

Therapy by Proxy

Charles Puccia

Byron entered his office building in a tony zip code populated by wealthy boors and chosen by his mother, who paid the lease. He calculated the hours he had spent listening to brooding clients' trivia: one embarrassed by sporting an orange tie to a St Patrick's party; another didn't receive a birthday card from their best friend; a stockbroker who didn't capitalize on insider trade information. Not one of his clients had repressed mommy phobia, the one psychosis he could have empathized with.

Whiners populated his consultation room, and he wanted to smack them on the side of their heads, screaming, "*Grow up.*" He'd soon long for those bored-to-death days listening to trifle as serendipity confronted him in high heels.

Arriving an hour before his first appointment, as was his routine, Byron found a woman draped across his white office couch like an MGM lion waiting for its prey. Her low-cut blouse didn't leave Byron much to imagine. Her black leather trousers were the kind that take two people to put on and three to remove. The red bottoms of her Christian Louboutin stilettos shone.

A large canine of the Hellhound breed converged on him, its whipping tail slamming the office door shut. Byron shuffled sideways, aware that the dog's gaze followed him without moving its head, just the eyeballs. He looked to the closed door and back at the dog.

"Aren't you going to introduce yourself, Doctor?" asked the woman with a Southern fried chicken and grits accent.

"Do you have an appointment?" Byron asked.

"Well, I'm here, aren't I?"

Byron inched his way to his therapy chair. "And you are?"

"Honey pie, names aren't all that important in these kinds of matters, are they?" she said, patting her lap, "But if you insist, you can call me Miss Shelley."

"My sessions are private," said Byron, edging to his chair while passing the dog.

"Oh, don't you fuss over Marie," said the woman. "She's harmless and trustworthy. Anything said here will stay confidential, at least on our part. And you?"

Her familiarity made Byron uneasy. The intruder had invaded his sacred private space, even moving mementos he collected from his travels. Every object carefully chosen and arranged to

create rapport with his patients, from the white divan and the modern desk to the S-curved interview chair, was set back precisely ten feet from the patient. Darkening curtains hung halfway up wall-to-ceiling windows, preventing anyone passing along the street from looking in. The uncovered upper sash let in cheerful sunlight. Byron would have objected strongly to the woman's presence, even thrown her out of his office, if not still processing the large dog eyeballing him. And called Marie, for God's sake! Not to mention, harmless.

Sliding to sit in his interview chair, the ridges massaged his backbone. A hint of the woman's jasmine perfume floated across the room into his nostrils, not rudely so much as uninvited as the woman herself. Miss Shelley's tongue wetted her bottom lip, suggesting she needed an apéritif. He might be a psychoanalyst, but that didn't mean he had time to waste on crazy people.

He placated annoying patients, a trick he had learned from his mother. Worth a shot with Miss Shelley and devil dog.

"Why are you here?" Byron asked, picking up his notepad.

"Is that really necessary?" asked Miss Shelley.

"What?" Byron cinched his eyebrows.

"Oh my, words on paper could be discovered by unscrupulous people," said Miss Shelley.

The woman's honeysuckle charm roasted the molecules in the air, causing Byron to gag. He swallowed before giving assurances about the building's tight security.

"First, sweetie, I got in, didn't I? And second, one session will be enough."

Byron put down his pad and waved his hand. He delivered the standard rhetoric of his profession. Therapy was not a magic potion. Deep emotional turmoil required psychic drilling of the mind with delicate patience. No therapist can resolve deep issues in a single session. The unspoken counterargument to himself was that a one-time session would rid him of this nudnik.

"It's real simple," said Miss Shelley. "Y'all know how vulnerable a woman can be with a powerful man in her life. In my case, Frankie T. Maybe you heard of him, and what they say in the papers isn't true. I won't lie. At times, Frankie can be a monster, and at other times, a gentle giant. Lately, his mood swings are more violent."

Stuttering, Byron asked, "Uh, you mean, uh, Frankie..." He completed the sentence in his head. Wasn't Frankie the top mob boss across three state lines?

"Frankie Tine, that's him," Miss Shelley said, her smiling cheeks burnished by the sunlight.

Byron bottled his thoughts about Frankie T's infamous reputation for rendering his

adversaries apart, limb by limb. He knew Miss Shelley's story before she told it: a woman unable to extricate herself from an abusive relationship. Maybe Marie wasn't a bad idea after all.

Miss Shelley shifted on the couch, one leg crossing another, a finger touching her chin. "Yeah, he has his cowboy moments, but who doesn't?"

Byron gave a double crack of his neck, triggering muscle spasms. His hands took hold of his head to stop the bobbling.

"You okay, sweetie?" asked Miss Shelley.

"Yeah, fine. Happens all the time," said Byron, struggling to talk with his neck distended. He supped air. "Does he beat you?"

"Oh, my lordy, wherever did you get that idea?" said Miss Shelley.

"His violent mood swings."

"Sweetie pie, that's all true, but none are at me. Frankie wouldn't harm me. It's our guests, mainly my parents, sister, brother, and friends, that make his temper flare." She pressed a finger to her chin. "My father threw a hissy fit when Frankie had him frisked for a wire. I vouched for Mom, so she was left alone. And his tantrums, well, good lordy, when his team loses, you'd best be on the other side of town."

Byron assured Miss Shelley that friction with in-laws is common. Also, not uncommon among fans to express momentary anger over their team's failure. In his opinion, Frankie's behaviors fell within the norm, except for pulling a gun on his brother-in-law for not passing the turkey platter.

Miss Shelley hesitated. Byron waved an encouraging hand, like guiding someone into a parking spot. His curiosity mounted. What more had Frankie done?

"He throws beer bottles and small snack plates when he gets upset. And hit the TV screen from thirty feet with a flying ceramic dish. Last week, he smashed a lamp because the bulb burned out."

Byron stared at the floor, drawing an unempathetic blank. He always had cordial relations with inanimate objects and was on good terms with his furniture. He rubbed his eyes.

Miss Shelley clicked her shoes. "Oh my, y'all are overthinking this. He's the love of my life, but I'd like family visits not to end in crying or stitches at the emergency room. All I'm asking is for you to tell me how to change Frankie's personality."

If ever a perfect moment existed to gift his book on modern behavioral methods to treat latent

psychosis, this was it. Byron leaned back to dole out an abridged tutorial.

“There are no instant solutions. Most people need weekly sessions over months or years. If you like, set up an appointment for your husband to meet me.” The words came out by rote. Byron mentally tried to recant, scrub the words from the air. Was he obliged to help? Maybe a *no gangsters need apply* loophole. He’d consult with colleagues.

Miss Shelley let out a gut-busting sound, and Marie barked with a growl undertone. “Frankie in therapy! My gawd, you are funny,” Her hand covering her face didn’t hide from Byron her convulsive laughter.

“I’m sorry, but if Frankie refuses to talk with me, then I can’t help him.” *And why again suggest he’d help a mob kingpin? He’d make an appointment with his own psychotherapist as soon as this was over.*

“Oh, that’s so cute. Frankie never accepts refusals. He’s more a not-accepting kinda guy, and finds ways to turn noes into yeses.”

Byron looked down at his notepad, scribbling words like loon crazy, nutcase, barmy. He’d run out of synonyms. “Therapy is a process, mining for emotional residues of trauma. What you’re asking can’t be done.”

He watched as if front-row seating as Miss Shelley strode across the room with snapping cadence. She straddled him in his ribbed-back chair, while not actually sitting on his lap. More like hovering. He raised his arms as if to push her away. A thundering low-frequency growl sounded—Marie had moved to DEFCON 2. Byron relaxed his arms.

“I think you can do it,” said Miss Shelley in a vinaigrette voice as she pinned down his shoulders and lowered herself to sit on his knees.

Byron’s sweat glands pumped. Was she offering a *lap dance or a slit throat*? “How can I help if I can’t meet Frankie?” Again, the absurdity of his taking on a killer client.

Miss Shelley gleaming pink lip gloss rolled within inches of his face. “I never said you can’t meet Frankie, just not talk to him about his issues.” She tilted her head sideways. “Marie will be the intermediary client.”

Sweat exfoliated from his body as he mentally grappled with Miss Shelley’s batshit crazy notion of therapy using a dog. Of all outcomes he imagined, not one ended with his limbs intact. He flat-out refused until he heard her say that Frankie would be “*mightily disappointed*” if he didn’t help their beloved Marie. He had no choice but to exchange his dull, tedious practice for

an engrossing, nightmare client. And would Frankie/Marie be his final client?

A pink envelope arrived a day later. Miss Shelley's instructions were firm and unambiguous: park outside the Belview Pet Shop and wait. While head scratching how he'd gotten roped into this ridiculous plan, the instructions also suggested he get himself nourishment from a conveniently located Dunkin' Donuts at the end of the strip-mall complex, as the wait could be a stretch.

Munching on his second cream-filled donut, he saw Miss Shelley exit the pet store along with Marie, who was dragging a man wearing a porkpie hat and holding the dog's leash. No doubt about it, the man was Frankie T, with his signature hat, which Byron recognized from various media photos, usually with a courtroom backdrop.

The top of Frankie's head fell a good six inches below Miss Shelley's chin, herself no skyscraper, and a girth suggesting he never completed his Weight Watchers program. Crumbs tumbled off Byron's slack jaw, believing maybe big, bad Frankie was neither. The same jawbone stiffened as two men followed and, together, could form the entire defense for the Green Bay Packers. Each man ported seventy-pound dog food bags using just their thumbs and forefingers, as if carrying their brown bag lunches. Miss Shelley, Marie, and Frankie entered a black Mercedes sedan. A Hummer picked up the linebacker gofers.

Miss Shelley's instructions told Byron to follow a Hummer, which he identified as the only one in the parking lot. He tried to keep up, but the tank moved like a wild night in Kabul. Byron's electric car barely kept the Hummer in sight. He had asked Miss Shelley for GPS coordinates, but she told him that Frankie had persuaded Google and other GPS systems to erase his location.

Arriving just in time to see the Hummer pass through the gated entry, which closed with alarming speed, Byron pulled up to the intercom. A crackling voice asked for the secret password. Byron didn't know it, so he said, "I have an appointment with Marie." After a few minutes, the voice said Marie was expecting him. Byron slapped his forehead, thinking, How did the dog communicate? He had hoped to knock sense into himself and turn around, or knock himself out and have an accident.

Driving up the path, the ostentatious home's main portico grew larger, as if attached to an air pump. Dr. Byron Knightly had regretted becoming a psychologist and never more than in this

moment. He had wanted to become a poet, not an MD. He compromised with his mother on a medical degree. She wasn't thrilled with his specialty in psychiatry, preferring a more visceral one, like a surgeon (blood). She had even considered a corporate lawyer (more blood) as a choice. Now he was parked in front of a gaudy house bought with blood money — his mother would love it.

After a two-minute walk, he reached the front entry of an architectural disaster that an earthquake could improve. How did he get here? Bad luck played a role, having met the woman inside this eyesore. But he concluded his ultimate piece of bad luck had been choosing the wrong mother.

A bird flew overhead, splattering guano on his jacket. A female, for sure. He had compromised his entire life, and he summarized his failure with a single phrase: “no balls.”

Inside the big house lived the woman who had dropped from the sky, toting a *no-compromise* manifesto. Bloody hell, he was going to die. He chewed his fingernails. Maybe he could kidnap himself; the only flaw in that plan was that he couldn't afford to pay a ransom. As he approached the front door, he thought the best-case scenario was a broken arm. He didn't need two arms to write patient notes.

No courses he'd ever taken covered therapy by canine proxy. What was the protocol? Look the dog in the eye or Frankie? He'd brought a handful of kibble to reward Marie, but nothing to offer Frankie. With one hand inside his coat jacket pocket, he found a pack of peppermint lozenges. Would Frankie interpret this as an insinuation of halitosis? He loosened his hold of the packet.

As the front door opened, one of the pet store linebackers waved for Byron to follow him. The man had a taut face, with crescent biceps straining the fabric of his shirt sleeve. Byron brokered with a soft, “What do you think the Packers' chance of making it to the Super Bowl?”

The man ordered Byron to place his hands against the wall and spread his legs. Byron walked bowlegged the rest of the way into the house.

The large family den replicated the bodyguards' football motif. Two matching bars, stanchioned at each end of the room, guaranteed no beverage was more than a five-minute walk from any seat: the overall decor exemplified *nouveau* pretentiousness. The groin-grabbing linebacker pointed to an oversized, high-back chair, then retreated to guard the door. Byron's feet, like a small child in a highchair, dangled above the carpet. Miss Shelley lay on a long couch

extending from here to the edge of the solar system. Frankie burrowed next to her.

“So nice to meet you, Dr. Byron,” said Miss Shelley with a peachy wink. Frankie pouted with a lemon sourpuss.

The door sprang open, and the second linebacker escorted Marie into the room. Byron expected the man to toss the dog for a forty-yard pass, but instead he trotted her along the sideline. After handing Frankie Marie’s leash, the girth and weight meant for a cargo ship’s anchor, the man double-timed to the back of the room, taking up a position that mirrored his mate’s.

“Do your thing,” said Frankie. “And for what I’m paying, it better be good or else.” He slapped his leg. “Just fucking with you. I know these things take time.”

Miss Shelley described Marie’s behavioral issues, all resembling the description she’d given Byron of Frankie.

“Yeah, that’s Marie,” Frankie said, sinking further into the couch, tapping his feet to a tune in his head. “She’s good one minute, nasty the next. I never unleash her around strangers. Too violent.” Byron heard the pride in Frankie’s voice.

“Marie, what makes you growl?” asked Byron.

“When she’s nervous,” said Frankie, answering for Marie, and baring his teeth to reenact a dog’s expression.

“I see,” said Byron, who didn’t. He once had a delusional patient abruptly leave a session for an urgent meeting with intergalactic space cadets. That made more sense than this.

“And can you control your urges?” asked Byron.

“Good question,” Frankie said, petting the dog’s head. “Not always. Sometimes she growls at the slightest provocation. Isn’t that right, bunchy poo.” He kissed the dog’s head.

Byron scribbled on his pad, buying time to phrase another nonsensical question.

“And Marie, you’ve done nothing more serious than growl?” asked Byron.

Frankie leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees like a Humpty Dumpty precariously perched on a wall’s edge. “What are you implying?”

“You know, severe biting, that sort of thing.”

“Sounds like entrapment. Hey, Bruno, was this guy frisked for a wire?” One of the rampart men nodded.

Frankie’s face twisted, his eyes crossed. “I can’t deny her chops sunk into a few hands and

legs. Nothing serious. A few stitches. What's a little blood, anyway?" said Frankie with a heh-heh laugh, tipping himself forward, and if not for Miss Shelley's adroit reaction, he'd have gone the way of Humpty. Once stabilized, Frankie pointed to the dog lying with its eyes closed.

"She's exhausted," Frankie said. "Same as me, when my father sat me down every night to ask about who I met in the playground and the make of car my teacher drove. Not saying my mother was easier, with her wielding a wooden spoon around the kitchen."

Byron stood, and in a nanosecond, Marie rose, squatting on her haunches. Frankie cracked his knuckles. "This went well. I'm surprised Marie didn't once try to attack you, almost like she knew you."

Byron froze, casting a glance at Miss Shelley.

"Oh, sweetie, Dr. Byron just has one of those familiar faces, and a kind one too."

Marie's (Frankie's) weekly session stretched over months, uncovering a deep-rooted psychosis derived from an insecure, bullying father—the original Mafia *capo*—joined by an older brother (deceased from an undisclosed job incident), and a domineering mother—finally, something related to Byron's life.

He'd never have predicted Marie's aggression abating, or Frankie's bone-cracking, lessening, and booming voice softened.

Sunday lunch with his mother never failed to disappoint Byron. Not the meal *per se*, always a culinary delight at a five-star restaurant chosen by her, but the sore jaw from stiff conversation. He endured a litany of his mother's social engagements, waiting for the moment when she'd suddenly shift from self-centered to busybody interference in his life. Byron left most meals before dessert, taking indigestion with him.

Today, halfway through the meal, with coffee and dessert still to come, something strange happened. This luncheon was pleasant. His mother refrained from her usual organ recital—kidney stones, knee replacement, and heart pacemaker. Byron was moments away from having apple pie.

"Tell me about your new client," said his mother, brandishing a breadstick.

"What? Mother, you know I'm bound to confidentiality. And I have lots of new clients, so I don't know who you mean."

He stopped munching as his mother gave a viper's smile. Enjoying dessert became a fleeting fantasy the moment his mother mentioned she had met the lovely Miss Shelley for coffee.

"Absolutely delightful person, and the poochie woochie is so cute."

Byron's stomach churned. How had they met? No, he didn't want to know. But he did.

"When?" Byron asked. "Who set it up?"

His mother brushed a napkin across her lips, revving up to blow his self-esteem apart. "If you must know, I talked to Miss Shelley by happenstance." Byron's mother explained a phone call from Miss Shelley. His office assistant mistakenly gave out the wrong number. Miss Shelley told Byron's mother she urgently needed help with her dog, a client of yours.

His mother spoke with pride, then chuckled, "My boy is a pioneer in the emerging branch of canine psychoanalysis."

Byron's nausea gained momentum.

"And so we Facebook friended," said his mother, unconcerned by Byron's reflux, "and began a weekly Thursday lunch soiree. Much more ground gets covered in person, don't you think? And I don't believe there's a confidentiality clause for animals," said his mother. "I'm dying with curiosity."

If only that worked, thought Byron.

To stop his mother's annoying and sickening monologue, he divulged that Marie's insecurity stemmed from a tough life as a puppy. No breakthrough in her treatment so far, and none in sight. He left before the apple pie arrived to reconcile the convergence of his two seismic nightmares—his mother and Miss Shelley. His survival depended on forging an escape, reviving the previously ruled-out kidnapping scenario.

After a few months with Marie, Byron noticed the dog had grown listless, and her barking ceased. Meanwhile, Frankie began performing imitations of Hollywood gangsters for Byron—his Scarface quite good—and received a puff pastry from Miss Shelley after; Marie got a new leather shoe.

"Marie has a new personality," Frankie said one day, with a lilting voice. Marie's docility and Frankie's sunny disposition confounded Byron.

"I think we can cancel future sessions," Frankie said, chirping. "But listen, you're always

welcome to come around. Doing anything on Christmas Eve?”

“Uh, that’s seven months from now, so I haven’t made plans,” Byron said, and made a mental note to make plans as soon as he returned home.

“Praise the Lord,” said Miss Shelley, latching onto Byron’s arm as they moved to the entrance. She opened the door but kept hold of him. “You know, Frankie’s changed in ways I didn’t expect. I’m afraid for him.”

“Are we talking about Marie or Frankie?” asked Byron, tugging to free himself from Miss Shelley’s iron grip.

“Silly you. Marie doesn’t talk. I fear for Frankie.”

Byron gave a pull as Miss Shelley’s fingers dug in. He could see the outside but was too dizzy from Miss Shelley’s grip cutting off his circulation.

“You mean you have a fear of him?” he asked, damning himself for sounding interested.

“No. *For him!* He’s lost his edge. His business *associates* say things to his face they’d never have dared think. He grins at insults, as if he’s taking Marie’s olanzapine pills.

“What pills?”

“Gawd almighty, you don’t think Marie calmed down from your talking therapy, do you? I started her on sedatives once I saw Frankie agreed to multiple sessions for Marie.”

With Marie’s docility a pharmaceutical marvel, not his therapy, Byron took a deep breath and sighed. His celebrity status as a dog whisperer vanished, like so many of his failures.

“You okay, Dr. Byron?”

“Yeah, fine. Just a passing reflection on my practice. So, what’s the problem with Frankie?”

“He’s become passive.”

Byron suggested that Frankie’s remarkable calmness was a positive outcome. The thought also brought on a brief smile, realizing the result was positive for himself, proving behavioral therapy worked, albeit not for dogs.

“I don’t understand the problem,” said Byron.

Miss Shelley pulled him closer and forced him to bend over as she whispered in his ear. “His associates perceive him as weak. There’ll be a *coup*.” Her index finger crossed her throat.

“What do you want from me?” asked Byron, and sensed Miss Shelley’s grip relaxing. He attempted a dash out the front door, and he might have made it, if not for Miss Shelley’s outstretched leg. He splayed on the floor as if playing Twister. Miss Shelley righted him,

brushing off his rear end like a spanking.

“I can’t undo what’s been done. It’s not a switch you turn on and off,” said Byron. Tears filled his eyelids.

Miss Shelley pressed one of her long-nailed fingers to his lips. “Now, now. You know I know that. I’m thinking of group therapy for Frankie and his associates.”

For days, Byron moped around, cancelled all office appointments, and screened calls from his mother and Miss Shelley. In matters of life and death, he chose avoidance as a tactic. He’d gone from being the son of a domineering, interfering, blue-haired woman in tennis sneakers to a whipping boy of a sex-crazed dominatrix--from Sunday lunch to being lunch.

Time was not on his side. They would find him. Miss Shelley’s scent was better than Marie’s. His mother would mobilize a gang of widows and hunt him down.

Scanning his bookshelf, he spied the one volume that fit his mood, James Joyce’s *The Dead*. Byron’s index finger slid across each word on his favorite passage. “His own identity was fading out... the solid world itself, which these dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving...” Oh, God, he was going to die.

Dominic John lived in a remote Tuscan villa. He wrote travel guides while peering out his study window at his vineyard. His guides centered on the paths of nineteenth-century British poets throughout Italy. Except for his publisher, he had no outside contact with the outside world, having severed all relations. Out of courtesy, he had mailed his last letter to his mother from the JFK departure lounge, explaining he would be incommunicado during a sabbatical. He paid cash for his flight, used public transportation in Europe, and located a villa so remote that the nearest neighbors were a herd of goats.

Months later, a hand-addressed letter arrived at Dominic’s Florence villa with no return address but franked with an international USA stamp commemorating the Westminster Kennel Society. He didn’t recognize the delicate cursive writing. A fan? How did they get his address?

Dearest Byron, aka Dom John,

I hope this finds you well. I’m as happy as a pig in mud to learn about your new travelogue writing career. I love the pseudonym too. While perusing travel books for

possible escapes from the daily, dull routines, I came across your Italian guidebooks. What a surprise. From your poetic descriptions of the scenery, I knew it was you. You always had a way with words.

In case you're curious, your publisher provided your address to an associate of Frankie's, who, along with Marie, visited him. So eager to help out.

It turns out Frankie and I must postpone exploring your splendid itineraries until after the trial. We are so looking forward to a new identity in retirement. Any thoughts on a name? I'm so grateful to all you did for Frankie and me.

All our love, and Marie's too. We'll be in touch.

Yours forever,

Miss Shelley

A short time later, Byron opened the villa front door with one hand, the other shielding his eyes from the bright midday Tuscan sun. He could barely make out the silhouette on his doorstep. As his vision adjusted, he saw a woman in tennis sneakers holding a picnic basket and a bottle of Montepulciano. "Shall we do lunch?"

Byron shut the front door and heard a goat's shrill nasal bleat.