

A QUESTION OF BALANCE



For
Dr. Steven Gold,
a single patient
may unearth
the truth behind
a murder—
and himself.

a novel by
DAVID S. SHERMAN

A Question of Balance

*A thought-provoking murder mystery probing the uneasy space
where psychology, philosophy, and religion collide.*

*For Dr. Steven Gold, a single patient may unearth
the truth behind a murder—and himself.*

*A Question of Balance is a cerebral and emotionally charged mystery
that examines the fragile terrain of guilt, belief, and the cost of self-knowledge.*

A Question of Balance is a philosophical psychological murder mystery exploring the unraveling mind of therapist Steven Gold after an enigmatic new patient reveals unsettling truths.

Blending the taut intensity of a therapy thriller with the layered depth of literary fiction and the moral complexity of a murder investigation, the novel follows Dr. Steven Gold, a seasoned psychotherapist who prides himself on rationality and control—until a new patient walks through his door. Samael Light is articulate, self-assured, and disturbingly perceptive. What begins as an unusual case quickly becomes something far more personal, as Light begins unearthing truths Gold has long buried.

When a respected rabbi is discovered murdered—his body posed in a crucifixion—Gold is drawn into the investigation. His connection to the victim is hazy, but troubling. And as the sessions with Light deepen, Gold finds himself caught in a tightening web of memory, guilt, and suspicion.

With echoes of *The Silent Patient* and *The Secret History*, A Question of Balance explores the fragile boundary between analysis and obsession—and how even a mind trained to heal can lose sight of itself.



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David S. Sherman

PRE-PUBLICATION PREVIEW ONLY

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

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A Note to the Reader

At the start of each chapter, you'll find a series of epigraphs—quotes I've drawn from literature, psychology, philosophy, and scripture. Some are familiar. Others may surprise you.

These are not required reading. But for those who choose to linger, they offer hints, echoes, and emotional resonance—signposts through the inner terrain of this story.

Skip them if you wish. Savor them if you're so inclined.

Like therapy, this novel invites you to take what's useful—and leave the rest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DISCLAIMER

This is a work of fiction. All characters, dialogues, and scenarios are products of the author's imagination.

While this novel engages deeply with theological, psychological, and philosophical themes, it is not intended to promote, mock, or oppose any particular religious or spiritual tradition. The views expressed by its characters reflect their internal conflicts and narrative arcs—not the beliefs of the author.

Some reinterpretations of biblical stories, spiritual symbols, or religious figures may challenge conventional interpretations. These elements are intended to provoke reflection, not disrespect.

Citations attributed to Dr. Steven Gold, as well as journals such as *The Journal of Existential Psychodynamics*, are entirely fictional and used for literary effect.

This book is intended to spark thought—not to cause offense.

*To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God. the Human Imagination*
— William Blake, *Milton: A Poem* (1804–1810)

A man must consider what a blindman's-bluff is this game of conformity.
— Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance* (1841)

*I said that we must close our eyes to truly see.
We must become aware of reality.
But you said horses lose their races when
Their eyes are free—
And you're gone.*
— Dave King & Asgard, lyrics from *You're Gone*

*I know it's crazy. Impossible.
But... what if?*
— Steven Gold, *A Question of Balance* (2026)

PREFACE

This novel's seed took root in 1978, during the early days of my psychotherapy career. That summer, I worked the night shift in a locked, acute-care psychiatric facility. One night, around 2:00 a.m., I made my usual rounds—quiet halls, dimly lit—no horror-movie moans, just reverent silence. Hushed—most patients restrained, physically or chemically.

I opened one door—and froze. A young woman—perhaps roused by the hallway light or the sound of the latch—shot upright in her bed. Her wrists jerked—restraints clanking like chains in a tomb. Her black hair lashed across her face as she thrashed, silhouetted by a dim nightlight behind her.

“Get the fuck out!” she screamed. “I am the devil.”

Whether she was delusional, hallucinating, possessed, or the devil herself—I'll never know. But something in her voice—some fusion of fury and certainty—lodged in my chest and never left. It wasn't just what she said—it was that she believed it.

That encounter—and another, years later, with a young man convinced he was God—haunted me.

Not because I believed them, but because they believed themselves.

This novel grew from that spark.

David S. Sherman
August 2025
Beverly Hills, California

INVOCATION

The Struggle

*Nay, Prometheus—keep thy stolen flame.
Nor offer me thy embers that burn cold.
Dark as Death's breath, crushed cold within his grip.
Thy rage against Jove's capricious decree,
Thy struggle ignitest a fire in me—
A blaze no hand could gift, nor god could quell.
—David S. Sherman, *The Struggle* (2025)*

DEDICATION

PROLOGUE

Beginnings are always messy.

— *John Galsworthy, The Eldest Son (1912)*

The beginning of wisdom is silence.

— *Pirkei Avot 3:13, Mishnah (c. 200 CE)*

*The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and
the unreasonable silence of the world.*

— *Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus (1942)*

PROLOGUE

[PRESENT DAY]

Behind silver-rimmed glasses, his wide, unblinking eyes reflected the golden shimmer of the synagogue's Ner Tamid—the eternal flame above the ark.

Flickers danced across his pupils, as if he were watching something no one else could see.

His lips parted slightly, caught between thought and speech—holding back a revelation too sacred—or too dangerous—to name.

The familiar lines of his face—once lit with warmth and wisdom—were unreadable now. His expression offered neither peace nor resistance—only the quiet gravity of surrender.

The silence hung heavy in the sanctuary—thick with waiting. The kind of hush that used to precede Rabbi Shapiro's slow unraveling of hidden meanings—or the solemn calm before his graveside eulogies.

But this silence stretched—past the pause of reverence, into something unspoken.

This was a silence Rabbi Shapiro would never break. Whatever thoughts he held would remain unspoken—forever. Or perhaps another would speak them—at his own interment.

Flash—light split the darkness like a wound.

A police photographer's camera snapped, fracturing the

stillness with mechanical precision.

Each burst of light exposed the sacrilege—before the darkness, jealous and ancient, swallowed it whole.

Flash

Hi pale skin and thick white beard glowed faintly in the dim light—haloed by the blood pooling beneath his head, like a medieval painting of the saints.

Flash

He lay cruciform, arms flung wide—not in defense, but offering—as though offered for sacrifice.

Flash

His salmon-colored linen shirt—still neatly pressed, its row of wooden buttons untouched—rested over dark jeans, a strangely serene counterpoint to the carnage below.

The shirt had ridden up, exposing a pallid belly—the same stark white as his spotless Stan Smiths.

Flash

His white yarmulke—knocked loose in the struggle—lay nearby.

Just inches away, its once-white silk turned crimson—drinking from the slow, red stream winding down the gray-carpeted sanctuary steps.

Flash

On the wall behind the bimah, dark red symbols pulsed to life with each flash—crude, finger-drawn shapes that seemed summoned, then ashamed—more ancient than accidental. They vanished—

recoiling into shadow, as if unwilling to be seen.

For a moment, they left a ghosted afterimage—tears trailing from the shapes, as if the wall itself were weeping.

CHAPTER ONE

*You can't connect the dots looking forward;
you can only connect them looking backwards.
So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future.*
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know.

— Rene Daumal, *Mount Analogue: A Novel of Symbolically Authentic Non-Euclidean Adventures in Mountain Climbing* (1952)

In my experience, lust only ever leads to misery.
— Chrissie Hynde, interview, *The Guardian*, 2014

*Unexpressed emotions will never die.
They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways.*
— Sigmund Freud, attributed paraphrase of psychoanalytic theory

The only thing worse than not getting what you want is getting what you want.
— Steven Gold, therapy session transcript

-1-

Lust

[THREE DAYS EARLIER]

Fuck. Just leave.

Steven Gold froze—like he'd glimpsed Medusa herself.

Rigid and barely breathing, he feared even the faintest chair squeak might betray him in his office.

After two minutes of pounding the reception door and stabbing the Ring doorbell, Jane Sanders finally reached her limit.

She jabbed the button just once more. Same grating chime, like a dentist's drill.

She screamed, pounding the door with both fists.

Finally, she whirled and kicked the door with her heel—a final, furious concession of defeat.

"This isn't over, you fucker! I know you're in there!"

"You can't hide forever. You'll be sorry—I swear!"

She stomped toward the elevators. The low hum of the AC filled the silence.

Still motionless, he shifted only his eyes.

When she finally vanished into the elevator bay, he exhaled—long and shaky. *Fatal Attraction* flashed through his mind.

Thank God I never had a pet rabbit.

She's right. I can't avoid her forever. And Rachel's

already suspicious.

Even in grainy video, she moved with runway grace.

She wore the look he remembered: a sheer Tom Ford blouse, low-rise Calvin jeans, chocolate Hermès Jumping boots.

Still elegant. Still dangerous. Still in control.

The runway never left her. She moved like she owned it.

Like riding a bike—muscle memory dressed in leather and silk.

He could hear the echo of her boots through the iPad speakers. Onscreen, her New York strut remained fierce. Even in fury, she was captivating.

He devoured the footage—scrolling, zooming—like forbidden fruit too sweet to resist.

He froze her mid-glare.

He zoomed in—remembering the silk of her hair, the faint ghost of *Joy* by Jean Patou haunting his senses.

Her face—full screen now—filled his vision.

He stared, mesmerized. Then slowly zoomed out, savoring how her hair curved around her cheeks and slid down her shoulders—nuzzling the blouse’s collar like the tease before a kiss.

She was no longer the coke-thin waif of her early days. Her once-pristine skin now carried the imprint of life—sun, smoke, and hazy nights. Time had softened her—but her bone structure always commanded attention.

Her tall frame whispered fashion model—elegant, erotic, impossible.

With each fist strike on the door, he imagined flashbulbs freezing catwalk poses—bright strobe memories triggered by rage. But now he noticed the fine wrinkles, the age spots on her long, elegant fingers—clenched in fists.

Behind the locked door, her murderous blue eyes and wild silver hair thrilled him. Dangerous. Erotic. Hypnotic.

He paused again—capturing her face at a strange angle. One eye slightly higher than the other, one lip subtly fuller. The asymmetry unsettled him—and excited him.

She wasn't twenty-one anymore. But at fifty-one, she remained—undeniably—a perfect ten. That ineffable "X" factor hadn't faded—the magnetic pull that once crowned her the "It Girl" of the '90s.

Crazy as hell—but she's still got it.

He zoomed out—revealing her lithe frame, head to toe.

That round, toned ass. Jesus.

He lingered. Then zoomed in tight.

He panned slowly—holding on the ghosted outline of her small breasts beneath the sheer white fabric. He imagined her angry, erect nipples pressing against the fabric, straining for visibility.

Arousal stirred—familiar, unwelcome.

I'm such a moron—I never should've told Rachel I liked that blouse. She always suspected. After Thanksgiving, she said, "I see the way you two look at each other."

Delete it. Now.

He hovered over the trash icon. Hesitated. Then tapped: "DELETE VIDEO."

He exhaled—deep, relieved. But the thrill had already encoded itself. Arousal tinged with guilt—like a scar that still flinched when touched.

Disaster averted. For now.

Something's off. Vertigo? Get a grip.

He reopened Spotify and resumed Haydn's Cello *Concerto No. 1 in C major*—his *Romantic Literature* playlist.

Jane never liked Haydn—"too predictable," she'd say.

Gold needed that order now. Its serenity poured into the silence—poised, symmetrical, calming. Yo-Yo Ma's cello—mellow, unhurried—spilled like watercolor over still water, tinting his thoughts in hues he hadn't felt in years.

Gold exhaled, then shut the iPad. The magnetic click sealed it.

He leaned back and returned to his leather-bound Byron's *Cain: A Mystery*. The page still dog-eared from Jane's intrusion.

He re-read Cain's soliloquy from Act I, Scene I:

Cain. (solus.). And this is
Life!—Toil! and wherefore should I toil?—because
My father could not keep his place in Eden.
What had I done in this?—I was unborn,
I sought not to be born; nor love the state
To which that birth has brought me. Why did he
Yield to the Serpent and the woman? or,
Yielding, why suffer? What was there in this?
The tree planted, and why not for him?
If not, why place him near it, where it grew
The fairest in the centre? They have but
One answer to all questions, "t was his will,
And he is good."—How know I that? Because
He is all-powerful, must all-good, too, follow?

I judge but by the fruits—and they are bitter—
Which I must feed on for a fault not mine.
Whom have we here?—

BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ.

His Apple Watch buzzed—yanking him from Byron and into
the dull gravity of now.

His next patient would arrive in minutes.

*Byron—what a waste. Dying so young. What great
thoughts did your death deprive us of?*

*Some people are born into judgment. Others just wait
around for it.*

Rational men still do irreversible things...

And sometimes, they know before they do it.

CHAPTER TWO

*I cannot make you understand.
I cannot make anyone understand what is happening inside me.
I cannot even explain it to myself.*
— Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (1915)

*I have wandered out of myself in the pursuit of an ideal; and now I am
nothing.*
— Samuel Taylor Coleridge, letter to Thomas Poole (1797)

“But the Emperor has nothing at all on!” said a little child.
— Hans Christian Andersen, *The Emperor’s New Clothes* (1837)

*Bad faith is thus neither exactly a lie nor exactly a truth. It is to lie to
oneself, but lying to oneself presupposes that the truth is present within
oneself. The liar is thus conscious of the truth he is hiding. Bad faith is
distinct from a lie in that it seeks to avoid the truth about one’s freedom and
responsibility.*
— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943)

-2-

Mauvaise Foi

BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ.

Gold pressed “Stop,” annoyed at yet another interruption—by time, by thought, by anything. He’d been absorbed in the injustice of Cain’s punishment—for a sin not truly his. Adam and Eve’s fall.

He sighed and set the book aside, mind already drifting.
My shoes aren’t as comfortable as they look.

He lifted his feet, resting his Santoni Uniqua loafers on the edge of the ebony desk. As he leaned back into his black leather Eames chair, striped Brunello Cucinelli socks peeked from beneath tailored cuffs.

Shit—my freshman year at Harvard cost less than these loafers. And the dorm bed was more comfortable, too.

Erasmus wrote, ‘vestis virum facit’—clothes make the man. Twain, of course, one-upped him: ‘Clothes do not merely make the man; the clothes are the man.’ So I keep playing the part.

At \$300 an hour, the costume damn well better fit.

He exhaled through pursed lips, dog-eared the yellowed page, and reached for his iPad.

Shit. There it is again—a flickering edge, a blooming blind spot. Aura? Migraine? Not stroke—it’s moving.

He paused his Romantic Literature playlist and queued up

Pink Floyd. *Comfortably Numb* began, low and steady.

*Hello, hello, hello
Is there anybody in there?
Just nod if you can hear me
Is there anyone home?*

He chuckled, recalling the moment at his office door barely twenty minutes earlier.

Ha. How fitting.

As David Gilmour's guitar solo floated thorough the office, Gold looked around—content, almost serene. He took pride in the office—how polished it looked, how perfectly it mirrored him.

He especially liked the photo from last month's *Atlantic* profile—*Psychotherapy in America: A Question of Balance*—where he sat behind his imposing desk, hair perfect, tie expensive.

He took two Advil from his desk drawer and swallowed them dry.

Just in case.

He picked up the small statuette he'd placed that morning, turning it gently in his hands.

Wish I'd had this for the Atlantic shoot. Would've balanced the desk—made a nice counterpoint to the sandstone.

The statuette—a gift from a world-renowned archaeologist he'd treated for postpartum depression—was an earthenware Sumerian goddess. She'd left him the latest issue of the *Israel Exploration Journal*, featuring an article on her most recent dig.

The relic—either Astarte or Asherah—had likely been smuggled from southern Iraq. He ran his thumb gently over the goddess's breasts—nipples worn smooth, but still discernible.

Was she offering them—or caressing herself?

He reflected on how the “ideal” female form had shifted so drastically through the ages.

Back and forth like a pendulum—fat, thin, fat, thin. Even pendulums slow eventually—settling into a compromise.

He set the figure down next to the greeting card with large ornate handwriting that read “Thanks for curing me, Dr. Gold!”

“Cured”... ha. She wasn’t broken—just overwhelmed.

“Life” is a spectrum disorder—we’re all fucked up. No one gets cured—we just get by.

Yeah. “Normal” is being abnormal—just not too often.

He slid the card in his top desk drawer.

First child. She has no idea how much more complicated her whole life just became.

Hell—that’s how I can afford these shoes. She’ll be back.

His eyes wandered to the sandstone plaque—

Just walk a mile in his moccasins

Before you abuse, criticize and accuse.

If just for one hour, you could find a way

To see through his eyes, instead of your own muse.

— Mary T. Lathrap

The plaque had been a gift from Rick Hanlon, his old grad school professor—the one who once said, ‘You’ve got a sharp mind and good instincts, but don’t forget who you work for.’

He’d quietly bristled at the backhanded compliment. Why he’d recently unearthed it and set it front and center—unclear, even to him.

A faint pressure rose in his throat.

Ugh. Nausea again. It’ll pass. It usually does.

No one has any idea what I'm going through.

Lately, Gold had felt unsteady—even about things he'd long believed resolved. He wasn't as certain—so cocksure—as he once was.

People rarely change—but they do grow. Not everyone's a redwood. Some twist like oaks, reaching for light however they can. Old oaks—gnarled, meandering, crooked—can be just as majestic. Maybe more so.

Do we fault the oak for winding its way around a fence, chasing light? Can we ever truly define it—at fifty, or even five hundred?

Change is inevitable—rarely sudden, never simple.

Decisions feel final. Binary. But they rarely are. Some are carved in stone. Others in sandstone. All crumble eventually—like Ozymandias.

Hmm. Maybe some of this belongs in a poem—something on change.

He set the sandstone back on his desk. Truth was, he'd never walk in anyone else's shoes—comfortable or not. That wasn't his style.

He chuckled, glancing down at his loafers.

Most people don't know how to choose shoes—let alone how to wear them. Sometimes, you sacrifice function for form.

He stood six feet tall, with stylishly cut gray hair and a neatly trimmed beard. His slender, handsome face was defined by pensive gray-blue eyes—framed not only by wire-rimmed glasses, but by deep crow's feet.

Those who knew him understood—they weren't smile lines.

He wore a tailored navy Zegna suit and a turquoise Brioni tie—Rachel's gift for his forty-fifth.

He considered himself funny, though most of his jokes were internal. They were location jokes—you had to be there. And 'there'

was inside Gold's head: jokes for an audience of one. Too clever. Too obscure. Lost on others—so he kept them to himself.

When he did share, close friends would politely laugh—out of kindness, or obligation. Most didn't appreciate Gold's quirky, esoteric humor.

He had a reputation as a stick in the mud—though one close friend joked the stick was “up his ass.”

Outside his inner circle, Gold came off as formal—officious, even cold. Patients called him intelligent, well-read, cultured—but robotic.

At times, he came off as a know-it-all—holier-than-thou, tinged with a God complex.

He wasn't completely devoid of emotion, but he insisted on self-restraint—so as not to encourage the “the wrong type of transference which would compromise the therapeutic process.”

Whatever the case, Steven Gold seemed to possess a golden touch. He was wildly successful. Was it brilliance—or mass delusion, *folie à plusieurs*?

It hardly mattered. As people liked to shrug: *it is what it is*.

Gold had been a wunderkind—a Rhodes Scholar who deferred Oxford to complete his undergrad at Harvard, his master's at USC, and his PhD at UCLA—all by twenty-six.

At twenty-seven, he studied late 18th-century Romantic literature at Oxford's St. Peter's College while interning with Dr. Richard Carlyle at Cambridge's Gonville and Caius.

He returned to Los Angeles to practice and teach at UCLA, where he met—and eventually married—Rachel.

Over time, Gold built a lucrative private practice, serving celebrities and world-class athletes.

His office—on the top floor of a Wilshire Boulevard high-rise across from UCLA—had a modest reception area that opened into a spacious suite, complete with a discreet rear exit so patients could leave unseen.

He installed a Ring video doorbell and smart lock at the reception entry. He often worked late—seeing patients or writing—so the door was always locked.

The office was spacious, its gray sisal wallpaper and bright white-framed window offering a sweeping view of the Los Angeles Country Club. Apart from a few of Rachel's pieces, the office mirrored Gold's personality—though some might say it lacked one. It was sharp, pristine—curated like a real estate listing. Almost sterile—except for the art.

Any personality it had came from that visual cacophony—paintings, sculptures, and framed prints jostling like guests at an overbooked salon. Each piece seemed to compete for attention, the chaos curated—perhaps intentionally.

The few items atop his desk and bookshelf credenza were deliberately curated—to spark imagination and provoke conversation. In one corner stood a freestanding sculpture of a nude girl—touching herself. It raised a few eyebrows—but he loved it. He called it a conversation starter.

The photographer had insisted on removing it during the Atlantic shoot. Rachel had agreed—she never liked the piece. She hadn't even heard of the artist. She'd challenged him when he bought

it. “Steven, don’t you think it’s a bit sexist—for a therapist’s office? It might make some of your female patients uncomfortable.”

“That’s exactly the point,” he said. Of course he was attracted to the piece—that’s why she called it ‘Galatea.’

Gold wasn’t an introvert—his ego wouldn’t allow that—but he was reserved, disliking the idea of “putting himself out there.” He enjoyed what he called “running therapy”—it let him remain firmly in control. He felt safest behind the bulk of his oversized desk—what Rachel mockingly called “Hadrian’s Wall.”

On the other side of the “wall” sat his Harvard College captain’s chair: cherry-finished top, satin black body, the Veritas crest shining from the back. Behind it, resting on a faded Serapi Persian rug, was a Schumacher toile club chair, angled toward its matching couch.

Gold’s gaze drifted to the books lined neatly across his ebony credenza. He loved this little library—each spine bore personal weight.

Know a man by his books.

There was no system. He’d often be reading two, three—sometimes four—at once. After reading—more often rereading—he slid each book wherever space allowed. He took pride in the collection, convinced its authors would be flattered to find themselves shelved in Gold’s private library.

When not running therapy or playing tennis, he was usually reading in his black leather Eames chair—or drifting through used bookstores, hunting odd or evocative titles.

He read only physical books, scoffing at electronic ones:

“That’s not how a book is meant to be used. You have to feel it. Smell it. Hear the page as you turn it.”

In truth, Gold enjoyed displaying his library—it reflected his intellect. Occasionally, he’d share a quote with a patient—but mostly, he reveled in showcasing his erudition through epigrams and aphorisms he found apropos.

He’d asked the Atlantic photographer to increase the f-stop—just enough to keep all the book titles sharp in the background.

His four-tiered bookshelf offered a glimpse into who Gold believed he was—and who he needed others to believe. His collection was eclectic—a bridge spanning psychology, theology, poetry, philosophy, and pulp.

The top shelf of the credenza displayed an eclectic assembly of titles—

Affirmation and Reality; Gestalt Therapy Verbatim; Being and Caring; The Varieties of Religious Experience; The Mask of Sanity; Disorders of Sexual Desire; Dune Messiah; The Dissociative Mind; The Interpretation of Dreams; Prometheus Unbound; Self-Reliance and Other Essays; Creature and Creator; Crime and Punishment; The Four Horsemen; The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge; The Mind Parasites; The Unconscious Observed; Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre; The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy; The Structure of Scientific Revolutions; Cluster Headache: Mechanisms and Management; The Prince; Faust; William Blake: The Complete Illuminated Books; Galatea 2.0; Mythology; The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell; Moses and Akhenaten; The Portable Atheist; Being and Nothingness; The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature; Miles of Heart;

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus; Ishmael; Fear and Trembling; The Impressionists; Gulliver's Travels; The Master and Margarita; An Atheist's Guide to Reality; Meditations on First Philosophy; Flatland; Nausea; The Art of Dreaming; The God Delusion; Sapiens; and Amador: In Which a Father Addresses His Son on Questions of Ethics.

While the bottom shelf showcased held his own works—multiple copies, meticulously arranged.

Eulogies; The Little Boy Who Wouldn't Go to Sleep; The Image Teleporter; Bark; Trees; Dave King & Asgard: Chronology; Solip; DietWrite; ...and his infamously overwrought Harvard psychology honors thesis: A Phenomenological and Neurophysiological Study of Schizophrenic Hallucinations, with an Original Hypothesis for the Etiology and Pathogenesis of Schizophrenia Based on the Mesolimbic Dopamine System. Then came his master's thesis: Schizophrenic Hallucinations: A Psychodiagnostic Tool? And finally, a hardbound copy of his doctoral dissertation: The Psychosocial Correlates of Adolescent Substance Abuse.

Substance Abuse... an entire year, wasted.

Gold clenched his jaw and exhaled through his nose, remembering when his doctoral advisor quit—after reading only the abstract.

“I will not allow you to associate my name with this—travesty! You're not just condoning—you're promoting teen drug

abuse,” his advisor had barked.

“Bullshit,” Gold snapped. “You didn’t even read it. I’m hypothesizing that recreational ‘ab/users,’ as I call them, score higher on self-concept and life satisfaction than non-users or abusers. They’re the ones who feel accepted. They belong. Statistically, they are the norm. These days, it’s the strict abstainers who stand out as the real deviants.

He’d replayed the scene a hundred times, never quite admitting it was displaced aggression.

Unconsciously, he’d been angry at himself—masking an obsessive fascination with psychedelics beneath academic language. It was his craving—tempered by fear—to step inside an alternate world: Castaneda’s *A Separate Reality*.

A strict non-user himself, Gold knew he was one of the deviants his study had labeled. He rationalized his abstinence: he didn’t want to be one of *them*—the blissfully ignorant lemmings.

He’d been thoroughly indoctrinated—imprisoned in a parentally sanctioned, well-mannered world. He hadn’t realized those outbursts—then or since—were his unconscious self, rattling the bars of his psychic cage. He’d always wrestled with ambivalence.

Maybe—if he’d been calmer—more honest, more mature, he could’ve convinced his advisor the research had value. And maybe he wouldn’t have wasted a full year recruiting a replacement.

He sometimes wondered: how would his life have been different if he’d finished his doctorate a year earlier?

Bradbury might call it too many butterflies. Who’s to say

where that path would have led?

He gave himself a pass—clinging to the old refrain: I wouldn't change a thing. Even if he could.

No regrets... I'm still here.

He pretended that simply calling them “mistakes” made them truth—as if naming alone could absolve him. Thinking too long on it made him nauseous. It was more truth than he liked. But he was beginning to understand.

My stomach's growling. I shouldn't have skipped lunch.

He glanced again at the statuette—his quiet proof that therapy, sometimes, actually worked. He needed the reassurance—especially now. In moments like this, no diploma, no certificate, no bookshelf or glowing profile could silence the questions. Or the doubts.

'Mauvaise foi.' Sartre's phrase. Barnes softened it to 'bad faith.' But Kaufmann nailed it: 'self-deception.'

You can't truly deceive yourself. You can only distract—for a while.

Freud knew Shakespeare was right: “truth will out.” If not consciously, then neurotically.

Ha. That's why I'll always have work.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, as Pink Floyd's *Brain Damage* drifted from his iPad speakers.

*The lunatic is in my head
The lunatic is in my head
You raise the blade
You make the change
You rearrange me 'til I'm sane
You lock the door
And throw away the key
There's someone in my head, but it's not me*

BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ.

His Apple Watch buzzed and vibrated—another interruption.

6:30. Five minute warning. New patient: Samael Light.

Samael? Had to be a typo.

He couldn't remember who had referred Light—or when. He had a few minutes to text Rachel—to let her know he'd be late again.

He always had new patients complete both the Suicide Probability Scale and the Psychological Screening Inventory. The forms only took twenty minutes, but new patients were always anxious. And he hated having to cut them off when their fifty minutes ran out.

Some first interviews had stretched past two hours.

When the floodgates open, you steer the boat. You don't close the dam.

He pulled a new patient folder, clipboard, and leather-bound pad from the top left drawer.

If I call, she'll ask questions. No time. Better to text.

[Typing]

Sorry Rach, I have to run a new patient so I'll be late. Just eat and watch Rogue's Gallery without me. I'll grab something later. I'll see it on DVR. Sorry. Lo

RING CHIME

The Ring chime cut in, the video flashing onto his iPad and interrupting his text.

A dark blur flickered on his screen. He tapped the mic, then the unlock icon. “Come on in and have a seat... be with you in just a sec.”

He closed Spotify, straightened his tie, popped a Tic-Tac.

The office lights flickered—twice like a nervous blink.
Not a rolling brownout I hope.

He walked toward the reception room door. A ripple—something between dizziness and dread—passed through him. His fingers twitched on the doorknob.

Jumped up too fast?

He released the doorknob.

PVC, probably. Not Afib. Right?

He raised his wrist. Clicked the ECG icon.

Normal sinus rhythm.

A thin, strikingly handsome man—mid-to-late thirties, jet-black hair—sat, just left of the ficus, thumbing the reception room copy of the *Atlantic*. He recognized a faint scent of Paco Rabanne’s *1 Million Luxe Edition* cologne.

Whoa, that’s what LeRoi Davis wears. That stuff’s over \$50,000 a bottle. Not an NBA star—more like a model. Or an actor.

He was wearing a black Armani suit with an exquisite black and burgundy-patterned Hermès tie. A matching pocket square completed the look—far too formal for a therapy session.

As Light looked up, he caught a flicker—something in his eyes—triggered something oddly familiar but foreign.

Déjà vu. Not mere familiarity—something primal. Like the mark of Cain: invisible, but unmistakable.

As he approached, he caught himself—somewhat sheepishly—noticing the enviable gleam on Light’s black Prada crocodile-effect leather Oxfords.

He gave a quick, disappointed glance at his own shoes.

“Dr. Steven Gold,” he said. “Come in.”

CHAPTER THREE

*All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered;
the point is to discover them.*

— Galileo Galilei, *Il Saggiatore* (1623)

There are two ways to be fooled.

One is to believe what isn't true;

the other is to refuse to believe what is true.

— Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard* (1847)

The devil is a better theologian than any of us and is a devil still.

— A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (1948)

Some lies are easier to believe than the truth.

— Frank Herbert, *Dune Messiah* (1969)

Man is not what he thinks he is, he is what he hides.

— André Malraux, *Anti-Memoirs* (1967)

-3-

Truth Hides In Shadows

Light stood—tall, six-foot-three—and let the magazine fall to the table with effortless control. As he stepped inside, his deep blue eyes met Gold—unsettlingly calm. He extended a manicured hand. A thick gold ring on his middle finger caught the light—etched with symbols Gold couldn't quite place. Writing, perhaps.

“Hello, I’m Samael Light. Samuel—or Sam—if that’s easier. Pleasure to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too, Samuel.”

His handshake was firm. Steady. No hesitation.

A cold thread slipped down Gold’s spine.

Shit. COVID again?

Gold turned toward his desk, expecting Light to take the captain’s chair—as everyone always did. But Light strolled to the club chair instead, angled it slightly—just enough to break the room’s symmetry—and sat, crossing one leg with the ease of someone used to commanding rooms.

Gold stiffened. That chair wasn’t part of the choreography. The office was designed to frame him—diplomas and credentials in full view. A throne behind the desk. Control. Boundaries. Patients belonged outside Hadrian’s Wall.

And Light had just crossed it.

What the fuck?

“You’ve curated some striking pieces, Dr. Gold.”

Gold grabbed his Hermès Ulysse notebook—a gift from Rachel—along with the intake folder, and crossed the room, clipboard in hand.

He perched—awkwardly—on the couch’s edge and stole a glance at Light.

I never sit on the couch.

Is this a power move?

“Thanks. My wife says it’s too gloomy for a psychologist’s office.”

“Not at all,” Light replied. “I find it... stimulating.”

His gaze drifted across the diplomas, prints, and sculptures—lingering on the cluttered shelf with deliberate interest.

“Isn’t that Asherah—the old Canaanite goddess?” Light asked, nodding toward the statuette.

Gold softened—genuinely impressed. “Yes, it is. Keen eye. A gift from a patient.”

Impressive.

“Fertility goddess, right? Let me guess—gift from someone struggling to conceive? Clearly a success story. I’m just a mythology nerd.”

Most patients wouldn’t catch that.

He's perceptive.

“Ah—Nebuchadnezzar and Newton. I’ve spent hours in the Blake rooms at the Tate, soaking them in. And Moore’s *Woman Seated in the Underground*, yes? Thought so.”

He gestured toward the wall print.

“Pollock—fantastic piece.”

He glanced at the sculpture. “That Michelangelo—one of the *Slaves*—perfect choice for a psychologist’s office.”

Okay... this guy knows his shit.

I might actually enjoy this one.

“That bust—the woman in the T-shirt—she looks so... serene. Peaceful. Like nirvana. Very calming.”

He smiled. “I love how art draws emotion out of you.”

He looked across the room.

“That oil painting—who’s the artist?”

Rachel.

“I don’t recognize the signature, but that balance of imagination and technique—that’s rare.”

Gold lit up. “My wife would love hearing that. She made both—the bronze and the painting. Van Gogh’s one of her favorites.”

Light nodded. “She’s clearly gifted. That oil reminds me of Seurat’s *Le Mouillage à Grandcamp*—but painted with Van Gogh’s 1888 Arles palette. Personally, I never bought the xanthopsia theory.”

Maybe an art student.

“She said the office needed at least one bright spot. Painted it for my first anniversary in this space.”

“She’s got a strong emotional range. Her textures and tones... they communicate that.

There’s a sadness beneath it all.”

He’s not just perceptive—he’s intuitive.

“Thank you. You really do know your art. I think it helps people relax. Open up.”

He gestured toward the *Slave*. “That one puzzles some.”

Light pointed to the large print.

“*Lucifer*—that one’s always felt... personal.”

Interesting.

“I’m impressed you recognized *Lucifer*. Most people guess Pollock—never the name.”

“It’s always held special meaning for me.”

Definitely loaded.

Worth revisiting—but not now.

This isn’t an art class.

Gold shifted in his seat.

“Okay, Samuel—let’s begin.”

He picked up the clipboard and held it out.

“There’s a basic info sheet and a couple of short questionnaires—just a quick snapshot.

Then we'll talk."

Remember—don't promise more than you can deliver.

Beneath the clip: a ballpoint pen, a two-page intake form, and two brief assessments.

Light withdrew a Montblanc fountain pen from his jacket and began to write—slow, deliberate, precise.

Form by form. Page by page.

His penmanship evoked *shodō*—disciplined, balanced, ceremonial.

Gold used the moment to study him more closely.

Left-handed... but his tie's a half-Windsor. Shoelaces tied right-handed.

Interesting. Haven't seen that before.

Balanced, or divided?

Gold leaned in—closer—eyes caught again by the ring. The markings—faint, angular—teased familiarity.

Runes? Norse? Maybe something older.

I'll ask later.

A prickle of heat bloomed across his scalp.

Light had been watching him.

"Would you like to see it?" Light asked, already slipping it from his finger.

"Here—take a closer look."

Gold hesitated—then took it.

He turned it slowly between his fingers, thumb grazing the grooves.

He hoped Light wouldn't notice the sweat gathering at his hairline.

Shit.

My whole scalp's probably glowing.

He exaggerated the motion—turning the ring deliberately.

Hoping to divert Light's gaze.

Hmm.

Feels heavier than it looks... than it should.

“Wow. It's heavier than I expected.

Solid gold?”

Light shifted in his chair. “Yes—it's gold. But it's old.

Needs a cleaning.”

Gold turned the ring, squinting.

“These symbols—prehistoric?”

𐤀𐤁𐤁𐤀𐤍𐤕𐤁𐤀𐤍𐤁𐤊𐤕
𐤌𐤕𐤕𐤕

“Looks like something off a cave wall.”

Light said—too quickly, too shakily—

“It’s ancient Hebrew.”

Gold raised an eyebrow. “Hebrew? I used to read it. Doesn’t look familiar.”

Light squirmed.

Clearly uncomfortable.

He’s lying.

Shifting more than his story.

“What does it say?”

Light adjusted his posture again.

“Actually—it’s Proto-Sinaitic. Oldest known alphabet.

Precursor to Hebrew. Dated around 1900 BCE.

“No one’s been able to fully translate it.”

Bullshit.

He knows exactly what it says.

Why lie?

“It was a gift from my father.

Sentimental, I guess.”

That’s the trigger.

Light’s right hand moved instinctively to his left middle finger
—then froze.

It was bare.

He let the arm fall quickly to his side.

dad.

Déjà vu again.

Be careful.

Gold grabbed his notebook and leaned in to write.
His pen felt heavy, almost as if it were fighting with him.

He wrote just one word. Stark. Bold.

RING.

Then he circled it hard.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nothing fixes a thing so intensely in the memory as the wish to forget it.

— Michel de Montaigne, *Essays* (1580)

Guilt is the most important problem in the development of civilization.

— Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930)

Shame is a soul-eating emotion.

— C.G. Jung, as quoted in *Boundaries of the Soul* by June Singer (1972)

Please allow me to introduce myself

I'm a man of wealth and taste

— Mick Jagger & Keith Richards, lyrics from *Sympathy for the Devil*,
Beggars Banquet (1968)

Guilt isn't always a rational thing.

Guilt is a weight that will crush you whether you deserve it or not.

— Maureen Johnson, *The Name of the Star* (2011)

Some guilt is earned. Some is inherited.

The hardest kind is borrowed—because you can't return it.

Steven Gold, *Journal of Reflective Psychotherapy* (2012)

-4-

An Anchor Chained To Your Heart

He knows exactly what it says. No question. He's hiding something—but what?

Light returned to the forms, composure restored. Halfway through, he paused—hesitated—then looked up.

“Do all your patients fill these out, Dr. Gold?”

“Yes, standard procedure. They often reveal more than you’d expect—insights, directions to explore.”

Light raised an eyebrow. “I expected conversation, not checkboxes. But hey—you’re the doctor.”

Gold bristled. That wasn’t curiosity. It was a challenge.

Heat crept up his neck. He hated that Light might notice.
Ignore it. You’re the doctor. You don’t need to justify my ways to him.

Gold snapped his notebook and set it aside.

“Let me just turn the AC back on—it shuts off after six. Gets stuffy in here.”

He crossed to the thermostat. He could feel Light’s eyes boring into his back. And he knew—he was losing the upper hand.

“You just about done?” he asked, a little too casually.

Nice. Passive-aggressive. Brilliant. What the hell is wrong with me? Don’t start like an asshole. There will be time for that later. Ha.

“Just finished. Here you go.”

Gold took the papers and stood. Rather than return to the couch, he angled the desk-side chair toward Light.

Light slowly swiveled the club chair to face him.

Now Light faced what Gold wanted every patient to see: degrees, books, curated artwork—a deliberately constructed wall of quiet authority.

Not the chair I prefer—but now his view is right.

He skimmed the intake form. No referral. Just a lone question mark.

Occupation: Senior Partner at Legion Law.

I know that firm. White-collar crime central. Crooks in suits. Smug, polished sociopaths.

He looked up. “Samuel, what’s your area of practice?”

“Appellate. Mostly criminal appeals—I work with the wrongly convicted.”

Gold nodded. “Impressive. Noble work—an appeal to a higher court. Godly, even.”

Light’s Montblanc slipped from his fingers. He bent to retrieve it, then tucked it back into his suit pocket.

Gold noticed the mobile number and emergency contact lines were blank.

“You left these blank. I’ll need a number in case we reschedule—or if there’s a medical emergency. Completely confidential.”

Light offered a slight shrug. “Oh, I believe you.”

He leaned in, voice lowered. “I just got in from New York yesterday. Someone snagged my phone in the TSA line at JFK.”

That’s annoying.

He shook his head. “I’ll replace it tomorrow or Friday. New phone, new number—like starting over. Just haven’t had a chance to breathe.”

He smiled faintly. “Don’t know a soul here yet. But I’m healthy—and careful.”

He is undeniably likable. But something stirs beneath—polished, but buried. Whatever it is—I doubt I’ll enjoy unearthing it.

Fear is always about loss. But whose—his, or mine?

“You mentioned your father. Still alive? Want to list him as your emergency contact?”

Light hesitated. “He’s alive. But we’re not on speaking terms.”

“We worked together—for a long time. Many years. Then... disagreements. A total break. He threw me out. I left. Never went back.”

As he spoke, Light’s thumb began turning his ring—slow, rhythmic, automatic.

“He’s a judge now. I haven’t seen him in... ages. Given how long we’ve been estranged, it doesn’t really make sense to list him.”

He gave a tight, knowing smile. “I’m sure we’ll get into it—your specialty, right?” Then came the wink.

That wink again—like a magician’s misdirection—pulling focus while the real trick happens elsewhere. What’s he hiding? Is he mocking me? Testing me?

Or something darker—sociopathy?

Gold stayed silent. He knew that smile—the kind that shuts a door just as it begins to open. The wink sealed it. Gold braced—he’d have his work cut out for him.

Let it go—for now. But make a note. This matters.

The SPS and PSI revealed nothing remarkable.

No suicidal ideation. No major red flags. Slight elevations in Alienation and Discomfort—fairly common. No depression. No clinical psychopathology. Even his Defensiveness score was low—everything seems valid.

That’s what bothered him most.

These numbers don’t track. Something’s off.

This didn’t read like someone new to therapy. It felt rehearsed—like a role he’d played before.

“Why don’t you start by telling me what brought you in today,” Gold said, leaning back slightly—projecting a calm he didn’t feel.

He preferred sitting behind Hadrian’s Wall—his default intake perch.

The college chair was no accident—just uncomfortable enough to unsettle. And now, shifting in it, he realized: it worked.

Brace yourself.

He readied himself for the usual cerebral hide-and-seek patients played at the start.

Therapy is a stealthy mirror—until it catches them off guard. People flinch when it shows them who they really are. People think they’re better at hiding who they are than they really are.

They don't care what I uncover. I'm a stranger—legally gagged. That makes the mirror tolerable—initially.

They expect me to be non-judgmental. But we all judge—constantly. The only way to avoid judgment is to avoid listening.

Gold saw early therapy—the trust games, the surface-level problem-solving—as sandbox play, not curative. A safe rehearsal space before the real issues emerged.

No one ever comes to therapy for the problem they claim. Their “presenting problem” is just the ticket in. It takes a few weeks for the transference to kick in—then they think they trust me. But transference isn't always helpful. Sometimes it complicates everything.

Gold understood transference: the mind's quiet substitution of old emotions for new contexts—projecting ghosts onto him. But countertransference—his own emotional leakage—unsettled him, as it had Freud. He insisted on objectivity, shielding the process from distortion.

Rachel gets it. She watches 'Real Housewives,' and 'Survivor'—reads people like novels. She remembers what's passed—and senses what's coming. She would've made a better therapist than me—she's an empath. I barely qualify as sympathetic. I just mirror. They see the diplomas and assume I know. Assume I care.

I've never had much interest in other people. No patience. No gift for decoding loyalties and lies. She hates it when I skip the human-interest segments.

I should've gone into medicine—pathology, maybe. No patients. No people. Just the cold comfort of a final report—anchored in real science.

He told himself it was therapeutic necessity: objectivity, emotional neutrality, impartiality. In truth, it was just his nature—

clinical detachment that bled into every relationship.

Even behind the mask of neutrality, faint echoes surfaced—flickers of feeling neither fully his, nor fully theirs. To him Professor Hanlon’s mantra—Get in touch with yourself—was just a rebrand of Socrates: Know thyself. A summons to confront his blind spots before they shadowed someone else.

Sometimes he imagined Carl Rogers—saint of unconditional positive regard—leaving sessions seething, poisoned by all that restraint. Gold’s method: no apologies. Don’t suppress your bias—face it. Own it. Use it.

Gold lived comfortably in black and white. But gray? Shadows? Not his domain. He wasn’t a detective. He fancied himself a teacher, a counselor, a fixer. He preferred concrete problems—fixable ones. Something he could grip and guide.

He saw early therapy like his old Rorschach cards—smudged, incomplete, frayed corners. Ambiguity on ambiguity. Assumptions were minefields. Process, not content. He wasn’t listening. Not really. He was watching—always analyzing behavior.

Intuition mattered—but only after groundwork. He needed to watch them walk before trying to run them.

Gold hated dancing—literal or metaphorical. A behavioral therapist might have labeled him ‘well-adjusted.’ But he knew better. He’d always felt like he was dancing to a song no one else could hear—offbeat and out of step.

No. Nobody really knows what I’m going through. Not even Bob.

Light leaned back, crossed one leg over the other, and exhaled slowly.

“I’m not sure,” Light said softly. “I’m not happy. Honestly... I don’t think I ever have been.”

He looked up. “Maybe it’s naïve... wanting to feel wanted. Or loved. You’ll tell me.”

Wow. That’s unusually open—for an intake.

His fingers returned to the ring—as if guilt lived there, coiled and dormant.

“People don’t know me. But they have opinions—stories. About who I am. All because of Him.”

Don’t interrupt. Let him go on.

“I feel guilty. But I’m not a bad person. I shouldn’t feel this way. But they make me feel like I did something... unforgivable.”

He stared down to his shoes. “I’m not comfortable. I just want to feel normal.”

His hand returned to the ring—twisting it like a silent rosary of guilt. Miniature acts of self-flagellation.

“My father started that fire,” he said softly. “And he’s still feeding it.”

Gold said nothing.

That’s deep. Real deep—for only fifteen minutes in. Spontaneity dies when we wait our turn. Truth rarely survives that silence. But speak too soon, and it’s all collisions. Noise. Static. Just shut up and listen.

Gold leaned forward—thumb beneath his chin, forefinger curled over his lips. A gesture of self-restraint—fingers pressing

silence into his face.

He spoke gently. “Go on.”

“We’ll get into the details later, I know. But growing up—my father made me do things. Things I knew were wrong. I couldn’t understand how he didn’t know. He had to. They were... sinister.”

Pain crossed Light’s face—undeniable, unguarded.

“I think he did. But that’s him. He knows everything.”

What the hell? Was this sexual abuse?

His right hand clenched—tight, white-knuckled.

“After what felt like forever, I couldn’t take it anymore. I left. Then I became the villain. Everything got pinned on me—like it was all my fault. That’s why I can’t look at him. I can’t even talk to him... not anymore. I’ve been misunderstood my whole life—and it’s all because of him.”

And yet—he wears the ring. Still. As if forged from guilt itself.

What the hell did he do?

“I know you worked with Dr. Carlyle at Cambridge. Thought maybe a little Freudian lineage could help with my father issues.”

“Just to be clear—I never wanted to kill him. I didn’t.”

He paused—then leaned in. Just a little too close.

“But... if he’d asked me to?” Light paused. “I don’t know...”

He gave another wink.

“I might have.”

That’s... unexpected.

“If it’s not his idea? Forget it. If he says it’s good? It’s good.

He’s a narcissistic, vindictive bully—controlling, sadistic, and homophobic.”

Maybe he’s gay.

“You probably think I’m being dramatic. I’m not.

You don’t know him. But if you did—if you knew him like I do—you’d know he’s worse than all that.”

Hard to believe this is still the intake. Unreal.

“For years, I kept asking—why doesn’t he love me?

Shouldn’t a father’s love be unconditional? Eventually, I realized—he only loves one person unconditionally—himself.

He disgusted me. I hated him. I couldn’t live with him—or work with him—any longer. I couldn’t live in his world anymore. So I left.

He saw it as betrayal. And because he’s so egotistical, so vindictive—he made sure I took the fall.”

Disgust is intimate. But hate? Hate is closer. It requires history. It requires hope.

You can’t hate someone you’ve never hoped would love you. Hate requires proximity—emotional and historical. It demands intimacy. It’s not wasted on strangers. You don’t just walk away forever, rip them out of your life, unless some part of you still cares—still wants, needs something from them.

He’s not just angry—he’s wounded. Still searching for love, even through rejection. The ring? A relic. A loop of

unfinished grief.

This is his narrative—but it lacks texture. It needs color. Detail. The full spectrum of truth.

“I’m no saint. You can’t be—when obedience means survival. I couldn’t say no—to anything he asked. I wanted to. I knew it was wrong. But saying no... to him... that just wasn’t an option. Choice was an illusion.”

Was it? We always have a choice. Life is nothing but—we are our choices.

Let him talk. Don’t dam the flood.

“My biggest flaw? Honesty. Odd, I know—for a criminal lawyer. But I swear, it’s true.

Everyone assumes I lie. But honesty—that’s what ruined us. That’s what ended me—with him.”

Gold swallowed the urge to interrupt. “Mmm hmm,” he murmured instead.

“He shifts it all onto me. I’m the fall guy—that way he keeps his halo.

I’m the evil one. The liar. The troublemaker. They believe him—every time. If you knew what he made happen—what he ordered—you’d never dare question him. If I weren’t his son, I’d be dead.”

Who is this guy’s father—some kind of cartel boss?

“You know this, Dr. Gold—it’s hypnosis. Repeat something often enough, from enough mouths—and no matter how insane, it becomes truth. *Their truth.*

And the truth is—he’s insane. Arrogant. Egotistical. A

megalomaniacal bastard.

“I never want to see him again.”

But here you are.

“They trust him. Blindly. Believe every word. Thinking’s harder. Question him—and you’re punished. Branded. Forever.

Sorry, I know I’m ranting. But I swear—I’ve been honest.”

Maybe. Your truth. Honest—“to the best of your knowledge,” as your affidavits say.

Pilate asked, ‘What is truth?’ Not an answer—just a dodge. But the question still haunts us.

Gold remained silent. Fingertip whitening against his lips. The instinct to jump in—to interpret—held in check.

After a taut silence, Light stared—hungry for something. A nod. A flicker of belief. Anything.

The literal truth about his father? Maybe that doesn’t matter anymore. Reconciliation? Unlikely. The facts—whatever they are—feel secondary now. What matters is what he believes.

Still, if I knew more, maybe I could help him reframe it—understand it, accept it—without the emotion. Without the vitriol.

Gold finally spoke. “Samuel, that’s a rare kind of self-awareness. Most people take weeks to open up like this. You seem to understand why you’re here. I appreciate your openness—it’s never easy. Sharing is a gift. Trust—a rare treasure. Thank you.”

Gold shifted in his chair. “I agree. Most people don’t want the truth. Like *A Few Good Men*—they can’t handle it. Too uncomfortable.

“People prefer affirmation—even if it isn’t real.

It's confirmation bias. That's why people gather their 'truth' from friends, echo-chamber podcasts, or their go-to network—anything that validates what they already believe. Birds of a feather.”

Gold picked up the assessments again, flipping through them slowly.

Did I misread this?

He double-checked the PSI's Social Nonconformity score.

Normal. Minor elevations in Alienation and Discomfort—common enough.

Gold said, “People hate discord. You hear a bad note—you flinch. In music or in life—uncertainty sets nerves on edge. That's anxiety: a future you can't predict or control.

A jigsaw puzzle with a missing piece—infuriating. Some people jam in a wrong one, just to feel whole. Pretend it's complete.”

One reason for the high divorce rate.

“We crave closure. Ambiguity rattles the soul. We want resolution—no loose ends. To believe everything's fine. Just... as it should be.

It's not unlike religion.”

Should I go here? Why not.

“Belief is *thinking you know*. That's faith. Binary. On or off.

Agnosticism? I'm not sure it truly exists. People either believe—or they don't.”

Light raised a hand, gently objecting. “But Dr. Gold, a lot of people say they don't know exactly what God is.”

Gold nodded, energized. “Exactly! They believe—they just don’t comprehend.

“I don’t understand quantum physics, but I don’t doubt it exists. It’s just beyond me.

That’s why you can’t argue someone out of their religion—it’s been baked in since childhood. Once someone believes, it’s almost impossible to convince them they don’t really know.

Hope is wanting to believe—even when the facts suggest otherwise. Wanting always trumps knowing. People want to believe. No one wants to discover they’re wrong—it creates cognitive dissonance. It threatens their beliefs. It could unravel everything.

Suggesting another viewpoint—even a better one—can feel like betrayal. So we double down, telling ourselves we see clearly—while everyone else is misled, mistaken, or lying.”

Light nodded in agreement.

Am I pushing too hard? No—he’s still with me.

“It’s human nature to be biased. We’re judged by what we do. Intentions don’t count. You can’t see them. Only actions register.

Seeing clearly—while everyone else stays blind—that’s the hard part.”

Light’s expression softened, a flicker of amusement surfacing. “Preaching to the choir, huh? That’s my job too—juries for me, patients for you.”

Gold nodded. “Exactly. We’re told how to act—what to be. But we don’t know what we really want. Just what we’re supposed

to want. That gap? That's what drives the neurosis—questioning everything.”

This is his hour—not mine. Save it for Bob. Wrap it up.

“You’re right of course. And I do want to hear more about your father. You’ve shared a great deal already—we’ll explore it, piece by piece.”

What evil did he actually do?

“Samuel—and I apologize, I tend to talk too much—I’d like to revisit something. You used a powerful word: ‘evil.’ What do you mean by that? You said you were the evil one. Did you actually do something wrong? Or, were you just told you had?”

Shit. One question—not a list.

Life’s not a multiple choice quiz. Don’t hand him the answers. Make him earn them.

Light slouched back with a heavy exhale, something in him collapsing.

“Everyone,” Light said softly. “Judged. Convicted. Sentenced.”

A grimace flickered across his face. His eyes—pained and distant—made him look smaller, older.

“I was told—commanded—to do things I knew were wrong. Morally wrong.

I hurt people. People who didn’t deserve it.”

He swallowed hard. “I had no choice. I had to obey.”

We always have a choice. Like it or not—our choices define us.

“My father didn’t allow questions. But I knew—what he asked—commanded—was wrong. And I’m sure he knew it too.”

There he goes again... spinning that ring. Like an ouroboros, devouring its own guilt.

“A few times, I tried to fake it—pretend I’d done his bidding, hope he’d forget. But when I finally disobeyed... the punishment was severe.

That didn’t bother me. I deserved it—for disobeying him. The punishments didn’t break me—I was used to them. I didn’t care about myself—I was numb.

It was seeing others hurt—people I tried to protect. After a while, I couldn’t take it anymore. Too many people were getting hurt. So I stood up to him.”

Severely punished? And he’s a criminal attorney. Who the hell is his father—El Chapo?

“I confronted him—and didn’t back down. I’d never seen him so furious. He never gave explanations. Just: ‘Do it. Because I said so.’”

Sounds familiar.

“But he lost it when I asked, ‘Who are you?’

He thundered back at me ‘*I AM!*’

I said, ‘You are what? Look at yourself. Look at what you’ve become.’

He screamed, ‘You weren’t there! Where were you when I laid the foundation. You can’t understand.’

There was no reasoning with him. And more people were going to get hurt. So I quit—I left for good.

He blamed everything he’d commanded me to do—on me. It

wasn't fair. But I still feel guilty. And I've felt like hell ever since."

Gold sat back, letting it all wash over him.

He waited, but Light sat slumped, head bowed—dejected, drained.

I can't just leave him sitting in the wreckage. Despair is no place to pause. Time for something positive—hopeful. A little teaching, but not too much. My brothers used to say, 'Not everybody went to Harvard.'

I need to win him over. Give him hope. Be human. Be kind.

"Thank you, Samuel. I appreciate your honesty. I'm sorry you went through that—it sounds harrowing. I don't know the specifics, but the fact that you held yourself together... that says a lot.

Nobody grows up without scars. And the emotional kind? They cut deeper than flesh—and rarely heal completely.

Guilt's rarely what people think. It masquerades as one thing—but there are two kinds. And the difference matters.

First, there's true guilt. You've done something wrong, you know it, and others do too. That's the guilt you should feel—it belongs to you—it reflects reality."

Light accepted this with a slight nod.

"Guilt is an anchor, chained to your heart—its deepest fold—silent, heavy, inescapable. You feel it physically—it's weight dragging you down. It lingers—not because others judge you, but because you judge yourself.

Disappointing your family is hard—disappointing yourself is worse. You might withdraw, hide, run—but it stays with you. It depresses you.

Even when you make amends, it lingers. It stops devouring you—but it never quite leaves. Not until you forgive yourself. And even then—you remember.”

Okay. Give him a minute to let that sink in. Looks like he's following.

“Then there’s neurotic guilt—the kind that creeps in when you’re blamed for something that wasn’t your fault. When someone tells you it’s your fault—or makes you feel like it—even when you know it isn’t.

Being blamed for something you didn’t do—or never intended—is the kind of crazy-making that breaks people. It usually starts with parents, teachers, friends—the ones who matter to us. Sometimes it’s not even malicious. But sometimes it is.

But you still feel guilty—because someone told you to.”

Light nodded in agreement. Gold continued.

“You try to fix it, but nothing changes. That’s when guilt becomes a trap—no off-ramp, no exit. You keep fixing what you didn’t break. That’s what drives you mad.”

Light nodded again, slowly.

“We start to doubt everything—especially ourselves. Maybe we don’t even know ourselves. Maybe we can’t trust ourselves. So how do we make amends? How do we fix it?

“Why do we still feel awful after apologizing? It’s

manipulative. It lets someone else pull the strings—but only because we agree to play along. We play their game, by their rules—and the rules keep changing.

It paralyzes us—emotionally and psychologically. We grow afraid to think. To move. To act.”

Light nodded. “Yes”

Good.

Gold continued. “That’s the breeding ground for neurosis.

It becomes a scream in your unconscious—*What did I do wrong? I can’t live like this.*

So we grasp for relief—but it never comes. We spiral—faster, deeper—toward the silence we can’t name. We feel shame and guilt—unearned, but corrosive. And because apologizing doesn’t fix it, we start hiding from ourselves. The unconscious begins to doubt even our feelings—lashing out in confusion, seeking relief that never comes. That’s when guilt becomes the anchor—dragging us into the abyss.

Some believe guilt is the prime mover—the great motivator of human action. I’m not sure I’d go that far. But guilt? It makes people act—or freeze.”

He’s with me. Good. Emotions are resonating—but don’t overload him. Let it breathe another minute.

“*Feelings* just happen—we don’t choose them. But *emotions*? Emotions are how we respond.

That’s where therapy comes in—to help you recognize feelings and choose how to respond emotionally. Remember—

emotions are your reactions to your feelings. We're conditioned to feel certain things. But emotions aren't automatic. They're choices—if we can catch them in time.”

Check in. Ping him.

“Does that make sense to you? Is this too much at once?”

Light nodded. “No, it's not too much. It's cerebral—but it makes sense. Sounds like mine's neurotic guilt. But how do I make it stop?”

A great question—if his hands are clean. But nobody's are spotless.

Gold nodded. “Good. First step? Naming what you feel. Therapy is language—and honesty. Learn the words. Then you can name the feelings. Understand, then verbalize. Only then can you choose how to respond—consciously, intentionally.

“When we say we ‘know how someone feels,’ we're guessing—reading their emotions—their outward cues.

Someone says something cruel. I feel hurt. I respond—with anger, sarcasm, withdrawal, maybe tears.

One of my jobs is to help you figure out what you're feeling—and why. The why helps you judge if the feeling fits—then you decide how to respond.

If you did something wrong—objectively—you have to confront that guilt. If your guilt is earned, you're serving time—for a real crime. The work then is redemption.

But if you were made to feel at fault for something you didn't do, then my job is to help you respond—not with symptoms—but

with clarity.

My job is to help you reclaim your free will—and the responsibility it brings. No shifting blame. Not after that.

We're judged by what we do. Intentions? Invisible. No one sees those. All we see is behavior—actions, gestures, maybe emotion. That's what people respond to. That's what they remember."

Light sat upright, attentive—as if in a classroom.

Okay. The horse is dead. Enough.

I can hear Oster saying, 'Lecture less and listen more.'

Ha. Guess I didn't listen—to him.

"Sorry—bit of a firehose moment. Old habits. I taught psych once—long ago. Hope that all made sense. I just wanted to define terms—to show you how I work.

Take a breath. Sit with your thoughts. Your feelings aren't wrong. They just... *are*. They're real. They're valid.

Gold paused for a moment. Then he continued. "You said you were called the '*evil one*.' I'd like to understand that—if you're willing. Why do they see you that way? What did you do—or what did they think you did?"

What things did you do?

"Life's a journey—we all screw up. If we're lucky, someone teaches us along the way. That's how we learn. From our mistakes. It's normal to feel uneasy. This is all new. I'm new. Take your time.

Be real. Be honest. I'm listening."

Light's knee bounced. His fingers spun the ring—restless, compulsive.

“Thank you, Dr. Gold,” Light said. “I appreciate it—I really do. I think I followed it all. It makes sense.”

He paused.

His voice dropped, barely a whisper.

“And now... I feel guilty.

Not because I lied.”

He glanced down.

“I told you the truth. But I left something out.”

He bowed his head, fingers clenched on the armrest.

The air thickened— heavy with what was coming.

Gold leaned forward, heart clenched. One finger curled over his lips—the listening pose. A silent vow: just listen.

Light slumped forward. The overhead light painted him like a chiaroscuro portrait—half-lit, half-lost. Suspended between confession and concealment.

He stopped spinning the ring.

His voice barely escaped—a whisper.

“My real name is... *Satan*.”

Thank you for previewing my novel *A Question of Balance*. I expect to have it completed September or October 2025. I would greatly appreciate your thoughts, comments, and criticisms.

If you are willing to share your thoughts, please use the contact form on my web page—

A Question of Balance | Psychological
Literary Mystery Novel by David S. Sherman

Below is from the novel's afterword—

A poem is never finished, only abandoned.
— Paul Valéry, from "*Tel Quel*" (1941)

AFTERWORD

To the Reader—

If you've made it to this point, thank you. Not just for finishing the book, but for sitting with ideas that may have challenged your beliefs, your comfort, or your sense of certainty. This novel was not intended as doctrine or manifesto. It is, quite deliberately, a provocation—*questions posed rather than answered*.

I've always thought it more important to understand the questions than to demand answers—as I wrote years ago in my poem

The Birth of a Man:

*I sought not answers, nor made suggestions,
I merely wished to learn the right questions.*

Some of the themes—religion, guilt, madness, love, death, and the nature of evil—cut close to the bone. I understand that. They cut close to the bone for me, too.

You may have found parts of this story troubling. I hope you did.

Not because I wanted to upset you—but because I believe that art, like therapy, like philosophy, sometimes requires discomfort to do its work. The aim was never to offend, but reframe. To ask you, gently or forcefully, as the narrative demanded, to reconsider—from another angle, from a parallax view.

The characters you've met are flawed, like all of us. Their voices carry pain, contradiction, longing, and—in some cases—audacity. Some speak with love, others with fury. All of them, I hope, felt human. That was the point.

If you find yourself disagreeing with what was said—good. That means you were listening. If you find yourself still thinking about it tomorrow, or next week, even better. That means the dialogue continues—between the page and whatever in you it stirred.

Thank you for engaging. For allowing me to pose difficult questions. And for understanding that while not every prayer can be answered, every one deserves to be prayed.

In 1772, Voltaire wrote, *Le mieux est l'ennemi du bien* (the perfect is the enemy of the good). As much as I have loved playing with the questions, ideas, and stories in this book, I think I've said

enough... for now. Perhaps Steven Gold will have more to share at some point in the future.

At this point, he might think to himself—

Obsession is not love—it is fear dressed as discipline.

Knowing when to stop is the rarest form of control.

I hope I didn't abandon this work too soon.

David S. Sherman

August, 2025