

A QUESTION OF BALANCE



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

A novel by
DAVID S. SHERMAN

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DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

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*To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God. the Human Imagination*
— William Blake

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

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

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

INVOCATION

The Struggle

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

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is important to note that even child prodigies, including

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At its core, psychotherapy is applied moral philosophy.

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

Caveat emptor (let the buyer beware).

PREFACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

David S. Sherman
June, 2025
Beverly Hills, California

PROLOGUE

Beginnings are always messy.
— John Galsworthy

The beginning of wisdom is silence.
— Pirkei Avot

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

PROLOGUE

[PRESENT DAY]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then—a flash split the darkness.

A police photographer’s camera fired, shattering the stillness

with mechanical precision.

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

Flash

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

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

Flash

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

Flash

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

Flash

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

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

Flash

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

nearby.

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

CHAPTER ONE

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

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

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

Lust

[TWO WEEKS EARLIER]

Fuck! Just leave already!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Once the live video feed showed Jane disappear completely

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

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

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

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

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

Even in this rage, she was captivating.

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

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

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

He filled the entire screen with her face.

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

nuzzling its way into her slightly open blouse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gold felt himself getting aroused.

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

I need to erase this video—now.

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

He blew out a deep sigh.

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

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

Gold exhaled softly and closed the cover of his iPad.

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

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

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

BUZZ BUZZ BUZZ

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

CHAPTER TWO

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

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

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

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

Mauvaise Foi

Gold quickly pressed “Stop,” annoyed to be interrupted again—by time or anything else. He’d been lost in thought about the injustice of Cain’s punishment—for a sin he did not commit. Adam and Eve’s fall. With a sigh, distracted and losing focus again, he set the open book on his desk and thought—

My shoes aren’t as comfortable as they look.

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

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

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

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

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

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

minutes earlier.

Ha. Apropos.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Cured... ha.
She wasn't "sick" in the first place. Grow
up.
"Life" is a spectrum disorder—we're all
fucked up. No one gets cured. We just get by.
Yeah, being normal is being abnormal—just
not too often.
This is her first child. She has no idea how
much more complicated this has made her whole
life.
Hell, that's why I can afford these shoes.
She'll be back!*

His eyes wandered to the sandstone plaque—

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

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

A slight pressure stirred in his throat.
*Ugh. Nausea again. It'll pass. It usually
does.
No one has any idea what I'm going
through.*

Lately, Gold had been feeling conflicted—even about things he once considered settled. He wasn’t as certain—as cocksure—as he used to be.

*People don't change much—but they grow.
Not everyone's a Redwood—some twist and turn
like Oaks, reaching for the sun however they
can. Old gnarled Oaks with meandering trunks
and branches can be just as majestic—maybe
even more so.*

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

Change is inevitable—but rarely sudden.

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

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

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

He chuckled and flashed a look down to his loafers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The photographer had insisted on removing it during the

Atlantic shoot.

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

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

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

Know the man by his books.

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

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

He only read physical books, deriding electronic books saying “That's not how a book is meant to be used. You must be able to feel, hear, and even smell the page as you turn it.”

In truth, Gold enjoyed displaying his library, seeing it as a reflection of his intellect. To be fair, he did occasionally share a

passage or quote with patients, but more than anything, he loved showcasing his erudition through epigrams and aphorisms he deemed apropos.

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

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

The top shelf of the credenza held the following titles—

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

At the end of the top shelf, his own works were carefully arranged—

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

A year wasted.

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

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

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

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

Unconsciously, he’d been angry with himself—masking an obsessive fascination with psychedelics beneath academic language.

It was his craving—tempered by fear—to experience an alternate reality: Castaneda’s *A Separate Reality*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ha. Another reason I still have a job.

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

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

BUZZ BUZZ BUZZ

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

Samael? Had to be a typo.

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

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

First interviews had stretched past two hours before.

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

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

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

[Typing]

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

RING CHIME

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

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

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

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

Jumped up too fast?

He released the doorknob.

PVC, maybe. Not Afib...right?

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

He opened the office door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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