

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

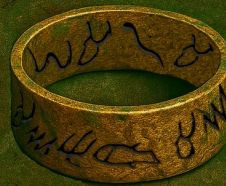
*A Question of Balance
is a cerebral and emotionally charged mystery
that examines the fragile terrain of
guilt, belief, and the cost of self-knowledge.*

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

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

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

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



A QUESTION OF BALANCE

a novel by

David S. Sherman

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

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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, such as just minimalism or surrealism, or if all music were 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.

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

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.*

*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

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.

Flash—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,” annoyed to be interrupted again—by time or anything else. He’d been lost in thought about the injustice of Cain’s punishment—for a sin he did not commit. Adam and Eve’s fall. With a sigh, distracted and losing focus again, 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 propped his Santoni Uniqua loafers on the edge of his large ebony desk. Leaning back in his black leather Eames chair, striped Brunello Cucinelli socks peeked from beneath tailored cuffs.

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

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

He exhaled slowly through pursed lips, dogeared the yellowed page in his book, and set it down, 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?

He chuckled, recalling the scene at his office door just twenty minutes earlier.

Ha. Apropos.

As David Gilmour's guitar solo softly filled the office, Gold looked around—relaxed, content. 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*,—Gold with perfect hair, and expensive tie, seated behind his imposing desk.

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

Wish I'd had this for the Atlantic shoot. It would have balanced my desk—made a nice counterpoint to the sandstone.

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

The relic—either Astarte or Asherah—had been smuggled out of southern Iraq. He ran his thumb lightly over the goddess's breasts, the nipples worn smooth but still discernible. Was she offering them—or fondling them, herself?

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

Back and forth like a pendulum—fat, thin, fat, thin. Eventually, even pendulums slow, settling into a dissatisfying compromise.

He set the figure down next to the greeting card with large

ornate handwriting that read “Thanks for curing me Dr. Gold!”

Cured... ha.

She wasn't “sick” in the first place. Grow up.

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

Yeah, being normal is being abnormal—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 wandered to the sandstone plaque—

Just walk a mile in his moccasins
Before you abuse, criticize and accuse.
If just for one hour, you could find a way
To see through his eyes, instead of your own muse.
— Mary T. Lathrap

The plaque had been a gift from Rick Hanlon, his former graduate school professor—the one who told him, “You’ve got a great sharp mind and good instincts, but don’t forget who you work for!” He’d been quietly offended by the left-handed compliment. Why he’d recently dug it out and placed it so prominently on his desk was unclear—even to him.

A slight pressure stirred in his throat.

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

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

Lately, Gold had been feeling conflicted—even about things he once considered settled. 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 Oaks, 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 winding slowly
around a fence, stretching out to capture the
sun? Can we define it 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 etched in stone. Others in
sandstone. All crumble eventually... like
Ozymandias.*

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

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

He chuckled and flashed a look down to his loafers.

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

He stood six feet tall, with a full head of stylishly cut gray hair and a neatly trimmed gray 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 knew—they weren't smile lines.

He wore a smart dark blue Zegna suit and a turquoise silk Brioni tie—Rachel's birthday gift last year, on his forty-fifth.

He thought he had a good sense of humor, but most of his

jokes were internal. They were location jokes—you had to be there. And “there” was inside Gold’s head. Inside jokes for an audience of one. Too clever. Too obscure. They’d be lost on others—he just kept them to himself.

When he did share, close friends would politely laugh—out of kindness, or because they knew they should. Most didn’t really get Gold’s quirky, esoteric humor.

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

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

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

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

Whatever the case, Steven Gold seemed to possess a golden touch. He was wildly successful. Was it due to his therapeutic brilliance or just widespread gullibility?

It hardly mattered. As people like to say: *it is what it is*.

Gold had been a wunderkind—a Rhodes Scholar who petitioned to defer Oxford until finishing his undergraduate degree at Harvard, his masters at the USC, and his PhD at UCLA—all by twenty-six.

At twenty-seven, he studied late 18th-century Romantic literature at Oxford’s St. Peter’s College while interning with Dr.

Richard Carlyle, at Cambridge's Gonville and Caius.

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

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

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

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

The main office was spacious, with gray sisal wallpaper and a bright white wood frame encircling the east-facing window—offering a panoramic view of the Los Angeles Country Club. Apart from a few of Rachel's pieces, the office mirrored Gold's personality—though some might say it lacked one. It was sharp, pristine, with the curated feel of a real estate listing—almost sterile.

Any personality it did have came from a cacophony of paintings, sculptures, and framed posters jostling for space—like an overstuffed gallery. Each piece seemed to compete for attention, the chaos curated—perhaps intentionally.

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

The photographer had insisted on removing it during the *Atlantic* shoot.

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

On the other side of the “wall” sat a captain's chair—his Harvard College chair. Cherry-finished top, satin black body, and the Veritas crest on the back. Behind it, resting atop a faded Serapi Persian rug, stood a Schumacher toile club chair—facing a matching couch.

Gold's gaze drifted to his books, aligned neatly across his ebony credenza. He loved this little library—each title carried personal weight.

Know the man by his books.

There was no system. He slid each book into whatever space was available after reading—or more often, rereading—it. He took pride in his collection—convinced the authors would be flattered to find themselves shelved in Gold's private library.

If not running therapy or playing tennis, he 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, ensuring 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 held 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; Nausea; 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 the top shelf, his own works were carefully

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. Then came his master's thesis, Schizophrenic Hallucinations: A Psychodiagnostic Tool? And finally, a hardbound copy of his doctoral dissertation, The Psychosocial Correlates of Adolescent Substance Ab/Use.

A year wasted.

Gold clenched his jaw and exhaled sharply through his nose, remembering how his doctoral advisor resigned the moment he read the abstract.

"I will not allow you to associate my name with this—travesty! You're not just condoning—you're promoting teen drug abuse," his advisor had barked.

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

He'd replayed that exchange in his mind a hundred times—but never admitted that his outburst was really displaced aggression.

Unconsciously, he'd been angry with himself—masking an

obsessive fascination with psychedelics beneath academic language. It was his craving—tempered by fear—to experience an alternate reality: Castaneda's *A Separate Reality*.

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

He had been thoroughly indoctrinated—imprisoned in his parentally-accepted, well-mannered and behaved world. He hadn't realized that his outburst—then or since—was his unconscious angrily banging on the bars of his psychic prison. He'd always wrestled with ambivalence.

Maybe, if he'd been calmer, more honest, more mature, he could have convinced his advisor the research had value. And maybe he wouldn't have wasted a school year replacing him.

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

*Bradbury would call it too many butterflies.
Who knows how that future would have turned
out.*

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

*No regrets.
Without those mistakes, I wouldn't—couldn't
—be here now.
My stomach's growling. I shouldn't have
skipped lunch.*

He pretended that simply calling them “mistakes” counted as truth—as if that alone absolved him. Thinking too long on it made him nauseous. More truth than he liked. But he was beginning to

understand.

He glanced again at the statuette—his quiet proof that therapy really could work. He needed the reassurance—especially now. In moments like this, no diploma, ring, certificate, or article—or even his bookshelf—could silence his questions, his doubts.

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

You can't truly deceive yourself. You just distract yourself—from the truth—for a while.

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

Ha. Another reason I still have a job.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, as Pink Floyd's *Brain Damage* played 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

His Apple Watch vibrated. Another interruption. 6:30—five minutes. New patient: Samael Light.

Samael? Had to be a typo.

He couldn't remember who 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 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.

First interviews had stretched past two hours before.

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 start asking questions. 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 eat and see it on DVR later. Sorry. Lo—

RING CHIME

The Ring chime cut in. The video popped up on his iPad, interrupting his text.

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

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

He walked over to the reception room door. A ripple—something between dizziness and fear—ran through him. His fingers twitched on the doorknob.

Jumped up too fast?

He released the doorknob.

PVC, maybe. Not Afib...right?

Raised his wrist. Clicked the ECG icon. Normal sinus rhythm.

He opened the office door.

A thin, strikingly handsome man—mid-to-late thirties, jet-black hair—sat leafing through a reception room magazine. He recognized a faint scent of Paco Rabanne’s *1 Million Luxe Edition* cologne.

*Whoa, that’s what LeRoi Davis wears.
That’s over \$50,000 a bottle. This guy’s 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 complemented his outfit perfectly, but it was far too formal for a therapy session.

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

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

Walking closer, he 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.”

CHAPTER THREE

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

*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

*We are what we pretend to be,
so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.*
— Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Some lies are easier to believe than the truth.
— Frank Herbert

Truth Often Hides In Shadows

Light stood—tall, six foot three—and casually tossed the magazine onto the table. As he stepped inside, his deep blue eyes met Gold's with relaxed assurance. He extended a manicured hand. A large gold ring on his middle finger caught the light—etched with strange markings. Squiggles, maybe writing. Gold couldn't decipher them.

“Hello, I’m Samael Light. Just call me Samuel—or Sam, if you prefer. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too, Samuel.”

Light’s handshake was firm and confident—no hesitation.

A chill ran down Gold’s spine as they shook hands.

*Crap. I hope I’m not coming down with
COVID again.*

Gold turned toward his desk, assuming Light would take the captain’s chair across from it.

Instead, Light moved to the club chair near the couch, turned it slightly, and sat—crossing his leg with practiced ease.

Gold stiffened. That chair was never part of the plan.

He had designed the office for patients to view Gold, seated on his throne, with his diplomas and framed credentials behind him. The idea: to establish control—keeping patients on the other side of Hadrian’s Wall.

And Light had just crossed it.

What the fuck?

“You have some beautiful art here, Dr. Gold.”

Gold grabbed his Hermès Ulysse notebook—a gift from Rachel—along with the intake folder. He pulled a clipboard from the drawer and walked across the room.

Awkwardly, he perched on the edge of the couch, sneaking a glance at Light.

*I don't sit on the fucking couch! Never have.
Is this a dominance move? Shit.*

“Uh, thanks. My wife thinks it's too gloomy for a psychologist's office.”

“Not at all,” Light interjected. “I find it... stimulating.” His gaze swept slowly across the diplomas, prints, sculptures, and shelf clutter with deliberate interest.

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

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

Impressive.

“Fertility goddess, right? I'm guessing she came from a woman having trouble conceiving... clearly a success story.” But that's none of my business. I get confidentiality. I'm just a mythology nerd—especially Babylonian myths.”

Most people wouldn't catch that.

“Ah—Nebuchadnezzar and Newton. I've spent hours in the Blake rooms at the Tate, soaking up the originals. And Moore's *Woman Seated in the Underground*, right? Yes, I thought so.”

He motioned toward the wall. “And that Pollock—*Lucifer*, right? Fantastic piece.”

His eyes shifted to the sculpture. “That Michelangelo reproduction—one of the *Slaves*—perfect for a psychologist’s office.”

Okay, this guy knows his shit. I might actually enjoy this one.

“That bust—the woman in the T-shirt—she looks so... serene. Peaceful. Like nirvana. Very calming. I love how art can draw emotion out of you.”

He looked across the room. “That oil painting—who’s the artist?”

Rachel.

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

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

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

Art student maybe.

“She said my office needed at least one bright piece. She painted it for my first anniversary in this space.”

“She’s clearly talented. She knows how to emote through texture and tone—though there’s a subtle sense of sadness.”

He's perceptive... and intuitive.

“Thank you. You really do know your art. I think it helps people relax—and open up. That *Slave* sculpture though—it puzzles some.”

Light gestured to the painting. “That’s *Lucifer*, isn’t it? Pollock. That one’s always felt... personal.”

Interesting.

“I’m impressed you knew that was *Lucifer*. People often guess it’s Pollock, but they don’t know its name.”

Light gestured to the painting, “It’s always had a special significance for me.”

That’s a loaded comment. Worth circling back—but not now. This isn’t an art class.

Gold adjusted in his seat. “Okay, Samuel—let’s go ahead and get started.”

He picked up a clipboard and offered it across.

“There’s a basic information sheet and two short questionnaires. They’ll save us some time and give me a good snapshot. Then you can tell me what brings you in—and we’ll talk for a while.”

Remember—don’t make promises you can’t keep.

Under the clip were a ballpoint pen, a two-page intake form, and two brief psychological assessments.

Light withdrew a Montblanc fountain pen from his jacket. He wrote with slow precision—form by form, page by page—each stroke deliberate.

His penmanship reminded Gold of Japanese shodo:
disciplined, balanced, ceremonial.

Gold took the opportunity to study him more closely.

*Left-handed... but his tie's a half-Windsor,
and his shoelaces are tied right-handed.
Interesting.*

Gold leaned in, eyes drawn again to the ring. The markings—
faint, angular—looked vaguely familiar.

*Runes? Norse? Maybe something else... I'll
ask later.*

Heat prickled his scalp—he realized Light had been watching
him.

“Would you like to see it?” Light asked, already slipping the
ring from his finger. “Here—take a closer look.”

Gold hesitated, then accepted it.

He turned it slowly between his fingers, thumb tracing the
grooves, hoping Light wouldn't notice the sweat forming along his
hairline.

Damn. My whole scalp's probably glowing.

Gold welcomed the distraction—it drew attention away from
being caught staring.

He exaggerated his hand movements, turning the ring deliberately
to divert Light's gaze from his forehead.

“Wow. It's heavier than I expected. Solid gold?”

Light began to move about in his chair. “Yes, it is gold—but
it's old. Needs a cleaning.”

Gold rotated the ring in his hands. He squinted. “There's
writing—old. These symbols look like... prehistoric glyphs.”

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၃ နှစ် နှစ်

“Something I’d see on a cave wall.”

Light said, shakily, “It’s ancient Hebrew.”

Gold raised an eyebrow. “Hebrew? Really? I used to read Hebrew. I don’t see it.”

Light squirmed in his chair, clearly uncomfortable.

He's lying. Shifting around as much as his story.

“What’s it say?”

Nervous now. Interesting.

Light adjusted his position again. “Well, it’s actually Proto-Sinaitic, the first known alphabet. The precursor to Hebrew. It’s ancient—1900 BCE.

"I've never found anyone who could translate it."

He knows what it says. Bullshit.

Why lie?

“It was a gift from my father. Just sentimental, I guess.”

That's it.

Light's right hand reached instinctively for his left middle finger—then froze, finding it bare. He dropped his arm quickly to his side.

He's trying to act cool, but that meant something... something deep.

He turned the ring again. Inside—another inscription, barely visible. Worn nearly smooth.

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

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Light shrugged, trying to act nonchalant. “Yeah. I’ve had it forever.”

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

Light slid the ring onto his finger.

As he did, a sense of calm washed over him—quiet, brief, but unmistakable.

He was nervous the whole time I had it. A gift from your father, and you don't know what it says? Come on.

Gold leaned into his notebook and scrawled one hard, decisive note:

RING!

CHAPTER FOUR

*Guilt makes people do the weirdest things.
It must be awful to have a conscience.
— Angelika Rust*

*Guilt is the most powerful of all emotions.
It can make you do things you never thought possible.
— Sigmund Freud*

*If God did not exist,
it would be necessary to invent Him.
— Voltaire*

*Please allow me to introduce myself
I'm a man of wealth and taste
I've been around for a long, long year
Stole many a man's soul and faith
— Mick Jagger*

An Anchor Chained To The Heart

He knows what it says. He's hiding something—no question. But what?

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

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

“Yes, standard procedure. They often reveal more than you’d think. They help provide insight, areas to explore.”

Light raised an eyebrow. “I expected conversations, not checkboxes, but—you’re the doctor.”

Gold bristled. That wasn’t mere curiosity—it was a challenge.

Heat flushed up his neck. He hated that Light might see it.

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

Gold closed his notebook and set it aside.

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

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

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

Nice. Passive-aggressive. Great job, Steven. What the hell's wrong with me? Don't kick things off like an asshole. Plenty of time to be an asshole later. Ha.

“Just finished, here you go.”

Gold took the papers—and stood. He didn't return to the couch. Instead, he walked to the desk-side chair and turned it to face Light.

Across from him, Light slowly swiveled the club chair to meet his gaze.

Now Light faced what Gold wanted his patients to see: books, degrees, curated artwork. A quiet wall of credentials and authority.

Not the chair I want him in—but the view's right.

He scanned the intake form.

No referral—just a question mark.

Occupation: Senior Partner, Legion Law.

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

He looked up. "Samuel, what kind of law do you practice?"

"Appellate. Criminal appeals, mostly. I focus on helping the wrongly convicted."

Gold nodded. "Impressive. You're doing the Lord's work."

Light's Montblanc pen slipped from his fingers and hit the carpet. He bent, retrieved it, and tucked it back into his suit pocket.

Gold noticed the mobile number and emergency contact fields were left blank.

"You left these blank. I'll need a number in case we need to reschedule—or for a medical emergency. Confidential, of course."

Light shrugged slightly. "Oh, I believe you."

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

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

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

He’s likable—undeniably. But there’s something else. Something... buried under the polish. Whatever it is—I doubt I’ll like unearthing it.

Fear’s always about loss. But whose? His—or mine?

“You mentioned your father. Is he still alive? Want to use him as your emergency contact?”

Light hesitated. “Oh, he’s alive. But we’re not speaking.”

A pause.

“We used to work together—for a long time—many, many years. Then came... disagreements. A total break. He threw me out. I never went back.

“I went out on my own. He’s a judge now. I haven’t seen him in... ages.”

As he spoke, Light’s right thumb and pinky began to fidget, slowly turning his ring—unconscious, rhythmic.

“Considering how long we’ve been estranged, listing him doesn’t make sense.”

He gave a tight, knowing smile. “I’m sure we’ll get into it—that’s your speciality, isn’t it?” Then he winked.

Mocking? Provoking? Or worse—sociopathy?

Gold said nothing.

He recognized that smile. The kind that shuts a door just as its opening. The way Light punctuated his response with a wink, Gold braced—he’d have his work cut out for him.

Drop it—for now. But circle back. This matters.

The SPS and PSI revealed nothing remarkable.

No suicidal ideation. No major red flags. Just mild elevations in Alienation and Discomfort—fairly common. No depression. No clinical psychopathology. Even his Defensiveness score was low. Results seemed valid.

That’s what bothered him.

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

This didn’t read like someone new to therapy. It felt rehearsed—like someone who knew exactly what to say.

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

He’d have preferred sitting behind Hadrian’s Wall—his usual intake post.

The college chair wasn’t an accident. Just uncomfortable

enough to provoke emotion. Now, shifting uncomfortably, Gold realized—it worked.

Get ready.

He prepared himself for the usual cerebral game of hide and seek patients played early on.

Therapy is sneaking up with a mirror to show people what they're doing. They get scared when the mirror reflects who they really are. People think they are good at hiding dirty truths.

They don't care what I find out—they don't know me, they're not invested. I'm a stranger, legally silenced. That makes the mirror tolerable—at first.

They expect I'll be non-judgmental. Impossible. We all judge—constantly. The only way not to judge, is not to listen.

Gold believed early therapy—the trust-building and trivial problem-solving—was sandbox play, not curative. A way to feel each other out before the real issues emerged.

No one comes to therapy for the problem they present. Their “presenting problem” is just their acceptable or comfortable excuse. They need a few weeks to feel me out until the transference kicks in and they think they can trust me. But sometimes that transference makes things harder... for everyone.

Gold understood transference—the unconscious redirection of old emotions or expectations onto him. But countertransference—his own unconscious emotional reactions—unsettled him, like it did

Freud. He told himself that objectivity was essential—to protect the process from harm. Yet even as he clung to objectivity, faint echoes surfaced—flickers of emotion, that didn’t belong entirely to his patients.

He convinced himself that this was a therapeutic necessity—to be objective, impartial, and emotionally neutral. In truth, it was just his personality, a manner he always exhibited and carried over into his daily life and personal relationships.

He’d always interpreted Professor Hanlon’s admonition—‘Get in touch with yourself’—to be like Socrates’s ‘Know thyself.’ A call to understand his own prejudices so he could face them—and protect patients from himself.

He always suspected Carl Rogers—the father of unconditional positive regard—walked out of every session seething, from holding it all in. His method: don’t apologize or hide your bias—face it, own it, use it.

Gold was comfortable working in black and white. But gray? Shadows? Not so much. He had no interest in playing detective. He preferred to be a teacher. A counselor. A fixer. He wanted to discuss real, concrete issues, where he knew he could help.

He saw early therapy as a Rorschach test—with smudges and missing corners. They barely made sense to begin with—missing pieces made assumptions dangerous.

Intuition mattered—but not without groundwork. Gold needed to watch his patients “walk” before he could “run” them.

Rachel gets it—Real Housewives, Survivor—

she reads people. She remembers what's past, senses senses what's coming. She would've made a damn good thereapist. I never really had any interest in anyone else. I don't have the patience, or skills? to decipher relationships and alliances. She gets upset when I fast forward through the human-interest segments on the network news.

I should've stuck with medicine—pathology—no patients, no people. Just the quiet certainty of a report based on real science.

Gold hated dancing, literal or metaphorical. A behavioral therapist might call him normal. Well-adjusted, even. But he knew better. He'd always felt like he was dancing to a different song—off-beat, out of sync.

No, no one really knows what "I'm" going through. Not even Bob.

After a pause, Light leaned back, crossed his legs, and let out a sigh.

"I'm not sure," Light said softly. "I'm not happy. Honestly... I've never been."

He looked up. "Maybe I'm just being unrealistic—wanting to feel... wanted. Or loved. You'll tell me."

Wow. Unusually open—for an intake.

Light's fingers found the ring again—as if guilt lived inside it.

"People don't know me. Even strangers have opinions—stories—about me, who I am. All because of my father."

Don't interrupt. Let him go on.

“I feel guilty—but I’m not a bad person. I shouldn’t feel this way, but everyone makes me feel like I did something unforgivable.”

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

His hand went to the ring again.

His fingers twisted the ring again, “My father started that fire,” he said quietly. “And he’s still feeding it.”

Gold stayed silent.

That’s deep. Way too deep for the first fifteen minutes.

Spontaneity dies if we always wait our turn to speak. But jump in too soon, and it’s just collisions of thought. Noise. Static.

Just shut up and listen.

Gold leaned forward putting his thumb on the bottom side of his chin, forefinger curled over his lips. It was a gesture that looked as though he were forcing himself to be quiet.

He gently prodded, “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 never understood how he didn’t know. He had to. They were... sinister.”

Light’s face bared a deep pain.

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

What the hell? Was he sexually abused?

His right hand curled into a fist.

“After what felt like an eternity, I couldn’t take it anymore. I left.

“And then I got labeled the bad guy. Everything blamed on me—like it was my fault.

“That’s why I can’t even look at him. I can’t talk to him... not anymore.

“I’ve been misunderstood my whole life—and it’s all because of him.”

And yet—he wears the ring. Literally, wears it from years of spinning guilt.

What the hell did he do?

“I know you worked with Dr. Carlyle at Cambridge. Figured maybe Freudian training could help me with my father issues.”

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

He paused briefly and leaned in—just slightly too close.

“But... if he’d asked me to?

“I don’t know... I might have.”

That’s bizarre.

“If it’s not his idea, forget it.

“If he says it’s good—it’s good.

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

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

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

I can’t believe this is our first session. This is crazy.

“For years, I kept asking myself—why doesn’t my father love me? As his son, shouldn’t he love me unconditionally? I realized—he doesn’t love anyone unconditionally—except himself

“He disgusted me. I hated him. I couldn’t keep living—or working—with him. I couldn’t be in his world any longer. So I left. Of course, he saw it as betrayal. And because he is so egotistical, so vindictive—he made sure I got the blame.”

Disgust is intimate. But hate? Hate’s even closer.

You can’t hate someone you don’t care about. You don’t waste that kind of energy on strangers. You’ve got to be really heavily invested in someone to hate them. You don’t walk away from someone like that forever. Not unless you still care.

He’s not just angry. He’s hurt. Still hoping for love. That ring? He hasn’t let go—that’s why he’s here.

This is his version—but I’m missing specifics. Black and white won’t cut it here. I need shading. Color. Something closer to the truth.

I feel his guilt screaming out for compassion, for absolution.

I need to know the truth.

“I know I’m not perfect, certainly not a paragon of virtue. You can’t be, when you have to do what you are told. I couldn’t say no—to anything.

“I wanted to. I knew it was wrong. But it didn’t matter—I didn’t have a choice.

*We all have a choice.
But just let him keep talking. Don't dam this
therapeutic flood.*

“One of my biggest faults is that I’m honest. Strange, I know—from a criminal lawyer. But it’s true. Everyone assumes I lie. But I’m honest—to a fault. My honesty is what ended up destroying my relationship with my father.”

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

“He gets everyone to blame me. I’m the fall guy—that way he stays perfect.

“I’m the evil one. A liar. A shit-stirrer. Everyone just believes him. If you knew what he was capable of, what he ordered be done—you’d be terrified to question him. If I wasn’t his son, I’d be dead by now.”

Jesus. Who is this guy's father—a cartel boss?

“You know this, Dr. Gold—it’s hypnosis. People believe what they’ve been told... no matter how crazy—if they hear it enough times, from enough voices, they believe it. It becomes *their* truth—the truth.

“And the truth is—he’s crazy. He’s egotistical. Arrogant. A megalomaniacal son of a bitch.

“I never want a relationship with him again.”

And yet, you're here.

“They trust him. They don’t see how crazy he is. They believe everything he says. It’s easier than thinking. Because if anyone questions him—they get punished. Vilified. Forever.

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

Maybe... Your truth. You’re honest—“to the best of your knowledge,” like your affidavits say.

Pilate asked, ‘What is truth?’ A political deflection—but a question that still haunts us.

Gold held back. His fingertip blanched—pressed white against his lips. He refused to jump in, as he normally would.

After a long, taut silence, Light stared—waiting for something. Validation. A nod. Anything.

The actual truth about your father? It may not matter any more. I don’t see any reconciliation. It sounds like whatever the actual truth, it’s incidental to your perception, and more importantly—your belief. Still, if I knew more, maybe I could help reframe it, understand it, accept it, without the emotion.

Gold finally spoke. “Samuel, that’s a rare level of self-awareness. Most people don’t open up this quickly.

“You seem to understand what’s brought you here. I appreciate you sharing all of this—it’s not easy.

“Sharing is a gift. Trust? A treasure.

“Thank you.”

Gold adjusted himself in his seat and continued. “I agree with

you. Most people don't want to hear the truth. Like in *A Few Good Men*—they can't handle it. It's too uncomfortable.

"People prefer agreement with their own views—even if not based in reality.

"It's confirmation bias. That's why people get their truth from friends, podcasts, favorite networks that are all in alignment with their already existing views. 'Birds of a feather flock together.'"

Gold picked up his notebook and the assessments again.

Did I score this wrong?

He checked the PSI's Social Nonconformity score again—just to be sure.

Normal. Just slight elevations in Alienation and Discomfort. Everyone has that.

Gold said, "People hate discord"—

You can't ignore a bad note.

"In music or in life—people don't like uncertainty.

"That's the definition of anxiety—an uncertain or unknown future.

"A jigsaw puzzle with one piece missing—infuriating, unsettling. People will even force a wrong piece into a puzzle."

One cause of the high divorce rate.

"People want closure. They hate ambiguity.

"They just want to see things 'resolved,' no questions. They want to believe everything is okay—the way it should be.

"It's a little like religion."

Can I go here? Why not?

“Belief is when you *think* you know. That’s faith. Binary.

“Agnosticism? I’m not sure it exists. People either believe—or they don’t.

“That’s why you can’t reason someone out of their religion, people have been indoctrinated by it their whole lives. It’s difficult, if not impossible, to convince someone that they don’t *know*, once they *believe*.

“Hope is wanting to believe—believing despite the facts. Wanting trumps knowing. People want to believe—and no one wants to find out that their beliefs are wrong—they’d have to question other things, perhaps everything, about their life.

“It’s hard to convince someone there might be another viewpoint—maybe even a better one. So we convince ourselves we’re right—that we see things as they are and that others are simply misguided, mistaken, or lying.

Light nodded in agreement.

Am I overdoing it? No—he’s still with me.

“It’s human nature to be biased and prejudiced. We’re judged by what we do. Intentions don’t count—you can’t see them. You only see actions.

“It’s hard when you see something so clearly that others are blind to seeing for themselves.”

Light’s demeanor brightened slightly, the corners of his mouth turned up, “You’re preaching to the choir. That’s my day job. I guess both of ours, me with trial juries and you with your patients.”

Gold agreed, “Exactly, and we’ve all been told how to act, what to do. We don’t know ourselves—living in our heads isn’t living. We don’t know what we want—what we need—we only know what we are supposed to do, and we end up living a neurotic life because we constantly question everything about ourselves.”

This is his session, not mine. Save this shit for Bob. Sum it up.

“You’re right of course. I definitely do want to hear more about your relationship with your father. You’ve already shared a great deal and we’ll want to explore it all more fully.”

What evil did he do?

“But Samuel, and I apologize because I know I often interrupt and speak too much—I’d like you to clarify something you said earlier. You used a pretty highly charged word, ‘evil.’

What do ‘you’ actually mean by ‘evil?’ You said you were the ‘evil one.’

“Did you do something that is wrong—something you didn’t want to do—something you were told not to do? Who thinks you’re evil?”

Shit! Remember—just ask the question—one question, and don’t give multiple choice responses.

Make him work, make him squirm a little, if you want him to learn to run on his own.

Light slouched back in his chair, looking defeated and sighing heavily.

“Pretty much everyone,” Light said softly. “They’ve all judged

me—convicted me—sentenced me.”

There was a slight grimace, a pained look in Light’s eyes. He seemed older, weaker—conquered.

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

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

He swallowed. “I didn’t have a choice. I had to obey.”

“My father wouldn’t let me question anything. But I *knew* what he forced me to do was wrong. And I’m sure... deep down... he knew it too.”

There he goes... back to his ring.

“A few times, I’d get around it, try to make him think I did his bidding or hope he’d forget. But when I found the courage and strength to disobey, I was punished... severely.

“That didn’t bother me, I deserved to be punished for what I did—I disobeyed him. But those I helped got punished too. I didn’t really care about me, I was used to it. But after a while, I just couldn’t take it anymore. Too many people were getting hurt so I finally stood up to him.”

Severely punished? He’s a criminal attorney, maybe his father is a drug lord.

“I confronted him, and I didn’t back down. I’d never seen him more angry. There was never any explanation, just ‘do it because I said so.’ But he really lost it when I said, ‘Who are you?’

“He thundered back to 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 have no understanding.’

“I could see there was no reasoning with him, and that more people were going to get hurt, so I just quit—I left for good.

“Everything was blamed on me, unjustly, but I feel guilty—and I’ve felt like shit ever since.”

Gold sat back, to take it all in.

He waited, but Light sat with his head down—dejected and depressed.

I don’t want to end on that note. Give him something positive, optimistic. Time to teach, but don’t lecture too much. My brothers always used to say, ‘Everyone didn’t go to Harvard.’ I need to win him over now. I need to give him some hope. And I have to be relatable and compassionate.

“Thank you Samuel. I appreciate your honesty and I’m sorry you had to go through that. It sounds horrible. I don’t know the specifics, of course, but how you kept yourself together—it must have been pretty tough.

“No one grows up without scars. Emotional ones often run deeper than the physical—and they rarely heal.

“Let me share how I approach this—especially guilt.

“Most people lump guilt together, but there are really two kinds. First, *true guilt*, as in you did something that is wrong, that you know is wrong, that everyone knows is wrong. That is something you ‘should’ feel bad about.”

Light accepted this with a slight nod.

“Guilt is an anchor chained to the heart.

“You feel it—physically—the weight of it drags you down.

“It’s lingers—not because others judge you, but because you judge yourself.

“It’s hard enough to disappoint your family—disappointing yourself is the worst.

“You might withdraw, run away and hide, but it’s always there—it’s depressing.

“Making amends helps, but it never quite disappears. Not unless you forgive yourself—which is the hardest part.

“Even then, you know you did something wrong, so you are never completely forgiven, because you don’t forgive yourself—but at least it is not eating you from the inside out.

*Okay, give him a minute to let that sink in.
Looks like he’s following.*

“Then there’s *neurotic guilt*—the kind you feel when you’ve been blamed for something that wasn’t your fault.

“You’re told that something is your fault, when it wasn’t. Or when someone makes you feel like you did something wrong.

“If you are blamed for something—something you didn’t do

or something you didn't mean to do—that is the crazy-making others do to us

“It's usually our parents, family, or our teachers and our friends. And, it may not be disingenuous on their parts, although it often is.

“You still feel guilty—because someone told you to.”

Light nodded in agreement. Gold continued.

“You try to fix it—but nothing improves. That's when guilt becomes a trap.

“In fact, we feel worse because there's no way to get off that treadmill.

“We keep trying to make things better, but our unconscious knows we did nothing wrong—as I said crazy-making.”

Again, Light shook his head in agreement.

“We start doubting everything—especially ourselves.

“Maybe we don't know ourselves as well as we thought, maybe we can't trust ourselves, how can we make amends and fix it?

“Why do we still feel shitty after apologizing?

“It's manipulative.

“It allows someone else to control us, but only because we buy into it. We play their game with their rules, that are unknown or are constantly changing.

“That paralyzes us emotionally and makes us afraid—afraid to think—afraid to move—afraid to act.”

Light said, “Yes”

Good.

Gold continued. “That's what causes 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 just spiral.

“We feel shame and guilt but unfairly, and since we cannot change the feeling by apologizing, we end up hiding from ourselves.

“Our feelings become questionable by our unconscious and it strikes out with various emotions, looking for relief—relief that never comes—the anchor of guilt just dragging us down into the deep.

“Some people believe that guilt is the prime mover, the great motivator of human action. I don’t know that I would go that far, but guilt certainly makes people act or, in some cases, freeze.”

Okay, he looks like he’s with me. Emotions, but don’t overload him. Give it another minute.

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

“That’s where therapy comes in—to help you recognize feelings and choose your emotional response.

“Remember, emotions are your reactions to your feelings.

“Emotions aren’t automatic, but we’ve been conditioned, or trained, how to use our emotions.”

Ping him.

“Does that make sense to you?”

Light said, “Yes, it’s cerebral, but it makes sense.

“Sounds like neurotic guilt. But how do I make it stop?”

Great question if your hands really are clean. But everyone’s hands are a little dirty.

Gold nodded. “Good. The first step is naming what you feel. Therapy is language and honesty. You have to learn the words—then you can name and share the feelings. To understand and then verbalize what we feel. Only then can we choose how to respond—consciously, intentionally.

“When we say we ‘know how someone feels,’ we’re guessing—based on their emotions.

“Someone says something cruel. I feel hurt. I act out—anger, sarcasm, tears, withdrawal, indifference.

“One of my jobs is to help you figure out what you’re feeling—and why.

“The why lets you judge if the feeling fits—then you can decide how to respond.

“If you did something wrong—objectively wrong—you have to deal with that guilt.

“If your guilt is earned—you’re serving time for a real crime. Then the work is redemption.

“But if you’ve been made to feel at fault when you’re not—my job is to help you respond differently. Not through symptoms. Through clarity.”

“My job is to help you realize your free will—and the responsibility that follows.

“No shifting blame. Not after that.

“We’re judged by what we do. Intentions? Invisible. No one sees them. All we see is each others’ behavior—actions. Maybe emotion. That’s what we respond to.”

Light was sitting upright, attentive—as if in a classroom.

Okay. Dead horse. Enough.

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

Ha. Guess I didn't listen... to him.

“Sorry—firehose moment. Old habits. Used to teach psych back in the day.

“I hope it made sense. I just wanted to define terms—show you how I work.

“Take a breath. Sit with your thoughts. Remember—your feelings aren't wrong. They just... *are*.”

“They're always valid.”

Gold paused for a moment.

Then he continued. “You said you were called the ‘evil one.’ I'd like to understand that—if you're willing. Why do they see you that way.”

What things did you do?

“Remember—life's a journey. We're all learning as we go. If we're lucky, we get parents, teachers, or friends who help us along the way. We all screw up—that's how we learn—from our mistakes.

“It's normal to feel uneasy. This is new. I'm new. Take your time.

“Be real. Be honest. I'm listening.”

Light's knee was bouncing now.

His fingers spun the ring—restless, twitching.

“Thank you, Dr. Gold,” Light said. “I appreciate it, I really do. It all 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 not the whole truth—I haven't told you everything.”

His head bowed. Fingers clenched into the chair's armrest.

The air thickened. Heavy. Waiting.

Gold leaned forward, heart clenched. Listening pose: finger curled over his lips. Silent vow—just listen.

Light slumped forward. Overhead light illuminating him like a shadowy portrait—half-lit, half-lost. A portrait suspended between confession and concealment.

His voice barely made it out—a whisper.

“My real name is... Satan.”
