



Narrative Therapy in the “Imaginative-Agentive Gap” Or: Imagined into Agency: Goth Lolita Comes to Life

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1. Summary

In this paper, I seek to illustrate ideas of working in the imagination by utilizing excerpts from a case story of my therapy conversations with “Misha,” a pseudonym chosen by this client. I highlight how our steps into an imaginative realm in our conversations led to surprising discoveries of Misha’s agency and joy in her living. With the help of some descriptive summaries as well as poem and transcript excerpts from my conversations with Misha, I hope to invite readers to consider the healing possibilities of the imagination.

2. The Beginning of My Story with Misha

Misha had experienced several “failures” at therapy by the time she made up her mind to give it one last try with me. She gently and quietly summarized her hope at our first: “I want to feel something other than depressed and anxious...” She had clearly decided to make this last effort at therapy count as she proceeded to offer a description of how she had felt compelled to “lie” to her previous therapists about the “usefulness of their suggestions” to her in living with the effects of what felt like an “all-encompassing depression” in her life. When I asked more about the purposes of such lying Misha told me how she was too ashamed to return week after week having attempted her breathing exercises and not feeling any differently. I invited Misha to spare me the lies and instead requested she fire me immediately and without warning if I ended up setting her up to fail at our conversations. We giggled together at this and from that point I vowed to forego any advice, suggestions, or tips for Misha’s life. Instead, I turned my efforts into learning more precisely how it was Misha had been hurt and also how she has held tightly to the idea that she is something far beyond depression: that she has a life worth living.

In our first conversation Misha invited me into the realm of her experience of “depression:” she spoke of the relentless “arguing” in her mind for her to finally learn to “suck it up,” “control herself,” “smile” or else “be invisible” and if she could not fulfill these demands, she ought to consider herself a “waste of space” and her life to have come to its end.

She spoke of the aching loneliness and strangeness she felt with the world and the people in it. She described the crushing pressures to “please others” and make “pretend appearances” in life as a “compliant and pretty girl.” Misha asked me to help her understand if she was “crazy;” how





else could she come to understand the effects of a life of being neglected and the little favor she had experienced, especially at the hands of her respected parents. She told me of her sense of being an “unwanted burden” to others as a small child and her longing to be attended to in a loving way. She described her days as a child spent alone in an apartment from sunup to sundown scrounging for food and watching television. She recalled the many times her requests for company or attention were rebuffed as “complaints of a spoiled brat.” Misha told me of the time the role she was to play in life was made abundantly clear to her by her caregivers: at age 6, when she cried, a mirror was shoved in her face and she was admonished: “look at yourself, you look ugly when you cry.” My heart broke for Misha upon hearing these stories of cruelty and haunting neglect.

*She was born a girl
Nourished on scavenged milk and bread
Fed lies of illegitimacy
And yet she grew up
In hell – a place that whispered endlessly to her:
You don't matter
Hell is scary and an all-alone place
It tears apart her insides
As she musters every ounce of faith
To beg – please, stop the punishment
Instead of a trip to Heaven,
She found the apartment cleared out
-The hell moved to its next phase...*

“So you see,” Misha concluded, “all my life I have lived in a box and it was opened only for me to perform a perfectly good and cute girl. If the box was opened, and I happened to not be smiling to the pleasure of others I was reprimanded to smile and not be so serious.” “I do see, Misha. I do,” I said, feeling the sorrow of a young child who was in a horrible bind to please the whims of these adults and struggle with the confusion of these demands that left her lonely and a bereft and at odds in her own skin. I was full of sadness for all that she had been deprived of when she was not treated as a precious child. But there was something intriguing about the fact that Misha did not flinch when she told the stories of her life. As a consequence, I felt my own hopefulness billowing within me as we set out to plot her escape from the box.

*...She tells the truth
And she forms her words late into the night
Because she has always knew how to hoard the most precious things
Like her very own life:*





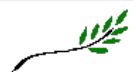
*She knows how to lie to stay in school
She knows how to be enraged at comings and goings without explanation
She knows the pungent taste of hatred in her mouth
She knows how to rely on herself
She knows how to demand an explanation
She knows how to scream: HOW COULD YOU?
She knows she is not willing to live with disregard
She knows how it feels to be rejected by society
She knows how women are forced to make horrible choices
She knows how to shift her charms when need be
She knows how to hold onto tenderness and hints of love
She knows how to recognize soothing words
She knows how to silence taunting recollections of the past (Don't ever talk about that again)
She knows what it feels like to live alongside angst and sorrow
She knows how to pick up the phone in the midst of darkness*

In this first meeting, I came to imagine Misha's life of invisibility, of performance pressures, and abandonment. I came to imagine and understand something of what it was like for Misha to live "shoved into a box:"

*...It is tricky to spot me
Inside this box
Emerging with the masks
That will please you
And protect me
It's a neutral costume
That has been skillfully sewn together...*

I came to marvel how Misha had mustered up the energy and steadiness to walk herself up many flights of stairs to get to her university counselling center and to exclaim in her desperation: "I want to die." I came to understand depression as a strong, argumentative voice in Misha's life that functioned to keep her poor company inside the box. Depression's tiresome arguments left Misha's mind exhausted and had diverted her from questioning the reality of the painful experiences she had endured so she might consider any sense of her own agency navigating a lonely childhood and youth.

*...It was then that we thought
Maybe the depression
Was leading her astray
With the idea that feelings
Are failures,*





Tearful mirrors have been used against her after all.

*But all the other stuff, it has to count, doesn't it?
We wondered together...*

“What would you say, Misha,” I asked towards the end of our first meeting, “if you and I were to set out in our conversations together to understand the makings of this box...” Misha seemed intrigued. And so it was that we set out to understand the makings and effects of the worst of the good girl-cardboard, plastic, and paper boxes and to tell every story of the living girl and her efforts at liberation. “She does have a logical voice and a tiny light with her in the box,” Misha ventured shyly. I was moved by her proposal! But that is not all she had as we were soon to discover together. Not by a long shot.

3. Beginning Leads into Our Work in The Imagination

Our lead into the realm of the imagination happened by surprise and was entirely guided by a moment of rare joy and delight on Misha’s face. It was the first time I had seen Misha smile a real smile since our first meeting, and this smile with the accompanying sarcasm in her voice set us both off for travelling far beyond boxes to another way of appearing.

At the time of this significant smile, Misha was struggling with her upcoming birthday. She told me that every year, her forthcoming birthday was a time of particularly intense arguments and accusations by depression. Depression was exacting “happiness performances” of her as well as overwhelming her with memories of being scolded for acting like “she owned the day” and reprimanded for not being sufficiently cheerful. “The only time when I escaped this box...” she began shyly, but then stopped abruptly, as if embarrassed. “The only time...?” I said, hoping to encourage her to continue speaking, holding my breath. “Well, the only time was kind of using ... make-up...” “What do you mean?” I asked. “Well, I remember when I was 11, I used to bring make up to school and wear these really bright colors of eyeshadow and lipstick at school. I’d feel like such a rebel. I wiped it all off before I got home, of course... but”

“But?” I asked, on the edge of my seat. Misha smiled at me full of mischief: “On those days, it felt more like *me*...I wasn’t granted freedom to express myself at home at all, so it was these little wins that would keep me sane.”

*...There are precious and hidden compartments
In the box
That represent secret freedoms
In moments when I remember
About all the selves I do not show*





*I impulsively
Kick myself out of the box
Like only the most daring kind of rebel would:*

*Full of cool piercings
Colourful lip balm and the boldest eyeshadow
Picking up little wins along the way to keep myself sane
I want the punk, the goth, the feminine frilly girl
To be expressed*

*One day I might march the streets
Right out there as myself
Holding placards:
ANTI-CONFORMITY
PRO-JOY
My black nails and Lolita dress
Will grab your eye
And you might wonder
How I got out of that box
But I will know it was a lifetime
Of hidden rebellions
One tiny kick at a time...*

There was a growing excitement in this conversation that really captured my attention. Misha was laughing and being sarcastic; she was nearly “giddy” (Misha’s own word!) in recalling what she “got away with” with her joyous “make-up rebellion.” Here is the end of our conversation that day:

Chelsey: Given these little acts of breaking out of the box all along, how important is it for you to express yourself in these kinds of ways for your own freedom?

Misha: Umm, I mean they definitely do bring me joy. I can talk about my piercings. They are permanently there. When I see them I think they are so nice. I think I’ve learned that there is a “me” inside my head, the punk one, the frilly girly one, the one with tons of piercings, the one that likes things that aren’t the norm. I’m happy keeping her in my head. Yah, it brings me joy. I’ve sort of learned that I’m not going to get that because society expects me to look a certain way. I can conform to that while living a fantasy in my head.

I was so delighted to witness Misha’s excitement in sharing these details of make-up and piercings and “alternative me’s.” When I remembered her smile long after she had left my office,





I resolved to not let these details go, but instead to “delve” into them. I wondered where Misha’s imagination for bold expression might take us. I very much wanted to be front and center on the runway of Misha’s “expressive revolution” and couldn’t help but wonder if this might be the very key to unlocking the “counter agent” that Misha had been shaping even from inside that box, safe from her critics.

- What if her smile and the rebellion she had imagined into being at age 11 might have something to say about the pressures toward “good girl appearances?”
- If she could wear daring makeup as a means of expressing the artistry and freedom of her soul at age 11, in what ways might she imagine to respond to her neglect and the voice of depression now?
- If the clothing one wears has the power to change the way one walks, as Misha proposed, might it also have the capacity to embolden her thoughts beyond the reaches of the punishments she had received?
- If she could play with her senses in the world of color, texture, design and movement, maybe Misha could walk right on into a new kind of world?
- And what would be possible for Misha to utter in this new world without depression arguing every one of her thoughts right out from underneath her?

In any case, I couldn’t let up on this realm that Misha just invited me into; there was hope in this land. I could see it in a smile.

4. Enter “Goth Lolita”

While holding on to Misha’s spontaneous expressions of delight and taking them as substantial guides for a possible path to walk out of misery and suffering, I trained my ears to listen to her expressions for what she could enact in this imaginary world. I heard her say: “Expressing myself brings me joy,” and “the idea that if I like it, that’s what matters.” These were entirely new ideas and words unlike the ones that “depression” had long whispered to her. “Joy” and “liking” - Misha and I coined these terms as part of her “hidden rebellion.”

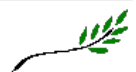
*...I thought of the unexpected giddiness, the unusual happiness.
An empowering action she did for the sake of possibility.
I thought of how she got away with it!
And there was this lightness that followed
It was a blue streak
Beaming with intention...*

Here is the ensuing conversation that introduced us both to an imaginary character that would become our treasured guide.





- Chelsey: Is it valuable to discern the parts of you that you've held onto and secretly imagine yourself in these different looks...or maybe dressed up in your room, but no one even saw you...have you tried that?
- Misha: (with delight) Oh yah! I know exactly what I'd wear. I'd wear black lipstick or crazy make-up...
- Chelsey: The way you speak of this is so remarkable to me Misha! You know, earlier you used the word rebellion...
- Misha: (strongly) Yah!
- Chelsey: Is there something of a rebellion going on inside you that people don't know about?
- Misha: (smiling) Yah!
- Chelsey: Would it be fair to say it's something of a protest against these restrictions that were set upon you?
- Misha: Yah
- Chelsey: Is this... the words "rebellion" or "protest"... is this a way you've known yourself before or is this new idea to you?
- Misha: No. I think it's always been there since I was a little kid. I think it's more internalized. I guess I knew I'd get in trouble or be reprimanded if I showed it. I don't want to do that...but I'd still like to do that. While I'd still like it I'm not going to show it, it will be MY thing that I'll keep to Myself. Even if my parents accepted or tolerated it, it's kind of like... hoarding things that are mine. When I was little, I was a tomboy, always in runners and tracksuits. They were telling me to be a pretty girl with white socks with a frill. Which is funny because now I do like those things. Not dressing how they wanted me to... that was my little win. I was doing all these other things to please their demands, but I was doing this one little thing that wouldn't get me into trouble, but it was my own.





- Chelsey: Have you told anyone about this little rebellion before? I shouldn't call it little...secret rebellion? Is that a good word? What do you want to call it What's a good name?
- Misha: Hidden? Haha
- Chelsey: The hidden rebellion you've described as being internalized... in sharing it with me, is it getting out a little bit?
- Misha: Yah, parts of me think, maybe I should just do it. Almost like I should freak out and just do it.
- Chelsey: You play with this in your mind?
- Misha: Like, who cares.
- Chelsey: Holy cow. And if you were, one morning...no, let's say Monday, cuz it's your birthday, you were to wake up and something magical was in the air, maybe it was, when you wake up on your 26th birthday and you have this giddy feeling in your body like you described and you get out of bed and you think, "you know what, who cares, it's my birthday, I'm just gonna do it." What would you put on?
- Misha: What would I put on?
- Chelsey: Yah
- Misha: Hmm... I would say... a Lolita dress.
- Chelsey: Do you have one? What would it look like? I don't really know what that is...If I did, I'd be way cooler. (laughter)
- Misha: It's a Japanese alternate fashion. They look kind of like dolls, like cupcakes.
- Chelsey: What color would yours be?
- Misha: I'd merge them, like a Goth Lolita. Black dresses...yah!





Chelsey: Okay, I gotta write all this down!!! I want to hear the rest of the outfit. We only have the dress down...

Misha: I'd wear a crazy color hair.

Chelsey: Like what? Pastel?

Misha: Yah, pastel would be good, I like alternate color hair. Something crazy...maybe pastel blue or something yah...

In the above transcript, I was introduced to someone whom Misha and I would from here on out refer to as "Goth Lolita." Goth Lolita, according to Misha, is a woman who has some very clear ideas about how she can take up some alternative ways of being in her world. Goth Lolita is an expert in doing what she wants which was exceedingly important to Misha. For example, Goth Lolita had ideas for Misha's birthday; she thought that Misha might go out in her dress and have a picnic in the park and that she might like to see others go by and marvel at her freedom of self-expression. I was floored to discover that Goth Lolita could so easily speak about her clear vision of a riotous birthday outing. Misha herself for the first time spoke of the word "bravery" relating to Goth Lolita's ideas for her life. Our conversation on that day ended like this:

Chelsey: You know what I'm noticing right now? You may not agree with this... but guess who didn't boss around our conversation? Like this was you and me really talking, like the you you. Is this right? Do you agree that depression was shutting up while we were talking today?

Misha: Yes

Chelsey: (smiling) Did you just rebel against depression in this conversation?

Misha: (smiling) It was freeing. Everything I've shared is a secret, but this is a secret that I'm not ashamed of. It doesn't bring pain to my life. It's something weird about me, but not messed up.

5. "Goth Lolita" Shows the Way

When Misha came into my office for our next meeting after her birthday, I was in for a surprise. Misha appeared with her hair dyed blue and her nails painted black. Misha laughed at my dumbstruckness and my attempts to ask about how Misha had gone and taken up Goth Lolita's ideas!





She was beaming as I asked questions about this “visible action” toward her invention for her much-dreaded birthday.

In addition to hair dye and nail polish Misha also took to the page and wrote me a letter that week that outlined the “worst of her stories” of her growing up experience. She told me she sent the letter to me with shaky hands and a beating heart and was up all night after hitting send. She had never before uttered these words to any living soul. She had dreaded feeling horrible regret and shame and perhaps even getting scolded by me or her family for her change in appearance and spirits.

However, in our conversation following these developments, Misha found herself questioning the voice of depression about its threats regarding her shaping rights of her own life because she did not suffer retaliation for her bold new actions. Misha wondered if this had to do with the spirit of “Goth Lolita” appearing by her side, the spirit of a young woman who can catch her eye in the mirror and be surprised by happiness and stand proud in her “breaking out of the box.”

*...It did not lead to spirals
But to a woman
Who caught a glance of herself in the mirror
Except this time
She knew something of happiness
The depression shrivelled so small in that moment
Like a wrinkled raisin
Its power was diminished....*

At this, I wondered if there was a way to speak to Goth Lolita herself. If Misha and I might travel together into the imaginary realm of Goth Lolita and her ideas, what possibilities alongside “snacks for a picnic” might we consider?

Misha and I decided to invite Goth Lolita to be interviewed during our conversation. I was attempting to learn Goth Lolita’s thoughts on Misha’s behalf, and to bolster Misha’s agency as she had already begun to bring this inner idea about an “alternate self” into the outer world through her hair, make up and writing down the “unspeakable.” I was wondering how Goth Lolita might lend her voice to Misha as she was stepping into these new questions, words, possibilities and experiences in her life. I puzzled over what would happen if Misha could be witness to Goth Lolita’s thoughts on her recent efforts in living. Could this imaginary realm expand Misha’s possibilities further?

(*Note: In my study of this transcript, and on behalf of any future ventures into such imaginary realms, I found myself wishing to refine the questions I asked of Goth Lolita that day. I have included my revised questions in the following excerpt for further considerations).

Chelsey: Goth Lolita, are there any particular words or saying or phrases that come to mind? You don’t have to censor them...they can be horrible swears, or not, In





Spanish or not...that you would say to this shame and blame. If Misha's voice was shaky and her mind was blanking and she needed you to speak up for her and push back, what would you actually say?

Misha: (as Goth Lolita) That there is nothing to be ashamed of who you are or what happened to you. That there was no...you didn't have a choice, it wasn't by your own doing. That in many ways surviving it shows some strength or some resilience and that even though it happened, and you may never want to talk about it or acknowledge it, maybe you can take it and sort of build yourself up knowing you can overcome things that you thought you couldn't. [PAUSE] But that girl grew up and is no longer in that situation. So, I guess she can jump out of the box and be Goth Lolita.

Chelsey: HOLD ON GOTH LOLITA! You're saying: "Hey Misha, join me!" Is that how you'd say it?

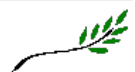
(Chelsey, revised: Hold on Goth Lolita! Are you suggesting that Misha has lived in such a way that you would be honored for her to escape from that box and join you? Why is it that Misha earned this spot as your companion in living – do you have some stories coming to mind about how she has befitted such an honoured position as a co-picnic enjoyer, style-star and freedom fighter? When did you first get the sense that Misha would one day join you and what you stand for in life?)

Misha: Sort of. Break all the barriers... whether it is you or other people have placed around you whether its break the box or jump out of the box, I guess it's don't let the errors of everybody in that story hold you captive in the box.

Chelsey: I'm having a clearer picture now, Goth Lolita, of you saying these things out loud with a conviction, almost like talking to the box. I see you in your dress, like this maybe talking to this box. Is there an action you'd take, Goth Lolita? Do you extend your hand? Do you help pry open the box? What do you do as you encourage Misha to break the barriers?

(Chelsey, revised: What have you witnessed Misha doing to escape the box that she was held captive in? What kind of unboxed life was Misha reaching for when she pried open the box enough to see you standing there with your hand extended?)

Misha: I guess it's sort of rebelling one step at a time. And maybe it is working on the things that made Misha more Goth Lolita. So, whether its Step 1: dye your hair blue or step 2: wear black nails...Finding what other steps or what other actions or what other feelings can be given to Misha so that she can break out of the box, or walk out more Goth Lolita and less childhood-stuck-in-her-past-Misha.





Chelsey: And Goth Lolita! You have this idea and you have even laid it out in step form! Does this get you thinking Goth Lolita about what might be next for Misha if she were to see these steps as things that she could do or take up in her life?

Misha: It's an overall arc of accepting her weirdness or her alternate tastes that might bring joy. It may make her more comfortable in her own skin. Maybe it's working through her self-worth because right now there isn't much of that.

(Chelsey revised: Are you suggesting somehow, Goth Lolita, that there might be some worth in accepting an overall arc of Misha's weirdness? Just how much worth do you think Misha has had to hold onto in order to keep her ideas and alternate tastes alive despite the boxed life that others had in mind for her? In this overall arc do you imagine Misha's dyed-blue hair might hold more worth than what the tab at the salon might have been?)

6. "Goth Lolita" Takes Back Stage While Misha Stands

This imaginary conversation with Goth Lolita as a witness to Misha's actions made it far more difficult for the arguments of depression to dismiss Misha's imaginative ways of responding to the narrow life proposed by the dull rules, the dress code, and the dismissal of her person. At the beginning of Goth Lolita's companionship, Misha would always anticipate what the voice of the depression would have her believe about the insignificance of her own actions in life, but Goth Lolita served as a lively counterargument with flesh and blood and bold ideas. Misha said to me at one point: "I started this. I voiced it. This gives it a shape and physicality. There is something worth trying for in this push against the voice of depression." Misha recalled how the arguments of depression were losing their influence in her life. She began to be curious about the criteria by which she could stand behind her actions rather than having the voice of depression and its counsel of regret and shame be the sole judge of her life. Misha started to move beyond being a model for the purposes of others to being a designer of her own future.

As an example of this reorientation, Misha shared a story of living in residence at university. She told me that historically she struggled to find meaningful connections with peers. However, when she was in university, she had developed some friendships. Misha was putting in all of her best efforts to achieve this aim. They had, to Misha's surprise, developed a supportive back and forth when it came to studying and leisure often going for ice cream together to unwind after exams. The voice of depression had overshadowed the friendship successes Misha had accomplished with one person's casual comment about Misha being "weird." Misha initially grew destitute as the depression told her she was a failure and would never have any real friends. Once we knew something about how Goth Lolita might have experienced these same events, Misha was able to evaluate her own efforts and actions as "wins" in the realm of developing connections and relating with others. Misha's imagination had allowed her to recalibrate her own barometer toward making meaningful actions against the depression.

Misha continued taking these agentive steps when she told me more stories of her life. Now they included tender memories of her and her family creating art together and caring for one another,





not just the harsh tales of mistreatment. Her eyes, even when focused on the past were able to see a fuller picture of how she was living. This made it possible for her to reinvigorate joyfulness and connection and hold it close to her heart for the future she was imagining.

These steps amounted to a grand leap in sharing the truth of her inner world after feeling very struck down by arguments with her mother who had trouble understanding exactly what Misha had been up against. In these arguments Misha had, for the first time, attempted to share her confusion about her mother's attempts at "tough love" throughout her life. This argument felt insurmountable to Misha, however, and she considered cutting her Mom out of her life as she had done many times before. But upon consideration of her new ways of expression, Misha wrote a letter to her mother outlining what it is like to live with the voice of depression in her mind and shared all of the ways she had tried to be a perfect daughter and how they were no longer appealing to her. She had spoken the "unspeakable" of her longing and the ways she was hurting, to her mother of all people. This was unimaginable before our forays into the imagination that all started with make-up and blue hair. At the end, blue hair was no longer necessary. Take a look:

Chelsey: I'm imagining a SNAP and a photo of you standing in front of your work...do you have the blue hair in the picture?

Misha: Yah, I think so.

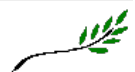
Chelsey: And what else?

Misha: I don't know. I think at this point maybe it would be more important than dying my hair or the clothes I wear or how I physically look...its more how I feel. Its more that there is a certain strength or comfortable in my own skin and being okay or accepting who I am. Being at ease with my thoughts. The dark voice may still exist but it's in the back, it's not fully presence or consuming me. There is a certain lightness and carefree nature that I've fixed all the broken pieces and I'm stronger. I don't know, I'm just a better me....

*...The unspoken is spoken
A butterfly flaps its wings
A baby is born
And
Goth Lolita re-applies her lipstick.*

7. Conclusion

Misha taught me about the possibilities of the imagination through our active engagement with Goth Lolita.





It seems to me that it is oftentimes the “labelled problem” that insists on our attention as therapists: in Misha’s case this was the label of “depression.” When Misha and I moved into Goth Lolita’s world outside “the box,” something wonderful happened. It became possible to speak of Misha’s lived experiences, both the painful and the joyful. Misha, for the first time, smiled as she jumped right into the glorious minutiae of her imagined agency like the hue of her nail polish, and she shook and cried as she wrote me a letter of the “unspeakable.” Both these developments stand in stark contrast to Misha’s conclusion that she was simply “depressed” without the means of seeing this label in connection with her lived experiences of oppression and joy.

However, the imagined world of Goth Lolita did not stop there. Somehow, this imagination of Goth Lolita as a companion by Misha’s side transformed into the real life energy of agency that suddenly involved the sparks of dying her hair, celebrating her birthday for the first time, meeting friends at the University, writing a heartfelt letter to her mom, and perhaps, least visibly but most powerfully to me, speaking to herself differently. A world opened up, aided by imagination: Misha spontaneously remembered memories of some tender moments within her family and with other people that had been long lost to her.

As our conversations continued, the boxed-in-life continued to make threats, but Goth Lolita became a solid ally in our conversations who could be counted on to matter-of-factly counter arguments to hateful and diminishing voices in Misha’s life.

Misha’s reaches and epiphanies took me back to thinking about my own life and my felt understanding how problem stories are not welcome in the land of imagination, how they have no history of viciousness there and struggle to take root, because they were never present in magical places in the first place (Carlson, 2020, personal communication). In a similar way, the use of the imagination freed me up, as a therapist, to move about in a place of hopefulness; this lent itself to a playfulness in our conversation, something that was welcome against the backdrop of the intensity of the voice of depression.

The revised questions highlight the necessary ‘giving back’ of agency from Goth Lolita to Misha, rather than maintaining Goth Lolita as an ‘advice giver’ and position her as “the central character, the protagonist, the agent” in her own life (Paljakka, 2020, personal communication). This serves not only to shine a spotlight on Misha’s accomplishments in living, but also to allow Goth Lolita’s witness to become a powerful internal presence blurring the lines between imagination and reality, an internalized imaginary other that can pipe up when she is in the “depths of despair.”

Paradoxically, what I witnessed when our conversations were focused in the imagination with Goth Lolita was that Misha herself came more to life. She ventured beyond the darkness of the voice of depression with something of an ease. At the end of these conversations, Misha would often comment something to the effect of “this helped. I feel better now, like the pinprick of light is still there for me” or “I feel lighter having had this conversation, I liked it.” Enlivening the counter story through the imagination brightened possibilities for Misha’s life.





I vividly recall our first session and Misha's shy retelling of a moment of "temporary escape" from the "boxed-in-life" when she was growing up. On this day, she was visiting Disneyland, a land of characters and stories she had long secretly admired and delighted in. She spoke of the sign she saw when leaving the theme park that read: Have a Magical Day. She recalled, with some embarrassment, that this statement didn't annoy her, but how her heart skipped a beat in response to think that this may be possible in her life yet.

Misha, thank you for the magic you have brought into my life. I will never forget it. All the streaks of blue hair will remind me of you.

*...Goth Lolita is a superhero
She can bravely time travel back to the time
When barriers were built around her
And she can whisper softly:
"You are not to blame
This was never your choice
You have survived and overcome
And here we are taking the past back
Don't be scared, nothing can happen to you now"*

*Goth Lolita doesn't give a damn about what others say
She does not conform to superhero dress codes
And she certainly doesn't stick to nude shades for her lips or nails
Her superpowers are amplified –
She is strong when she opens up (crushing terror)
She is tough when she accepts her weirdness (it's a joyful arc)
She is kind when she shares her story (it won't hold her captive)
She is caring when she keeps pushing toward new directions (freedom awaits)*

*She voices the unspeakable giving it shape and physicality
Kick starting her way to a new life
Building up a catalogue of over comings
Breaking barriers
With her chunky platforms and lacy socks
The magic awaits...*

