

A QUESTION OF BALANCE



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

a novel by
DAVID S. SHERMAN

A Question of Balance

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

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

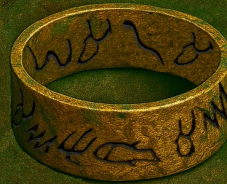
A Question of Balance is a cerebral and emotionally charged mystery that examines the fragile terrain of guilt, belief, and the cost of self-knowledge.

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

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

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

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



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David S. Sherman

PRE-PUBLICATION PREVIEW ONLY

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

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DEDICATION

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DISCLAIMER

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

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

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

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

A Note to the Reader

Beginnings are always messy.

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

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

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

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

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

Preface

Epigraphs

What in me is dark, illumine.
— John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667)

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

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

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

PREFACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

This novel grew from that spark.

David S. Sherman
September, 2025

INVOCATION

The Struggle

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

Prologue
Epigraphs

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

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

We walk by faith, not by sight.

— *2 Corinthians 5:7, KJV (1611)*

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

— *Steven Gold, Journal of Existential Psychodynamics, (Spring, 2026)*

Prologue

One Doesn't Always Need Light To See

Saturday, 8:00 p.m.

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

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

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

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

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

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

something unspoken.

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

Flash—light split the darkness like a blade.

A police photographer's camera snapped, fracturing the
stillness with mechanical precision.

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

Flash

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

Flash

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

Flash

His salmon-colored linen shirt—still neatly pressed, its row of
wooden buttons untouched—rested over dark jeans, a serene

counterpoint to the carnage below.

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

Flash

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

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

Flash

On the wall behind the bimah, dark red symbols pulsed with each flash—crude, finger-drawn shapes that seemed summoned, then ashamed—more ancient than accidental. They vanished—recoiling into shadow, as if unwilling to be seen.

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

CHAPTER ONE

Epigraphs

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

— Steve Jobs, *Stanford Commencement Address* (2005)

What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above.

One climbs, one sees.

One descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen.

There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up.

When one can no longer see, one can at least still know.

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

In my experience, lust only ever leads to misery: ultimately all we ever want (and we always land) is love.

— Chrissie Hynde, interview, *The Guardian* (2014)

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

— Sigmund Freud (attributed)

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Lust

Three Days Ago— Wednesday, 4:00 pm

Fuck. Just leave.

Steven Gold froze—like he'd looked straight into Medusa's eyes.

Rigid, barely breathing, he feared even the faintest chair squeak might betray him.

After two minutes of pounding the reception door and stabbing the Ring doorbell, Jane Sanders snapped.

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

She screamed, pounding the door with both fists.

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

Her voice was low, husky, roughened by smoke.

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

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

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

Still motionless, he shifted only his eyes.

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

Thank God I don't have a pet rabbit.

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

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

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

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

Rimbaud wrote, "Of all sweet passions Shame is the loveliest."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her face, full screen, filled his vision.

He stared, mesmerized. Slowly, he zoomed out, savoring

how her hair curved around her cheeks, slid down her shoulders, nuzzling the blouse's collar like the tease before a kiss.

She was no longer the coke-thin waif of her early days. Her once-pristine skin bore the imprint of life—sun, smoke, nights blurred by excess. Time had softened her, but her bone structure still commanded attention.

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

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

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

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

Not twenty-one anymore, but at fifty-one she was still—undeniably—a perfect ten. That ineffable “X” factor hadn’t faded, the magnetic pull that once crowned her the “It Girl” of the ‘90s.

Crazy as hell. Still lethal. Still got it.

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

That round, toned ass. Jesus.

He lingered, then zoomed in tight.

He panned slowly—lingering on the ghosted outline of her breasts beneath the sheer blouse. He imagined her nipples hardening, pressing against the fabric, straining to be seen.

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

Jane's not more beautiful, she's desperate—more deliberate—provocative in every gesture, knowing exactly how to wield it.

Arousal stirred—familiar, unwelcome.

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

Delete it. Now.

He hovered over the trash icon, hesitated—then tapped: “DELETE VIDEO.”

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

Disaster avoided—for now.

Something's off. Vertigo? Get a grip.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BUZZ BUZZ BUZZ

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

His next patient would arrive in minutes.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWO

Epigraphs

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

— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943)

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

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

...nothing can be hidden from the superego. Not even thoughts.
— Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930)

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Mauvaise Foi

Wednesday, late afternoon

BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ.

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

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

My shoes aren't as comfortable as they look.

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

Shit—my freshman year at Harvard cost less than these loafers. And the dorm bed was more comfortable, too. Erasmus wrote, vestis virum facit—clothes make the man. Of course, Twain one-upped him: Clothes do not merely make the man; the

clothes are the man. So I keep playing the part. At \$300 an hour, the costume better fit. Funny. Rachel used to tease me—said I looked like I was auditioning for a part I didn't believe in. She was right, as usual.

He leaned back in his black leather Eames chair; striped socks peeked from beneath tailored cuffs.

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

*There it is again—the flicker, a blind spot blooming.
Aura, not stroke. Moving.*

He paused his Romantic Literature playlist and queued up Pink Floyd. “Comfortably Numb” began, low and steady.

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

He chuckled, recalling the moment at his office door not twenty minutes earlier.

Ha. Fitting.

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

He especially liked the photo from last month's *The Atlantic* profile—"Psychotherapy in America: A Question of Balance." Him behind the desk: the perfect shot.

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

Just in case.

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

Wish I'd had this for the shoot with The Atlantic.

Would've balanced the desk—nice counterpoint to the sandstone.

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

The relic—Astarte or Asherah—had likely been smuggled out of southern Iraq. He ran his thumb across the goddess's breasts—nipples worn smooth but still discernible.

Was she offering them—or caressing herself?

He reflected on how the “ideal” female form kept shifting through the ages.

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

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

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

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

Life’s a spectrum disorder—we’re all fucked up somehow.

*No one gets cured; we just get by. “Normal” is being abnormal
—just not too often.*

He slid the card into his top desk drawer.

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

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

His eyes wandered to the sandstone plaque—

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

A gift from Professor Hanlon—encouragement then,
accusation now. He had unearthed it and placed it front and center,
not knowing why. Perhaps it reminded him of empathy—or of the
distance between his shoes and anyone else’s. The plaque whispered
humility; the man behind the desk performed authority. Hanlon’s

words still rang in his head: “You’ve got a sharp mind and good instincts, but don’t forget who you work for.”

He had bristled quietly at the backhanded compliment.

A faint pressure gathered in his throat.

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

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

People rarely change—but they do grow. Not everyone’s a redwood.

Some twist like oaks, reaching for light however they can.

Old oaks—gnarled, crooked—can be just as majestic.

Maybe more so.

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

Change is inevitable—never sudden, never simple.

Decisions feel final—binary. They rarely are.

Some are carved in stone.

Others in sandstone.

All crumble eventually—like Ozymandias.

Hmm. Maybe that's a poem—on change.

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

He chuckled, glancing at his loafers.

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

Gold stood six feet tall, close-cut gray hair and a neatly trimmed beard. His slender, handsome face was marked by pensive gray-blue eyes—framed not only by wire-rimmed glasses, but by deep crow's feet. Those who knew him understood: they weren't smile lines.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maintain authority.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The office was spacious, gray sisal wallpaper and bright white-framed window opening onto the broad sweep of the Los Angeles Country Club. Sharp, pristine—like a real estate listing, scrubbed of human warmth. Apart from a few of Rachel's pieces, the space mirrored Gold himself: intellectual, pompous. Even buried beneath an avalanche of art, sterility clung to the air.

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

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

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

The few items atop his desk and credenza were chosen with care—to spark imagination, to provoke conversation. In one corner stood a freestanding sculpture of a nude young woman touching

herself. It raised eyebrows, but he called it a conversation starter. In truth, less provocation than confession—desire carved in stone, denial disguised as art. Like him, it invited dialogue but concealed something raw beneath.

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

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

"That's the point," he said.

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

But Gold insisted. Of course he was drawn to it—that's why she called it *Galatea*.

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

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

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

I sit, reading, trying to find meaning.

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

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

From each other.

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

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

Gold focused on the books arranged with care along his ebony credenza—a satellite collection to the larger library at home.

Each spine was chosen to carry personal weight, each title a reflection of him.

Know the man by his books.

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

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

He read only physical books, scoffing at electronic ones:
That's not how a book is meant to be used. You have to feel it, smell it, hear the page turn.

In truth, Gold enjoyed displaying his library; it was less for use than display, a reflection of his intellect. Occasionally, he'd share a quote with a patient, but mostly he reveled in showcasing erudition through epigrams and aphorisms he found apropos.

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

Clarity performs well on camera.

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

The *top shelf* leaned into psychology and therapy: *Affirmation and Reality; Gestalt Therapy Verbatim; Being and Caring; The Dissociative Mind; The Interpretation of Dreams; The Psychopathology of Everyday Life; Civilization and Its Discontents; Moses and Monotheism; The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis; The Unconscious Observed; Disorders of Sexual Desire; Cluster Headache: Mechanisms and Management; The Mask of Sanity.* Nestled among them was

Frieda Fromm-Reichmann's *Principles of Intensive Psychotherapy*, a reminder of the analytic lineage Gold simultaneously revered and resisted.

The *second shelf* tilted toward philosophy and existential thought: *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*; *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*; *Fear and Trembling*; *Being and Nothingness*; *Meditations on First Philosophy*; *The Outsider*; *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; *An Atheist's Guide to Reality*; *The God Delusion*; *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*; *Sapiens: A Brief History of Mankind*; *Amador: In Which a Father Addresses His Son on Questions of Ethics*. Interspersed were volumes he often cited in session—Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

The *third shelf* carried the weight of theology, myth, and guilt: *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*; *Creature and Creator*; *Mythology*; *Moses and Akhenaten*; *The Four Horsemen*; *Faith Versus Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible*; *A Book Forged in Hell*; *The Portable Atheist*; *Paradise Lost*; *Job*. They pressed together like reluctant neighbors—belief and unbelief, creation and destruction.

The *fourth shelf* spilled over with literature, poetry, and pulp: *Prometheus Unbound; Crime and Punishment; Faust; Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus; Nausea; The Master and Margarita; Gulliver's Travels; The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy; Flatland; Dune Messiah; The Art of Dreaming; The Mind Parasites; The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge; The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell; William Blake: The Complete Illuminated Books; Wittgenstein's Mistress; The Trial; The Double; The Wreckage of Agathon.* Gold liked the sprawl here, the way high art jostled against science fiction and psychedelic oddities, as if the canon itself were in therapy.

And on the *bottom shelf*, meticulously arranged in multiple copies, were his own works. The fiction and experiments—*The Little Boy Who Wouldn't Go to Sleep; The Image Teleporter; Bark; Trees; Dave King & Asgard: Chronology; Solip; DietWrite.* The clinical and scholarly—*Eulogies & Headstones; The Psychosocial Correlates of Adolescent Substance Ab/Use; Schizophrenic Hallucinations: A Psychodiagnostic Tool?* And the academic foundations, preserved like relics of identity: his pretentiously titled undergraduate honors thesis, *A*

Phenomenological and Neurophysiological Study of Schizophrenic Hallucinations, with an Original Hypothesis for the Etiology and Pathogenesis of Schizophrenia Based on the Mesolimbic Dopamine System; his master's thesis, Schizophrenic Hallucinations: A Psychodiagnostic Tool?; and his doctoral dissertation, The Psychosocial Correlates of Adolescent Substance Ab/Use.

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

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

Gold clenched his jaw and exhaled, recalling when his doctoral advisor quit—after glancing only at the abstract.

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

“Bullshit,” Gold snapped. *“You didn't even read it. I hypothesize that recreational ‘ab/users’—as I call them—score*

higher on self-concept and life satisfaction than non-users or abusers. They're the ones who feel accepted, who belong. Statistically, they're the norm. These days the strict abstainers are the true deviants."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bradbury would have called it too many butterflies. Who could say where that path might have led?

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

No regrets. I'm still here.

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

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

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

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

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

Kaufmann nailed it: self-deception.

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

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

Ha. That’s why I’ll always have work.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, as Pink Floyd’s “Brain Damage” drifted from his iPad speakers.

*The lunatic is in my head
The lunatic is in my head
You raise the blade
You make the change*

*You rearrange me 'til I'm sane
You lock the door
And throw away the key
There's someone in my head, but it's not me*

BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ.

His Apple Watch buzzed and vibrated—another interruption.

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

Samael? Had to be a typo.

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

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

Some first interviews had stretched past two hours.

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

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

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

[Typing]

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

RING CHIME. The video flashed onto his iPad, cutting off his text.

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

Walls hold.

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

The office lights flickered—twice, like a nervous blink.

Not a rolling brownout, I hope.

He walked toward the reception room door. A ripple—half dizziness, half-dread—passed through him. His fingers twitched on the doorknob.

Jumped up too fast?

He let go.

PVC, probably. Not AFib. Right?

He lifted his wrist and tapped the ECG icon.

Normal sinus rhythm.

Right.

A thin, strikingly handsome man—mid-to-late thirties, jet-black hair—sat just left of the ficus, thumbing the reception copy of *The Atlantic*. A faint scent of Paco Rabanne's *1 Million Luxe Edition* cologne hung in the air.

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

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

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

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

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

He glanced at his own shoes, disappointed.

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

CHAPTER THREE

Epigraphs

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

— Galileo Galilei, *Il Saggiatore* (1623)

*There are two ways to be fooled.
One is to believe what isn't true;
the other is to refuse to believe what is true.*
— Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals* (1847)

Some lies are easier to believe than the truth.
— Frank Herbert, *Dune Messiah* (1969)

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

-3-

Truth Hides In Shadows

Wednesday, early evening

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

Rachel would remark on his symmetry. She'd love to sculpt that face—the hollows, the angles.

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

*She'd have focused on the ring if she were painting him.
Saturn's finger. A ring of judgment—heavy.*

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

pleasure.”

“Nice to meet you, Samuel.”

His handshake was firm, steady—decisive.

A cold thread traced Gold’s spine.

Shit—COVID?

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

Gold stiffened.

That breaks the choreography.

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

And Light had stepped across it.

What the fuck?

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

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

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

I never sit on the couch.

Is this a power move?

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

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

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

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

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

Impressive.

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

Most patients wouldn’t catch that.

He’s perceptive.

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

He glanced at a sculpture. “Michelangelo’s *Slave*—perfect for a psychologist’s office.”

This guy knows his shit.

I might actually enjoy this one.

“That bust—the woman in the T-shirt—she looks so... serene. Peaceful. Like nirvana. Calming.” He smiled. “I love how art draws emotion out of you.”

He looked across the room.

“That oil painting—who’s the artist?”

Rachel.

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

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

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

An art student... or collector.

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

“She’s got a strong emotional range—her textures and tones hold it. There’s balance, but beneath it all, a hint of sadness”

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

“Thank you. You really do know your art. I think it helps people relax. Open up.” He gestured toward the *Slave*. “That one puzzles some.”

Light pointed to the large wall print. “Pollock—fantastic... *Lucifer*. It’s always felt personal.”

Interesting.

“I’m impressed. Most people guess Pollock—but no one recognizes *Lucifer*.”

Light grinned. He rubbed his hand, turning his ring. “It’s always meant something to me.”

Definitely loaded. Worth revisiting—but not now.

This isn't an art class.

Gold shifted in his seat.

“Okay, Samuel—let’s begin.”

He handed Light the clipboard.

“There’s a basic info sheet and a couple of short questionnaires—just a snapshot. Then we’ll talk.”

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

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

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

Gold seized the moment to study him more closely.

Left-handed, like me... but his tie's a half-Windsor.

Shoelaces tied right-handed. Balanced—or divided? Interesting.

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

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

Heat prickled across his scalp. Light was watching him.

“Want to see it?” Light asked, already sliding it from his finger. “Here. Take a closer look.”

Gold hesitated, then took it.

He turned it slowly between his fingers, thumb grazing the grooves. Sweat beaded along his hairline; he prayed Light wouldn't notice.

Shit. My whole scalp's probably glowing.

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

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

“Wow. Heavier than I expected. Solid gold?”

Light shifted. “Yes—it’s gold. But it’s old. Needs a cleaning.”

He seems uncomfortable.

Gold squinted at the ring. “These symbols—prehistoric?”

ayyamhs amalhs nohkehs

“Looks like something from a cave wall.”

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

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

Light squirmed, clearly uncomfortable.

He’s lying. Shifting more than his story.

“What does it say?”

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

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

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

That’s the trigger.

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

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

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

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

Inb ata ahkiva ina

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

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

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

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

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

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

Be careful.

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

He wrote just one word—stark, bold.

RING.

He circled it hard.

CHAPTER FOUR
Epigraphs

Nothing fixes a thing so intensely in the memory as the wish to forget it.
— Michel de Montaigne, *Essays* (1580)

Guilt is the most important problem in the development of civilization.
— Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930)

Guilt isn't always a rational thing.
Guilt is a weight that will crush you whether you deserve it or not.
— Maureen Johnson, *The Name of the Star* (2011)

Please allow me to introduce myself,
I'm a man of wealth and taste.
— Mick Jagger & Keith Richards, lyrics from *Sympathy for the Devil*,
Beggars Banquet (1968)

-4-

An Anchor Chained To Your Heart

Wednesday, evening

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gold snapped his notebook closed and set it aside.

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

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

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

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

“Just finished. Here you go.”

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

Light slowly swiveled the club chair to face him.

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

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

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

Occupation: Senior Partner, Legion Law (Appellate & Post-Conviction).

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

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

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

Gold nodded. “Impressive. Noble work—an appeal to a higher court. God’s work.”

Light’s Montblanc slipped from his fingers, clattering softly on the floor. He bent to retrieve it, then tucked it into his suit pocket.

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

“You left these blank. I’ll need a number in case we

reschedule—or if there’s a medical emergency. Completely confidential.”

Light shrugged lightly. “Oh, I believe you.” He leaned in, voice lowered. “Just got in from New York yesterday. Someone snagged my phone in the TSA line at JFK.”

“That’s annoying.”

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

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

Gold chuckled. “Didn’t Einstein say, ‘Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous’?”

Light smiled faintly.

“I don’t know a soul here yet. But I’m healthy—and careful. And not superstitious.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Or something darker—sociopathy?

Gold stayed silent. He knew that smile—the kind that shuts a door just as it begins to open. The wink sealed it.

I'm going to have my work cut out for me. Let it go... for now. But make a note. This matters.

The SPS and PSI revealed nothing remarkable—screeners clean.

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

And that bothered him most.

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

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

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

The college chair was deliberate—just uncomfortable enough to unsettle.

Shifting in it now, he realized: it worked. He braced for the usual cerebral hide-and-seek patients played at the start.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No one ever comes to therapy for the problem they claim.

Their “presenting problem” is just the ticket in. It takes a few weeks for transference to kick in—then they think they trust me. But transference isn’t always helpful. Sometimes it complicates everything.

Gold understood transference—the mind’s quiet substitution of old emotions for new contexts, projecting ghosts onto him. Countertransference—his own emotional leakage—unsettled him, as it had Freud. So he clung to objectivity, shielding the process from distortion.

Rachel gets it. She watches Real Housewives, and

Survivor—reads people like novels. She remembers what's passed—and senses what's coming. She would've made a great therapist, better than me. She's an empath. She senses hurt beneath bravado—she always did.

I barely qualify as sympathetic. Often, I just mirror. I get distracted by the mask. They see my diplomas and assume I know. Assume I care.

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

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

He told himself it was therapeutic necessity: objectivity, emotional neutrality, impartiality. In truth, it was just his nature—clinical detachment that bled into every relationship.

Even behind the mask of neutrality, faint echoes surfaced—flickers of feeling not fully his, not fully theirs. To him Professor Hanlon's mantra—Get in touch with yourself—was just a rebrand of

Socrates: ‘Know thyself.’ A summons to confront his blind spots before they shadowed someone else.

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

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

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

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

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

step.

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

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

"I'm not sure," Light said softly. "I'm not happy. Honestly... I don't think I ever have been."

He looked up. "Maybe it's naïve... wanting to feel wanted. Or loved. You'll tell me."

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

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

"People don't know me. But they have opinions—stories. About who I am. All because of him."

"Him?" Don't interrupt. Let him go on.

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

“They?”

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

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

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

Gold said nothing.

That’s deep. Real deep—for only fifteen minutes in.

Spontaneity dies when we wait our turn. Truth rarely survives that silence. But speak too soon, and it’s all collisions—noise, static.

Just shut up and listen.

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

He spoke gently. “Go on.”

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

“They were sinister.” Pain crossed Light’s face—undeniable, unguarded.

What the hell?

Was this sexual abuse?

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

His hands clenched—tight, white-knuckled.

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

because of him.”

*And yet—you wear the ring. Still. As if forged from guilt
itself.*

What the hell did he do?

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

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

He paused—then leaned in, just a little too close.

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

“I might have.” And he gave another wink.

Gold shifted in his chair—uncomfortable.

That’s... unexpected.

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

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

Maybe he's gay.

“You probably think I’m being dramatic. I’m not. You don’t know him. But if you did—if you knew him like I do—you’d know he’s worse than all that.”

Hard to believe this is still the intake. Unreal.

“For years, I kept asking—why doesn’t he love me? Shouldn’t a father’s love be unconditional?”

Yes.

“Eventually, I realized—he only loves one person unconditionally: himself.

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

He saw it as betrayal. And because he’s so egotistical, so

vindictive—he made sure I took the fall.”

Disgust is intimate. Hate is closer still—it requires history, and it requires hope.

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

He's not just angry—he's wounded. Still searching for love, in spite of rejection. The ring? A relic. A loop of unfinished grief. A symbol of tarnished hope.

This is his narrative—but it lacks texture.

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

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

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

Let him talk. Don't dam the flood.

“My biggest flaw? Honesty. Odd, I know—for me—a criminal lawyer. But I swear, it's true. Everyone assumes I lie. But honesty—that's what ruined us. That's what ended me—with him.”

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

“He shifts it all onto me. I'm the fall guy—that way he keeps his halo—I've lost mine. I'm the evil one. The liar. The troublemaker. They believe him—every time, they have to. If you knew what he made happen—what he ordered—you'd never dare question him. If I weren't his son, I'd be dead.”

Who is this guy's father—some cartel boss?

“You know this, Dr. Gold—it's hypnosis. Repeat something often enough, from enough mouths, and no matter how insane, it

becomes truth. *Their truth.*

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

“I never want to see him again.”

But here you are.

“They trust him. Blindly. Believe every word. Thinking’s harder. Question him—and you’re punished. Branded forever. Sorry, I know I’m ranting. But I swear—I’ve been honest.”

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

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

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

After the taut silence, Light stared—hungry for something: a nod, a flicker of belief, anything.

The literal truth about his father? Does it even matter anymore? Will he let me challenge him? His beliefs? Unlikely. The facts—whatever they are—feel secondary now. Reconciliation? Not unless he is open to seeing things differently. What matters is what he believes. This didn't happen overnight. Still, if I knew more, maybe I could help him reframe it—understand it, accept it—without the emotion, without the vitriol. In time, maybe? If he's willing to work.

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

Don't challenge him yet. Win him first.

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

“People prefer affirmation—even if it isn’t real. That’s confirmation bias. That’s why people gather their ‘truth’ from friends, echo-chamber podcasts, or their go-to network—anything that validates what they already believe. Birds of a feather. Nobody likes being challenged—especially fathers.”

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

Did I misread this?

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

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

Gold said, “People hate discord. You hear a bad note—you flinch. In music or in life, uncertainty sets nerves on edge. That’s anxiety: a future you can’t predict or control. A jigsaw puzzle with a missing piece—infuriating. Some people jam in the wrong one, just to feel whole. Pretend it’s complete.”

One reason for the high divorce rate.

“We crave closure. Ambiguity rattles the soul. We want resolution—no loose ends. To believe everything’s fine. Just... as it should be. It’s not unlike religion.”

Should I go here? Why not.

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

Agnosticism? I’m not sure it truly exists.” He gave a faint smile.

“People either believe—or they don’t.”

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

Gold nodded, energized. “Exactly! They believe—they just don’t comprehend. I don’t understand quantum physics, but I don’t doubt it exists. It’s just beyond me.

“That’s why you can’t argue someone out of their religion—

it's baked in since childhood. Once someone believes, it's almost impossible to convince them they don't really know. Hope is wanting to believe—even when the facts suggest otherwise. Wanting always trumps knowing. People want to believe. No one wants to discover they're wrong—it creates cognitive dissonance. It threatens their beliefs. In their mind, it could unravel everything. Suggesting another viewpoint—even a better one—can feel like betrayal. So we double down, telling ourselves we see clearly—everyone else is misled, mistaken, or lying.”

Light nodded in agreement.

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

“It's human nature to be biased. We're judged by what we do. Intentions don't count. You can't see them. Only actions register. Seeing clearly while everyone else stays blind—that's the hard part.”

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

Gold nodded. “Exactly. We're told how to act—what to be.

But we don't know what we really want, only what we're supposed to want. That gap? That's what drives the neurosis—questioning everything.”

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

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

What evil did he actually do?

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

Shit. One question—not a list. Life's not a multiple-choice quiz. Don't hand him the answers. Make him earn them.

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

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

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

“I was told—commanded—to do things I knew were wrong. Morally wrong. I hurt people—people who didn’t deserve it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sounds familiar.

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

back at me ‘*I am!*’ I said, ‘You are what? Look at yourself. Look at what you’ve become.’ He screamed, ‘You weren’t there! Where were you when I laid the foundation? You can’t understand.’

“There was no reasoning with him. And more people were going to get hurt. So I quit—I left for good. He blamed everything he’d commanded me to do—on me. It wasn’t fair. But I still feel guilty. And I’ve felt like hell ever since.”

Gold sat back, letting it all wash over him. He waited, but Light slumped forward, head bowed—dejected, drained.

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

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

“Thank you, Samuel. I appreciate your honesty. I’m sorry you went through that—it sounds harrowing. I don’t know the

specifics, but the fact that you held yourself together... that says a lot. Nobody grows up without scars. And the emotional kind? They cut deeper than flesh—and rarely heal completely.

“Guilt is rarely what people think. It masquerades as one thing—but there are two kinds, and the difference matters.

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

Light accepted this with a slight nod.

“Guilt is an anchor, chained to your heart—its deepest fold—silent, heavy, inescapable. You feel it physically—its weight dragging you down. It lingers not because others judge you, but because you judge yourself. Disappointing your family is hard—disappointing yourself is worse. You might withdraw, hide, run—but it stays with you. It depresses you. Even when you make amends, it lingers. It stops devouring you—but it never quite leaves. Not until you forgive yourself. And even then—you always have the scars.”

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

“Then there’s neurotic guilt—the kind that creeps in when you’re blamed for something that wasn’t your fault. When someone tells you it’s your fault—or makes you feel like it. You know it isn’t, but you feel like crap anyway. Being blamed for something you didn’t do—or never intended—is the kind of crazy-making that breaks people. It usually starts with parents, teachers, friends—the ones who matter to us. Sometimes it’s not even malicious. But sometimes it is. And you still feel guilty—because someone told you that you are.”

Light nodded in agreement.

Inherited guilt—my father’s silence.

Neurotic guilt—Jane’s shadow.

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

Light nodded again, slowly.

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

“Why do we still feel awful after apologizing? Because it’s manipulative. It lets someone else pull the strings—but only because we agree to play along. We play their game, by their rules—and the rules keep changing. It paralyzes us—emotionally and psychologically. We grow afraid to think. To move. To act.”

Light nodded. “Yes.”

Good.

Gold continued. “That’s the breeding ground for neurosis. It becomes a scream in your unconscious—*What did I do wrong? I can’t live like this.* So we grasp for relief—but it never comes. We spiral—faster, deeper—toward the silence we can’t name. We feel shame and guilt—unearned, corrosive. And because apologizing doesn’t fix it, we start hiding from ourselves. The unconscious begins to doubt even our feelings—lashing out in confusion, seeking relief that never comes. That’s when guilt becomes an anchor—dragging us

into the abyss.”

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

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

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

“*Feelings* just happen—we don’t choose them. But *emotions*? Emotions are how we respond. That’s where therapy can help: to teach you to recognize feelings and choose how to respond emotionally. Remember—emotions are your reactions to your feelings. We’re wired to feel certain things. But emotions aren’t automatic. They’re choices—if we can catch them in time.”

Check in. Ping him.

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

Light nodded. “No, it’s not too much. It’s cerebral—but it makes sense. Sounds like mine’s neurotic guilt. I can’t seem to let go, so how do I make it stop?”

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

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

“When we say we ‘know how someone feels,’ we’re guessing—reading their emotions, their outward cues. Someone says something cruel. I feel hurt. I respond—with anger, sarcasm, withdrawal, maybe tears. One of my jobs is to help you figure out what you’re feeling—and why. The why helps you judge if the feeling fits, if it’s justified—then you decide how to respond. If you did something wrong—objectively—you have to confront that guilt. If

your guilt is earned, you're serving time—for a real crime. The work then is redemption. But if you were made to feel at fault for something you didn't do, then my job is to help you respond—not with symptoms—but with clarity. My job is to help you reclaim your free will—and the responsibility it brings. No shifting blame—not after that. We're judged by what we do. Intentions? Invisible. No one sees those. All we see is behavior—actions, gestures, maybe emotion. That's what people respond to. That's what they remember.”

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

Okay. The horse is dead. Enough.

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

Ha. Guess I didn't listen—to him.

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

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

Gold paused for a moment, then continued. “You said you were called the ‘*evil one*.’ I’d like to understand that—if you’re willing. Why do they see you that way? What did you do—or what did they think you did?”

What things did you do?

“Life’s a journey—we all screw up occasionally. If we’re lucky, someone teaches us along the way. That’s how we learn. From our mistakes. It’s normal to feel uneasy. This is all new. I’m new. Take your time. Be real. Be honest. I’m listening.”

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

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

He paused.

His voice dropped, barely a whisper. “And now... I feel guilty.

Not because I lied.”

He glanced down.

“I told you the truth. But I left something out.” He bowed his head, fingers clenched on the armrest. The air thickened—heavy with what was coming.

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

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

He stopped spinning the ring.

His voice barely escaped—a whisper.

“My real name is... Satan.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Epigraphs

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

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

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

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

The Devil doesn't come dressed in a red cape and pointy horns.

— Tucker Max (attributed)

*Pleased to meet you
Hope you guess my name
But what's puzzlin' you
Is the nature of my game*

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

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

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

-5-

Sympathy for the Devil

Wednesday, late evening

What the fuck?

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

“Your parents named you... Satan?”

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

Gold blinked. His breath caught.

He's serious? No... a nickname. No one names a kid Satan. Not even a drug lord. Actually, maybe a drug lord might. Yeah—his father. But “I never had a mother?” Abuse? Abandonment? Death? This session just got longer. A lot longer.

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

He jotted—quickly:

*Estranged from father. Maternal absence? Grief
masked as myth?
Abuse? PPD?
MMPI—overkill?*

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

Okay, not crazy. So... metaphor.

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

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

Paranoid Personality Disorder—prone to misreading

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His dark blue eyes brimmed; he fought the tears.

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

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

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

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

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

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

What 'is' going on with me?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I can't let Rachel down.

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

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

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

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

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

"Used wisely, self-disclosure shows them you understand—because you've been there. Because you can help.

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

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

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

I'm losing Rachel.

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

“Dr. Gold... are you okay?”

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

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

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

“So... not the Devil—Satan. I’m sorry, I don’t understand the difference.”

“I’ll explain. But first—I need to see the battlefield. Are you religious?”

Battlefield?

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

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

The biblical Job—faith under fire. Blake’s Job—symbolic, a journey from moralism to awakening. Satan casts a longer shadow in Christianity and Islam. And in literature—Milton’s tragic hero in ‘Paradise Lost.’ Lucifer, the Morning Star, in Byron’s ‘Cain.’ In Islam, he’s not even an angel—he’s a jinn. A

tempter.

Shit. Which one is he?

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

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

Light leaned in, eyes narrowed sharp.

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

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

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

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

Well Dr. Oster, looks like you’re getting your wish. I’m stepping onto the line. Just hope it’s not the wrong side of firing squad. Ha.

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

Light stayed silent.

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

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

Light smiled. “I thought so.”

Gold flushed at Light’s certainty.

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

“That’s okay. I’m Jewish too.”

What?

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

Gold blinked like he’d taken a hit—shaken off a concussion.

It wasn't what Light said—it was his face. The way it changed. A weight lifted.

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

Gold cleared his throat, re-centering. "I'm curious—why ask about my religion?"

Wishing to deflect, he added, "And what does my saying I'm Jewish tell you?"

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

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

"Am I wrong?"

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

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

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

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

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

Psychology borrowed too much from physical science. Not enough from philosophy. Or religion.

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

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

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

Light’s mood shifted again. His jaw clenched and his eyes

seemed to flash with anger.

Uh oh. He's pissed.

Well, maybe that will end this Satan bullshit.

Maybe that's why his parents won't talk to him.

“You don’t believe me. You think I’m just another nut who needs a steady lithium level.”

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

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

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

Am I talking about him—or projecting me?

“The problem is, even if you throw others off balance—

you're the one who stands out. Looks strange.

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

"Of course, this is Southern California. You've got more leeway.. Politics aside—almost anything goes.

"Being 'eccentric' is fine. But telling people your name is Satan? Most will think you're a religious Satanist, some burned-out post-hippie, or just a professional shit-stirrer—like you said people accuse you of being.

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

Gold paused, letting it settle.

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

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

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

Okay. Brace yourself. Fireworks coming.

“So... how can I actually help you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ich bin der Geist, der stets verneint. I am the spirit that

always denies. Like Goethe's Mephistopheles?

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

Is this a game? A delusion? A test?

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

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

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

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

Clearly angry. "Not believe, Dr. Gold. *Know!*"

Shit, doubling down again. If he really believes this, I've

got to refer him to psychiatry. Freud said defense mechanisms help us survive stress. Anxiety. Conflict. Anna Freud said they protect the ego by distorting or denying reality. Well, Anna—this guy's tearing reality to shreds.

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

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

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

“Even in just this short time, I can see why you’re upset. Frustrated. Sad.”

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

—”

Gold caught himself.

“Everyone does. I’d just like to understand what brought you here. That’s how I’ll know how to help.”

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

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

I just need his trust. For a little while.

Sink the hook... then reel.

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

“Dr. Gold, I’m not estranged from my mother. I never had one.

“I *am* Satan. Not the biblical version. The Bible got it wrong. I was part of God’s heavenly court.”

Gold’s eyes flicked upward—a reflex.

“Of course it sounds crazy. I get that. But now—I’m telling

you the whole truth.

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

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

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

“But I promise you—I’m no comic book character.”

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

“Dr. Gold, you said you’re not religious. That belief is ‘thinking you know.’ That no one can be reasoned out of religion.”

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

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

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

“Faith is believing without evidence. No data. Just faith.

“So, here’s my offer. Call it a *Gedankenexperiment*—a thought experiment.

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

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

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

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

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

Light smiled, savoring the moment.

“Don’t worry—I won’t make you sign in blood. I deal in contracts, not covenants. This time.”

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

Now you're the judge too? If Rachel was in the gallery, would she see me defending truth—or abetting madness? Am I enabling him? Is this therapy, or voyeurism?

Gold straightened, forcing his voice steady. “All right, Samuel. So stipulated. I won’t cure you of your belief—your identity as Satan. But you’ll have to cut me some slack. Never studied this in class.”

Light’s hand flicked the air like a dismissive ruling.
“Objection overruled. That’s all I ask.”

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

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

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

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

I'll trace it back. Parental betrayal. Rage displaced.

What myth is he recasting—and who plays the villain?

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

“C’mon—this has to get your intellectual juices flowing, right?

“Think of the case study you could write. I could be your ‘Anna O.’ Not that anyone would take you seriously, of course. But I honestly believe you can help me.”

Gold straightened, trying to maintain his clinical calm.

“I read that Atlantic piece. You’ve got a style—an approach. And definitely the background. I think you work for me. That’s good, right? You already have my trust. I’m motivated. I want your help. Just treat me like any other patient... Any other *mortal* patient.”

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

Gold paused, mulling it over.

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

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

“Thanks, Dr. Gold. That’s all I ask.”

That—and my soul?

Too soon.

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

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

I’m feeling better about this.

Could be a hell of a case study.

Or a novel.

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

“Speaking of time and money...”

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

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

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

“Today’s Wednesday. How about Tuesdays and Thursdays—say, 5:00 or 5:30?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Cash okay? No card fees, right?”

Gold nodded, still visibly uneasy.

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

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

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

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

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

“Whether you report it or not? That’s on you. See you tomorrow, Dr. Gold!”

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

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

“Okay. See you then. Take care.”

There it was again—the ring, gleaming beneath the barrel like a coiled serpent. Not a trigger. Not a warning. Just... waiting. As if the thing itself were watching.

Thank you for previewing my novel *A Question of Balance*. I have completed it and am currently editing and polishing it. I expect to complete it by early October 2025.

I would greatly appreciate any thoughts, comments, and criticisms you'd be willing to share. To do so, please use the contact form on my web page— <https://www.aquestionofbalance.com/>

I've included the novel's Afterword and Author's Note in this preview—

AFTERWORD

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

To the Reader—

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

I've always thought it more important to understand the questions than to demand answers—as I wrote years ago in my poem, which I've used in this novel, *The Birth of a Man*:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps Steven Gold will have more to share at some point in the future. At this point, he might think to himself:

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

Knowing when to stop is the rarest form of control.

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

David S. Sherman
September, 2025

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Like most childhoods, mine was a mosaic of flashes—small, scattered, unforgettable.

My imagination was kindled by mythology, religion, comic books, and encyclopedias—each striking sparks against the dry kindling of suffering, blindness, and death. The sudden loss of a grandparent's vision—and the deaths of beloved pets and grandparents—raised questions few children know how to ask: Why do people suffer? Why do we die? Why would God allow it?

Those sparks smoldered through adolescence, flaring at times into obsession—but they ignited in college, fanned by Paul Cantor's *Myths of Creation* and courses in philosophy and psychology. They were further fueled by classes in expository and creative writing—and by the independent research I conducted for my undergraduate honors thesis on schizophrenia. I poured those questions into stories—and into therapy. Each became a vessel for a fire I couldn't quite name.

This novel is a thought experiment—an imaginative lens

through which I explore my reflections on psychotherapy: its promise, its pitfalls, and its profound complexity.

I've been a licensed psychotherapist since 1981. In that time, people have entered therapy for countless reasons. Most find it helpful. Some, tragically, do not. And in rare cases, it makes things worse.

In graduate school, I remember a professor holding up Eysenck's study like it was radioactive—his voice low, as if invoking a heretic. The claim? That most neurotics recovered on their own. That therapy might be ineffective—or even harmful. It was scandalous. And unforgettable.

His legacy sparked an enduring debate about psychotherapy's efficacy and ushered in a more empirical approach to its study. Subsequent meta-analyses estimate that 75–80% of patients improve with therapy—yet 5–10% actually worsen.

Among the most critical predictors of therapeutic success is the therapeutic alliance: a collaborative, egalitarian relationship between therapist and client. That's why Carl Rogers and other humanistic psychologists abandoned the term *patient* in favor of *client*—to emphasize relationship over hierarchy. Therapy depends

on trust, mutual respect, and a sense of hope. A session should offer a space to speak freely, without judgment—to collaborate in the process of self-understanding.

In *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), Freud and Breuer introduced the ideas of projection and transference. In subsequent writings, including *The Dynamics of Transference* (1912), Freud expanded this framework to include countertransference—the therapist’s own unconscious reactions—and emphasized the importance of self-awareness to avoid contaminating treatment.

That’s because therapists—whether psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, or social workers—are human. We bring our own feelings, unresolved emotions, and psychological baggage into the room. Despite our training, psychotherapy is no exact science. It’s a soft science—an interpretive art, practiced by fallible humans. Therapy can be a descent—into memory, projection, or loss.

Originally trained in the medical model—I began college premed as a biology major (though I first considered Folklore and Mythology). I’ve always believed in the model: that physical and mental conditions are the result of specific biological causes. I’ve always found the stress-diathesis model—where biology meets

circumstance—the most truthful.

I've always believed that patients and clients deserve full transparency—especially in a soft-science field like psychotherapy. The therapist's personality, ethics, and worldview are inseparable from the treatment process. A therapist's own mental health and emotional self-awareness are paramount.

Psychology's major schools—psychoanalytic, behavioral, cognitive, humanistic—reflect the personalities and moral visions of their founders.

Human behavior resists tidy classification. The DSM—now in its fifth major edition—evolves with each generation's fears and fashions. Its categories reflect the era as much as the mind. Like an artist changing palettes, psychology redefines disorder with every cultural shift. Therapy, too, resists clarity. What begins as insight may end in echo—or silence.

Therapy is like art school. There are tools, techniques, and theory—but what matters most is the artist. Even the greatest prodigies—Mozart, Liszt, Yo-Yo Ma, or Arshile Gorky—required structure and mentorship before creating works that changed the world. They learned fundamentals before breaking the mold.

But not everyone becomes a master. A Stradivarius won't play a concerto on its own. In the hands of Jascha Heifetz, even a thrift-store violin can create magic. What separates the mediocre from the transcendent isn't just training—it's temperament, awareness, and timing.

Some see only chaos in Pollock, hear only noise in Stravinsky. But others glimpse revelation. Genius lives in the interplay between skill, culture, and personality—like Rachmaninoff reimagining a Paganini theme into a slow, soaring melody of sublime beauty.

We would be impoverished by a world with only one genre—only rap or classical, only minimalism or surrealism. The human psyche requires variety.

Some therapist-client pairings click. Others fail. In art, the artist is key—and so it is with therapy.

Freud's insight about countertransference remains essential: therapists must examine their own emotional reactions, or risk harming the very people they seek to help.

Every therapist paints with the palette of their own psyche. Some create refuge. Others, unknowingly, reopen wounds with every stroke. Insight is their only shield—and often, it comes too late.

Therapists vary—sometimes wildly. Some violate the foundational maxim attributed to Thomas Sydenham: *primum non nocere*—first, do no harm. While psychoanalysts are required to undergo their own analysis, many clinicians are not. That lack of self-examination can compromise the care they offer.

At its core, therapy is moral philosophy—applied and intimate. Every therapist, consciously or not, brings their own ethical, emotional, and existential framework to the room.

The story is not a theory, but a descent.

One man. One room.

The struggle of vision—too much, or too little.

The demand it makes: a cost no one escapes.

Some mirrors don't reflect. They expose.

David S. Sherman
September, 2025
