

# Heart Of A Monster

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Francis is led to a large space with bars and a lock and the same yellow-brown walls and floor as his cell. Francis himself couldn't have picked a better color for making one feel as bad as he wants his victim to feel. There's a guard posted outside this therapy room, on the other side of the bars, a table, and two prison-issue chairs in the room itself. The shrink shakes Francis' hand.

"I'm so glad you want to have therapy, Francis."

The joy in the shrink's face is palpable, intense, overpowering, whether the shrink knows it or not. Like a girl who's just been asked to the prom by the captain of the football team.

"Where would you like to begin?" the shrink says.

"I don't know," says Francis, in a dreamy, thoughtful tone that he's seen patients use in therapy movies. Then inspiration strikes. If this doesn't mesmerize and galvanize the shrink, nothing will.

"I hate myself the way I am. I hurt people for the fun of it, and I don't want to be doing it, but I can't help it."

Does the shrink fall for it? Francis checks the shrink's face face. Yes, he may be smart, he may be good, but he's also starving for...what, Francis doesn't know, but who cares. The shrink is hungry enough that his being smart won't matter. He's going to fall hard. Oh, boy!

"And I almost got killed," Francis continues, "because I was torturing another inmate, Logan, emotionally. I told him that I'd killed his dog, the dog he's training to be a service dog. That dog means everything to him; I can tell. When I said it, I saw his face go ashen and tears come to his eyes. He couldn't help himself. You can't cry here, you know, ever. And seeing those tears, I felt really glad, really great."

"Yeah, I can tell," says the shrink. "There's joy in your face just describing it."

"Yeah," says Francis, dreamily.

“So why stop doing it if it feels so wonderful?”

“Well, there’s the obvious,” said Francis. “If I keep doing it, I’ll get killed. I’ve already been attacked once. But I think there’s a reason to stop doing it that’s even deeper than that, Doc.”

Deeper than that. He’ll love that, Francis thinks.

And he does, leaning closer to Francis, eyes alight with incipient joy and hope.

“It feels great,” says Francis, “but not all the time. Sometimes when I’m in the middle of doing it, it’s—I don’t know how to say it—something comes over me.”

“Is it a feeling that comes over you?”

“No!” says Francis emphatically.

“Do you get an image when that something comes over you?”

The shrink’s voice is kind. Not in a phony way. Francis isn’t used to kindness, and it rattles him, slightly.

And he does see an image. He sees darkness, the color black. Blackness like death. A shroud encompassing him. He is feeling the image. Francis doesn’t feel, not even in pretend-genuine therapy!

“I don’t see any fucking image. Fuck off!”

The shrink does a double take. Mild shock and alarm cross his face. Francis remembers himself. Not yet. Don’t attack yet. You’re supposed to really give yourself to this therapy. Let the shrink into your psyche.

“I’m sorry, Doc,” Francis says with feigned humility. He can’t bring himself to call the shrink Lyle—too personal and friendly—or Dr. McKenzie—way too respectful. What do you call someone you want to ensnare with respect and gratitude and maybe even love, and ultimately torment? Perhaps “Doc.”

“I’m sorry too,” says Doc. “Maybe I pressed you too hard. It proves my point, though. There’s a cost to making a big change like this. Don’t underestimate the cost of working on something that big, that fundamental to who you are.”

“I’m up for it, Doc,” Francis says in as open-hearted a voice as he can muster. “Don’t you think that’s a good thing to be working on, Doc?”

“I think it’s a great thing to be working on. I can’t think of a better thing. But tell me. You said that emotionally torturing Logan was one reason the inmate George almost killed you. Was there another reason, you think?”

“My crime. They call me Cunt Stabber.”

“I see,” says Doc. “How do you like it when they call you that?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. I actually didn’t mean to kill her,” says Francis.

The shrink sits up straight.

Francis has blurted that out without thinking. Why did I do that? Because there is this nagging sense of...failure? On the one hand, murder is a badge of honor here. And Dad would be proud, wouldn’t he? On the other hand, here he is, at Clear Lake Penitentiary. This was never part of the plan. And worse, if the torture had really worked, I wouldn’t have needed to kill her. Francis has a nagging feeling about the crime, and he needs to get it on the table. A confession of sorts.

“What did you mean to do?” the shrink asks.

“Just pretend to be in love with her and then leave her. Abandon her. Love her, then break up with her, and leave her sobbing and utterly destroyed, the very foundations of herself in ruins. I didn’t mean to kill her.”

“Just kill her emotionally.”

“Exactly.”

“So what went through your mind when you did murder her?”

“Nothing, nothing went through my mind.”

“You didn’t mean to kill her. But maybe she said or did something right before you killed her that set you off and caused you to lose your cool and stab her. What was that, Francis? What did she say or do?”

Francis hasn’t thought about this since he stabbed Jane. He doesn’t want to remember what she said. He wants to black out the words for all time. But he does remember whether he wants to or not. “I feel sorry for you. You must be really wounded inside.” The bitch! How dare she!

“I don’t remember!” he snarls. Deep breath. “That’s enough for now,” adds Francis.

He takes another breath. Calm, stay calm, you want the shrink to walk away from here on cloud nine.

“You’re right,” says the shrink. “It is enough for now. I pushed you very hard. You pushed yourself hard. But I do have one more thing I’d like to try before our next meeting. A mission of sorts.”

“A mission?”

“Something that will help you commit to the task of not torturing others. Or decide that the task isn’t worth it.”

“What’s the mission?” he says with a touch of feigned excitement.

“Your mission is to write with your dominant hand all the reasons to keep on torturing others, and to write with your non-dominant hand all the reasons to stop. Let the two parts of you, the part that wants to torture and the part that wants to stop, argue with one another, have a dialog, and see what you come up with. No one else has to know. How does that sound?”

Weird. This guy is a weirdo.

“I know maybe it sounds a little weird. I see that in your face. Sometimes the weirdest tasks can take you to the farthest places, get you to your goal the fastest. This will help you fight for your goal, if you want it. Do you have any reservations that you want to share?”

“No, I’m good. I’ll try it.”

“Great! Good! Here’s some paper and a pen. Go to it.”

Now? Somehow Francis expected this to be something that he could do before his next session. Or rather, not do before his next session. Give the shrink his first small disappointment, the harbinger of things to come. Now he’s stuck. Or is he? He could write gibberish. “This is total crap!” he writes with his left hand, his dominant hand. He transfers the pen to his right, nondominant hand, and the words write themselves:

“I am tired, and I don’t want to be me anymore.”

Francis stares at the words. Where the hell did they come from? The words are horribly alive. A message from another planet, written in a totally unrecognizable hand. As if a Martian had invaded his head and hand and put pen to paper. They are not his words.

Wherever they came from, they need to go, now. He takes the pen and begins to black out the alien words.

“Wait!” cries the shrink. “Don’t erase that. That could be the most important thing you wrote.”

Francis ignores the shrink and writes with his left hand, “Torturing is me, and I love it. I won’t give it up for anything.”

With his right hand, he consciously writes, “But I want to change.” The right-handed words are phony. Perfect. He hands his document to Doc.

“Well, that’s a great start,” says the shrink. “Take it with you. You can add to it when you get bored. Instead of watching Orange Is the New Black. Great work today.”

The shrink’s voice brims with happiness. Francis imagines him walking out of the cell and doing cartwheels, dancing a jig, and glowing inside, thinking, He likes me. He really wants to change. I can make it happen. I’m a good therapist. He likes me. He likes me!

“Thanks, Doc. I really appreciate it.”

Francis carelessly-purposely drops the document on the floor.

The fun begins.

Francis wastes no time in scheduling another session. Let the shrink wonder about the exquisite contradictions: I want to change. I drop my paper on the floor as a subtle fuck you, but I schedule another appointment. Delicious, delicious! Almost worth going to prison to have this opportunity to victimize someone new, a different breed of person to study and master. To observe him as he wonders and hopes, hopes and crashes. To watch his face rise and fall.

“I don’t know why you invited me back, Francis,” says the shrink. “But I can tell you this: I offer my skill, expertise, discernment, and understanding to the task of helping you be the person you want to become and achieve your goals, if they are real. But if you subvert the process by pretending to embrace goals that you secretly have no intention of meeting, our relationship as client and therapist is over. Finito. How does that strike you?”

What does the shrink expect him to say? I love it? I’ll happily comply? “Go to hell! How

does that strike you?” That’s what Francis would say if he weren’t so in control.

“What makes you think my goals aren’t real?” Francis says innocently.

“Well, actually, I’m going to assume that they are real until proven otherwise. But since you asked...” Lyle hands Francis the dropped paper.

“Oh, that,” says Francis nonchalantly. “It was an accident.”

Lyle gives Francis the Look. “It wasn’t an accident that you dropped the paper before you left,” he says. “You meant to disrespect that assignment. But maybe it was an accident that you didn’t cross out this sentence completely.” He holds up the paper and points to the crossed-out part of Francis’ writing. Then he reads it out loud: “‘I am tired, and I don’t want to be me anymore.’ That, I suspect, is the real you.”

“I didn’t freaking write that!” blurts out Francis. He is drowning in fury, and fear so strong that he even half knows that it’s fear. He has an image of strangling the shrink. Forget the slow torture.

Lyle registers the fury and fear on Francis’ face and almost calls for a guard. But he is too excited not to go on, and he feels a surge of empathy that he hopes will carry him through and reach Francis somehow.

“You’re right,” Lyle says softly. “You didn’t write that. Or rather, 99.9 percent of you didn’t write that. It came from a very small, miniscule part of you.”

Francis smiles, coming back into the self that he knows and loves. His face is almost relaxed. “Can you tell me more about this ‘part of me’? What do you mean by ‘a part of me’?” he says, pleased that he sounds as earnest as he does.

“Well, I’m sure you’ve been told that you’ve been diagnosed with Antisocial Personality Disorder, a polite way of saying sociopath. What does that mean? To most shrinks it means that you don’t have a conscience, a moral compass, empathy, a heart, or, at best, that you left those things behind a long time ago. To me, it means that a conscience, a moral compass, empathy, a heart still live in you somewhere, and they constitute that tiny part of you that wrote, ‘I don’t want to be me anymore,’ even though the rest of you denies that you ever wrote it.”

Francis glares at Lyle. He can’t help it.

“Are you angry?” the shrink says softly. “Are you angry because I implied that you don’t have a conscience or moral compass, or are you angry because I suggested that you do and are afraid to acknowledge it?”

That is the question, the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question, and Francis couldn’t begin to answer it if he wanted to, and he emphatically does not want to. Primal fear arises in him and has to be put down. Kill him, kill him. He slowly stands and takes a step toward the shrink.

Lyle steps back, ready to call the guard. But no, shouting for the guard would give Francis too much power, too much satisfaction. He takes out an oval-shaped pager and flashes it pointedly at Francis.

Francis steps back. He bangs his chair pointedly and menacingly at Lyle. Francis doesn’t throw the chair and he doesn’t sit in it, but starts to pace around the room with big steps, swinging his arms, keeping his eyes on Lyle the whole time. This alarms Lyle somehow more than the menacing step or the banging of the chair. Time to leave.

“This session is over,” announces Lyle, making his way to the door.

“Damn right it’s over,” counters Francis. “You’re a fake shrink and a pussy, with the heart of a monster.” Good one! thinks Francis.

Francis registers the hurt on Lyle’s face. Excellent.

“Let me know if you really want to change.” Lyle manages to eke out the words, but there is no fight in them. He is stunned, filled with a paralyzing flash of light and an ache in the chest as if a gunshot or an explosion has gone off. He’s right. I do have the heart of a monster. I am a fake shrink.

The deflation, the shock and pain in his face are palpable and not lost on Francis, who does a quiet celebration. Got him! Good shot, Francis! You’re good. “You pretend to be all gentle and nice,” he adds, “but you don’t have a heart at all. You’re not even good enough to be a monster.”

Lyle takes a deep breath. Wait a minute, he thinks, that’s really over the top, even for a “monster” like me. He takes another breath, summons his invisible circle of support: his daughter Eliza, his best friend Jake, his own wisest voice. You’re a good therapist,

remember that. Back as his therapist self, it hits him: I'm seeing the master at work. I'm seeing him do what he does best.

"You're very good, Francis. You do know how to torture people. My hat goes off to you. It must be really hard to give up something you're so good at and have honed so well." He pauses for no more than a second. "I think I have given you some things to think about now that you know that I know your dropping the paper wasn't an accident."

Lyle is rewarded by a stunned look on Francis' own face that quickly hardens into an inscrutable mask.

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Lyle leaves the session thinking, The guy is a genius. He overdid it with "you're not good enough to be a monster." But how did he know that "heart of a monster" are the four words that would really get to me? He doesn't know about James, yet he knows. With an almost animal instinct.

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It takes Francis five days to ask for another session with the shrink, but in the end, he does. He could have rested on his laurels, celebrated the fleeting, tortured look on Doc's face when informed that he had "the heart of a monster." But there are other forces at work making another session too tempting.

Wanting to meet his "goal" of not torturing others isn't one of them, of course, but he is bored and—*forbidden word*, don't even think it—lonely.

Also, the kindness and nonjudgment that infuriate Francis get to him, too, on a visceral, nonverbal, *Mommiemommie* level. It is intolerable, unacceptable, this kindness, worth killing someone over, but he yearns for it, without being able, or willing, to admit it.

Maybe he can be my friend and my object of torture, at the same time.

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"So," says Lyle. "Are you here because you really do want to change?"

"Nah, I'm here because I like you, Doc." It is dangerously true, and on some level, Francis knows it.

"Am I the same Doc who has 'the heart of a monster'?" Lyle smiles.

"I'm sorry," says Francis.



“I’m sorry.” Do I believe that? wonders Lyle. Probably not, but it doesn’t matter because Lyle is thrown into another universe in which his older, stronger, fourteen-year-old brother James, who never apologized, did. For once. It was after James broke ten-year-old Lyle’s leg, which, in turn, was after Lyle found a secret message in James’ drawer. Lyle is frozen with the memory of it. The memory is so vital that, momentarily, the man in the jumpsuit sitting before him is both Francis and James, as if Lyle were in one of those dreams where one person can, illogically, be person A and person B.

“Apology accepted,” says Lyle warmly. “So, I’ve been transformed, magically, into a nice guy?”

“Yep.”

“How did that happen?”

“I don’t know,” says Francis, and the two, unaccountably, laugh together.

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“You have to have a goal,” says Lyle. “I can’t keep seeing you if you don’t have a goal. I have a lot of clients who need me and sincerely want therapy. I can’t afford to see you unless you genuinely commit to something.”

“Can’t we just talk?”

My God, this is like being with James. Grudgingly, gradually talking, becoming friends, after years of enmity. He can almost see the two of them, can in hand, by the lake, illicitly guzzling beer.

“We can. We are. But we can’t just shoot the breeze. There has to be something that you want out of it that is also something I can get behind. For instance, finding five more inmates to torture is not a goal I can endorse. But getting to know and strengthening the small part of you that doesn’t want to torture people is a goal I can get behind.”

“No!”

“I know it’s the last thing on earth you want to do, but we’ve got ninety-nine years in which to do it.” Lyle smiles.

“Fuck off!”

They sit in silence for a while. It’s not a murderous silence, so Lyle allows it.

“Well, I have a question, Doc. It, it...” It bothers me. But nothing ever bothers Francis, so he settles for reiterating, “It’s a question.”

“What’s your question, Francis? Lay it on me.”

The question is, “Would Dad be proud of me for actually killing somebody, or would he be ashamed of me for letting some stupid girl drive me to it? Was I strong or was I weak?” There’s no way in hell he’s going to put it that way to the shrink.

“Why do I care how I killed her?” he says with a shrug. It’s a shade less risky than the Father question.

“It’s eating you, huh? Want to say more?”

No, Francis does not want to “say more.” He has already said too much. He doesn’t know what he would say anyway. There is a blizzard in front of him, and, figuratively speaking, a sign that says Road Closed. Time to kill the shrink or come out with some other remark that is going to paralyze and torture his soul.

“Do you mind if I take a stab at it?” says Lyle. “You can always say I’m way off base. You want to be proud of the fact that you killed Jane. You’d feel accepted by the other inmates if you did, and you’d be happier with your own handiwork. Am I on track so far?”

Yeah, and there’s no way I’m going to tell you.

Lyle sees a glimmer of relief in Francis’ eyes and takes that as a “yes.”

“You are proud of what you did, in a sense, but something is bothering you. You didn’t plan to kill her; you killed her in a fit of rage, and maybe something she said or did drove you over the edge. If you had planned to kill her, you would feel better about it, stronger, more manly, more in control, even prouder of what you’d done.”

“Yeah, that’s it.” Francis regrets saying this as soon as it is out of his mouth. Damn, he made me tell the truth. But the shrink has a spell on him. He is actually getting the upper hand. He knows me. It is a wonderful-awful feeling to be known like this. Francis doesn’t want to be known. Shit. Still, there’s a small voice inside him that wants it badly. Don’t worry, you’ll torture him even harder later on.

“So, what was it that she said or did that, in an instant, made you kill her, without planning on it? What was it that enraged you so much that you had to kill her?”

Lyle sees the fury in Francis' face as Francis advances toward him, his hands encircled around an invisible neck, Lyle's. He needs a guard's intervention, for sure. But instead, thanks to some life-saving gut wisdom, he finds himself hollering, in his best parent voice, "Sit down, Francis!"

Francis glares at Lyle but sits.

"You don't ever have to tell me what she said. But you do have to have a goal that we can agree on and work toward. How about to get out of here sooner, rather than in ninety-nine years. That's your sentence, isn't it? I could help you escape, give you tips." Lyle smiles.

What is with this dude! thinks Francis, but he stays seated, hands at his side.

"But seriously," says Lyle, "strange as it sounds, I believe there's a reason you stabbed and killed that girl that makes sense to you. Even if it doesn't make sense to anybody else. If you know what it was that enraged you, then you can do something about it so that you don't kill unplanned. You can be in control."

Francis straightens up, his eyes incredulous. Lyle is a little incredulous himself. Wait a minute, what am I doing?

"Not that it's a great idea to go around killing people, in prison or elsewhere," says Lyle. "Absolutely not! But maybe you'll be happier if you can face what it was that made you so furious and master it, defeat it, rather than letting it win. You'll be stronger. You're a brave person, Francis, I know you are. You'll be happier and more in control if you can face this."

"Huh?"

"Say out loud what your victim said to you and deal with it."

"All right, all right! She said she felt sorry for me."

"Oh, man, that must have really gotten to you. No one wants people to feel sorry for them. Ick!"

"She said, 'You must be really wounded inside.'" He says this mimicking her. "The stupid cunt! She deserved it."

"Oh, I know, I know, that must have really enraged you. But, hey, let me let you in on a secret: Everybody is wounded inside."

“Not me!”

“Everybody. It’s part of being human.”

“No. It’s not.”

“Okay, let’s try this. Think of the toughest, meanest, most macho person you can possibly think of. Go ahead, do it now.”

It takes Francis less than a second to think of that person.

“I guarantee you someone or something hurt that person.”

“Yeah, it did.” Francis sees it in a flash. There was a terrible day when seven-year-old Francis caught his father naked. Francis had seen his father naked before, but this time something new caught his eye.

“What’s wrong with your nuts?” he queried.

Dad gave Francis a stricken look, as if Francis had shot him with a crossbow between the eyes or shot him in the heart. The look turned angry. “Nothing, nothing is wrong with me, nothing! Get out of here, get out!”

Francis’ whole body shook. There was something wrong; Francis could see it.

“I was born that way!” Dad called out the door. “With one testicle.” He muttered “testicle” so softly that Francis could hardly hear it. “And if you ever say anything again, I’ll...” He didn’t finish the sentence, but Francis finished it for him in his mind.

“I thought he was going to cut off one of mine, or both. I still have them both, though.” He smiles tightly.

“Me too,” says Lyle.

What? Jesus, what am I doing?! It’s okay for a therapist to disclose things about himself if it can help the client in some way, but this?

“That was not very professional of me.”

“It’s okay, Doc.”

No, it’s not okay.

“We’ll just keep it a secret. Pay me half your salary, and I won’t go blabbing, ‘The shrink has two balls, the shrink has two balls.’”

God, he really does sound like James. “No, it’s not worth it. It’s not a shocking enough

secret. A tenth of my salary, maybe.” He is rewarded by Francis’ smile. “But seriously, your father, even your father, was wounded big time. What if you made your goal to understand, to face, how you were wounded inside so that you don’t want to kill or torture anyone. So that you can get out of here someday way down the road, or at least have a better life in here.”

“I’ll think about it.”

No possible way, adds Francis to himself.

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Lyle is almost out the door when he hears a soft “Doc?”

He turns around.

“Did you ever kill anyone?”

Lyle freezes. Oh, my God.

“You can tell me.” Christ, the client turned into a shrink.

Lyle’s whole body, from belly to throat, is pulsing with, heaven help him, yearning. He, or at least a part of him, wants to tell Francis, “I killed my brother. I was ten. I stabbed him with a kitchen knife. That, or I did something to him that was even worse than murder; I’m not sure which.”

He longs to do this. He absolutely Can. Not. Do. This. Why the hell does he want to? Draw your boundaries. Remind him that he’s the client; you’re the therapist. Do the right thing. The “right thing to do” is to give him a mini-tutorial about the value and limits of the therapist-client relationship. But that would turn off Francis like crazy. He can just hear Francis saying, “Spare me the shrink bullshit.” Just when he’s doing so well, just when we’re doing so well, breaking down walls. It would slam the door on their relationship, which maybe should end, but Lyle can’t bring himself to end it.

“Really, you can tell me.”

“No,” says Lyle softly. But he hears the hesitation in his own voice and knows that Francis hears it too.

“Aw, come on,” Francis says teasingly.

Lyle considers saying, “Everybody wants to kill somebody somewhere along the line.”

Then, a stroke of inspiration. “Did you ever love somebody, Francis?”

“No!”

“Aw, come on,” Lyle wheedles. “Don’t worry, I won’t make you write it down. Think about it. I double dare you.”

“Go to hell.”

“All right, all right, I’ll tell you my secret. If you must know, I was a contract killer before I became a shrink.”

“Go to hell,” Francis says again, but it’s a happier, James-like “go to hell.” □