

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

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

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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 one striking a spark on 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 throughout adolescence, sometimes flaring into brief obsessions, but they ignited in college—fanned by Paul Cantor's *Myths of Creation* and classes 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 the fire, I couldn't quite name.

What follows is my personal reflection on psychotherapy—its promise, its pitfalls, and its profound complexity.

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

In graduate school, I remember a professor holding up Eysenck's study like it was radioactive—his voice low, as if naming a heretic. The claim? That most neurotics recovered on their own. That

therapy might be useless—or worse. It was scandalous. And unforgettable.

Though Eysenck's methodology was later criticized, his legacy sparked an enduring debate about the efficacy of therapy 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 be a safe space for clients to speak freely, without judgment, and 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 theoretical training, psychotherapy is not an 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 pre-med as a biology major (although I first considered a Folklore and Mythology major). 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 also long 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 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 since 1951—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, shifts and resists clarity. What begins as insight can 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 is not just training, but 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—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.

What follows is not a theory—but a descent. One man, one room, and the cost of seeing too much—or not enough.

Some mirrors don't reflect. They expose.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PREFACE

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

I opened one door and froze. A young woman, likely stirred 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 whipped 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 actually the devil—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, a few years later, with a young man convinced he was God—haunted me. Not because I believed them, but because they believed themselves.

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

I don't aim to change minds. Perspective, after all, depends on where you stand. But I do hope to spark discussion and help readers recognize that different vantage points can yield different

truths.

As a therapist, my job was to help people understand their own perspectives—why they saw, felt, and believed what they did. More importantly, I helped them step into someone else’s shoes, to reframe experience, and perhaps shift behavior. That theme echoes in Chapter Two, which references Mary Lathrop’s 1895 poem *Judge Softly*. The familiar phrase—“*walk a mile in their shoes*”—captures this novel’s essence: perspective.

The writing began in 1992, as a poem that now opens the book:

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

And then the novel’s first line:

My shoes aren’t as comfortable as they look.

The manuscript was set aside for more than thirty years—until retirement finally gave me the time, and distance, to return. Life delivered its own syllabus—grief, love, humility, and time. That long pause gave the story space to deepen.

Throughout the novel, I’ve included “chapter appetizers”—epigraphs drawn from poetry, scripture, literature, philosophy, and pop culture. They are meant to invite reflection without overshadowing the story. I’ve also embedded “Easter eggs”—subtle references and hidden allusions whose significance may only unfold with time.

Psychology, in my view, leans too heavily on the physical sciences. While research and rigor matter, the human psyche also requires interpretation, myth, and meaning. I believe psychotherapy would benefit as much from philosophy and religion as from

neuroscience and data. That's the blend this novel seeks not only to explore, but to embody.

As in all fiction, there are echoes, shadows, and refractions of the self. Some elements may resemble personal experience, but this is a work of imagination.

The standard legal disclaimer applies: *Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.* It exists to protect privacy, avoid defamation, and satisfy publishing norms. But it also serves a deeper truth: fiction is a mirror—cracked, yes, but still reflecting something true. Some reflections are intentional. Others, perhaps, are accidental—or inevitable.

If this story leaves a spark—or a scar—then I will have succeeded.

David S. Sherman

June 2025

Beverly Hills, California

INVOCATION

The Struggle

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

—David S. Sherman, “*The Struggle*” (1992)

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

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

DEDICATION

PROLOGUE

Beginnings are always messy.
— John Galsworthy, *The Eldest Son* (1912)

The beginning of wisdom is silence.
— Pirkei Avot 3:13

*The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and
the unreasonable silence of the world.*
— Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)

PROLOGUE

[PRESENT DAY]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Flash—light split the darkness like a wound.

A police photographer’s camera fired, shattering the stillness with mechanical precision.

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

Flash

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

Flash

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

Flash

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

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

Flash

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

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

Flash

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

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

What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer; but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know.
— Rene Daumal, *Mount Analogue: A Novel of Symbolically Authentic Non-Euclidean Adventures in Mountain Climbing* (1952)

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

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

Lust

[TWO WEEKS EARLIER]

Fuck. Just leave.

Steven Gold froze—as if turned to stone by Medusa.

Rigid, barely breathing, he feared even a chair's faint squeak might betray his presence.

After two minutes of pounding and stabbing the Ring doorbell, even Jane Sanders had reached her limit.

She jabbed the button again—same grating chime. Then, with a scream, she pounded the door with both fists.

At last, conceding defeat, she whirled and kicked the door with her heel.

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

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

Jane stomped toward the elevator bay. The only sound left was the low hum of fluorescent lights.

Still frozen, Gold shifted only his eyes.

Once the live feed showed her vanish into the elevator bay, he exhaled—long, shaky. *Fatal Attraction* flashed to 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 grainy video couldn't dim her glow—she still radiated runway grace.

She wore her signature look—a sheer silk Gucci blouse by Tom Ford, Calvin Klein low-rise jeans, and her favorite chocolate brown Hermès Jumping boots. She moved with that old effortless elegance. She still carried the unshakable confidence of the runway—commanding attention, respect... desire. That part hadn't faded.

I guess it's like riding a bike. Must be muscle memory or something.

He could hear the echo of her boots from the iPad speakers. Onscreen, she still had that fierce New York strut.

Even in rage, she was captivating.

He devoured the video—scrolling, zooming—like a starving man at a forbidden feast.

He froze her mid-glare at the Ring doorbell.

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

Her face—full screen now—filled his vision.

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

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

Her tall frame still whispered fashion model—an impossible,

intoxicating silhouette.

With each fist strike on the door, he thought of the catwalk flashbulbs freezing poses like a strobe light. But now, he noticed the fine wrinkles and age spots on her long, elegant fingers clenched in fists.

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

He paused again—capturing her face at a strange, slanted angle. Her left eye sat just slightly higher than the right; her lips, subtly fuller on one side. The asymmetry made her even more unsettling.

She wasn't twenty-one anymore. But at fifty-one, she was still—undeniably—a perfect ten. She still had that ineffable “X” factor that once made her the “It Girl” of the 90s.

Crazy as hell—but she's still got it.

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

His favorite look: blouse half-unbuttoned, half-tucked into low-rise jeans hugging her still-toned, round behind.

He lingered—then zoomed in tight.

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

Arousal stirred. Familiar. Unwelcome.

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

I need to erase this. Now.

He hovered over the trashcan icon. Hesitated. Then tapped:

“DELETE VIDEO.”

He exhaled—deep, relieved. But the thrill was already encoded. Guilt fused to arousal, like a scar that still flinched when touched.

Disaster averted. For now.

Something's off. Vertigo? Get a grip.

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

Jane never liked Haydn—‘too predictable.’

Gold needed that order now. Its poised serenity poured into the silence, steadying him. Yo-Yo Ma's cello—mellow, unhurried—spilled like watercolor into the stillness, tinting his thoughts in forgotten hues.

Gold exhaled, then shut the iPad cover with a satisfying magnetic click.

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

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

Gold’s Apple Watch buzzed, yanking him out of Byron—and
back into the dull gravity of of the present. His next patient was only
moments away.

CHAPTER TWO

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

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

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

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

Mauvaise Foi

Gold pressed “Stop,” annoyed to be interrupted again—by time or anything else. He’d been absorbed in the injustice of Cain’s punishment—for a sin not his own. Adam and Eve’s fall. He sighed, distracted, and set the open book on his desk, thinking—

My shoes aren’t as comfortable as they look.

He lifted his feet and rested his Santoni Uniqua loafers on the edge of his ebony desk. Leaning back in his black leather Eames chair, striped Brunello Cucinelli socks peeked from beneath tailored cuffs.

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

Erasmus said “vestis virum facit,”—clothes make the man. Twain countered, “clothes do not merely make the man, the clothes are the man.” So I keep playing the part. At \$300 an hour, the costume damn well better fit.

He exhaled slowly through pursed lips, dogeared the yellowed page, and swapped the book for his iPad. He stopped his Romantic Literature playlist and switched to Pink Floyd. *Comfortably Numb* began to play, softly.

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

He chuckled, remembering the scene at his office door just

twenty minutes earlier.

Ha. Apropos.

As David Gilmour's guitar solo filled the office, Gold looked around—relaxed, content. He was proud of his office—how impressive it looked, how precisely it mirrored him.

He was especially pleased with the photo that accompanied last month's Atlantic article, *Psychotherapy in America, A Question of Balance*—Gold, with perfect hair and an expensive tie, seated behind his imposing desk.

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

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

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

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

Is she offering them or fondling herself?

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

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

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

Cured... ha. She wasn't broken—just overwhelmed.

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

Yeah. Being normal is being abnormal—just not too often.

This is her first child. She has no idea how much more complicated her whole life just became.

Hell—that's why I can afford these shoes. She'll be back!

His eyes wandered to the sandstone plaque—

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

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

A faint pressure stirred in his throat.

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

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

Lately, Gold had felt conflicted—even about things he once thought settled. He wasn't as certain—so cocksure—as he used to be.

People rarely change—but they do grow.

Not everyone's a redwood—some twist and turn like oaks, reaching for the sun however they can. Old gnarled oaks with meandering trunks and crooked branches can be just as majestic—maybe more so.

Do we fault the oak for winding slowly around a fence, stretching to find the sun? Can we define it at fifty—or even five hundred?

Change is inevitable—but rarely sudden.

Decisions feel final—binary—but they don't have to be. Some are etched in stone. Others in sandstone. All crumble eventually—like Ozymandias.

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

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

He chuckled, dropping a look to his loafers.

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

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

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

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

He thought he had a good sense of humor, but most of his jokes were internal. They were location jokes—you had to be there. And “there” was inside Gold's head. Inside jokes for an audience of one. Too clever. Too obscure. They'd be lost on others—so he

kept them to himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The photographer had insisted on removing it during the Atlantic shoot. Rachel had agreed—she never liked the piece. She'd never even heard of the artist. She'd challenged him when he bought

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

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

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

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

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

Know the man by his books.

There was no system. He’d usually have two, sometimes three—or even four—going at once. He slid each book into whatever space was available after reading—or more often, rereading—it. He took pride in his collection—convinced the authors would be flattered to find themselves shelved in Gold’s private library.

If not running therapy or playing tennis, he was usually reading in his black leather Eames desk chair—or wandering used bookstores, hunting for odd or evocative titles.

He only read physical books, scoffing at electronic ones:

“That’s not how a book is meant to be used. You need to feel, hear, even smell the page as you turn it.”

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

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

His bookshelf offered a glimpse into who Gold believed himself to be—and what he valued. His collection was eclectic—a bridge spanning psychology, theology, poetry, philosophy, and pulp.

The top shelf of the credenza displayed the following titles—

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

The next shelf held his own works—multiple copies, carefully arranged.

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

Substance Ab/Use... a year wasted.

Gold clenched his jaw and exhaled sharply through his nose, recalling the moment his doctoral advisor resigned on reading the abstract.

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

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

He'd replayed the exchange a hundred times—never

admitting it was really displaced aggression.

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

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

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

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

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

*Bradbury might call it too many butterflies.
Who's to say how that path would have turned
out?*

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

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

He pretended that simply calling them “mistakes” counted as

truth—as if that alone absolved him. Thinking too long on it made him nauseous. More truth than he liked. But he was beginning to understand.

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

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

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

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

Ha. Which is why I'll never be out of work.

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

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

BUZZ BUZZ BUZZ

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

Samael? Had to be a typo.

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

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

First interviews had stretched past two hours before.

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

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

If I call, she'll start asking questions. Better to text.

[Typing]

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

RING CHIME

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

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

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

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

Jumped up too fast?

He released the doorknob.

PVC, maybe. Not Afib...right?

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

He opened the office door.

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

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

He was wearing a black Armani suit with an exquisite black and burgundy-patterned Hermès tie. A matching pocket square complemented his outfit perfectly, but it was far too formal for a therapy session.

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

*Déjà vu? Like the mark of Cain—invisible,
but unmistakable.*

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

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

“Hi, I’m Dr. Steven Gold—won’t you come in, please.”

CHAPTER THREE

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

— Galileo Galilei, *Il Saggiatore* (1623)

There are two ways to be fooled.

One is to believe what isn't true;

the other is to refuse to believe what is true.

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

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

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

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)

Truth Often Hides In Shadows

Light stood—tall, six-foot-three—and casually dropped the magazine onto the table. As he stepped inside, his deep blue eyes met Gold’s with calm assurance. He extended a manicured hand. A large gold ring on his middle finger flashed—squiggles, maybe writing. Gold couldn’t place them.

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

“Nice to meet you too, Samuel.”

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

A chill traced Gold’s spine as they shook hands.

Crap. COVID again?

Gold turned toward his desk, assuming Light would take the captain’s chair. Instead, Light strolled to the club chair, angled it slightly, and sat—crossing one leg with practiced ease.

Gold stiffened. That chair wasn’t part of the choreography. The office had been designed so patients saw him framed by his diplomas and credentials—enthroned behind the desk. The idea: to establish control—keeping patients on the other side of Hadrian’s Wall.

And Light had just crossed it.

What the fuck?

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

Gold grabbed his Hermès Ulysse notebook—a gift from

Rachel—along with the intake folder, then walked across the room with a clipboard in hand.

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

I don't sit on the couch. Never have. Is this a power move?

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

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

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

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

Impressive.

"Fertility goddess, right? Let me guess—she came from someone struggling to conceive? Clearly a success story. But hey, I'm just a mythology nerd."

Most people wouldn't catch that—he's perceptive.

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

He motioned toward the wall print. "Pollock—fantastic piece."

He glanced toward the sculpture. "That Michelangelo

reproduction—one of the *Slaves*—perfect for a psychologist’s office.”

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

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

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

Rachel.

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

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

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

Maybe an art student.

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

“She’s got a strong emotional range—her textures and tones really communicate that. There’s a sadness beneath it all.”

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

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

Light gestured back to the large print. “*Lucifer*—that one’s always felt... personal.”

Interesting.

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

“It’s always had a special significance for me.”

Definitely loaded. Worth revisiting—but not now. This isn’t an art class.

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

He picked up a clipboard and held it out.

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

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

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

Light withdrew a Montblanc fountain pen from his jacket and began to write—slow, deliberate, precise. Form by form. Page by page.

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

Gold took the opportunity to study him more closely.

Left-handed... but his tie’s a half-Windsor; and his shoelaces are tied right-handed. Interesting. Haven’t seen that before. Balanced, or divided?

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

What's he hiding... what's it hiding?

There's something in him. Déjà vu again. Be careful.

Gold leaned in and scrawled a single word in his notebook—
then circled it hard.

RING.

CHAPTER FOUR

*Guilt makes people do the weirdest things.
It must be awful to have a conscience.*
— Angelika Rust, *The Girl on the Red Pillow* (2015)

*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)

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

My guiding principle is this: Guilt is never to be doubted.
— Franz Kafka, *Letters to Felice* (1919)

*Please allow me to introduce myself
I'm a man of wealth and taste
I've been around for a long, long year
Stole many a man's soul and faith*
— Mick Jagger & Keith Richards, lyrics from "Sympathy for the Devil"
(1968)

An Anchor Chained To Your Heart

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gold snapped his notebook and set it aside.

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

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

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

Nice. Passive-aggressive. Great job. What the hell is wrong with me? Don't kick things off like an asshole. They'll be of time for that later. Ha.

“Just finished. Here you go.”

Gold took the papers and stood. Instead of returning to the

couch, he moved to the desk-side chair and turned it toward Light.

Light slowly swiveled the club chair to face him.

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

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

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

Occupation: Senior Partner at Legion Law.

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

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

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

Gold nodded. “Impressive. That’s the Lord’s work.”

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

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

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

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

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

That’s annoying.

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

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

He is likable—undeniably. But it feels like something lurks beneath—polished, but buried. Whatever it is—I doubt I’ll enjoy unearthing it. Fear’s always about loss. But whose—his, or mine?

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

Light hesitated. “Oh, 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 fidgeted, slowly turning his ring—rhythmic, automatic.

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

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

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

*mocking me? Testing me?
Or something darker—sociopathy?
Gold said nothing. He knew that smile—the
kind that shuts a door just as it begins to open.
The wink sealed it—Gold braced. He'd have his
work cut out for him.
Let it go—for now. But make a note. This
matters.*

The SPS and PSI showed nothing remarkable.

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

That's what bothered him most.

*These numbers don't track. Something
doesn't add up.*

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

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

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

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

Brace yourself.

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

*Therapy is a slow sneak with a mirror—until
it catches them off guard. People flinch when it*

shows them who they really are. Everyone thinks they're better at hiding who they are than they actually are.

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

They expect I'll be non-judgmental. But we all judge. Constantly. The only way to avoid judgment is to avoid listening.

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

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

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

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

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

segments.

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

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

Even behind the mask of neutrality, faint echoes surfaced—flickers of feeling neither fully his, nor fully theirs. He'd always seen Professor Hanlon's mantra—Get in touch with yourself—as a rebrand of Socrates' Know thyself. A summons to confront his blind spots before they shadowed someone else.

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

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

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

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

Gold hated dancing—literal or metaphorical. A behavioral

therapist might've labeled him "well-adjusted." But he knew better. He'd always felt like he was dancing to a song no one else could hear—off-beat, out of step.

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

Light leaned back, crossed his legs, 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 waiting.

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

Don't interrupt. Let him go on.

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

He stared down to his shoes. "I'm not comfortable. I just want to feel normal."

His hand returned to the ring—twisting it like a silent rosary of guilt. Miniature 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 fifteen minutes
in.
Spontaneity dies when we wait our turn.
Truth doesn't survive that silence. But speak too
soon, and it's all collisions. Noise. Static. Just
shut up and listen.*

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

He spoke gently. “Go on.”

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

Pain crossed Light’s face—undeniable, unguarded.

“I think he did. But that’s him. He knows everything.”
What the hell? Was this sexual abuse?

His right hand clenched—tight, white-knuckled.

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

*And yet—he wears the ring. Still. As if
forged from guilt itself.
What the hell did he do?*

“I know you worked with Dr. Carlyle at Cambridge. Thought

maybe a little Freudian lineage could help with my father issues.”

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

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

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

He gave a quick wink.

“I might have.”

That’s... bizarre.

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

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

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.”

*I can’t believe this is still our first session—
an intake—this is insane.*

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

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

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

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

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

*You can't hate someone you've never hoped
would love you. Hate requires proximity—
emotional and historical. It demands intimacy.
It's not wasted on strangers.*

*You can't hate and walk away from someone
forever unless some part of you still cares about
them—wants something from them. Needs
something from them.*

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

*This is his narrative. But it's missing texture
—missing the grays. I need color. Detail. A full
spectrum of truth.*

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

*Was it? We all have a choice. Don't we?
Let him keep talking. Don't dam the flood.*

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus. Who is this guy’s father—a 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 stayed silent. Fingertip whitening against his lips. The instinct to jump in—to interpret—held in check.

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

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

believes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Did I misread this?

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

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

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

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

One reason for the high divorce rate.

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

“It’s not unlike religion.”

Should I go here? Why not.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Suggesting another viewpoint—even a better one—feels like betrayal to them. So we double down—telling ourselves we see clearly while others are misled, mistaken, or lying.

Light nodded in agreement.

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

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

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

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

Gold nodded. “Exactly. We’re told how to act—what to be. But we don’t know what we really want. Just what we’re supposed to want. That gap? That’s what drives the neurosis—questioning everything.”

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

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

What evil did he actually do?

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

Shit. One question. Not a list. 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, distant—made him seem smaller, older.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Severely punished? He’s a criminal attorney.

Jesus. 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., and that more people were going to get hurt, so I just quit—I left for good.

“He blamed everything he’d commanded me to do on me. It wasn’t fair, but I feel guilty. And I’ve felt like shit ever since.”

Gold sat back, letting it all wash over him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Light accepted this with a slight nod.

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

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

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

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

“Then there’s neurotic guilt—the kind that creeps in when

you're blamed for something that wasn't your fault. When someone tells you it's your fault—or makes you feel like it—even when you know it isn't.

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

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

Light nodded in agreement. Gold continued.

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

Light nodded again, slowly.

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

“Why do we still feel awful after apologizing? It's manipulative. It lets someone else pull the strings—but only because we agree to play along. We play their game, by their rules—and the rules keep changing.

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

Light nodded. “Yes”

Good.

Gold continued. “That's what causes neurosis.”

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s where therapy comes in—to help you recognize feelings and choose how to respond emotionally. Remember—emotions are your reactions to your feelings. We’re conditioned to feel certain things. But emotions aren’t automatic. They’re choices—if we can catch them in time.”

Ping him.

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

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

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

Gold nodded. “Good. First step? Naming what you feel.

Therapy is language—and honesty. Learn the words. Then you can name the feelings. Understand, then verbalize. Only then can you choose how to respond—consciously, intentionally.

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

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

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

“If you did something wrong—objectively—you have to confront that guilt. If your guilt is earned, then 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 react to.”

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 used to teach

psych, back in the day. 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 always valid.

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

What things did you do?

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

“Be real. Be honest. I’m listening.”

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

“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, waiting.

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*.”
