

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

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DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

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*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

A man must consider what a blindman's-buff is this game of conformity.
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

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

*I know it's crazy—it's not possible.
But... what if?*
— Steven Gold

INVOCATION

The Struggle

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

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As a formally trained, board-licensed psychotherapist since 1981, I've seen people enter therapy for countless reasons. Most find it helpful. Some, tragically, do not. And occasionally, it can make things worse.

When I was in school, I recall one lecture in which the professor discussed criticism regarding Hans Eysenck's claims in the early 1950s, that over two-thirds of neurotics experienced spontaneous remission and the suggestion that psychotherapy may only be nominally effective or actually ineffective. Though Eysenck's methodology was later criticized, his legacy remains influential. His work sparked an enduring debate about the efficacy of psychotherapy and helped introduce a more empirical approach to its study. Since then, rigorous meta-analytic studies indicate that 75-80% of patients improve with therapy. However, it is estimated that 5-10% of patients actually worsen as a result of therapy.

Among the most critical predictors of therapeutic success is the *therapeutic alliance*: a collaborative, egalitarian relationship between therapist and client. In fact, that is one of the reasons why humanistic psychologists like Carl Rogers stopped using the term "patient" in favor of "client," to identify and emphasize that relationship, instead of the traditional hierarchical relationship between medical doctors and patients. The connection between a therapist

and a client is built on trust, mutual respect, and a sense of hope. A therapeutic session should provide a safe space for the client to express themselves freely without judgment and allows for collaboration in the therapeutic process.

In their seminal work, “Studies in Hysteria” (1895), Freud and Breuer introduced the concepts of projection and transference. In discussions with colleagues as early as 1910, and then in his 1912 paper “The Dynamics of Transference,” Freud identified countertransference and described the importance of maintaining objectivity in the face of these emotional reactions.

It is important to remember that all psychotherapists, whether psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, or social workers, are human, with feelings, emotions, and their own psychological baggage. While they are exposed to and/or trained in various disciplines that are supported by philosophical and scientific foundations, the actual practice of psychotherapy is not an exact science and is wholly dependent upon the therapist’s personality and skills. Despite its theoretical rigor and increasing empirical foundation, it remains, fundamentally, a soft science: an art practiced by fallible humans.

As someone originally trained in the medical model (I started as pre-med in college), I’ve long felt that clients should know as much as possible about their therapist before entrusting them with intimate truths. Even understanding the collaborative nature of the therapeutic relationship as a client rather than a patient, the mental health and

wellbeing of the therapist always struck me as being of paramount importance in psychotherapy.

Complex human behaviors and mental processes are difficult to quantify and measure precisely. The history and evolution of the classification of mental disorders using the American Psychiatric Association's "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders," now in its sixth revision since 1951/1952, makes that clear through its shifting classifications, reclassification, and declassification of various diseases and syndromes over the past seven decades. The schools of psychology themselves—psychoanalytic, behavioral, cognitive, humanistic—often mirror their founders' personalities, philosophies, and moral views. Similarly, the classification of mental disorders reflects the socially accepted norms of the current culture. Therapists tend to be drawn toward the methods that align with their own identities.

It is accepted that, as a soft science, the practice of psychotherapy is an art, albeit guided by psychological theories and research. If you think of an art school, any class at all, drawing, painting, sculpting, music composition, performance, etc., there is formal instruction—tools, techniques, and fundamentals—that students need to learn to be proficient. Everyone requires instruction in certain fundamentals before they can break the mold and create masterpieces that may eventually resonate with society at large.

It is important to note that even child prodigies, including

Mozart, Liszt, Yo-Yo Ma, Kieron Williamson, and Arshile Gorky, all had some form of training or structured learning before creating their first masterworks. Their extraordinary talents were nurtured at an early age, where they benefited from guidance, exposure to established techniques, and opportunities to develop their skills. Then, their creativity took hold and they were well-equipped, to quote Steve Jobs, to “think different.”

But not every individual has the innate talent to become a master. Not everyone becomes a master, even with decades of training. Give an art student a palette and a blank canvas, and they might not produce a masterpiece. Likewise, giving a music student a Stradivarius or sitting them down at a Steinway will not guarantee beautiful compositions (although a fifty-dollar violin in the hands of a Jascha Heifetz or Itzhak Perlman can still result in beautiful music).

Some people will only see paint splatter when looking at Jackson Pollack’s No. 5 1948, or just hear dissonance and shocking rhythms in Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. There is a crucial interplay between fundamental skills, the environment—that is, society or culture—and the personality that allows genius to flourish resulting in someone like Rachmaninoff taking a violin theme of Paganini’s, reversing it, putting it in a major key, shifting it to a different key, and then slowing it down, to create one of the most exquisite melodies of all time.

We would be a much poorer society if there were only one

style of painting, e.g., just minimalism or surrealism, or if all music was the same style, only classical or rap, for example.

There are many subtle shades and hues in the vast human rainbow. Some therapists and clients “click.” Others never connect.

In art, the performer is the key. So, returning to psychotherapy; Freud’s concept of countertransference—the therapist’s own unresolved emotional issues—can either deepen or derail treatment. It must never be ignored.

Whatever their training—psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, social workers—therapists paint with the brush of their own psyche. Some create moments of genuine healing. Others, lacking the insight or temperament for a particular client’s needs, may offer only superficial or even harmful sessions.

Therapists vary widely—sometimes wildly. Some struggle with their tools, and may violate the dictum attributed to Thomas Sydenham—*primum non nocere* (first, do no harm). While many psychology programs and licensing boards require therapists to engage in supervision, only psychoanalysts are required to undergo psychoanalysis as part of their formal training. The rest—regardless of discipline—may never examine their inner lives with the same rigor they ask of their clients.

At its core, psychotherapy is applied moral philosophy.

Whether consciously or not, every therapist brings their own worldview—ethical, emotional, existential—to bear on a client's dilemmas.

Caveat emptor (let the buyer beware).

PREFACE

The seed for this novel was planted in 1978, in the early days of my psychotherapy career. While working the night shift in a psychiatric hospital one summer, I encountered a woman who claimed to be the devil—and, just a few weeks later, a young man convinced that he was God.

This novel became my vessel for exploring guilt, doubt, religion, and philosophy.

I don't aim to change minds—perspective, after all, depends on where you stand. Instead, I hope to spark discussion and help readers recognize that different viewpoints offer different truths.

As a therapist, my job was to help people understand their own perspectives—why they saw, felt, and believed as they did. More importantly, I helped them step into someone else's shoes—to reframe their experiences, and perhaps even shift their perceptions and behaviors.

That theme echoes in Chapter Two, which references Mary Lathrop's 1895 poem *Judge Softly*. The familiar phrase—"walk a mile in their shoes"—captures this novel's essence: perspective.

I began writing the story in 1992 with my Invocation poem, *The Struggle*—

Nay, Prometheus, hand me not thy flame...

And then the actual story with the opening line—
My shoes aren't as comfortable as they look.

The story was bookshelved over more than thirty years—until retirement finally gave me the opportunity to revisit and focus on it. During that hiatus, life provided diverse experiences and time to mature, allowing me chance to wrestle with my own existential questions, before committing the story to paper.

Throughout the novel, I share 'chapter appetizers'—epigraphs, aphorisms, and adages drawn from a wide variety of sources—meant to pique curiosity and offer insight without overshadowing the story.

I've also hidden Easter eggs—references and allusions whose meaning only fully unfolds with time.

Psychology, in my view, leans too heavily on the physical sciences. I believe it would benefit more from philosophy and religion—perspectives this novel seeks not only to explore, but to illuminate.

My goal is to explore ideas that spark reflection, invite dialogue, and provoke debate.

As in any novel, there are parallels, contradictions, and blurred lines between the author and his characters. Some elements may echo personal experiences or feel autobiographical, but this is entirely a work of fiction—meant to explore its themes from perspectives familiar to me.

As such, the standard legal disclaimer—“Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental”—is necessary to avoid defamation claims, protect privacy, account for coincidence, preserve artistic freedom—and, of course, satisfy publishing industry norms.

If this novel stimulates thought, sparks curiosity, or inspires dialogue—then I will have succeeded.

David S. Sherman
June, 2025
Beverly Hills, California

PROLOGUE

Beginnings are always messy.
— John Galsworthy

The beginning of wisdom is silence.
— Pirkei Avot

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

PROLOGUE

[PRESENT DAY]

Behind silver-rimmed glasses, his wide, unblinking eyes reflected the golden glow of the Ner Tamid—the synagogue’s eternal flame.

Flickering glints played across his pupils, as if his gaze followed something unseen.

His lips parted slightly, caught between thought and speech—as if wrestling with a revelation he wasn’t sure should be spoken.

The familiar lines of his face—usually lit with warmth and wisdom—were unreadable now. His expression revealed neither peace nor resistance—only a silent acquiescence.

Silence hung heavy in the synagogue—thick with waiting. It was the kind of quiet that often preceded Rabbi Shapiro’s unraveling of some hidden meaning from scripture, or the profound calm before one of his graveside eulogies.

But this silence stretched—beyond the natural pause of reflection.

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.

Then—a flash split the darkness.

A police photographer’s camera fired, shattering the stillness

with mechanical precision.

Each burst of light laid the terrible truth bare—then darkness swallowed it whole.

Flash

On the far wall behind the bimah, dark red symbols appeared for a heartbeat with each flash—crude, finger-drawn shapes that seemed more ancient than accidental, as if caught by surprise. Then they vanished again, recoiling into shadow—unwilling to be seen.

For a moment, the dripping symbols left a ghosted afterimage—tears trailing from the shapes, as if the wall itself were weeping at the macabre sight.

Flash

Rabbi Shapiro's pale skin and thick white beard glowed faintly in the dim light—a stark contrast to the blood pooling beneath his head, like a medieval painting of the saints.

Flash

His body lay in a cruciform pose, arms outstretched, as though prepared for sacrifice.

Flash

His salmon-colored linen shirt—still neatly pressed, with its row of brown wooden buttons—lay over dark blue jeans, a strangely serene counterpoint to the stillness below.

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

Flash

His white yarmulke—knocked loose in the struggle—now lay

nearby.

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

CHAPTER ONE

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

In my experience lust only ever leads to misery.
— Chrissie Hynde

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

Lust

[TWO WEEKS EARLIER]

Fuck! Just leave already!

Steven Gold sat frozen, motionless as though he'd been turned into stone by Medusa.

He sat rigid, barely breathing, afraid that even the faintest squeak from the chair would betray his presence to anyone in the outer hallway.

After two and a half minutes of pounding on the office door and repeatedly stabbing the Ring doorbell, even Jane Sanders reached her limit.

She hit the doorbell again, only to be met with the same grating three-tone chime. Screaming in frustration, she pounded the door with both fists.

Then—finally conceding defeat—she whirled around and kicked the office door with her heel screaming,

“This isn’t over, you fucker! I know you’re in there!

“You can’t hide forever. You’ll be sorry—I swear!”

Jane stomped her way down the hall to the elevator bay. The only sound remaining was the hum of the hallway lights.

Still paralyzed with fear, Gold dared not move anything but his eyes.

Once the live video feed showed Jane disappear completely

into the elevator bay, he exhaled a huge sigh of relief. He was reminded of the movie—Fatal Attraction.

Thank God I don't have a pet rabbit! But she's right, I can't avoid her forever and Rachel's already suspicious.

Gold opened the video clip on his laptop. It was obvious that Jane Sanders used to be a runway model.

Dressed in jeans, a no-name blouse, and knee-high riding boots, she moved with effortless elegance. She radiated the unshakable confidence that once ruled runways—the kind that commanded attention, respect, and admiration. It had never faded.

Through his iPad speakers, he heard her clomping down the building hallway, and in the video, he could see she still had a style and flair as fierce as any of her New York Fashion shows.

Even in this rage, she was captivating.

Feverishly scrolling back and forth and zooming in and out, he consumed the video feed like a starving man stumbling upon a forbidden feast.

He hit pause—freezing on a frame of Jane glaring into the Ring doorbell.

He zoomed in, remembering the feel of her soft skin and silky hair, the ghost of her perfume—Joy by Jean Patou—haunting his senses.

He filled the entire screen with her face.

He stared, mesmerized, then zoomed out slowly, savoring the way her hair caressed her cheeks as it crept down her shoulders—

nuzzling its way into her slightly open blouse.

Jane was no longer the coke-thin waif of her early days. Her once-flawless skin bore the marks of a life well lived since her supermodel days. Time had softened her edges—smoking, drinking, and sun-soaked beaches leaving their quiet marks—but her bone structure still demanded attention.

Her tall thin figure still shouted fashion model—she radiated that impossible, intoxicating allure.

Each time she hammered the door with her clenched fists, Gold noticed wrinkles and tiny age spots on her long slender fingers.

From the safety of his locked office doors, the murderous rage flashing from Jane's blue eyes and the wild ruffle of her long gray hair was intriguing, exciting—sexy.

He hit pause, freezing the video again, her face askew at an unusual angle. He noticed a slight asymmetry—her left eyebrow and left eye were just a bit higher than her right. Her lips, starting to prune now, were almost imperceptibly more full on the left than on the right. Somehow, it all simply added to her unsettling allure.

She certainly wasn't twenty-one anymore—but for fifty-one, she was a perfect ten. She still had the "X" factor that made her one of the decade's most sought-after models, the "It Girl" of the 1990s.

Crazy as hell, but she's still got it.

Gold zoomed out to reveal Jane's lithe figure from head to toe.

This was his favorite look—her partially unbuttoned shirt, half-tucked into tight, low-rise jeans that hugged her toned, round behind.

He savored the scene for a moment then zoomed in tightly.

Panning slowly, he lingered on the silhouette of her small breasts, faintly veiled behind the sheer white blouse. He imagined he could feel her angry erect nipples struggling—trying to poke their way through the delicate fabric.

Gold felt himself getting aroused.

I'm such a moron! I should have kept my mouth shut, never told Rachel I liked that blouse. Rachel's always suspected something's going on. After Thanksgiving she'd said, "I see the way you two look at each other."

I need to erase this video—now.

He hovered over the trashcan icon, lingered briefly, then confirmed "DELETE VIDEO."

He blew out a deep sigh.

*Disaster avoided...
Something's wrong. Like vertigo. Gotta get a grip.*

He opened his Spotify app and resumed Haydn's Cello Concerto No. 1 in C major from his Romantic Literature playlist, letting its poised serenity settle into the quiet and calm him. Yo-Yo Ma's cello—mellow and unrushed—spilled like watercolor across the silence, tinting his thoughts in colors he hadn't seen in years.

Gold exhaled softly and closed the cover of his iPad.

Leaning back in his chair, he returned to his leather-bound copy of Byron's *Cain: A Mystery*, the same passage he'd been reading before Jane's fiery interruption.

He re-read Cain's soliloquy from Act One, Scene One—

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, “’Twas his will,
And he is good.” How know I that? Because
He is all-powerful, must all-good, too, follow?
I judge but by the fruits – and they are bitter –
Which I must feed on for a fault not mine.
Whom have we here?—

BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ.

Gold’s Apple Watch vibrated, dragging him back to reality—
reminding him of his upcoming therapy session.

CHAPTER TWO

*I cannot make you understand.
I cannot make anyone understand what is happening inside me.
I cannot even explain it to myself.*
— Franz Kafka

*I have wandered out of myself in the pursuit of an ideal; and now I am
nothing.*
— Samuel Taylor Coleridge

“But the Emperor has nothing at all on!” said a little child.
— Hans Christian Andersen

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

Mauvaise Foi

Gold quickly pressed “Stop,” wishing he hadn’t been interrupted again—not by time, not by anything. He’d been lost in thoughts about the injustice of Cain’s suffering for a sin he did not commit—Adam and Eve’s fall in Eden. With a small sigh, distracted again and losing focus, he set the open book on his desk and thought

My shoes aren’t as comfortable as they look.

He lifted his feet and gently rested his Santoni Uniqua loafers on his large ebony desktop. He leaned back in his black leather Eames chair. Striped Brunello Cucinelli socks peeked out from beneath tailored cuffs.

Shit, my freshman year at Harvard cost less than these shoes—and the dorm bed was more comfortable.

Erasmus said “vestis virum facit,” clothes make the man, but Twain said, “clothes do not merely make the man, the clothes are the man,” so I got to keep playing the part if I want to get my hourly fee.

Gold exhaled slowly through pursed lips. He dogeared the yellowed page in his book and set it down on his desk, swapping it for his iPad. He stopped his Romantic Literature playlist and switched to Pink Floyd. *Comfortably Numb* began to play softly.

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

Ha, apropos.

He chuckled, thinking of the scene at his office door just

twenty minutes earlier. Listening to David Gilmour’s guitar solo, and completely relaxed now, Gold looked around. He was proud of his office—how impressive it looked, how precisely it mirrored him.

He was especially pleased with the photo that accompanied last month’s *Atlantic* article, “Psychotherapy in America, A Question of Balance,” showing Gold—perfect hair and expensive tie—sitting behind this enormous rich desk. The only noticeable difference from that photo was a new terracotta statue on the left side of his desk. He wished he’d had it then since it provided a counterbalance, actually a counterpoint he thought, to the light beige engraved sandstone on the right side of his desk.

Gold picked up the small statuette he’d placed this morning. He carefully examined the small brown figurine in his hands. He truly appreciated the gift—an earthenware Sumerian goddess—from a world-renowned archaeologist he’d treated for postpartum depression. She’d left him the latest issue of the *Israel Exploration Journal*, which included an article on her most recent dig.

The ancient relic, either *Astarte* or *Asherah*, had been smuggled out of the country by his patient on her recent dig in southern Iraq. He rubbed the smooth dark figurine, pausing slightly to consider how she offered—or actually fondled—her breasts.

Gold contemplated how the “ideal” female form had changed so dramatically over the millennia.

*Back and forth like a pendulum—fat, thin,
fat, thin—eventually all pendulums slow, settling
into inevitable dissatisfying compromise.*

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

Cured... ha. She wasn't "sick" in the first place. Grow up! "Life" is a spectrum disorder, we're all fucked up and no one gets cured... we just get by.

Yeah, normal is to be abnormal from time to time, just not too often. This is her first child. She has no idea how much more complicated this has made her whole life.

Hell, that's why I can afford these shoes... she'll be back!

His eyes settled on the sandstone engraving—

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

Gold had been given the token by Rick Hanlon, his former graduate school professor who'd told him "You've got a great sharp mind and good instincts, but don't forget who you work for!" He recalled being offended at the left-handed compliment. Why he dug it out recently and gave it such a prominent position of honor, on top of his desk, was not like him.

He felt a very slight pressure in his throat.

*Ugh, I feel a little nauseous.... It'll pass.
No one has any idea what I'm going through.*

Lately, Gold had been experiencing conflicting feelings about many things—even those where he once had strong settled opinions. He wasn't as certain, as cocksure as he used to be.

*People don't change much, but they grow.
Not everyone's a Redwood—some twist and turn like an Oak, reaching for the sun however they*

*can. Old gnarled Oaks with meandering trunks
and branches can be just as majestic—maybe
even more so.*

*Do we fault the Oak for slowly winding
around a fence, reaching out to capture the sun?
Can we define the Oak at fifty years, or even
five hundred?*

Change is inevitable—but rarely sudden.

*Decisions feel final—binary—but they don't
have to be. Some are written in stone. Some in
sandstone. All decay eventually... like
Ozymandias.*

*Hmm, maybe some of this belongs in a
poem. About change.*

Gold set the sandstone back down on his desk. The reality is that he would never walk in anyone else's shoes, comfortable or not. That wasn't his style.

He chuckled to himself and flashed a look back down at his loafers once again.

*Most people don't know how to pick shoes,
let alone what to wear them with. Sometimes
you have to sacrifice function for form.*

Gold was six feet tall with a full head of stylishly cut gray hair and a neatly trimmed gray beard. He had a slender, handsome face with pensive gray-blue eyes that were framed, not only by thin wire-rimmed glasses but also by deep crow's feet wrinkles.

Those who knew him knew: they were not smile lines.

He wore a smart dark blue Zegna suit and the turquoise silk Brioni tie that his wife, Rachel, had given him last year for his forty-fifth birthday.

Gold thought he had a good sense of humor, but most of his jokes were personal. They were location jokes—you had to be

there, but the “there” was inside Gold’s head. Inside jokes for an audience of one. Too clever, too obscure for most. They’d be lost on others so he’d usually just keep them to himself.

When he shared, close friends would politely laugh—they were generous, or they knew they should. They didn’t actually understand or appreciate Gold’s quirky esoteric humor.

He had a reputation as being “a stick in the mud,” but one of his close friends said, jokingly, “the stick was up his ass.”

Outside his small circle, Gold was formal, officious, and stoic. Patients describe him as intelligent, well-read, cultured—but robotic.

Gold was a know-it-all, holier than thou with a God complex.

He was not completely devoid of emotion, but he would rationalize that he needed to be careful not to encourage the “the wrong type of patient transference which would be detrimental to the therapeutic process.”

Whatever the case, Steven Gold seemed to have a golden touch. He was extremely successful in his career. Was that due to his therapeutic skill or just plain gullibility on everyone else’s part? It didn’t really matter, as people are fond of saying, “it is what it is.”

Gold was a wunderkind. He was a Rhodes Scholar and he’d petitioned to defer his Oxford study until he completed his undergraduate degree at Harvard, his masters at the University of Southern California, and his Doctorate at the University of California at Los Angeles—all which he did by the age of twenty-six.

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

he returned to practice in Los Angeles and teach at UCLA where he met and married Rachel.

Over the years Gold built a very lucrative private practice, with numerous celebrities and world-renowned athletes.

Gold's office, on the top floor of a Wilshire Boulevard high-rise just across from UCLA, consisted of a small reception room that led into a spacious office, with a back hallway exit so patients could leave unseen.

Gold had installed a Ring video doorbell outside the reception room entry with a smart lock on the door. He often worked late nights, seeing patients or writing, so the outer reception room door was always locked. The main office was quite large with gray sisal wallpaper and a bright white painted wood frame around the window looking east—a panoramic view of the Los Angeles Country Club. Except for a few pieces of Rachel's art, Gold's office was a mirror of his personality—though some might say it lacked personality. It was sharp and clean, with the staged look of a commercial real estate listing—pristine, almost sterile.

Its personality came from the cacophonous mix of fine art, paintings, sculptures, and framed posters crowding the walls, making it feel like an eclectic art gallery too small for its collection. Each piece in the jumble vied for attention, creating a sense of visual chaos—perhaps exactly as Gold intended.

The few items on Gold's desk and bookshelf credenza were deliberately chosen to spark imagination and provoke conversation. In one corner, a freestanding sculpture of a nude girl touching herself raised a few eyebrows, but Gold loved it, defending it as a great

conversation starter. It had been temporarily removed by the photographer during the Atlantic office photo shoot.

Gold was no introvert—he was too egotistical for that—but he was reserved and disliked “putting himself out there.” He enjoyed what he called “running therapy” because it let him remain in complete control. His authority felt most secure from behind the safety of his oversized desk, which Rachel referred to as “Hadrian’s Wall.”

On the other side of the wall sat a captain’s chair—Gold’s Harvard College chair. The top had a rich cherry finish, while the body was satin black with hand-painted gold beading and the Harvard Veritas logo on the back support. Behind it, resting on a somewhat faded antique Serapi Persian rug, stood a Schumacher toile club chair facing a matching couch.

Gold’s eyes drifted to his books, neatly aligned on the shelves atop his ebony credenza. He dearly loved this little library of his, each title carrying a profound significance.

Know the man by his books.

He displayed them without any particular order, sliding each book into whatever space was available after he read—or more often, reread—it. He loved his collection and took pride in it, convinced the authors would be honored to have their work included in Gold’s office library.

If not running therapy or playing tennis, Gold would often be found sitting, reading, in his black leather Eames desk chair or exploring used bookstores, looking for odd or evocative titles.

He only read physical books, deriding electronic books saying “That’s not how a book is meant to be used. You must be able

to feel, hear, and even smell the page as you turn it.”

In truth, Gold enjoyed displaying his library, seeing it as a reflection of his intellect. To be fair, he did occasionally share a passage or quote with patients, but more than anything, he loved showcasing his erudition through epigrams and aphorisms he deemed apropos.

He made certain to ask the Atlantic photographer to increase the f-stop setting on his camera, insuring all his book titles would be readable in the photo.

His bookshelf gave a glimpse into who Gold thought he was and what he valued. His collection was eclectic, bridging psychology, theology, poetry, philosophy, and pulp.

The top shelf of the credenza contained the following titles—

“Affirmation and Reality”; “Gestalt Therapy Verbatim”; “Being and Caring”; “The Varieties of Religious Experience”; “The Mask of Sanity”; “Disorders of Sexual Desire”; “Dune Messiah”; “The Dissociative Mind”; “Prometheus Unbound”; “Self-Reliance and Other Essays”; “Creature and Creator”; “Crime and Punishment”; “The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge”; “The Mind Parasites”; “The Unconscious Observed”; “Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre”; “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy”; “Cluster Headache: Mechanisms and Management”; “The Prince”; “Faust”; “William Blake: The Complete Illuminated Books”; “Mythology”; “The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell”; “Moses and Akhenaten”; “The Portable Atheist”; “Being and Nothingness”; “The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature”; “Miles of Heart”; “Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus”; “Ishmael”; “Fear and Trembling”; “The Impressionists”; “Gulliver’s Travels”; “The Master and Margarita”; “An Atheist’s Guide to Reality”; “Meditations on First Philosophy”; “Flatland”; “The Art of Dreaming”; “The God

Delusion”; “Sapiens”; and “Amador: In Which a Father Addresses His Son on Questions of Ethics”.

At the end of that shelf, Gold’s own books and manuscripts were arranged—

“Eulogies”; “The Little Boy Who Wouldn’t Go to Sleep”; “The Image Teleporter”; “Bark”; “Trees”; “Dave King & Asgard: Chronology”; “DietWrite”; his pretentiously titled Harvard undergraduate Psychology honors thesis, “A Phenomenological and Neurophysiological Study of Schizophrenic Hallucinations with an Original Hypothesis for the Etiology and Pathogenesis of Schizophrenia Based on the Mesolimbic Dopamine System”; followed by his master’s thesis, “Schizophrenic Hallucinations: A Psychodiagnostic Tool?”; and, lastly, a hardbound copy of his doctoral dissertation, “The Psychosocial Correlates of Adolescent Substance Ab/Use”.

Gold clenched his teeth and breathed out heavily through his nose as he remembered how his doctoral advisor resigned immediately upon reading his dissertation abstract.

“I’m not going to allow you to associate my name with this... this... travesty! You’re not just condoning, you’re actually promoting teen drug abuse,” exclaimed his advisor.

“Bullshit!” Gold blurted. “You never read my dissertation! If you had, you’d know I’m simply hypothesizing that the recreational substance ‘ab/users,’ as I call them, test higher on self-concept and life satisfaction than non- and over-users. They are accepted and they belong. Statistically, they’re the ‘normal’ ones. Today, it’s the strict non-users who are the deviants.”

Gold had played that exchange over and over again in his head, maybe a hundred times through the years, but never admitting to himself that his inappropriate outburst was displaced aggression.

Unconsciously, he was angry with himself, he had disguised his obsessive fascination with psychedelic drugs as an academic interest. It was his craving, tempered by his tremendous fear, to experience an alternate reality—Castaneda's *A Separate Reality*.

Being a strict non-user himself, Gold knew he was one of his own dissertation's deviants. He rationalized that he did not want to join that crowd, those "blissfully ignorant lemmings."

Gold had been thoroughly indoctrinated—imprisoned in his parentally-accepted, well-mannered and behaved world. Gold did not understand that his outburst, then and since, was his unconscious angrily banging on the bars of his psychic prison and he always wrestled with ambivalence.

Gold did admit to himself that maybe, if he'd been more calm, mature, and honest with himself, he might have been able to convince his advisor of the value inherent in his research. And, he might not have wasted a full year having to replace his dissertation advisor.

He wondered, how would his life have been different had he been awarded his doctorate a year earlier?

*Bradbury would say too many butterflies.
Who knows what the alternate future would
have looked like.*

As always, he gave himself a pass, stubbornly clinging to the belief that he wouldn't change a thing, even if he could.

No regrets. Had it not been for all my

mistakes I wouldn't, and couldn't, be where I am today.

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

He pretended that simply calling them “mistakes” was enough truthfulness, enough self-realization. Whenever he thought about it too much, it actually caused a slight tinge of nausea, more truth than he felt like dealing with... but he was starting to understand.

He cast another glance at the statuette, which he accepted as proof that psychotherapy really could work. He needed that assurance, now at least. It was times like this that all his diplomas, awards, college ring, certificates of distinction, magazine articles, or even his bookshelf, could not assuage constant nagging thoughts, questions, and self-doubts.

Hmmm. Sartre's “mauvaise foi.” Barnes called it “bad faith,” but I think Kaufmann hit the nail on the head translating it as “self-deception.”

You can't truly deceive yourself, you only distract yourself—for a while—from seeing the truth.

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

Haha, another reason I still have a job.

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, listening to Pink Floyd's “Brain Damage” playing through 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.

Gold's Apple Watch vibrated, interrupting him again, reminding him of his upcoming 6:30 appointment, in five minutes. This was a new patient, Samael Light.

Samael? Had to be a typo.

Gold could not remember who had referred Light or even how long ago the appointment had been made. He realized he had only a few minutes before the appointment to let Rachel know he would be later than usual tonight.

Gold always had new patients complete both the Suicide Probability Scale and Psychological Screening Inventory. Although that only took about twenty minutes, new patients were usually quite anxious and Gold hated interrupting patients to tell them that their fifty minutes were up.

There had been times when the first interview had gone on for more than two hours.

When the floodgates open, you must be ready to steer the boat, not close the dam.

He took a new patient folder and clipboard out of his top left drawer along with his leather-bound pad of unlined white paper.

If I call, I'll get stuck having to answer a bunch of questions. I'll just 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 eat and see it on DVR later. Sorry. Lo—

RING CHIME

The Ring doorbell chimed and the video appeared on his iPhone, interrupting his text.

He saw a dark blurred image on his iPad display, but rushing, he simply clicked the mic icon and then the unlock icon and said, “Come on in and have a seat... be with you in just a sec.”

He killed the Spotify app, straightened his tie, popped a Tic-Tac into his mouth.

He walked over to the reception room door. A ripple of something—not quite dizziness, not quite fear—ran through him. His fingers twitched on the doorknob.

Jumped up too fast? PVC, maybe—not Afib...right?

He released the doorknob. Instead, he raised his wrist and clicked the ECG heartbeat icon on his Apple Watch... it was a normal sinus rhythm.

He opened the office door.

A thin and strikingly handsome man who looked to be in his mid- to late thirties with neatly parted jet-black hair was seated,

leafing through one of the reception room magazines. Gold recognized a faint scent of Paco Rabanne's *1 Million Luxe Edition* cologne.

Whoa, that's what LeRoi Davis wears, over \$50,000 a bottle! This guy doesn't look like 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 complemented his outfit perfectly, but it was far too formal for a therapy session.

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

Déjà vu? Like the mark of Cain—I can't see it but I feel it.

Walking closer, Gold noticed, somewhat sheepishly, the enviable shine on Light's black Prada crocodile-effect leather Oxfords.

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

"Hi, I'm Dr. Steven Gold. Won't you come in, please."
