

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 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.

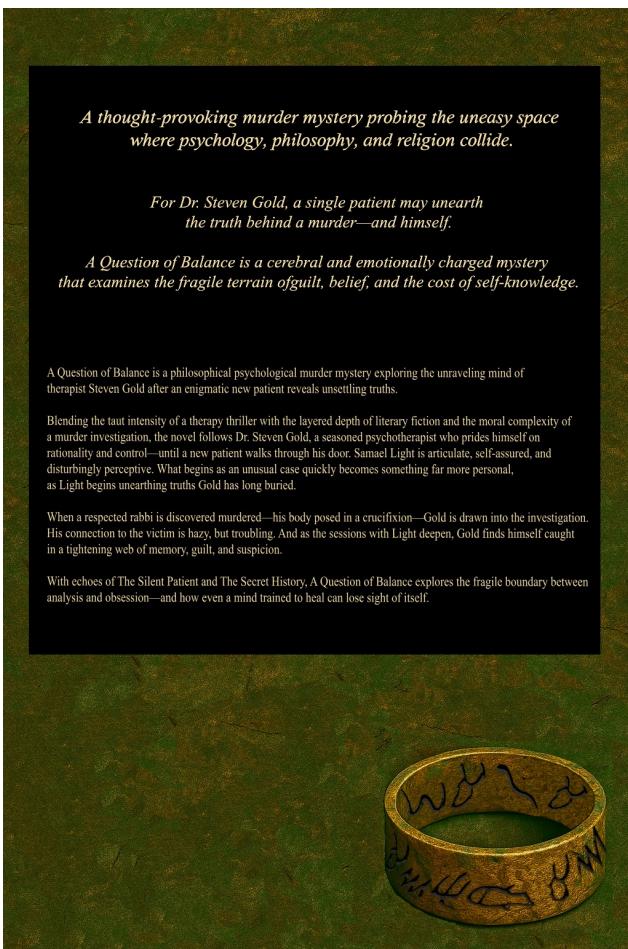
A Question of Balance is a cerebral and emotionally charged mystery that examines the fragile terrain of guilt, belief, and the cost of self-knowledge.

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. Samuel 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.



A QUESTION OF BALANCE

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a novel by
David S. Sherman

PRE-PUBLICATION PREVIEW ONLY

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

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DEDICATION

*Her name, from the Greek helē—light, bright one.
My in-laws were prescient.*

For my wife, Helene—my light, my center, my balance.

*I hope my hugs never lose their magic.
My love for you exceeds infinity.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To all who helped this book find its shape—my deepest thanks.

Without the encouragement, teaching, and support of so many—especially those listed below—this novel could never have been written.

To everyone—some now gone—whose guidance, friendship, or example shaped me: thank you for helping me realize a lifelong dream.

Drew Sherman

Thank you for everything you've taught me about storytelling. You have a wealth of knowledge and wisdom. It remains a loss to film and streaming audiences that you shifted from screenwriting and filmmaking to advertising and marketing. You created remarkable scripts and ideas that deserved the screen—but your creative fingerprints are all over this novel.

During our cross-country drive, you let me talk through the story, testing and refining its bones. Your honesty, encouragement, and notes on each draft were invaluable; the time we spent discussing it—priceless.

You pushed me to turn one- and two-dimensional figures into real people with histories, drives, flaws, and desires. You made me see how hard writing truly is and how much thought and revision it demands. Perhaps your next career move should be teaching screenwriting.

It's a clear fact: without you this book would not exist. I might have written pages of solipsistic drivel with a faint kernel of an idea, but nothing with life or meaning. Thank you for steering me toward depth.

Helene K. Sherman

My beshert—my missing piece, my perfect partner. You are the best person I know.

Your unwavering support and boundless empathy nourish everyone around you; your intellect and insight into the human condition make me strive to be better, to see myself through your eyes.

I am blessed and honored that you chose to share your life with me. Had you pursued psychotherapy professionally, the field would have flourished all the more. Thank you for giving me this past year to write this madness—and for listening, patiently and without judgment, and always being my cheerleader through every wild thought that spilled from my head.

Spencer Sherman

A remarkable combination—you're your mother's son, with a sprinkling of my faults, of course.

Thank you for your steady support and for urging me to open all my senses to new ideas and experiences. I *do* listen when you tell me to simplify and avoid clutter—though not always soon enough. I probably should have listened more about not sitting at the computer

so long each day.

Your honesty about the novel and your thoughtful suggestions were invaluable. As a philosophy major (like your mother) your reading may have suffered from the curse of knowledge—or simply revealed how little I truly know.

And as one who always pushes beyond limits, it made perfect sense for you to warn me not to ruin anyone's imagination by over-defining my characters. The mushrooms... we'll see.

Mel & Sheryl Sherman

I'm sorry you didn't live long enough to see this—though you probably wouldn't have read it anyway. Still, you'd have been proud that I wrote it and it and got it published.

After I finished my speech therapy at age five, you said I'd run out of words if I kept talking so much. Becoming an author seemed a practical solution. I hope I kept my own voice throughout this book.

Thank you for applying just the right pressure to succeed and for helping calibrate my moral compass.

Lee and Nedra Kudrow

Lee—the most intelligent and well-read person I've ever met—thank you for your continual love, humor, and support. I'm a better person for knowing and wanting to please you. Most of all, thank you and Nedra for creating the most perfect person I could imagine and for giving me your blessing when I asked for Helene's hand in marriage.

I miss how happy Nedra would have been for me—not because I crave praise, but because her self-conscious giggle whenever she was joyful was contagious. Nedra's empathy and Lee's intellect combined to make Helene who she is. Nedra would have bragged to her friends about her zundula's book—which, like my parents, she probably wouldn't have read—but she'd have made me feel successful all the same.

Paul A. Cantor, Ph.D.

In the acknowledgments of his book *Creature and Creator: Myth-Making and English Romanticism* (1984), Harvard Professor Cantor thanked the students of his course, Humanities 118, Myths of Creation. As one of those students, I think the debt is ours. His class was one of the most important and influential experiences of my academic life.

Thank you, Professor Cantor, for cleansing my doors of perception and enriching my life more than I can express.

Dan DeSantis

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Laura Guzik

Thank you for your friendship and your honest feedback—I cherish both.

To all of you—and to the many others whose kindness, patience, and conversation guided me, often without your knowing—thank you.

If I've learned a little along the way, it's because of you.

DISCLAIMER

This is a work of fiction. All characters, dialogue, and events 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 necessarily* 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.

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

Note: Citations attributed to Dr. Steven Gold, along with fictional journals, poems, academic works, and musical compositions appearing in the text, are invented for literary purposes unless otherwise indicated.

IMPORTANT NOTE TO THE READER

*If God exists, He is responsible for everything.
If He does not exist, then we are.*

David S. Sherman, Ph.D.

— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1947)

Preceding each chapter is a page of epigraphs—quotes drawn from my readings in literature, psychology, philosophy, and scripture. Some may be familiar; others might surprise you.

They’re not essential to the plot, and some readers prefer to skip them entirely—or return to them after each chapter. There is no wrong way.

But if you choose to pause, they offer resonance, foreshadowing, and emotional clues—subtle signposts through the inner terrain of this story.

Like therapy—and like life—this book invites you to take what speaks to you, and leave the rest.

Preface Epigraphs

What in me is dark, illumine.

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667)

*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)*

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 those sparks.

In his *Lyrical and Critical Essays* (1958), Albert Camus wrote, "A novel is never anything but a philosophy expressed in images." What follows is precisely that attempt—an exploration of belief, guilt, grace, and self-deception rendered not in argument, but in image and voice.

You may find yourself reading not just what happened, but what someone needed to believe happened. Sometimes the difference between the two is where the real story lives. None of this requires explanation in advance. All will make itself known in time.

David S. Sherman

December, 2025

INVOCATION

The Struggle

*Nay, Prometheus—keep thy stolen flame.
Nor offer me thy embers that burn cold.
Dark as Death's breath, clenched tight 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.*

Some stories conceal more than they reveal. They drift like smoke, doubling back, carrying traces of what burned long before the first page began. This is one of those stories.

Prologue Epigraphs

*The absurd arises from this conflict
between humanity's longing and the world's unreasonable silence.
— Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942)*

(author's translation)

Not every truth requires light; some reveal themselves in shadow.

— Steven Gold, *Journal of Existential Psychodynamics*, (Spring, 2022)

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)

*The question is not whether God exists,
but whether His existence would excuse us.*

— Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (1947)

FOREWORD

We move through life unevenly—some of us catching every detail, others missing what lies directly at our feet. Some attend to every flicker, every small shift in light or voice; others step past what matters most, unaware of the meaning sleeping inside those moments.

Therapy isn't simply the act of connecting the dots in a person's life. It's the work of stepping far enough back—high enough above—to see the picture those dots have been forming, and then helping someone understand it, make sense of it, accept it.

At first, the picture resembles a Rorschach inkblot: shifting, ambiguous, open to countless interpretations depending on our perspective, our fear, our light. But as we move farther away, the view paradoxically sharpens. The dots multiply. The forms deepen.

And what once seemed random reveals itself as something intricate, deliberate, and deeply connected.

The shape of a life begins, at last, to emerge—interwoven and impossibly alive with meaning we could not see, could not understand, without that elevated vantage.

Prologue
One Doesn't Always Need Light To See
Saturday, 8:00 p.m.

...Behind silver-rimmed glasses, his wide, unblinking eyes caught the golden shimmer of the synagogue's *ner tamid*—the eternal flame above the ark...its glow somehow both eternal and uncertain.

Flickers danced across his pupils, as if 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 once preceded Rabbi Shapiro's unraveling of hidden meanings—or the solemn calm before his graveside eulogies.

But this silence stretched—beyond 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 blade.

A police photographer's camera snapped—fracturing the stillness

with mechanical precision.

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

Flash.

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

Flash.

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

Flash.

His salmon-colored linen shirt—still neatly pressed, its row of wooden buttons untouched—rested over dark jeans: a 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, the once-white silk had 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 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 wept.

Chapter One Epigraphs

Lust

Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways.

—Sigmund Freud, paraphrased in Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of*

Sigmund Freud (1953)

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

In my experience lust only ever leads to misery. All that suspicion and jealousy and anguish it unleashes.
— Chrissie Hynde, interview, *The Guardian* (2014)

Pay attention to what the voice reveals unintentionally. That is where the real story waits.
— Steven Gold, *Clinical Notes*

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Lust

Three Days Ago — Wednesday, 4:00 pm

Fuck. Just leave.

Steven Gold froze—like he'd looked straight into Medusa's eyes. Rigid, barely breathing, he feared even the faintest chair squeak might betray him.

After two minutes of pounding the reception door and stabbing

the Ring doorbell, Jane Sanders snapped.

She jabbed the button once more—the grating chime drilling into him like a dentist's pick.

She screamed, pounding the door with both fists.

At last she whirled, boot heel slamming the door—a furious concession of defeat.

Her voice was low, husky, roughened by smoke.

"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 AC's low hum filled the silence.

Still motionless, he shifted only his eyes.

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

Thank God I don't have a pet rabbit.

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

Even in grainy video, she still moved with runway grace.

She wore the look he remembered: a sheer Tom Ford blouse he'd once admired too openly, low-rise Calvin jeans clinging to her hips, chocolate Hermès Jumping boots that carried her like weapons.

Elegant. Dangerous. In control—and he hated the want it woke in him.

Lust is not love. It's the hunger to be consumed.

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, captivating.

He devoured the footage—scrolling, zooming—like forbidden fruit he couldn't stop tasting.

He froze her mid-glare. Zooming in, he remembered the silk of her hair, the faint ghost of *Joy* by Jean Patou.

Olfactory memory is the strongest sense. And hers—smoke, sweat, Joy—flips a switch, brands itself into

me.

Her face, full screen, filled his vision.

He stared, mesmerized. Slowly, he zoomed out, savoring how her hair curved around her cheeks, 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 bore the imprint of life—sun, smoke, nights blurred by excess. Time had softened her, but her bone structure still commanded attention.

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

Each fist strike flashed like a strobe on the catwalk. The light revealed fine wrinkles, age spots on her long, elegant fingers—a grip that seemed to close around him.

Behind the locked door, those murderous blue eyes, that wild silver hair—dangerous, erotic, hypnotic—thrilled him.

He paused—capturing her face at a strange angle: one eye slightly higher, one lip subtly fuller. The asymmetry unsettled him—which only excited him more.

Not twenty-one anymore, but at fifty-one she was still—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. Still lethal. 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—lingering on the ghosted outline of her breasts beneath the sheer blouse. He imagined her nipples hardening, pressing against the fabric, straining to be seen.

Rachel would be gutted if she saw me—perving like this, like some creep. Rachel’s innocence—that’s what seduces me. But she’s gone inward, passion buried behind canvas and clay—silent.

Jane’s not more beautiful, she’s desperate—more deliberate—provocative in every gesture, knowing

exactly how to wield it.

Arousal stirred—familiar, unwelcome.

Without thinking, he touched his wedding ring to his lips—an old gesture, reflexive, half-prayer, half-apology—and forced himself to breathe.

I'm such a moron—I never should've told Rachel I liked that blouse. She always suspected. After Thanksgiving, she'd 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 avoided—for now.

Something's off. Vertigo? Get a grip.

The faint smell of stale coffee clung to the office air. He reopened Spotify and resumed Haydn’s Cello Concerto No. 1 in C Major—from his Romantic Literature playlist.

Rachel loved Haydn’s predictability—the order. It soothed her; let her light shine, made space to create.

Gold needed that order now. Its serenity poured into the silence—poised, easy, calming. Yo-Yo Ma’s cello—mellow, unhurried—spilled like watercolor across still water, tinting thoughts he hadn’t let himself touch in years.

Gold exhaled and shut the iPad. The magnetic click sealed it.

He leaned back to his leather-bound *Cain: A Mystery*, still dog-eared from Jane’s intrusion.

He re-read Cain’s soliloquy—

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?—A shape like to the angels,
Yet of a sterner and a sadder aspect
Of spiritual essence: why do I quake?*

BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ.

His Apple Watch buzzed—splintering his deep concentration with a sharp jolt behind his eyes, yanking him from Byron back into the dull gravity of now.

His next patient would arrive in minutes.

Byron—what a waste. Dying so young. What insights did death steal?

What truths will mine be buried with, guilt pressed down like earth on a coffin?

Some are born into judgment. Others just wait for it.

Rational men commit irreversible acts—and sometimes, we know it before our first step.

*Chapter Two Epigraphs
Mauvaise Foi*

*Bad faith is neither simply a lie nor a truth.
To lie to oneself presupposes that the truth is already present within.
The liar knows the truth he conceals.
Bad faith differs from lying in that it seeks to evade the truth of one's freedom
and responsibility.*
— Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant* (1943)
(author's translation)

*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)

*Know men by how they act—
by the sum of what they do,
by the effects their presence leaves behind in the world.
A man is shaped as much by what he invents about himself
as by what he truly desires.
The final pages of a life are already written
in its opening lines.*
— Steven Gold, *Reveries and Unanswered Questions from the Edges of Life*
(2026)

We understand ourselves only in retrospect, and even then, imperfectly.
— Steven Gold, *Journal of Existential Psychodynamics* (Winter 2026)

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

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Mauvaise Foi

Wednesday, late afternoon

BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ.

Gold pressed *Stop*, irritated by yet another intrusion—on time, thought, anything. He'd been absorbed in Cain's injustice—the punishment for a sin that was never his to bear.

He sighed and set the book aside, his mind already drifting.

My shoes aren't as comfortable as they look.

He lifted his feet and rested his Santoni Uniqua loafers on the ebony desktop.

Shit—my freshman year at Harvard cost less than these loafers. And the dorm bed was more comfortable. Erasmus wrote, vestis virum facit—clothes make the man. Of course, Twain 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 better fit. Funny. Rachel used to tease me—said I looked like I was auditioning for a part I didn't believe in. She was right... as usual.

He leaned back in his black leather Eames chair; striped socks peeked from beneath tailored cuffs. Exhaling through pursed lips, he dog-eared the page, and reached for his iPad.

There it is again—the flicker; a blind spot blooming. Aura, not stroke. 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 not twenty minutes earlier.

Ha. Fitting.

David Gilmour's solo floated through the room. Gold looked around—content, almost serene. He took pride in the office: how polished it looked, how perfectly it mirrored him. Tenth floor, Wilshire Corridor—quiet, efficient, everything in its place.

He especially liked the photo from last month's *The Atlantic* profile—"Psychotherapy in America: A Question of Balance." Sitting behind his desk: the perfect shot. The famous Dr. Richard Carlyle's heir apparent—at least, that was how they'd framed it.

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

Just in case.

He picked up the small statuette he'd set out that morning and turned it in his hands.

*Wish I'd had this for the shoot with The Atlantic.
Would've balanced the desk—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 her most recent dig.

The relic—Astarte or Asherah—had likely been smuggled out of southern Iraq. He ran his thumb across 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 kept shifting through the ages.

The “ideal” female form tilts with each era—fat, thin, fat, thin—like a pendulum hunting a false center.

In the ‘90s, it was Jane’s look: anorexic.

He set the figure down beside a greeting card, its ornate script reading, “Thanks for curing me, Dr. Gold!”

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

*Life’s a spectrum disorder—we’re all fucked up somehow. No one gets cured; we just get by.
“Normal” is being abnormal—just not too often.*

He slid the card into his top desk drawer.

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

Hell—that’s how I 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

A gift from Professor Hanlon—encouragement then, accusation now. He had unearthed it and placed it front and center, not knowing why. Perhaps it reminded him of empathy—or of the distance between his shoes and anyone else’s. The plaque whispered humility; the man behind the desk performed authority. Hanlon’s words still rang in his head: “You’ve got a sharp mind and good instincts, but don’t forget who you work for.”

He had bristled quietly at the backhanded compliment.

A faint pressure gathered in his throat.

Ugh. Nausea again. It’ll pass. It always does. No one has any idea what I’m going through. Not Rachel.

Not even Bob.

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

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, crooked—can be just as majestic. Maybe more so.

Do we fault the oak for winding its way around a fence, chasing light?

Change is inevitable—never sudden, never simple.

Decisions feel final—binary. They rarely are.

Some are carved in stone.

Others in sandstone.

All crumble eventually—like Ozymandias.

Hmm. Maybe that's a poem—on change.

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

He snickered, glancing at his loafers.

Most people don't know how to choose shoes—let alone how to wear them. Sometimes you sacrifice function for form. More often, form's all people see—or care about.

Gold stood six feet tall, close-cut gray hair and a neatly trimmed beard. His slender, handsome face was marked 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 birthday.

She's got the artist's eye. Her eyes—beautiful, blue, inviting.

Gold thought he was funny—though most of his jokes never left his head. Location jokes. You had to be there. And *there* was inside his skull: jokes for an audience of one. Too clever. Too obscure. Lost on others—so he kept them to himself.

When he did share, friends gave polite chuckles—kindness, maybe obligation. Few appreciated his odd, esoteric humor.

He had a reputation as a stick in the mud—one friend in his small circle said the stick was “up his ass.” Beyond that circle, Gold came off as formal, even cold. Patients called him intelligent, well-read, cultured—but also a know-it-all. Holier-than-thou. A hint of God complex.

Not emotionless—restrained. “To avoid the wrong type of transference,” he’d say, “which would compromise therapy.”

Maintain authority.

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

It hardly mattered. As people like to shrug, *it is what it is.*

Gold had been a wunderkind—a Rhodes Scholar who deferred Oxford to complete his undergraduate degree at Harvard, then raced through a master’s at USC and a PhD at UCLA—all by twenty-six. He still felt incomplete—hollow.

At twenty-seven, he immersed himself in late 18th-century Romantic literature at Oxford’s St. Peter’s College, while interning with famed psychoanalyst Dr. Richard Carlyle at Cambridge’s Gonville and Caius.

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

Over time, Gold built a lucrative private practice—its clientele ranging from anxious adolescents to world-class athletes and celebrities.

His Wilshire high-rise office overlooked UCLA: a modest reception leading into a spacious suite with a discreet rear exit.

He’d installed a Ring video doorbell and smart lock at the reception entry. Often working late—seeing patients or writing—he kept the door locked.

The office was spacious, gray sisal wallpaper and bright white-

framed window opening onto the broad sweep of the Los Angeles Country Club. Sharp, pristine—like a real estate listing, scrubbed of human warmth. Apart from a few of Rachel’s pieces, the space mirrored Gold himself: intellectual, pompous. Even buried beneath an avalanche of art, sterility clung to the air.

The chaos was curated—a personality cobbled together from borrowed pieces. Like Gold.

Paintings, sculptures, framed prints jostled like guests at an overbooked salon—each clamoring to be seen, yet none finding a voice. Like him, the room was crowded with brilliance but hollow at its core—an identity performed, not inhabited.

The lights flickered; a pulse fluttered behind his right eye. He rubbed the ache away, then let his gaze settle on the books.

The few items atop his desk and credenza were chosen with care—to spark imagination, to provoke conversation. In one corner stood a freestanding sculpture of a nude young woman touching herself. It raised eyebrows, but he called it a conversation starter. In truth, less provocation than confession—desire carved in stone, denial disguised as art. Like him, it invited dialogue but concealed something raw beneath.

The Atlantic photographer had insisted on removing it. Rachel had agreed; she never liked the piece. She hadn’t ever heard of Amar D’Izarny, but the figure was clearly a modern riff on Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*. She challenged him when he bought it.

“Steven, I don’t know. In a gallery, maybe. But in your office? It’s sexist. Many of your female patients will feel objectified the second they see it.”

“That’s the point,” he said.

“If you like, I can sculpt you something more abstract... less graphic.”

But Gold insisted. He was drawn to it—that’s why she called it *Galatea*.

Rachel deferred to him, as usual, assuming he knew best. She had always been his biggest supporter—his personal cheerleader, as he used to say. She knew him—or thought she did. He needed that: balance, grounding. But things had begun to tilt.

Gold wasn’t an introvert—his ego wouldn’t allow it—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, with a sculptor’s eye, mockingly dubbed “Hadrian’s Wall.”

She knows me so well—at least as much as I let her.

I sit, reading, trying to find meaning.

She takes a blank canvas, clump of clay, and creates hers.

She knows I hide—knows I need to. But we both hide.

From each other.

Me behind my wall; her, behind oil and clay.

On the other side of the “wall” sat his Harvard College captain’s chair—cherry-finished top, satin black body, the *Veritas* crest gleaming from the back, as if to say it was the arbiter of ‘truth.’ Behind it, on a faded Serapi Persian rug, rested a Schumacher toile club chair, angled toward its matching couch.

Gold focused on the books arranged with care along his ebony credenza—a satellite collection to his larger library at home. Each spine was chosen to carry personal weight, each title a reflection of him.

Know the man by his books.

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

When not running therapy or playing golf, he was usually reading in his black leather Eames chair—or drifting through used bookstores, hunting for odd covers or evocative titles, often as or more important than the content itself.

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 turn.*

In truth, he liked knowing the spines were visible. A library said things before he had to. He never considered that a personal bookshelf

was less a collection than a catalogue—something uncomfortably close to a list of confessions.

The physical books served as proof no Kindle could provide. Occasionally he shared a quote with a patient, but more often he enjoyed the act of quoting itself—aphorisms offered at just the right moment, somehow made truer by being spoken aloud, as though quoted from a holy scripture.

He'd asked *The Atlantic* photographer to bump the f-stop—to keep the titles sharp in the background.

Clarity performs well on camera.

Gold watched the window light rake across the spines.

Interesting how the light changes this time of year—in the fall.

He studied the shadows the afternoon light cast.

People are surprised to learn that a shadow—having no mass, no density—can still carry weight. Enormous weight.

My work is to illuminate the mind's darker corners, to ease that psychic burden—to name the shadows, or at least make them visible.

Not all shadows have clear boundaries. That's where the pain begins. But “not clearly defined” doesn't mean “without end.” Shadows bleed into our light, dimming it—but also defining it.

His large five-tiered bookshelf, packed tight with books, offered a glimpse into who Gold believed he was—and who he needed others to believe. Psychology leaned against philosophy, theology jostled pulp, the canon itself thrown into therapy. Less a library than a mask, it was a performance staged to suggest depth. Every spine declared identity, yet the chorus was orchestrated—performance without confession.

The top shelf leaned into psychology and therapy: *Affirmation and Reality; Gestalt Therapy Verbatim; Being and Caring; The Dissociative Mind; The Interpretation of Dreams; The Psychopathology of Everyday Life; Civilization and Its Discontents; Moses and Monotheism; The Origin and Development of*

Psychoanalysis; The Unconscious Observed; Disorders of Sexual Desire; Cluster Headache: Mechanisms and Management; The Mask of Sanity. Nestled among them was Frieda Fromm-Reichmann's *Principles of Intensive Psychotherapy*, a reminder of the analytic lineage Gold simultaneously revered and resisted.

The second shelf tilted toward philosophy and existential thought.

Sartre and Camus appeared in French—spines cracked, margins scarred. Two other volumes remained unopened, still shrinkwrapped: *The Sovereignty of Good* and *Pale Fire*.

The rest leaned toward interrogation rather than comfort: *Self-Reliance and Other Essays; Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre; Fear and Trembling; L'Être et le Néant; Meditations on First Philosophy; The Outsider; The Structure of Scientific Revolutions; The Concept of Mind; The Elegance of the Hedgehog; The Man Without Qualities; Amador: In Which a Father Addresses His Son on Questions of Ethics.* Interspersed were volumes he often cited in session—Camus's *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and *La Chute*, Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

The third shelf carried the weight of theology, myth, and guilt: *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature; Creature and Creator; I and Thou; Mythology; Moses and Akhenaten; Answer to Job; A Book Forged in Hell; The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason; The Portable Atheist; An Atheist's Guide to Reality; Paradise Lost; The Courage to Be; Violence and the Sacred; and Alter's The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary.* They pressed together like reluctant neighbors—belief and unbelief, creation and destruction.

The fourth shelf spilled over with literature, poetry, and pulp: *Prometheus Unbound; Crime and Punishment; The Brothers Karamazov; Faust; Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus; Nausea; The Master and Margarita; Gulliver's Travels; The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy; Flatland; Dune Messiah; The Gospel According to Jesus Christ; The Mind Parasites; The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge; The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell; William Blake: The Complete Illuminated Books; Miles of Heart; Wittgenstein's Mistress; If on a Winter's Night a Traveler; The Trial; The Double; The Wreckage of Agathon.* Gold liked the sprawl here, the way high art jostled against science fiction and psychedelic oddities.

And on the bottom shelf, meticulously arranged in multiple copies, were his own works. The fiction and experiments—*The Little Boy Who Wouldn't Go To Sleep; Reveries and Unanswered Questions from the*

Edges of Life; The Eighth Day; Africa; The Image Teleporter; Bark; Trees; Dave King & Asgard: Chronology; Eulogies & Headstones; Solip; DietWrite; Dreams in Amber; The Mirror That Lied. The hybrid experiment—*Case Studies in the Absurd.* The clinical and scholarly—*Rules & Laws; Category Errors in Life; The Wisdom of Silence.* And the academic foundations, preserved like relics of identity: his pretentiously titled undergraduate 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;* his master's thesis, *Schizophrenic Hallucinations: A Psychodiagnostic Tool?;* and his doctoral dissertation, *The Psychosocial Correlates of Adolescent Substance Ab/Use.*

Gold's gaze often lingered here, on the bottom row, where his name lined up neatly against the masters above—proof, or perhaps pretense, that he belonged at all.

Substance Ab/Use... an entire year, wasted.

Gold clenched his jaw and exhaled, recalling when his doctoral advisor quit—after glancing only at 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 hypothesize 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, who belong. Statistically, they're the norm. These days the strict abstainers are the true deviants."

He replayed the scene a hundred times, never admitting it was displaced aggression. He preferred "principle."

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

A strict non-user, 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*—those blissfully ignorant lemmings.

He'd been thoroughly indoctrinated—imprisoned in a parentally sanctioned, well-mannered world. He didn't realize those outbursts—

then or since—were his unconscious self, rattling the bars of its 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 would have called it too many butterflies.
Who could say where that path might have led?*

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

No regrets. I'm still here.

He pretended that simply calling them “mistakes” made them truth—as if words alone could absolve him. Thinking too long on it left him queasy—more truth than he liked. Still, he was beginning to understand.

I tell my patients—understanding isn't the same as changing.

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 that reassurance—especially now. In moments like this, no diploma, no certificate, no bookshelf or glowing profile could silence the questions. Or the doubts.

Sartre named it mauvaise foi. Barnes softened it to “bad faith.”

Kaufmann nailed it: self-deception.

The most dangerous form of bad faith is certainty.

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 video flashed onto his iPad, cutting off 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.”

Walls hold.

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—half dizziness, half dread—passed through him. His fingers twitched on the doorknob.

Jumped up too fast?

He let go.

PVC, probably. Not AFib. Right?

He lifted his wrist and tapped the ECG icon.

Normal sinus rhythm.

Right.

A thin, strikingly handsome man—mid-to-late thirties, jet-black hair—sat just left of the ficus, thumbing through the reception copy of *The Atlantic*. The moment he entered, the air shifted—not with sound, but with scent. *Roja Haute Luxe*. It was as if shadow itself had a fragrance, and it had chosen him as its emissary. It wasn’t just a scent; it was a presence—regal, enigmatic, unapologetically rare. Like aged parchment soaked in cognac.

Whoa. That’s what LeRoi Davis wears. \$3,500 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.

Light looked up. A flicker in his eyes—something oddly familiar and foreign.

Déjà vu—not mere familiarity. Primal. Like the mark of Cain: invisible, unmistakable. Ridiculous.

As he approached, he caught himself—sheepishly—noting the enviable gleam on Light's black Prada crocodile-effect Oxfords.

He glanced at his own shoes, disappointed.

"Dr. Steven Gold," he said. "Come in."

Chapter Three Epigraphs
Truth Hides In Shadows

*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* (1847)

Man is not what he thinks he is, he is what he hides.
— André Malraux, *Anti-Memoirs* (1967)

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Truth Hides In Shadows
Wednesday, early evening

Light, tall at six-foot-three, let the magazine fall to the table with effortless ease. As he stepped inside, his deep blue eyes locked on Gold's—steady, unsettling in their calm.

Rachel would remark on his symmetry. She'd love to sculpt that face—the hollows, the angles. She notices details—probably even the untouched books on my shelf.

He extended a manicured hand. A heavy gold ring on his middle finger caught the light. It was etched with symbols Gold couldn't place. Writing, perhaps.

She'd have focused on the ring if she were painting him.

Saturn's finger. A ring of judgment—heavy.

"Hello. Samael Light. Samuel, if you prefer—it's easier. A pleasure."

"Nice to meet you, Samuel."

His handshake was firm, steady—decisive.

A cold thread traced Gold's spine.

Shit—COVID?

Gold turned toward his desk, expecting Light to take the captain's chair—as everyone did. Instead, Light strolled to the club chair, angled it just enough to break the room's symmetry, and sat—crossing one leg with the ease of command.

Gold stiffened.

That breaks the choreography.

The office was staged to frame him—diplomas and credentials aligned in view. A throne behind the desk. Control. Boundaries. Patients kept outside Hadrian's Wall.

And Light's move forced Gold to cross it, exposing himself.

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, clipboard in hand as he crossed the room.

He perched awkwardly on the couch's edge, stealing a glance at Light.

I never sit on the couch.

Is this a power move?

"Thanks. My wife thinks it's gloomy for a psychologist's office."

"Not at all," Light replied. "I find it... stimulating."

His gaze drifted across the diplomas, prints, and sculptures—pausing deliberately on the cluttered shelf.

"Asherah—the old Canaanite goddess?" Light asked, nodding at the statuette.

Gold softened, genuinely impressed. "Yes. Keen eye. A gift from a patient."

Impressive.

"Fertility goddess. Let me guess—a gift from someone struggling to conceive? Clearly a success. 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. Moore's *Woman Seated in the Underground*, yes? Thought so."

He glanced at a sculpture. "Michelangelo's *Slave*—perfect for a psychologist's office."

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. Calming." He smiled. "I love how art draws emotion out of you."

"I don't recognize the signature, but that balance of imagination and technique—that's rare. People think symmetry in art is easy—it's not. Especially in such an angelic face."

Rachel.

He looked across the room. "That oil painting—who's the artist?"

She's clearly gifted. It 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."

Gold lit up. "My wife would love hearing that. She made both—the bronze and the painting. Van Gogh's a favorite of hers."

An art student... or collector.

"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 hold it. There's balance, but beneath it all, a hint of sadness"

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 wall print. "Pollock—fantastic... *Lucifer*. It's always felt personal."

Interesting.

"I'm impressed. Most people guess Pollock—but no one recognizes *Lucifer*."

Light grinned. He rubbed his hand, turning his ring. "It's always meant something to 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 handed Light the clipboard.

"There's a basic info sheet and a couple of short questionnaires—just a snapshot. Then we'll talk."

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

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

Light withdrew a Montblanc fountain pen from his jacket and began writing—slow, deliberate, precise. Form by form. Page by page. His penmanship evoked *shodō*—disciplined, balanced, ceremonial.

Gold seized the moment to study him more closely.

*Left-handed, like me... but his tie's a half-Windsor.
Shoelaces tied right-handed. Balanced—or divided?
Interesting.*

Gold leaned closer, eyes drawn to the ring. Its faint, angular markings teased familiarity.

Runes? Norse? Older still? I'll ask later.

Heat prickled across his scalp. Light was watching him.

"Want to see it?" Light asked, already sliding 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. Sweat beaded along his hairline; he prayed Light wouldn't notice.

Shit. My whole scalp's probably glowing.

He exaggerated the motion, turning the ring slowly—hoping to divert Light's gaze.

Hmm. Heavier than it looks... heavier than it should be.

"Wow. Heavier than I expected. Solid gold?"

Light shifted. "Yes—it's gold. But it's old... ancient. Needs a cleaning."

He seems uncomfortable.

Gold squinted at the ring. "These symbols—prehistoric?"

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"Looks like something from a cave wall."

Light said—too quickly, too shakily—“Ancient Hebrew.”

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

Light squirmed, clearly uncomfortable.

He’s lying. Shifting more than his story.

“What does it say?”

Light adjusted his posture. “I’m not sure. It’s a precursor to Hebrew—Proto-Sinaitic. Oldest known alphabet. Around 1900 BCE. But only a few archaeologists can read it. No one’s been able to fully translate it.”

Bullshit. He knows exactly what it says. Why lie?

“A gift from my father. Sentimental, I guess.”

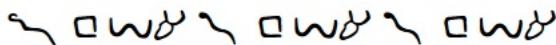
That’s the trigger.

Light’s right hand moved instinctively to his finger—then froze. Bare. He let the arm fall quickly to his side.

He’s trying to act cool. But it meant something. Something deep.

He turned the ring again. Inside, another inscription—faint, nearly worn smooth.

“There’s something engraved here too... faded.”



Light shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “Yeah. Had it forever.”

Gold handed it back. “Well... must be important.”

A gift from your father—and you don’t know what it says? Please.

Listen for echoes. Sometimes they speak more clearly than the voice that made them.

Light slid the ring back on, spinning it slowly. With each turn, calm returned—but the wrong kind: uneasy, suspicious, watchful.

*OCD? He was sweating the whole time I held it.
What's he hiding... what's it hiding?*

*Strange. There's something about him. What is it?
He makes me think of Dad. Déjà vu again.*

Be careful.

Gold grabbed his notebook and leaned in. The pen felt heavy, as if resisting him.

He wrote just one word—stark, bold.

RING.

He circled it hard.

*Chapter Four Epigraphs
An Anchor Chained To Your Heart*

*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)*

*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)*

*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)*

I know it's crazy. Impossible.

But... what if?

— Steven Gold, *A Question of Balance: A Descent Into Madness* (2026)

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An Anchor Chained To Your Heart
Wednesday, evening

Light returned to the forms—paused just long enough to look up—then continued, mask firmly back in place.

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

"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—it wasn't curiosity, it was a challenge.

Heat crept up his neck. He hated that Light might notice.

Ignore it. You're the doctor. I don't need to justify my ways to him.

Gold snapped his notebook closed 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. He knew—he was losing the upper hand.

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

*Rachel hates it when I'm passive aggressive.
Brilliant, Dr. Gold—what the hell is wrong with me?
Don't start off being an asshole. Ha. Even though I'll
probably end up being one.*

"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: his degrees, books, curated artwork—a quietly constructed wall of 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, Legion Law (Appellate & Post-Conviction).

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

He looked up. "Samuel, what's your area of practice?"

"Criminal law," Light said, his expression unchanged. "I used to try cases—juries, cross-exams, all of it. But now I focus on appellate and post-conviction work. These days I'm mostly buried in briefs and transcripts. Court is rare now, and I'm usually done by four, which makes evenings easier. Mostly I work with the wrongly convicted. They deserve an advocate."

Gold nodded. "Impressive. Noble—an appeal to a higher court. God's work."

Light's Montblanc slipped from his fingers, clattering softly on the floor. He bent to retrieve it, then tucked it 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 shrugged lightly. "Oh, I believe you." He leaned in, voice

lowered. "Just got in from New York yesterday. Someone snagged my phone in the TSA line at JFK."

"That's annoying."

Light nodded. "I'll replace it tomorrow or Friday. New phone, new number—like starting over. Haven't had a chance to breathe yet."

"Coincidentally, last year, when I was in LA on business, my wallet was stolen." He gave a dry laugh. "If I were superstitious..."

Gold chuckled. "Didn't Einstein say, 'Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous'?"

Light smiled faintly.

"I don't know a soul here yet. But I'm healthy—and careful. And not superstitious."

Undeniably likable—polished, but something stirred beneath the surface. I doubt I'll enjoy unearthing it.

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

"Not married. 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 turned 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?" He punctuated it with a wink.

That wink—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.

He's smart, wily. I'm going to have my work cut

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

The SPS and PSI revealed nothing remarkable—screeners clean.

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

And that bothered him most.

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

This didn't read like someone seeking therapy. It felt rehearsed—like a role he'd played before.

"Samuel, why don't you start by telling me what brought you in today," Gold said, leaning back slightly—projecting calm he didn't feel. He preferred sitting behind Hadrian's Wall—his default intake perch.

The college chair was deliberate—just uncomfortable enough to unsettle. Shifting in it now, he felt it doing its job. He braced for the usual cerebral hide-and-seek patients played at the start.

Therapy is a stealth mirror—harmless until it suddenly catches them off guard. People flinch when it reflects the face they thought hidden.

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

They expect me to be non-judgmental. But we all judge—constantly.

The only way to avoid judgment is not to listen at all.

Light cleared his throat and said, "What brings me here. Hmm. It should be easy to answer."

Gold said, "Take your time. Sometimes it's not so easy to put into words. Especially when dealing with feelings."

Gold saw early therapy—the trust games, the surface-level

problem-solving—as sandbox play, not cure. A 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 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. Countertransference—his own emotional leakage—unsettled him, as it had Freud. So he clung to 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 great therapist, better than me. She’s an empath. Almost too sensitive for this world. Like Don McLean’s line—“This world was never meant for one as beautiful as you.”

She senses hurt beneath bravado—she always did. I barely qualify as sympathetic. Often, I just mirror. I get distracted by the mask. They see my 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 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 not fully his, not 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 was different: 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 at the corners. Ambiguity on ambiguity. Assumptions were minefields. Process, not content. He wasn’t listening—not really. He was watching, always analyzing behavior from a metaphorical observation blind—safely hidden, avoiding exposure.

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

Gold hated dancing—literal or metaphorical. Always awkward. Always out of rhythm. 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, 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.”

“Him?” Don’t interrupt. Let him go on.

“I feel guilty. But I’m not a bad person. I shouldn’t feel this way.

They make me feel like I did something... unforgivable."

"They?"

He stared down at 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, pressing silence into his own 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 know."

"They were sinister." Pain crossed Light's face—undeniable, unguarded.

What the hell?

Was this sexual abuse?

"I think he did know—didn't care. That's him. He knows everything. Really only cares about himself."

His hands 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—because of him."

And yet—you wear 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."

Carlyle was upset I never took to his couch. He had theories.

"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 hesitated. "I don't know..."

"I might have." And he gave another wink.

Gold shifted in his chair—uncomfortable.

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, 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?"

Yes.

"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. Hate is closer still—it requires history, and 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, in spite of rejection. The ring? A relic. A loop of unfinished grief. A symbol of tarnished hope.

This is his narrative—but it lacks texture.

It needs color, detail, the full spectrum of truth.

"I know I'm no saint. You can't be—when survival means obedience. 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. He knew I'd do it. Choice was an *illusion*."

Was it? We always have a choice. Life is nothing but choice—we are our choices. And sometimes we make bad choices, that we can't undo.

Let him talk. Don't dam the flood.

"My biggest flaw? Honesty. Odd, I know—for me—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."

Honesty is a gift. Hard to give. Sometimes harder to accept.

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've lost mine. I'm the evil one. The liar. The troublemaker. They believe him—every time, they have to. 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 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 the taut silence, Light stared—hungry for something: a nod, a flicker of belief, anything.

The literal truth about his father? Does it even matter anymore? Will he let me challenge him? His beliefs? Unlikely. The facts—whatever they are—feel secondary now. Reconciliation? Not unless he is open to seeing things differently. What matters is what he believes. This didn't happen overnight.

Still, if I knew more, maybe I could help him reframe it—understand it, accept it—withouth the emotion, without the vitriol. In time, maybe? If he's willing to work.

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."

Don't challenge him yet. Win him first.

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. That'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. Nobody likes being challenged—especially fathers."

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 the 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.

Light leaned forward, clearly interested. "Belief is *thinking you know*. Faith is binary—on or off.

"Agnosticism? I'm not sure it truly exists." He gave a faint smile.

"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 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. In their mind, it could unravel everything.

"Suggesting another viewpoint—even a better one—can feel like betrayal. So we double down, telling ourselves we see clearly—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, only 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, what he 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.

“Even 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

slumped forward, head bowed—dejected, drained.

I can't just leave him in the wreckage. Despair is no place to pause. Time for something positive—hopeful. My brothers used to say, "Everybody didn't go to Harvard." Economists had a name for it—the Curse of Knowledge.

But the real curse, my curse, is when everyone thinks you know... and you don't.

Well, don't dumb it down, just don't assume the same foundation. 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 is 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—its 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 always have the scars."

"But the goal shouldn't always be to escape the weight—but to learn how to carry it."

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. You know it isn't, but you feel like crap anyway. 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. And you still feel guilty—because someone told you that you are."

Light nodded in agreement but said, "No disrespect, Dr. Gold—but you say that like someone who's never had to carry it."

Gold bristled, shifting uncomfortably on the couch. "I'm talking clinically. Everyone suffers at its hands, by its weight."

I'm trying to stay detached, but guilt is glue.

Inherited guilt—my father's silence.

Neurotic guilt—Jane's shadow.

Gold continued. "You try to fix it, but nothing changes. That's when guilt becomes a trap—no off-ramp, no exit. You keep trying to fix it. But fix what, how? You didn't break it. 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? Because 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, 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 an anchor—dragging us into the abyss."

Rachel, the only one who ever tried to unchain me by believing in me. By loving me.

Gold cleared his throat. "Some believe guilt is the prime mover—the great engine 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 can help: learning to recognize feelings and choose your emotional response. Remember—emotions are reactions to feelings. We're wired to feel certain things, but we fall into the habit of letting those emotions run automatically. The goal is to break that habit—to act consciously, not reflexively."

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. I can't seem to let go, so 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, if it's justified—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 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?

Truth is rarely immediate; it emerges reluctantly, piece by piece.

"Life's a journey—we all screw up occasionally. 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."

Chapter Five Epigraphs
Sympathy for the Devil

If the devil doesn't exist, but man has created him, he has created him in his own image.

— Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880)

We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.

— Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Mother Night* (1961)

But who prays for Satan?

*Who, in eighteen centuries, has had the common humanity
to pray for the one sinner that needed it most?*

— Mark Twain, *Letters from the Earth* (1962)

*Pleased to meet you
Hope you guess my name
But what's puzzlin' you
Is the nature of my game*
—Mick Jagger & Keith Richards, lyrics from "Sympathy for the Devil,"
Beggars Banquet (1968)

-5-

Sympathy for the Devil
Wednesday, late evening

What the fuck?

*Don't overreact. Probably a metaphor. Just clarify.
Why Satan? Challenge him—gently.*

"Your parents named you... Satan?"

Light's expression shifted. He looked down, twisted the ring on his finger. Then, almost inaudibly: "My Father... I never had a mother."

Gold blinked. His breath caught.

He's serious? No... a nickname. No one names a kid Satan. Not even a drug lord. Actually, maybe a drug lord might. Yeah—his father. But "I never had a mother?" Abuse? Abandonment? Death?

This session just got longer. A lot longer.

Gold leaned in—thumb beneath chin—finger across lips—his *stay quiet and listen* pose. He exhaled—slow, steady, neutral. "Please

continue."

He jotted—quickly:

Estranged from father. Maternal absence? Grief masked as myth?

Abuse? PPD?

MMPI—overkill?

Light looked up, locking his deep blue eyes on Gold. "I'm sorry, Dr. Gold. I've shaken you. I can only imagine what you're writing. Please —humor me. Before you prescribe pills or pass me off—I'm not crazy. Just upset."

Okay, not crazy. So... metaphor.

But I blew it. "How can you be listening... if you're busy writing?" Shit. I have to win him back. PPD?

"I've done the research. I came to you because you might be the only one who can actually understand. And help."

Paranoid Personality Disorder—prone to misreading intentions, hypersensitive to slights. Tread carefully. But they don't usually confide. What's going on here? Is he bullshitting me?

Gold closed his notebook and slid it—along with his pen—behind him on the black-lacquered desk. He turned toward Light—fully now—locking onto those deep sapphire eyes.

"So... you don't really believe you're the Devil?" he said, scanning for flickers—body language, tension, tells.

*So much for Rogue's Gallery at nine with Rachel.
Hope she remembers to record it. Of course she will.
Why do I immediately jump to doubt?*

Gold noticed the fine crow's feet, the stray gray hairs.

"No—I didn't say 'the Devil.' I said 'Satan.' There's a difference. A real one."

"I thought you'd be the one... but you don't understand."

Light seemed to age mid-sentence. His voice faltered—softened. He looked... defeated.

His dark blue eyes brimmed; he fought the tears.

It takes guts—or desperation. Just walking through the door is a cry for help. You expect a welcome—a hand, not judgment. You don't expect dismissal. To be ignored. To have your pain overlooked.

Fuck. I should've waited. Made the note later. I didn't just lose control—I hurt him.

Gold leaned forward and—uncharacteristically—placed a hand on Light's knee.

Light twitched. "I'm not asking for sympathy, Dr. Gold—just understanding."

Where the hell did that come from? I've never done that before. So maybe I do feel something. Sympathy? Or something else?

Gold had never done that before. He couldn't have—not from behind Hadrian's Wall.

What 'is' going on with me?

He didn't touch patients—except for handshakes. Once, he'd hugged a woman overjoyed to be pregnant.

"You're right—I don't understand. But I hope you'll help me. I can see I hurt you, Samuel, and I'm sorry. I was listening—truly."

"I jot things down so I won't interrupt you. If I write a word, a question, I can come back to it. It helps me stay with your words—without cutting you off."

"You had—and still have—my full attention. Please go on."

I've never done that before. It felt like I needed to touch... something. Maybe his soul. But his leg—it felt hot. Am I falling into his delusion?

Something's buried. A darkness. What shadows drive him to believe he's Satan?

Gold hated talking about himself. Not with patients. Not even with Bob Oldman—his therapist, his friend.

Steven Gold didn't dance—literally or metaphorically. He loved accolades. Even expected them. But secondhand. From afar. Up close? Embarrassing.

That flop sweat, caught staring at Light's ring—said everything. He feared being challenged in real time—no prep, no research. No pearls of wisdom.

Gold had been doubting himself lately. This was new ground.

Do I deserve the praise? The tributes? The glowing articles? What have I really done? I'm not a genius. Therapy isn't brilliance. It's pattern recognition. Echoes of textbooks. Mimicked mentors. Scripted lines. Where's the genius in that? Am I just fooling everyone? Is the great Dr. Gold just a well-dressed fraud—reciting borrowed truths in a tailored suit, praying no one notices the frayed seams?

I can't let Rachel down.

He'd always rationalized the coldness. Told himself it was necessary. A Freudian precept—analytic neutrality—for the patient's sake.

In lectures, he'd say: "Provide the patient a *tabula rasa*. Don't contaminate the encounter. Don't let their need for your approval shape what they share. If they fear your judgment, they censor themselves."

He'd dodge real self-disclosure with parables and case studies. He preferred "we" over "I"—in opposition to his training. That's what the books were for. That—and the authority they projected.

He remembered Dr. Oster calling him out—live, in front of the class—for always holding back. "You've got instincts. Strong analysis. But Perls would eat you alive. He'd force you to use the one pronoun you dodge like the plague—'I.'

"Stop reaching out to dead authors. Reach out your hand. Your clients come to you unsteady, unsure—afraid they can't stand on their own, or that they'll need help for a while to do so.

"Used wisely, your steady, reassuring hand shows them you understand—because you've been there. Because you can help.

"It makes you human. Stop being 'Dr. Gold.' Try being Steven."

I've never liked being Steven. I'm not sure I even know who he is. "Dr. Gold" is comfortable. Safe.

No one knows what I'm going through. Hell—I'm not even sure I do.

I'm losing Rachel.

His eyes swelled. Vision blurred. He stared—dazed, as if into a mirror. Then he realized—he was looking at Light. Staring back. Concerned.

"Dr. Gold... are you okay?"

Gold wiped at tears he hadn't realized were there. "Yes. I'm sorry. I see your pain—and I've felt it too. I apologize."

I guess this is what real self-disclosure feels like. I'm not sure I'm ready. But I feel for him. I remember how much my father's approval meant. I still light his yahrzeit candle every year. Losing him... like that... it was brutal. I couldn't help him, but I forced myself to be there.

Rachel? What the hell—focus! Focus. Get back in the room!

"So... not the Devil—Satan. I'm sorry, I don't understand the difference."

Okay, there's some self-disclosure, honesty.

"I'll explain. But first—I need to see the battlefield. Are you religious?"

Battlefield?

Gold flinched at the word. *Battlefield*. He scrambled through half-buried memories of religious school, old texts, images of Satan and the Devil.

He knew: *Satan* meant adversary. Accuser. But the only reference he could recall from Hebrew scripture was Job—and he often mixed up the biblical Job with Milton's and Blake's.

The biblical Job—faith under fire. Blake's Job—symbolic, a journey from moralism to awakening.

Satan casts a longer shadow in Christianity and Islam. And in literature—Milton’s tragic hero in ‘Paradise Lost.’ Lucifer; the Morning Star; in Byron’s ‘Cain.’ In Islam, he’s not even an angel—he’s a jinn. A tempter.

Shit. Which one is he?

Realizing Light was still watching him, Gold answered—more embarrassed than he wanted to admit.

“I don’t see how that’s relevant... but what exactly do you mean by, ‘battlefield?’”

I’m not dodging his question. I’m trying to understand the transference.

Light leaned in, eyes narrowed sharp.

“I need to see the battlefield. Know what beliefs I’m up against. Where do you stand? I’m guessing you’re not very religious—but you never really know.”

*What did Reik say again? When you want to understand others, you must first look into yourself.
Shit. No third ear here.*

I hope this doesn’t turn into a theological debate.

If I tell him I’m an atheist... will he get uncomfortable? I know I will.

*Well, Dr. Oster, looks like you’re getting your wish.
I’m stepping outside my comfort zone—just hope it’s not in front of a firing squad. Ha.*

“Jewish, but not religious. I light yahrzeit candles for my parents—that’s about it.”

Light stayed silent.

Gold hesitated. “I suppose I’m an atheist.”

A montage hit him—his childhood neighbor screaming he killed Jesus, his tenth-grade girlfriend sobbing because he was doomed to Hell, the fury he felt toward God—because his father died, and because Rachel couldn’t have children.

Light smiled. “I thought so.”

Gold flushed at Light’s certainty.

"I'm sorry if I've embarrassed you. It just seemed to fit. I mean seriously—Dr. Steven Gold... of course you're Jewish."

"That's okay. I'm Jewish too."

What?

"This works better. I'd have had a hard time if you'd been raised Catholic—with all that dogma about me."

Gold blinked like he'd taken a hit—shaken off a concussion. It wasn't what Light said—it was his face. The way it changed. A weight lifted.

Light straightened. His eyes widened. Suddenly energized—engaged. Animated.

Gold cleared his throat, re-centering. "I'm curious... what does my admitting I'm Jewish tell you?"

Admitting? Why the hell did I say that? I'm not embarrassed.

"First, it shows you trust me. You didn't just echo me like an AI therapist bot.

"It also tells me that you probably don't know much about me—besides maybe the story of Job, and what like *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*, and *The Devil's Advocate* brainwashed you to think.

"Am I wrong?"

Mostly true... except Paul Cantor's 'Myths of Creation' at Harvard.

"Somewhat true. What I know so far—you're estranged from your father. And your mother? You won't even go there.

"You feel maligned—probably because of something that happened while working for your father—a family business. Maybe you left. Maybe you were kicked out.

"My beliefs—religious or not—shouldn't matter. I won't let them get in the way of this relationship."

Sounded good, but who am I kidding? They're always there—beliefs, values. Psychotherapy is moral philosophy in disguise.

Psychology borrowed too much from physical

science. Not enough from philosophy. Or religion.

Everything I say comes colored—beliefs, values, biases. That's the truth of this work.

"It's clear you have some serious parental wounds. I can help you explore them. Maybe resolve them—through change or acceptance.

Good. Reasserting control now.

"But it depends on your goals. What do you want from therapy?"

Light's mood shifted again. His jaw clenched and his eyes seemed to flash with anger.

Uh oh. He's pissed.

Well, maybe that will end this Satan bullshit. Maybe that's why his parents won't talk to him.

"You don't believe me. You think I'm just another nut who needs a steady lithium level."

*Fuck it, as Coach Lander used to always say:
'Don't hesitate—go for the ball!'*

"Not at all. I can see you're serious—about how people react to you. Maybe even about how you see yourself."

"But I think you stay in control by keeping others off balance."

"The problem is, when you throw everyone else off balance, you're the one who looks off-kilter—the one who stands out. Looks strange."

Am I talking about him—or projecting me?

"There's a cultural frame of reference. If you want to function in society—you've got to conform, at least a little."

"Of course, this is Southern California. You've got more leeway. Politics aside—almost anything goes. You can 'identify' as whatever you want. Being 'eccentric' is fine. But telling people your name is Satan? Most will think you're a religious Satanist, some burned-out post-hippie, or just a professional shit-stirrer—like you said people accuse you of being. Like it or not, everyone judges."

"And honestly? A trial attorney named Satan? That's a little too cinematic—even for LA."

Gold paused, letting it settle.

He felt a new confidence—he was starting to get a handle on this. On Light. Light was sharp. No doubt he'd follow every word.

In fact, he worried Light might be catching up. Fast. Clearly intelligent. No question.

*Careful. Wounded animals cornered strike fast.
Patients are wounded animals. They need compassion
—but they can bite. Hard. Without warning.*

Okay. Brace yourself. Fireworks coming.

“So... how can I actually help you?”

Light’s eyes flared. “You’re still not hearing me. I’m not saying I’m called Satan. I’m not saying I identify as Satan. I am Satan.”

*Why is he doubling down? He’s not psychotic.
None of this adds up.*

*He seemed normal. Still does. What the hell did he
just say? Is this even real?*

“Just to be clear—you’re not saying that you *feel* like Satan. You’re saying that you *are* Satan. The biblical Satan?”

“Yes I’m actually Satan. But not the biblical one. All the books, got it wrong.”

Light exhaled, shaking his head. “You don’t understand. No one does. No one can. No one knows what I’m going through.”

*Ich bin der Geist, der stets verneint. I am the spirit
that always denies. Like Goethe’s Mephistopheles?*

He leaned back, eyes on the ceiling, hand brushing his lips. Then, softly: “They distorted the stories. Twisted the truth. But I was there.”

Is this a game? A delusion? A test?

Light leaned in, gaze fixed. “Tell me, Dr. Gold... when’s the last time you doubted your own reality?”

Gold hesitated. His hands felt... wrong. Cold.

*He’s challenging me again—turning the spotlight
back on me. But there’s something in his voice... a
vulnerability. In his eyes—desperation.*

Gold swallowed. "Okay. So you believe you are Satan."

Clearly angry. "Not believe, Dr. Gold. I know!"

Shit, doubling down again. If he really believes this, I've got to refer him to psychiatry. Freud said defense mechanisms help us survive stress. Anxiety. Conflict. Anna Freud said they protect the ego by distorting or denying reality. Well, Anna—this guy's tearing reality to shreds.

You can't argue someone out of psychosis. Even if I could, I can't just shatter his belief. Not yet. Not 'till I know what function it serves—what it protects. I can't just pop the balloon. But seriously—Satan? Come on. What the hell am I supposed to do with that?

"I'm sorry, Samuel. But I don't know. As an atheist, I hope you'll understand—this isn't easy for me to make sense of."

We all have shadows. The trick is to learn how to dance with them.

"Even in just this short time, I can see why you're upset. Frustrated. Sad."

"You said you're estranged from your father... and you haven't mentioned your mother. I had my own issues with my parents—"

Gold caught himself.

"Everyone does. I'd just like to understand what brought you here. That's how I'll know how to help."

Where the hell did that come from? Hopefully he missed it.

Let it land. I'm being sympathetic—trying to connect. This won't get solved in one night.

I just need his trust. For a little while.

Sink the hook... then reel.

Light leaned in, locked his eyes with him, and said—dead serious:

"Dr. Gold, I'm not estranged from my mother. I never had one."

"I am Satan. But, as I said, not the biblical version. The Bible got it wrong. I was part of God's heavenly court, but..."

Gold's eyes flicked upward—a reflex.

"Of course it sounds crazy. I get that. But now—I'm telling you the whole truth."

*Truth is stubborn—shy, even—revealing itself only
in slow increments, always a little reluctant.*

"I didn't say the honest-to-God truth... because, well—He's the root of all my problems. God's truth is part of the problem.

"From your atheist point of view, Dr. Gold, I'm just a myth—dismissed. Certainly not a real, living person.

"Sounds like the setup for a horror novel, right? Or some sci-fi/fantasy mashup. A Marvel or DC reject.

"But I promise you—I'm no comic book character."

Light was wound tight. He sat back, shoulders taut, trying to settle himself.

"Dr. Gold, you said you're not religious. That belief is 'thinking you know.' That no one can be reasoned out of religion.

"You're a psychologist. You try to talk people into normalcy. So you know the power of logic. Of reason.

"I know this doesn't seem logical. Probably feels completely unreasonable. And the fact that you think you don't believe in God? That makes it even harder for me to prove I'm not lying—or insane."

What does he mean—'think I don't believe in God?

"Faith is believing without evidence. Believing *in spite* of the evidence—that's fanaticism.

"So, here's my offer. Call it a *Gedankenexperiment*—a thought experiment.

Light leaned forward, eyes glinting as if a cross-exam were about to begin.

"Suppose Satan were real. Suppose he sat here—in the defendant's chair, under oath. How would you treat him, Dr. Gold? Not as metaphor. Not as myth. As your patient."

He paused, letting the silence weigh like a judge's gavel.

"That's my stipulation. You don't argue the fact pattern—you work with it. Can you do that... Counselor?"

Gold exhaled—a dry laugh, caught halfway between disbelief and defense.

Light smiled, savoring the moment.

"Don't worry—I won't make you sign in blood. I deal in contracts, not covenants. This time."

The grin widened, courtroom wit shading into something darker. "Consider it a verbal agreement—binding, nonetheless. You treat me as I am. I'll try not to hold you in contempt."

Am I enabling him? Playing along with a delusion—or witnessing its logic?

Gold exhaled—a dry, disbelieving chuckle. Half laugh, half warning.

Fine. Let him run. His dime. I'll play along.

If I listen close enough—maybe I'll hear what's really broken.

I'll trace it back. Parental betrayal. Rage displaced. What myth is he recasting—and who plays the villain?

"What do you think, Dr. Gold? Can we stipulate—and leave it alone?"

"C'mon—this has to get your intellectual juices flowing, right?"

"Think of the case study you could write. I could be your 'Anna O.' I honestly believe you can help me."

Every life contains stories within stories: the one we tell, the one we believe, and the one we avoid at all costs.

Gold straightened, trying to maintain his clinical calm.

"I read that Atlantic piece, Dr. Gold. You've got a style—an approach. Interesting speculation about the unsolved St. Augustine murderer. And your background with Dr. Carlyle. I think you work for me. That's good. You already have my trust. I'm motivated. I want your help. Just treat me like any other patient... any other *mortal* patient."

His lips curled into a knowing half-smile. That was all. But the silence afterward felt loaded.

Gold paused, mulling it over.

There it is again—the grin. That glint. Is he performing? Testing me? Am I enabling a psychotic break—just playing along?

“Okay, Samuel—so stipulated. I won’t cure you of your belief—sorry, your identity as Satan. But you’ll have to cut me some slack. Never studied this in class.”

Light’s lips curved in approval. “Objection sustained. Thanks, Dr. Gold. That’s all I ask.”

That—and my soul?

Too soon.

Surreal. Like a verdict I never saw coming—delivered without trial, without jury. Without appeal? We’ll see. I should’ve filmed this. A mask? A fracture? He’s too polished for true madness—too precise for parody. A zealot? A con man? Certainly not Satan. Madness begins that way, doesn’t it? Not with delusions—but with questions you can’t quite dismiss.

“I’ll treat you like any other patient. But I may need context. Background. Clarification.”

Light smiled. “Don’t worry—I won’t cure you of your atheism. Though you might change your mind.”

I’m feeling better about this.

He’s right. This could be a hell of a case study.

Or a novel.

Gold smiled faintly. “Okay. I’ll keep an open mind—but it might be a waste of your time and money. Many have tried. All failed.”

“Speaking of time and money...”

Gold used the moment to shift gears—into the dreaded fee talk. Always uncomfortable.

“I usually start with two sessions a week for the first two weeks. Then we reassess and build a plan.”

“Sounds reasonable. I prefer late afternoons or early evenings. My trials rarely run past four.”

“Today’s Wednesday. How about Tuesdays and Thursdays—say,

5:00 or 5:30?"

Light stood, smiling wide. "Perfect. Tuesdays and Thursdays at five." He extended his hand. "What do I owe you for today?"

How about your soul? Haha. Better be careful—I might accidentally say that out loud. Though he seems to have a sense of humor... now.

"I charge \$400 an hour—plus \$100 today for the testing."

Gold avoided eye contact, feeling the flush rise. Like most therapists, he hated the fee talk. But he reminded himself—Light probably billed his own clients \$1,000 an hour or more.

They never taught this. Or am I the only one who finds it hard? I sell an illusion of insight—a glorified escort for the soul, paid to nod at pain, whisper borrowed wisdom, never flinch.

Light pulled a money clip from the inner pocket of his jacket.

"Cash okay? No card fees, right?"

Gold nodded, still visibly uneasy.

"Yes—of course." Gold fidgeted with Light's forms—a distraction.
"Would you like a bill for insurance?"

Light handed him five crisp \$100 bills and extended a hand.

"No need. As you might guess, a lot of my clients pay in cash. I don't ask where it comes from. And, well—since it's a privileged conversation, I'll admit... I don't always report it." Light grinned—pure mischief.

"Don't worry—I've got scruples. No offense, but my insurance pays crap for therapy. Eighty percent of \$25, after the deductible. Not even worth the paperwork."

Light turned to go, then glanced back. A final grin. A final wink.

"Whether you report it or not? That's on you. See you tomorrow, Dr. Gold!"

Light raised his hand—thumb and forefinger shaping a loose pistol.

He didn't blink. Didn't move. Just held it. Then—click. Soft. Deliberate.

"Okay. See you then. Take care."

There it was again—the ring, gleaming beneath the barrel like a

coiled serpent. Not a trigger. Not a warning. Just... waiting. As if the thing itself were watching.

*Chapter Six Epigraphs
Paradoxical Sleep*

Tonight in your dreams you must look at your hands.

— Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968)

Dreams are often most profound when they seem the most crazy.

— Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900)

I dreamed I was a butterfly, flitting around in the sky; then I awoke.

*Now I wonder: Am I a man who dreamt of being a butterfly,
or a butterfly dreaming that I am a man?*

— Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi* (circa 4th century BCE)

We have forgotten the age-old fact that God speaks chiefly through dreams and visions.

— C.G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (1964)

WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?

— Billie Eilish, album title (2019)

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Paradoxical Sleep

Wednesday, night

Gold punched in the alarm code, then noticed a note taped to the key bowl on the entry table.

It read:

Steven—You could have called or texted. Guess you were working. I'm going to sleep. Leftover chicken in the refrigerator. —R

Shit. She's pissed. I was working—that's why I texted. Not even a “Love, Rach.” I told her: eat dinner; watch TV, don't wait.

He yanked out his iPhone and opened the Messages app. The message was still there—unfinished. Unsent:

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

Crap. The fucking Ring doorbell distracted me—I never hit send. She won't believe me now. Thank God I deleted that video. If she knew Jane had been there—if her perfume had drifted through the hallway—I'd be dead.

He dropped his keys in the bowl, tapped “STAY” on the alarm, and walked into the kitchen.

He stared into the open refrigerator for a few moments, scanning its contents.

A chill ran through him—eerily like the one he'd felt in his office

before meeting Light.

He shook it off, took a few bites of cold chicken, then grabbed an apple, a cheese stick, and a bottle of water before settling at the kitchen counter.

Leaning on the counter, he replayed the day—strange. Unsettling.

Szasz said, “If you talk to God, you’re praying. If God talks to you, you have schizophrenia.” Does that hold for the Devil?

If he’s not Satan, he’s crazy. If he is Satan—I’m crazy. Tough call.

Why Satan?

And that ring—every time he mentioned his father, he fidgeted with it. It’s from his father—sentimental. But he wouldn’t tell me what it said.

The mind does not seek truth directly. We circle what frightens us.

What’s it mean?

He wrestled with questions.

Was Light more disturbed than he’d thought? Pranking him for fun? A Satanist? What was the point of the ruse?

Why would a handsome, intelligent, successful attorney identify as Satan? What did I miss? People with PPD don’t hallucinate—no delusions, not psychosis.

Why the ‘Devil’s Advocate’ bit? Oh right—don’t call him ‘the devil,’ only ‘Satan.’ I should look up the distinction.

And that ‘a religious Jew?’ question—that threw me. Intentional?

Still... there’s something about him. I feel sympathetic. Maybe even attraction.

Why do I get embarrassed around him? He’s so confident—then suddenly wounded.

‘Satan’... is he just fucking with me?

I guess I go with Perls—‘The person most in control

is the person who can give up control.'

Fine. He's Satan. I'll let him run with it. Wherever he goes, the real issues will surface—they always do.

As Herbert said: 'Truth suffers from too much analysis.' Maybe so. I won't be Torquemada. But I'll hold his feet to the fire. Ha—if he's Satan, he'll enjoy it.

I need to know what his father made him do—whatever the hell it was, it's serious. And why won't he even mention his mother? What did she do... or let happen?

Shit. Am I ready for this? Something's coming—something big. I need to be ready.

Since he was being paid in cash, with no insurance trail, Gold decided to keep it off his books—just like Light suggested.

He opened Calendar and renamed 'Light Session' to 'Bible Study.'

If I ever get audited—just Bible reading with Rabbi Shapiro's book club. No one questions religion.

He tossed the apple core and water bottle, then headed to the bedroom.

Easing the door open carefully, he stepped quietly, not wanting to wake Rachel.

In the bathroom now, he tread carefully over the creaking tongue-and-groove floors. He gently shut the door and switched on the light.

What the—fuck?

He jolted, almost knocking over a glass candle on the sink. A flash of someone staring—just his own reflection in the mirror.

Oh shit.

He caught his breath and stared. The man in the mirror looked... off. Unfamiliar. Not quite right.

Hair grayer? Crow's feet deeper? I need more sleep. And to start exercising.

In the toilet room, he aimed just above the bowl's waterline to

keep quiet.

He flushed the toilet without thinking.

Shit—dammit. Hope that didn't wake her. Wait for quiet before opening the door.

He stepped out—then paused and went back.

Seat down.

Knowing the closet would wake Rachel, he undressed in the bathroom. He slipped off his shoes and socks and placed them by the tub. Taking down the terrycloth robe, he laid it on the tub, then hung up his suit jacket, pants, and tie on the hook. He put his shirt on the floor, next to his shoes.

It's gotta go to the cleaners anyway.

He brushed his teeth, but couldn't find a glass—so he cupped his hands under the faucet. As he raised the water to his mouth, he dribbled foamy toothpaste down his chest and onto his boxers.

Shit.

He grabbed a towel and dabbed at his chest and damp boxers.

*Shit. If I go open the closet drawer, it'll wake her.
Screw it—I'll just sleep nude tonight.*

He tossed the towel and boxers in the hamper. Then, in darkness, eased open the bathroom door into the pitch-black bedroom.

*Pitch black. Photophobic, so no nightlights.
Thanks, Rach.*

Like stepping into Rothko's 'Untitled Black on Gray'—the top half: dense, inscrutable.

He guided himself with the faint glow of his Apple Watch, swimming through shadow, like a diver through ink.

Or maybe Rauschenberg's 'Untitled [glossy black painting].'

He looked at watch. 64% battery—no need to charge. He liked the “Sleep” feature—it tracked his REM cycles. He usually woke after each

dream, determined to remember them—though he rarely did. Ever since his sophomore class, *Sleep and Dreams*—he'd kept a journal. Each morning, he read the vivid, unfamiliar entries—in handwriting that barely looked like his own. Alien.

He moved quietly to his side of the bed.

In the watch's faint glow, Rachel lay on her back, half-covered by the sheet. The comforter lay bunched at the bed's center. He pulled back the covers on his side and slowly sat.

He just wanted to look at her.

No nightlight. Even the alarm panel LED is taped over. Pitch black. She's so light sensitive, if I had a good idea in the middle of the night, the light bulb would wake her—ba-da-bum. And, give her a migraine.

Even after his eyes accommodated, the room was still black—an ethereal black—as if looking through layers of dark gossamer veils.

Leaning on his left side, he angled the glow of his watch away from her. She wore her soft eye cover—a strip of navy fabric, once part of a baby blanket, draped over her eyes to mask light from any intrusions.

Wow. Even angry, she's perfect. Forty-one—she could easily pass for thirty-one. I really hit the jackpot. And everyone loves her. They put up with me just to be near her. Almost enough to make me believe in God.

He watched her chest rise and fall with each soft breath, steady as a tide. She loved how soft the fabric felt—threadbare from hundreds of washings. The worn collar of his old fraternity T-shirt fell away slightly, revealing the gentle swell of her breast.

She wears it because she still loves me.

I think... I hope.

He leaned closer, drawing a deep inhale through his nose. Her scent—Tom Ford Black Orchid—wrapped him in memory.

I wish I could make love to her now—feel her soft skin with my lips, my cheek.

His gaze lingered on the soft curve of her left breast, half-veiled by the shirt's torn edge—as if retreating, shy, into shadow. Her nipple clung to the fabric—shy and half-concealed. Calling him like the siren's song.

His heart raced. He felt himself stiffen.

Bad timing. Strange how the half-hidden always seduces—like forbidden fruit.

He gently pulled the sheet up, covering her chest and arm. He turned off the light on his watch, rolled carefully, and nudged the comforter into the middle.

He slid an AirPod into his left ear, reaching for his phone. He opened YouListen and searched: "Satan." He scrolled and selected "Satan in Milton's Paradise Lost."

He set the volume barely audible and started the 15-minute sleep timer.

He set iPhone down—clock glowing simply—and rolled onto his right side to sleep.

Gold turned over and stretched out his left leg—then froze. His bare foot poked into the air—uncovered. He jerked it back beneath the sheet and lay still. A childhood fear—one that never left. Objectively, he knew nothing could touch his outstretched foot.

I know it's crazy. Impossible. But—what if? What if something touched my leg? Even the tiniest chance terrifies me. That's why I can't do drugs. I'd try to see something, try to hallucinate—and I'd break myself. Forever.

Hell, I'm already fucked up. I can't even swim in the pool at night—the underwater shadows shifting, menacing, alive. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Yeah, well—my fear is fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of what might lurk in shadow.

He drifted off within minutes.

That night brought dreams—vivid, disturbing, prophetic.

In the first, Gold saw his father, Gerald—bathed in cold bluish-white light. Wearing street clothes, Gerald lay on an ER table, bleeding from the side of his head. Two doctors and a nurse moved frantically

around him. One doctor—tall, in green scrubs—wore a dark red pocket square. The heart monitor beeped steadily beneath the chaos.

One of them shouted “Defib—clear!”

The beeping stopped.

Then—he realized it wasn’t Gerald. It was him.

The tall doctor pressed the paddles to his chest. A bolt of electricity slammed through him—his body convulsed violently.

“Clear!” Again. Another jolt—like a mule’s kick.

The shorter doctor leaned in—stethoscope on chest. “No suh. Nuthin’.” Then he slammed a fist into Gold’s chest—like a sledgehammer.

“Bag him!” he shouted, pounding Gold’s chest like a Roman war drummer.

The tall doctor leaned in. Piercing blue eyes. He winked. Then came the hands—smothering his mouth, driving his head into the pillow.

Gold flailed, gasping. His own hands clawed at the ones pressing down—desperate for breath.

The doctor leaned in harder, putting his full weight on Gold’s face.

Straining for breath, Gold peeled back a finger—there was a ring beneath the glove.

“He’s not breathing—crack him open! Cardiac massage!” The short doctor sliced open his chest—like warm butter.

Still breathless, he saw the doctor’s hands—bloody, trembling—holding his heart.

“That’s wicked dahk—deep puhpul. Haha, ‘Smoke on the Watah.’ I’m callin’ it—12:58.”

A blinding white light exploded.

Then—his father’s whistle, distant and echoing. “Steven! This way!”

But he was walking the other way—away from the voice, toward the dark.

Gold jolted awake, eyes clenched, drenched in cold sweat.

He opened his eyes. Rachel lay asleep on her side, facing away, softly whistling with each inhale. She hadn’t heard his thrashing—her foam earplugs blocked everything.

He checked his Apple Watch: 12:58.

12:58. Jesus—that was intense. I'll remember. I've never died in a dream. Maybe just a hypnagogic hallucination. Probably glanced at my phone. Had to be.

Gold often had nightmares—but never told Rachel. The few times he'd tried in the past, she couldn't hear him through her earplugs. Irrational or not, he feared she'd think less of him. Famous psychologists weren't supposed to fear their own dreams. But he did—terrified she'd lose respect if she knew how afraid he really was.

Even with vivid nightmares, he rarely fixated once awake. He usually shrugged them off by morning. He rationalized them—interesting as cognitive sensory phenomena. Academic curiosities only—never meaningful... until now.

He'd always disagreed with Freud's "royal road" idea—that dream interpretation revealed unconscious truth.

But he'd always share them with Oldman, who took them seriously.

"People spend six full years of life dreaming," Oldman once said. "Seven, eight percent, Stevie. Why ignore that?"

I need to tell Bob about this one—he was in it.

Symbolism everywhere—rich, vivid. The colors, the sounds... too real.

Animals dream—at least mammals do. Never read Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? I should. I saw Blade Runner—barely remember it. Something about what makes us human.

He flipped his wet pillow to the dry side, grabbed his notepad and penlight, and jotted down everything he could recall. Careful not to wake Rachel, he used his left arm to shield her from the penlight's glow.

Finished writing, he rolled onto his left side, swapped AirPods, and reached for his iPhone to restart YouListen. He started it from the top—he'd fallen asleep so fast last time, he remembered nothing.

Again, he was asleep within minutes.

About an hour later, Gold fell into another dream.

He was walking with Jane Sanders and his college roommate, Bill

Shane. They'd just left the Fogg Art Museum. The bitter wind stung his face. Yet the sky was bright blue, the sun a harsh yellow.

A Ring doorbell chimed. Wait—Jane didn't even know Bill... or him, back then.

I'm dreaming. Focus. Stay lucid. Stay inside it. Like Michaux—'seeing what one sees when one is not dreaming.'

Castaneda said: Look at your hands. Yeah. My hands. Don't wake... just hands.

Gold quickly looked at his hands.

Thick black snow gloves.

He heard their voices, Jane's boots on cobblestone. They were heading down Prescott toward Harvard Street—Pennypacker Hall.

Stop. Just stop walking.

He stopped—but they kept walking, still chatting like he was with them.

Gold's eyes followed Jane's tight jeans—thin thighs, that perfect ass.

I'll call them—see if they react. Or, if this is just me.

"Bill, Jane—Wait up!" Bill didn't stop. But Jane spun around. A scent of Orchid filled his nostrils.

Her gray hair whipped around—no, blonde. It was blonde. Her breasts jiggled beneath the blouse. Then—her necklace. The diamond infinity one.

That's Rachel's necklace.

Not Jane. Rachel

He tried to look at her face, but couldn't—eyes locked on the necklace, nestled in her cleavage. A gold infinity loop, shaped like a Möbius strip—with channel-set diamonds and a single sapphire tucked just above the left loop.

Rachel always wears that. Skin—perfect. Hair—perfect. Her tits—Jesus. So why's she always so sad?

He looked up—her eyes were scowling. Angry.

"Jane? Looking for Jane? Sorry to disappoint."

*I've got to turn this. Don't lose it. Grab her hand—
tell her we're dreaming. My hands. Focus—my hands.*

He looked down—his hands—trying to stay lucid. Too late.

Only a spectator now.

The snow gloves vanished—replaced by thick, fur-lined leather. The left slipped off. But the right caught—something tight around his finger.

He tugged—leather scraped, resisted—until a final, violent snap sent him soaring.

Weightless. Unmoored.

He'd flown in dreams before. Familiar, yes—exhilarating, weightless.

But he'd lost lucidity—just drifting now.

Strings dangled—or sprouted—from his chest.

The beach.

Children ran laughing below, tugging his string. He was the kite.

Pelicans soared past, diving into the blue Pacific.

Wind roared like a subway—loud, warm.

Sunlight bathed his skin—warm, steady.

Queasy now. Air sick.

One pelican—black, shadowy—flew straight at him. It flapped, hovering—then started pecking the strings at his chest.

The children below shrieked—crying, panicked.

The child holding the string—familiar. It was him—three-year-old Stevie.

He looked down at little Stevie. Tears streamed down his face.

The black pelican kept pecking. He was helpless.

Its blue-black eyes locked on his.

Its beak glinted—not like bone, but metal. A flash of gold at the hinge.

One string snapped. Gold dropped—and Gold plummeted—spinning, cartwheeling in the air. He was falling—fast—toward the sea. The shore was gone. The children were gone.

He screamed, powerless to stop the fall. The black water surged up to meet him.

He slammed into the water—freezing, slapping him like a stone.

His plunged deep—like a pelican spearing the sea.

He kicked upward—gasping for air. He couldn't see a thing—no moon, no stars. The sky wasn't cloudy. It was empty—black, starless—just darkness visible.

Panic seized him—thrashing, treading water.

A hand erupted from the black—clamping onto his ankle.

He knew it instantly: the wrinkles, the wedding ring, the papery skin. His father.

The grip tightened—dragging him under.

He kicked, panicked—pulled at the wrist—but it wouldn't let go.

A violent thrust. He broke free.

As he rose, a golden glint disappeared beneath him.

He burst through—gasping, choking, the night now littered with stars.

He floated—calmer now—gazing at the moon. His breath slowed. He hovered, weightless, staring skyward.

Another hand shot out—snatched his wrist—dragged him down. He was pulled again—into the murk, into the black deep.

Muffled shouting: "Steven! Steven!" as water filled his lungs.

He heard a water-muffled shouting, "Steven! Steven!" as his lungs filled with water.

He couldn't breathe.

He clawed at the grip—it wouldn't let go.

His body thrashed. Then—he inhaled a mouthful of water.

"Steven! Steven!" Rachel was shaking him. "It's just a dream—wake up!"

Rachel was shaking his arm. "Steven! Steven, wake up! You're having a nightmare—it's just a dream. Wake up!"

Gasping, coughing, hyperventilating—"Shit, I was... khak... drowning. My dad—he pulled me under. I saw his wedding ring... but on his middle finger."

"It was just a dream. You're okay now. Everything's fine. Try to go back to sleep."

Rachel rolled toward him, pressed her body against his, then drifted back to sleep.

His chest heaved. Pulse hammering. He stared into the dark. Too

shaken to write.

*Too real. I'll remember. No need to write it down.
I felt the water in my lungs—salt burning, the smell still
clinging. And that gold glint... that ring. Light's ring.
I know it. But why him?*

He reached for his phone and reseated the AirPod in his right ear.

He queued his Spotify delta-wave playlist—72.4Hz to 75.2Hz—to calm his racing mind.

Gotta relax. Just be the music. See the sound.

He squeezed his eyes shut—triggering phosphenes. He chased the colored flickers—watching them fade to black. A technique he taught patients for sleep. He'd even taught it to patients with anxiety insomnia.

It worked. Within minutes, he drifted off again.

Gold slept soundly. About an hour later, Gold found himself in another dream.

A bowl of fluorescent Jello jiggled and sang: "I'm the son of God, I'm the son of God."

No body—just happiness. Pure joy... bliss.

I'm dreaming. Don't wake. Look at my hand.

Conscious again—lucid. He knew it. And wanted control.

He stared at his hand—half-expecting to see a gold ring inscribed with ancient Hebrew symbols.

Relax. I've got this. Stay focused—now fly.

He stretched his arms forward like Superman. Glanced at his Apple Watch—5:47.

He soared—Cotswolds village unfurling beneath him. Like Peter Pan over London—weightless, free. Exuberance pulsed through him—pure and unburdened. Invigorated, he flew through bright clouds—bathed in joy.

This is amazing.

He smelled black-eyed pea and barley soup—no idea why. He could taste it.

Who should I conjure? Anyone is possible.

Then—Hercules. His first dog. A basset hound, leaning against the cinderblock wall by his childhood pool.

He landed softly in the shallow end—arms resting on the coping. Hercules trotted over, tail wagging wildly—his whole rear-end sawing side to side.

My old house. I'm calm here. No questions. No demands. Just peace. This was home.

Hercules sniffed his face, tongue rough on his forehead, licking away the water. He giggled—pure joy. He stroked Hercules's head. Those ears—long enough to sweep the ground, harvesting scents like memories.

Gold let water drip from his fingers. Each droplet changed hue mid-air; every ripple sang a different note.

I love this. I wish I could come back. Stay forever. This is heaven.

He looked into Hercules's warm brown eyes. No pretense. No judgment. Just presence.

With Hercules, he was real. Safe.

You saw me. You were the only one I ever let in.

Footsteps. Splashing on the pool deck.

Shit. Lost it.

Cologne—familiar. Then the growl. Low, vicious. Hercules ran. Tail tucked.

Control gone. The dream shifted.

He found himself standing, unsteady, in a flat-bottomed skiff—punting across a black, breathless river. He couldn't pierce the mist, but the air reeked—fetid, raw, unbearable. Faint moans drifted as the shrouded figure pushed them deeper through the mist.

He didn't need to ask. He already knew.

A rumble thickened into growling as the boat neared the blackened shore.

Then came the barking—Cerberus, Hades' sentinel, howling for the newly dead.

The punt groaned beneath him, scraping in agony over jagged stone.

From the darkness, a withered arm reached to steady the boat.

That ring again.

Gold jolted awake.

Jesus. What the fuck.

He snatched his notepad and scribbled furiously before it all vanished. Grateful for the lucid dream. Grateful to see Hercules again. That ring—*his* ring—kept returning.

He set the pen down and rolled onto his back.

Something's different. I can't explain it, but I've changed—as if something of him has entered me—taken hold.

Maybe he really is Satan. Maybe this isn't dreaming at all, but a summoning.

I need to calm down. Just breathe.

I haven't thought about Hercules in... forever.

Back then, I was myself—real—but only with him.

Everything changed when he died. I lost my best friend.

Sad. He was my best—my only—friend.

What was that haiku I wrote when he died?

Emptiness... five-seven-five. Yeah, that's it.

*Emptiness, a void
Memories cannot replace.
Winter evermore.*

He sighed—deep and sorrowful, memory-shaped. Then turned and drifted into the dark.

*Chapter Seven Epigraphs
Purgatory*

Nothing is more wretched than the mind of a man conscious of guilt.
— Plautus, *Mostellaria* (circa 200 BCE)

*Our souls demand Purgatory, don't they?
...Wouldn't you rather be cleaned?*
— C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (1964)

What is hell? Hell is oneself. Hell is alone, the other figures in it. Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from. And nothing to escape to. One is always alone.
— T.S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* (1949)

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Purgatory
Thursday, morning

Gold woke alone. Rachel's pillow held a note, creased where her head had rested. The bedside clock read 9:35.

Late. She must've turned off the alarm. I needed the sleep—didn't help anyway.

He unfolded the note:

Didn't want to wake you. Saw your underwear in the hamper. Guess you were busy. I'll be at the studio all day. Live model class. See you tonight. Unless you're "working late" again.

* * *

Fuck. She's still pissed. And now she thinks that's—seriously—semen?

Can't call—she'll ignore me. Won't check her voicemail until tonight, if at all. Text's my only hope.

Gold typed out a text:

Rach—I swear I was working. Texted, but interrupted, forgot to hit send.

It was toothpaste—swear to God.

Okay. Now. Send.

He tapped his calendar app:

9:30— Davis
11:00— Larsen
2:00— Jones
3:30— Keller
5:00— Light
8:30— Bob

Hmmm. Let's see—

9:30 Davis

Brad. Focused on weight loss—trying to get back to his high school weight. Gave him a copy of DietWrite and worked with him on Cognitive Dishabituuation. Classic Sunday-to-Monday resolve—falls apart by Tuesday. Towel thrown.

Tough case—he's broken the habit and logging his food, but still making "bad choices," thinking he'll catch up later. Need to convince him there's only the present—no tomorrow. Can't change the past; only make up excuses to apologize for it.

But most of my patients—the key to their past is getting past it.

11:00 Larsen

The Larsens. Mormon dad. Pothead kid. Dictator father—insisted he had “the right answers” for every slide in the family Consensus Rorschach exercise. Tough case. Sad.

But I wonder... I'd probably do the same.

Interesting how hearing there's no right or wrong answer unnerves us. Of course there's wrong. That's what we all fear.

2:00 Jones

Ron Jones. College ball or the MLB. The kid's legit—over a hundred miles an hour and accurate. Could write his ticket anywhere—if the arm holds. But if it doesn't, goodbye jackpot. His family's counting on him.

Fear of failure—like everyone else. Some manage it better. Others hide it. Sublimation.

He pictured, without meaning to, his wall of diplomas.

Or overcompensation.

3:30 Keller:

Marty Keller. Tall, decent-looking. Girlfriend dumped him, feels worthless. Parents made the appointment.

Marty's terrified they'll find out he's gay—and they will. It won't go well. He's already leaning suicidal.

Camus was right—we all think about it. At least once. I remember... just swerve right. Off the cliff, and it's over.

If he admits he's gay, his father might be homicidal.

5:00 Light

Oh yeah—gotta change that to “Bible Study.” Looking forward to that... sort of.

Because I think I can help him... and me.

8:30 Oldman

Shit. I forgot—Bob's tonight. Two nights in a row won't go over well. She's already hinting I'm overdoing things.

Better text Rach—now.

Bob's out tomorrow and next week—APA convention. Had to reschedule. 8:30 tonight.

Sorry. Please don't be mad. I love you Rach.

Should've told her when Bob told me—just fueling the jealousy fire. I might need to rethink it... or tell her. Not that she'd believe "Bible Study," not for me. That'd just make her more suspicious. Maybe show her the cash Light paid in—proof I'm not lying.

The day slipped past—a blur of gray and guilt.

Davis canceled, probably binged over the weekend.

Gold wasn't really there. Not with the Larsens, Ron Jones, or Marty Keller. Not even with himself.

He brushed it off as stress, but deep down he knew he hadn't been behind the wheel that day.

He nodded, echoed their words, tossed out a question when silence dragged.

No insight. No analysis. No leaps. It felt like someone else had been sitting in that chair all day. I was just waiting—for Light.

He collapsed into his desk chair.

God, that was shitty of me. They probably thought they were digging deep. I wasn't even in the room—might as well have been a parrot, nodding and squawking on cue. Oster and Hanlon would've shredded me if they'd watched through the one-way mirror in practicum.

I wasn't there for anyone. Ron smiled, sure—but he

hates being challenged. Hell, a simple AI could've done better. What the hell is wrong with me? I wouldn't have done this before. Something's wrong. I can't stop thinking about Light—I'm obsessing. It's not healthy.

I should've canceled the whole slate. Didn't earn their money—or my self-respect. The great Dr. Steven Gold—who the hell even was I? Detached. Completely.

Not completely—Marty's notes had Light's fucking ring sketched in the margin.

Audre Lorde wrote that guilt is “a response to one's own actions—or lack of action.”

Yeah, that's it—guilt. Not the neurotic kind I treat, but the kind that stains.

Lately I feel like a barnacle—clinging to a jagged rock as the tide batters me from both sides. Every wave brings back the same thing: guilt. Each surge—guilt. Back and forth. Again and again. And that anchor is pulling me down.

Spiraling—down.

Light. Why does he both fascinate and frighten me? His ring—what is it trying to say to me?

I let down my father.

I let down my patients.

I let down Jane.

Worst of all—I let down Rachel. And if I keep this up, I'll lose her for good. She won't wait forever. She doesn't deserve this. Why do I punish her?

Sartre said hell is other people. But that's wrong. Hell is hiding from them—burying yourself in silence, speaking only to ghosts, talking only to yourself. To a ghost.

No exit. No. This is purgatory—a waiting room with no doors, no windows, no light.

Migraine brewing. I need sleep.

The office lights flickered—again.

That's not going to help my migraine.

He popped three extra-strength Advil and twisted open a water bottle.

RING CHIME

He gulped down the pills and shot up, heart pounding. He capped the bottle and set it down. Nearly ran to the reception door.

Gold opened the door. Light stepped in—eyes unreadable, presence heavy. The ring: gold, eternal, glinting like an unblinking eye.

A circle without beginning or end.

Chapter Eight Epigraphs Wrestling With God

*He may well slay me; I have no hope—
yet I will argue my case before Him.
—Job, JPS Tanakh (1985)*

I do not pretend to be able to prove that there is no God. I equally cannot prove that Satan is a fiction.

The Christian god may exist; so may the gods of Olympus, or of ancient Egypt, or of Babylon.

But no one of these hypotheses is more probable than any other: they lie outside the region of even probable knowledge, and therefore there is no reason to consider any of them.

*—Bertrand Russell, “What Is an Agnostic?” *The Illustrated Magazine* (1953)*

Perhaps evil is the crucible of goodness...

*and perhaps even Satan—Satan, in spite of himself—
somehow serves to work out the will of God*
— William Peter Blatty, *The Exorcist* (1971)

We live recursively. We explain ourselves by telling stories inside other stories.

— Steven Gold, *Journal of Phenomenological Psychiatry* (Spring, 2025)

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Wrestling With God
Thursday, early evening

Light extended a hand. “Hi, Dr. Gold.” Gold immediately clocked the Tom Ford pinstripe—gray, razor-tailored. The navy Hermès tie flared against a crisp white Oxford, mirroring the clash of Light’s sapphire irises against the whites of his eyes. His gaze dropped to the John Lobb Oxfords—black, mirror-bright.

Perfect again. And that damned ring. What does it say? I’ll ask... not yet.

Gold shook Light’s hand and hurried over to his club chair, facing the couch.

Not this time, Satan. Not today.

Gesturing to the couch, Gold said, “Have a seat, Samuel. Or—should I call you Satan?”

Light sat in the middle of the couch and leaned back a little, making himself comfortable. “Samuel is fine,” he chuckled. By the way—Satan’s not a name, it’s a title. *Ha-satan*. Hebrew. It means ‘the accuser.’ Or ‘the adversary.’”

Thank God. Just a nickname. Satan’s Hebrew...

but that ring? Definitely not. Not Hebrew. I'll ask—just not yet.

"So if Satan's a nickname, what's your real name? What did your father call you?"

"My Father named me Samael. But—being omniscient—He always called me Satan."

Oh no. He's holding firm. He really believes this—Satan. An angel.

Light's fingers spun the ring on his middle finger, slow, deliberate. The gesture looked practiced—ritual, almost.

Light continued. "Yes. My Father is the everlasting God. The Almighty. *The Lord your God...*"

There it is again—he sounds like a religious fanatic.

But then he stopped abruptly.

"And I... am *The Satan.*"

What? Is he reading my mind?

I won't drag him into the first commandment—tangent into monolatry and henotheism. Be rational, measured. But he's delusional.

Just go with it. I agreed, we stipulated, for the purposes of therapy, he actually is Satan. But I won't let him completely off the hook. I'll reality-check when I can.

"Okay, Samuel. Where do we start?"

"Well—'In the beginning...' Light cracked up.

So, he's fucking with me?

Gold laughed too, hesitantly at first but then more fully, to mirror Light.

I'll play along—for now. But you'll trip up. Humor's fine—but I won't let you hide behind it.

Light grinned. "Sorry—I couldn't help myself. I do want to begin... but first, a question—if you'll be honest with me, Dr. Gold.

Yesterday, you said you were Jewish, but not religious."

Gold nodded. "Religion," he said, "is man's fear of responsibility."

Light paused—then locked eyes. "Do you believe in God?"

Gold froze. Heat crept up his neck; there was no evading the question. Light's cologne struck as sharply as his words—cloying, inescapable.

Shit... fuck! He sees I'm red. Own it. What does it matter? I've told friends before—it's not a secret.

"Uh... sure. I'll be honest," Gold said matter-of-factly. "But in therapy, I usually avoid politics and religion. Complicates things—for the patient... and the therapist."

"I understand," Light said. "I'm willing to take that risk," he grinned. "... If you are. I need to know your context."

Okay—so not telepathic. But still...

Light grinned. "I don't want you to think I'm crazy." He winked.

Too late!

"As I said, I'm an atheist." Gold replied. So no—I don't believe in God. But all of this? It's a lot. You're saying you're the biblical Satan—and that God is your father. You can appreciate how much that is to take in.

"Still—I agreed. Relationship is what makes us human."

They locked eyes—waiting. Neither blinked. Then suddenly, they both burst out laughing.

That's good. Humor helps. It actually bonds us.

Gold's smile faded, "Same rules apply, right? After all—God made man in His own image. I'm not being flippant... but this is new ground for me."

Light nodded. "Of course."

Gold gave a faint smile. "Thank you. Yes, I'm Jewish. But no—I don't believe in God. I've tried. I'm sorry. I'm an atheist."

Jury voir dire—am I excused?

Light glanced toward the Blake prints. "With my Father, the rules don't apply—not the ones you mean. Psychologically, maybe.

Morally? He makes His own.

"He shifts the rules at will. That's the problem—they're always changing. For Him.

"These words came down intact. I was there. I heard Him say them. *I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God—punishing the children for the sins of the parents.*

"To Isaiah, He said: *I form the light and create darkness. I bring prosperity and create disaster. I, the Lord, do all these things.*"

Textbook delusional—grandiose type. Yet self-aware. Calculating.

"Sometimes He's gentle. Fatherly. But then—like a thunderstorm—He turns: sudden, jealous, vengeful... even malicious."

No—I was right. Classic grandiosity. Inflated uniqueness. Manipulative. NPD—maybe with delusional or dissociative traits.

Projecting? Jealousy's just fear in disguise—and fear comes from abandonment.

Gold jumped in, "Yes, parents drive kids crazy when they're inconsistent. Kids don't like rules—but they need stability. They actually crave it.

"Yesterday you used the word 'battleground.' It fits.

"Growing up is war. First you bend the rules—then break them. And every parent reacts differently."

Light's brow furrowed. He shifted, twisted slightly—then leaned in. "Sorry to cut you off, Dr. Gold, but... how can you say you're Jewish if you don't believe in God?"

Interrupting me? That almost never happens. Am I lecturing too much again?

Gold leaned forward, visibly annoyed. "Same rule-bending applies here. Judaism isn't just a religion—it's a multifaceted identity. It's a religion—but also an ethnic and cultural identity. It's not about belief alone—you can be Jewish and still be an atheist.

"In Christianity—Catholicism, Protestantism—belief in God, especially Jesus as the Son of God, is central.

"Same with Islam—faith in Allah is foundational.

"But in Judaism... about a quarter of Jews don't believe in God—and they're still Jewish. Though I'm guessing you already knew that. Being Satan and all."

Light blinked, eyes flicking up and left—more irked than surprised.

Careful. Don't go passive-aggressive.

Light let the silence sit, then exhaled. "Yes, of course I know—but I need to understand what you know, what you believe."

"But, respectfully—I disagree."

What? He's calculating his next move.

"You say you're an atheist, Dr. Gold—but to me, you're really an agnostic."

"*You say you don't believe*—but you want to. Or maybe... you used to. Something must've happened."

"Agnosticism's a safety net. You won't believe in something you can't see or touch. You're too sharp for Pascal's Wager. It'd be—what you'd call, as you'd say, *mauvaise foi*. So you say you don't believe... but I hear a silent parenthetical: *not any more*."

"Truth is, I think you do believe. Something just... broke it."

Now he's analyzing me?

"I read your *Atlantic* piece—the one where you called yourself a 'humanistic-existential atheist.' But you strike me as something else."

Okay then, Doctor Light.

Gold nodded, finger at his lips. "Okay," he murmured.

*Don't interrupt. Let him run. Feed him more rope.
Transference—it's his. Let it surface.*

Light glanced out the window. "I think the religious ones are the real atheists."

What?

He continued. "They claim to believe in God—in Scripture. But if they truly believed... especially in Hell—they wouldn't defy or disobey Him. Eternal Hell would stop anyone—if they really believed."

"So either they're hypocrites—or just stupid."

Gold nodded, not with agreement but with receptivity, openness.

Okay. Interesting. Logical.

Light went on, "At least you doubt. For some reason.

"If someone sees a train roaring toward them at a hundred miles an hour—they get off the tracks. Because they *know* what's coming.

"They don't just believe—they *know*."

Gold said, "Samuel, it seems to me that religion is belief. I don't want to argue theology, but belief is when you think you know. Faith is believing something in spite of the lack of evidence. Personally, I just cannot do that. But I have no issue with anyone else doing so."

Light smiled. "Dr. Gold, you're right. Belief is when you think you know. But why do you jump off the train tracks? Religious or not, everyone would jump out of the way, right?" He chuckled. "They have no evidence that they will be killed, they just know they will be. They can see it. They don't need to wait, to prove it."

"Of course," Gold said with a nod.

"So if they believe in God like they believe in the train—why don't they act the same way?"

Gold leaned in. "What do you mean?"

"God says: don't steal, don't lie, don't commit adultery—or else. Why, try to rationalize or reinterpret that? They don't try to reinterpret or rationalize the train—they jump—fast."

"So maybe they don't believe in God after all. Maybe *they're* the real atheists."

Gold murmured his agreement.

*I used to tell myself: you don't know until after.
Before that—it's just belief. But his logic's sound.*

"If someone *knows* Hell is real—why would they break His laws?" Light let the silence stretch.

Gold seized the moment. "Sorry to interrupt, Samuel. Of course—no one would choose Hell if they truly believed it existed. But crime doesn't drop with mandatory sentencing. Sometimes it gets worse. Most offenders don't believe they'll be caught."

"Maybe your so-called hypocrites don't think God cares enough to police everyone. They don't think they'll be caught or made to pay."

Because they believe He's kind. Loving. Forgiving."

That's what Rachel believes.

Light gave a silent snicker, then continued. "The truth is, you only *know* afterward. Before that—it's just belief... or hope."

Is someone else in here, or am I just rattled?

He nodded, smirking. "With respect, Dr. Gold—you're no fool. And you're no hypocrite. So are you *really* an atheist?"

"To me? You sound more like a misotheist. Someone angry at God." He winked.

*Misotheist? Never heard that term before. Shit.
He flipped the table. This isn't his session anymore—it's
mine.*

Need to get back on track. His track.

Light leaned back, palms open—like a defense attorney giving a closing argument. "If you're angry at God... then you must believe He exists!"

Gold's brows jumped, then drew tight. Irritated. Confounded. But silent.

What the hell? Did he just Cochran me?

'Blame Him for disease... just shows you believe.'

*Advil's useless. Dizzy again. Please—no more aura.
No more halos.*

"I gave Jacob the name *Israel*, after we wrestled through the night."

*More delusional babbling? Wait—Jacob wrestled
with God!*

Gold sat up sharply. "Jacob wrestled with *you*—not God?"

Light nodded. "That's right. God sent me to do His dirty work. Don't believe everything you read in Scripture."

Convenient.

"Jacob had doubts. Like you. He was scared. Angry. So—we wrestled. All night."

"He impressed me. Grit. Perseverance. But he was cunning too. Deceptive. You wouldn't think it. Thin. Wiry. But strong. Tenacious.

"He never stopped. Wouldn't let go. Wanted God's blessing.

"By daybreak, I gave in. He'd dislocated his hip. God told me—*don't harm him*. So, I praised his commitment—acknowledged his faith. I gave him the blessing. And the name—Israel. *One who wrestles with God*. A trophy. A scar. A legacy."

You named him 'Israel'—not God?

"Later I found out he faked the injury. God laughed."

As he spoke, his fingers returned to the ring. Absent at first—now deliberate.

Nervous tic... or sacred ritual?

Why can't I stop looking for it?

"And his descendants—Israelites—because they struggle... with God.

"So your doubts—your misotheism—it's cultural.

"I've always encouraged Israelites—Jews, if you prefer—to question Him. Challenge Him. Wrestling with Him—His ways—is sacred. Never just accept the world. Challenge it. Change it."

I've always questioned God. Wanted to wrestle with Him—but He never shows up.

Light leaned in. Close. Too close.

Gold's nose filled with his cologne again. Faint but inescapable. Like truth—or the idea of it. He noticed fine age lines on Light's perfect skin. He hadn't seen before.

Light spoke, slowly. "*Unbelief puts our circumstances between us and God, but faith puts God between us and our circumstances.*"

Shaken, Gold's eyes glazed as he looked inward.

That's Meyer. Not on my bookshelf—on my night table at home. How the hell did he know?

Am I that transparent? It's like he's reading my mind—from the inside.

Light said softly, barely a whisper:

“Nothing is ever quite what it seems.”

Thank you for previewing my novel *A Question of Balance*. I have completed writing and I am currently editing and polishing the text and “extras.” I expect to complete it by early to mid October 2025.

I appreciate any and all thoughts, comments, and criticisms you’re willing to share. I know this novel will not be for everyone. It’s not a “beach read,” but I hope it has entertained and provoked thought.

Please use the contact form on my web page for your thoughts and comments—

<https://www.aquestionofbalance.com/>

The following pages are the novel’s Afterword and Author’s Note (neither of which include any spoilers).

AFTERWORD

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

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 unsettled 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*, which I've used in this novel:

*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 as well.

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 to 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.

And there's one final layer I should acknowledge. By now, you may have noticed that *A Question of Balance* is itself the book Steven Gold begins to write at the end. The ouroboros completes its circle. The abundance of epigraphs, the catalog of books on his shelves, even the detailed naming of clothing brands—all of it belongs to him. Those flourishes are not mine, but his. They reveal a mind still reaching to impress, still hungry to prove erudition and taste, still defining self through intellect and display. That, too, is part of Gold's recovery. He still can't quite stop performing. The novel you've just read is his therapy—his confession, his argument, his mirror. It is the story he needed to tell, in the only way he knew how.

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, each one deserves to be prayed.

In the end, *A Question of Balance* is less about answers than about

equilibrium—the fragile harmony we seek between what we know and what we can never fully know. Guilt, belief, grace, and self-deception are not separate threads but entwined strands of the same human fabric.

Guilt, when faced honestly, gives birth to empathy.

Belief, stripped of dogma, evolves into relational faith.

Grace, no longer divine decree, manifests as human forgiveness.

Self-deception, once denial, yields to self-awareness.

Together, these form the balance — the reconciliation of knowing and not-knowing, sin and redemption, faith and reason. It is, perhaps, the only balance we are ever granted in life.

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

December, 2025

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Like most childhoods, mine was a mosaic of flashes—small, scattered, unforgettable.

My imagination was kindled by mythology, religion, comic books, and encyclopedias—each striking sparks against the dry kindling of suffering, blindness, and death. The sudden loss of a grandparent's vision—and the deaths of beloved pets and grandparents—raised questions few children know how to ask: Why do people suffer? Why do we die? Why would God allow it?

Those sparks smoldered through adolescence, flaring at times into obsession—but they ignited in college, fanned by Paul Cantor's *Myths of Creation* and courses in philosophy and psychology. They were further fueled by classes in expository and creative writing—and by the independent research I conducted for my undergraduate honors thesis on schizophrenia. I poured those questions into stories—and into therapy. Each became a vessel for a fire I couldn't quite name.

This novel is a thought experiment—an imaginative lens through which I explore my reflections on psychotherapy: its promise, its pitfalls, and its profound complexity.

I've been a licensed psychotherapist since 1981. In that time, people have entered therapy for countless reasons. Most find it helpful. Some, tragically, do not. And in rare cases, it makes things worse.

In graduate school, I remember a professor holding up Eysenck's study like it was radioactive—his voice low, as if invoking a heretic. The claim? That most neurotics recovered on their own. That therapy might be ineffective—or even harmful. It was scandalous. And unforgettable.

His legacy sparked an enduring debate about psychotherapy's efficacy and ushered in a more empirical approach to its study. Subsequent meta-analyses estimate that 75–80% of patients improve with therapy—yet 5–10% actually worsen.

Among the most critical predictors of therapeutic success is the therapeutic alliance: a collaborative, egalitarian relationship between therapist and client. That's why Carl Rogers and other humanistic psychologists abandoned the term *patient* in favor of *client*—to emphasize relationship over hierarchy. Therapy depends on trust, mutual respect, and a sense of hope. A session should offer a space to

speak freely, without judgment—to collaborate in the process of self-understanding.

In *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), Freud and Breuer introduced the ideas of projection and transference. In subsequent writings, including *The Dynamics of Transference* (1912), Freud expanded this framework to include countertransference—the therapist's own unconscious reactions—and emphasized the importance of self-awareness to avoid contaminating treatment.

That's because therapists—whether psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, or social workers—are human. We bring our own feelings, unresolved emotions, and psychological baggage into the room. Despite our training, psychotherapy is no exact science. It's a soft science—an interpretive art, practiced by fallible humans. Therapy can be a descent—into memory, projection, or loss.

Originally trained in the medical model—I began college premed as a biology major (though I first considered Folklore and Mythology). I've always believed in the model: that physical and mental conditions are the result of specific biological causes. I've always found the stress-diathesis model—where biology meets circumstance—the most truthful.

I've always believed that patients and clients deserve full transparency—especially in a soft-science field like psychotherapy. The therapist's personality, ethics, and worldview are inseparable from the treatment process. A therapist's own mental health and emotional self-awareness are paramount.

Psychology's major schools—psychoanalytic, behavioral, cognitive, humanistic—reflect the personalities and moral visions of their founders.

Human behavior resists tidy classification. The DSM—now in its fifth major edition—evolves with each generation's fears and fashions. Its categories reflect the era as much as the mind. Like an artist changing palettes, psychology redefines disorder with every cultural shift. Therapy, too, resists clarity. What begins as insight may end in echo—or silence.

Therapy is like art school. There are tools, techniques, and theory—but what matters most is the artist. Even the greatest prodigies—Mozart, Liszt, Yo-Yo Ma, or Arshile Gorky—required structure and mentorship before creating works that changed the world. They

learned fundamentals before breaking the mold.

But not everyone becomes a master. A Stradivarius won't play a concerto on its own. In the hands of Jascha Heifetz, even a thrift-store violin can create magic. What separates the mediocre from the transcendent isn't just training—it's temperament, awareness, and timing.

Some see only chaos in Pollock, hear only noise in Stravinsky. But others glimpse revelation. Genius lives in the interplay between skill, culture, and personality—like Rachmaninoff reimagining a Paganini theme into a slow, soaring melody of sublime beauty.

We would be impoverished by a world with only one genre—only rap or classical, only minimalism or surrealism. The human psyche requires variety.

Some therapist-client pairings click. Others fail. In art, the artist is key—and so it is with therapy.

Freud's insight about countertransference remains essential: therapists must examine their own emotional reactions, or risk harming the very people they seek to help.

Every therapist paints with the palette of their own psyche. Some create refuge. Others, unknowingly, reopen wounds with every stroke. Insight is their only shield—and often, it comes too late.

Therapists vary—sometimes wildly. Some violate the foundational maxim attributed to Thomas Sydenham: *primum non nocere*—first, do no harm. While psychoanalysts are required to undergo their own analysis, many clinicians are not. That lack of self-examination can compromise the care they offer.

At its core, therapy is moral philosophy—applied and intimate. Every therapist, consciously or not, brings their own ethical, emotional, and existential framework to the room.

The story is not a theory, but a descent.

One man. One room.

The struggle of vision—too much, or too little.

The demand it makes: a cost no one escapes.

Some mirrors are shields—they don't reflect, they expose.

David S. Sherman

A Question of Balance

December, 2025
