John grew more confident with their pregnancy, new fears about his genes set in and Fate, as we'll see eventually with another key dream, stepped in and confirmed his worst fears.

### PART III: THE DREAM AS REPARATION:

John now began to tell me, as his wife got more and more pregnant, that not only psychological but *physical* damage would come from his genes and that his wife would be damaged in childbirth. John couldn't say why he had this fear about his wife's health, except in an intellectual way, to recall that after his brother was born the doctors told his mother that she could very well die if she became pregnant again

But the memory didn't help him fully dispel his growing anxiety about his wife's health. The cause of impending physical damage came in actual medical facts he was given and which casually came up in sessions in missed hints and in dreams.

As it turned out, his wife was developing the dreaded degenerative disease that eventually killed his beloved grandmother and which John, “The Murderous Little Man,” unconsciously thought he had passed on to his wife.

Fortunately this time there was medication available to help his wife survive. John now felt the kind of urgency and pain his mother must have experienced with *her* failing mother, and John grew more through this tragedy.

As his life narrative expanded now a more three-dimensional mother began to appear, not simply the idealized one he had come in with, nor the abusive seductive castrator, but a woman he loved with serious reality problems

--like his wife's – ones he could now readily identify with.

As John dealt with this tragedy and distinguished it from the past which was fueling his sense of loss, his baby son freakishly experienced an accident John had caused. During a party he left a pot of hot coffee on his kitchen ledge; and while holding his son to pour a cup out of it, his son pulled the pot down and severely burned himself. Now John's anxiety and guilt over his having the "crazy" gene that would damage a son became rampant. Its clearest expression came a year later in a dream months after his wife told him she wanted to try have another baby, one who wouldn't be physically damaged and scarred like their son. John agreed but the same thing occurred – frequent erectile dysfunction and to deal with it John put on weight. Here is the dream that helped him overcome it:

*The Fifth Dream:*

*"I'm in a car with my son. I drive downhill and the lights go out. I'd had a couple of beers and was light-headed and thought maybe I shouldn't be driving at all. I pull over and try to get the lights back on. I'm eight blocks from home. Something in the car broke. I had Elmer's Glue and I leave the top off. I go down an embankment. The glue gets all over my son's face. I try to ask my mother to help get the glue off. She's not helping."*

His thought of: "Glue when it dries becomes crusty ... glue is also sperm when it dries. It becomes crusty too ... My wife and I are trying to have sex again without birth control. Thoughts of a *second* child coming stir up feelings about my brother coming and how my mother's attention will be taken away

from me.

But actually with another child coming and my wife's physical condition, she really will have less time for me *and* my son. My son needs a lot of attention with the *emotional* part of his recovery. And he's at an age when he's very accident prone. He's opening doors, safety latches, everything. He has to be watched."

He turned to me for a response, and I first said, "In the dream you leave the top off the glue, and it gets all over your son."

"Everything I do has to be out of reach. I'm dangerous. The top's got to be on.

"You want to cap your penis, so the come doesn't get all over your son."

"Yes, as I've said, " I'm very very upset about another baby coming!

"And for my son too! He's still having trouble with his body because of the accident.

Also a child will be coming around the time he's going to be toilet training.

I don't want to screw up. I'm not going to push him, force him to sit on the seat like my mother did. He'll be close to the same age I was when my mother was pregnant.

It will be upsetting for him when we get pregnant."

Thinking of the Pregnant Man fantasy in that phrase and looking at his growing belly, I said, "We again."

"That's how I think of it as: *We* again. Maybe," he laughed that's why I'm eating whole Entemann cakes and putting on weight again."

"And keeping your shit in again," I added. referring to another bout of constipation he had complained about.

"Maybe the glue is not only sperm but also shit."

Continuing the long established talk within the metaphor, I said, “Glue keeps things stuck, like the car in neutral. I wonder if you’re not keeping your shit in again, and your penis capped in the dream, to keep the *new* baby back.

“Holy shit,” he said. “No wonder I have this whole thing about toilet training. “Now that my son is at that stage, how is he going to handle *his* shit?”

Over the next several sessions and more dreams about cars and keys and images equivalent to glue, we were more able to reconstruct The Pregnant Man fantasy more fully and understand how through the sympathetic magic of holding in his feces, John at two-to-three had tried to keep his brother from being born.

In this anal birth fantasy, John apparently had identified with his pregnant mother, the original *We*. It was then, during the battles with his Pregnant Mother sitting him on the pink plastic toilet seat, that the constipation first became a severe symptom. It was then that the traumatic punishment of the enemas and beatings fit the crime of his “Pregnant Man” fantasy – a double blow.

With the reconstruction of this fantasy, John’s constipation and erectile dysfunction stopped.

Further, John was able to see how guilt over this fantasy had attached itself to the *present* trauma with his burned son, and this insight helped free him of some of his guilt.

With a profound sense of what guilt had cost him, and determined to lead a life different from the depressed and sadomasochistic style of his original family, John, succeeded in getting his wife pregnant and left treatment.

## PART 4: CODA – FATE

But then a year later, John called saying this time he was deeply depressed because that there was something seriously wrong with his new child, a daughter. When he came in I learned that her doctors confirmed his worst dread that showed up in his “predictive” dream. His daughter had a physical condition that would make her mentally retarded – like his aunt – but much more severely. John felt guilt-ridden, angry, and frightened again. He was guilt-ridden that his genes had caused the damage. He was angry that maybe the medication the doctors had given his wife for her degenerative illness caused it. He was angry at his wife for pushing him to have another child. And he dealt with it all by stuffing himself with so much kids’ food that he now put on a eighty pounds. We fought his depression by recapturing his now well-developed capacity for self-care after this trauma. In brief we reconstructed a *later* version of his murderous birth fantasy now from his brother to his sister, that enabled us to help lift his depression, and dissolve his food addiction that kept him insulated against grief and the necessary mourning in the present.

If you remember, back in *the dream about Elmer’s Glue* getting all over his son’s face, John was *eight* blocks from home when something in the car broke. What we got to now were affective memories from between around eight-years-old again when John’s mother, against her doctor’s advice, became pregnant *again* because she wanted a little girl. John now went into how there was constant talk that his mother could die because John’s younger brother had been a breech baby.

As he remembered more details from this time, John brought in other dreams to which he had a recurrent association – about crawling into an igloo some kids had built on his street. His mother warned him not to go into igloos because he could get killed. One such igloo had collapsed nonetheless.

From such memories (and others John had already told us – like stealing from his mother’s leather purse at this age, eight), we could reconstruct a fantasy of his wanting to destroy his *second* unborn sibling, played out in his entering his mother’s dangerous igloo womb so that there would be no place for a second baby.

As we reconstructed this later, eight-year-old version of his “Pregnant Man” and “Murderous Little Man” fantasies, John began to own up to powerful wishes that his defective daughter had never been born, and wishes for her to die *now* so that his son could get all his distressed wife’s attention as John had wanted it from his mother. He remembered how much he had wanted attention when his sister was born, and the immense sense of loss he had felt in this period when he didn’t get it. Not only did his mother give her attention to his baby sister and her own dying mother, but when his father’s union went out on strike *again*, his mother had to go out and take a librarian job again to help support them.

So at eight John started stuffing himself again with anything he could find to eat in order to get some relief from profound feelings of abandonment and isolation. He gained so much weight then he had to wear, as in his third dream, only fat boys’ clothing.

As repression lifted, John began to allow in the grief he felt then and now, for the limitations of both his parents and the tragically permanent one of his daughter; and he began to regain his capacities for self-care and started an inventive diet.

It was a diet very specific to the grief he felt over the loss not only of his mother, but also of his dying grandmother. He cut out sweets and fat and made up a diet of only pasta with varied condiments as his one meal. Pasta was the food he had loved most, relishing it at Grandma's house.

So in this final, ninth year of our work, what John accomplished was, besides the weight loss, the possession of a very flexible emotional life in the face of profound tragedy. As John went through mourning the coming loss of me, his grandmother, and his daughter his depression lifted; he began to take great pleasure in his son and wife, his business successes, his winning tennis matches and his violin playing in groups.

This difficult psychic change, manifested in his new adjustment to reality is perhaps best illustrated by his final car dream:

*Sixth Dream:*

*I am driving a white BMW. I won it in a contest. I'm driving down a street with the windows open. It's a beautiful day. I never dreamt a car would make me feel so good.*

“It's a statement of being well-off, things going well, Fred. I'm just cruising along. A BMW. This is nicer than I thought.”

## REFERENCES

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