

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.*

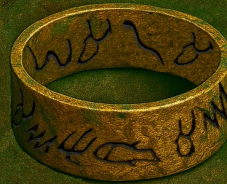
*A Question of Balance is a cerebral and emotionally charged mystery
that examines the fragile terrain of guilt, belief, and the cost of self-knowledge.*

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.



A QUESTION OF BALANCE

a novel by

David S. Sherman

PRE-PUBLICATION PREVIEW ONLY

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

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DEDICATION

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DISCLAIMER

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

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

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

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

A Note to the Reader

Beginnings are always messy.

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

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

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

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

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

Preface

Epigraphs

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

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

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

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

PREFACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

This novel grew from that spark.

David S. Sherman
September, 2025

INVOCATION

The Struggle

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

Prologue
Epigraphs

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

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

We walk by faith, not by sight.

— *2 Corinthians 5:7, KJV (1611)*

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

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

Prologue

One Doesn't Always Need Light To See

Saturday, 8:00 p.m.

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

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

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

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

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

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

something unspoken.

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

Flash—light split the darkness like a blade.

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

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

Flash

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

Flash

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

Flash

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

counterpoint to the carnage below.

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

Flash

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

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

Flash

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

Epigraphs

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

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

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

One climbs, one sees.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

— Sigmund Freud (attributed)

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Lust

Three Days Ago— Wednesday, 4:00 pm

Fuck. Just leave.

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

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

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

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

She screamed, pounding the door with both fists.

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

Her voice was low, husky, roughened by smoke.

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

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

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

Still motionless, he shifted only his eyes.

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

Thank God I never had a pet rabbit.

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

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

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

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

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

Like riding a bike—muscle memory dressed in leather and

silk.

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

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

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

Her face, full screen, filled his vision.

He stared, mesmerized. Slowly, he zoomed out, savoring how her hair curved around her cheeks, slid down her shoulders, nuzzling the blouse's collar like the tease before a kiss.

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

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

With each fist strike on the door, he imagined flashbulbs freezing catwalk poses—rage triggering bright strobe memories. But now he noticed fine wrinkles, the age spots on her long, elegant fingers, clenched in fists—a grip that seemed to close around him.

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

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

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

Crazy as hell. Still lethal. Still got it.

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

That round, toned ass. Jesus.

He lingered, then zoomed in tight.

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

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

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

Arousal stirred—familiar, unwelcome.

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

Delete it. Now.

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

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

Disaster avoided—for now.

Something's off. Vertigo? Get a grip.

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

Rachel loved Haydn's predictability—the order. It soothed her; made space to create.

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

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

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

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

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

BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ.

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

His next patient would arrive in minutes.

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

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

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

*Rational men commit irreversible acts—and sometimes,
they know it before the first step.*

CHAPTER TWO

Epigraphs

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

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

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

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

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

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Mauvaise Foi

Wednesday, late afternoon

BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ.

Gold pressed *Stop*, annoyed by yet another interruption—time, thought, anything. He'd been absorbed in Cain's injustice—the punishment for a sin never truly his.

He sighed, set the book aside—mind already drifting.

My shoes aren't as comfortable as they look.

He lifted his feet, resting his Santoni Uniqua loafers on the ebony desktop.

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

Erasmus wrote, vestis virum facit—clothes make the man. Twain, of course, one-upped him: Clothes do not merely

make the man; the clothes are the man. So I keep playing the part. At \$300 an hour, the costume better fit.

Funny. Rachel used to tease me—said I looked like I was auditioning for a part I didn't believe in.

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

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

*There it is again—the flicker, a blind spot blooming.
Aura, not stroke. It's moving.*

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

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

He chuckled, recalling the moment at his office door barely twenty minutes earlier.

Ha. Fitting.

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

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

He took three Advil from his desk drawer and swallowed them without water.

Just in case.

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

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

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

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

The relic—Astarte or Asherah—was likely smuggled out of southern Iraq. He ran his thumb over the goddess's breasts—nipples worn smooth, still discernible.

Was she offering them—or caressing herself?

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

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

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

He set the figure down 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’s a spectrum disorder—we’re all fucked up somehow.

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

He slid the card in his top desk drawer.

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

Hell—that’s how 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 was a gift from Rick Hanlon, his old grad school professor—the one who once told him, “You’ve got a sharp mind and good instincts, but don’t forget who you work for.”

He had quietly bristled at the backhanded compliment. Why he had recently unearthed it and set it front and center—unclear, even

to him.

A faint pressure rose in his throat.

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

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

Not Rachel. Not even Bob.

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

People rarely change—but they do grow. Not everyone's a redwood. Some twist like oaks, reaching for light however they can.

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

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

Change is inevitable—never sudden, never simple.

Decisions feel final—binary. They rarely are. Some are carved in stone. Others in sandstone. All crumble eventually—

like Ozymandias.

Hmm. Maybe it's a poem—on change.

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

He chuckled, glancing down at his loafers.

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

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

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

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

She's got the artist's eye.

Her eyes... Beautiful. Blue. Inviting.

Gold thought he was funny—though most of his jokes stayed in his head. Location jokes. You had to be there. And ‘there’ was inside his skull: jokes for an audience of one. Too clever. Too obscure. Lost on others, so he kept them to himself.

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

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

Outside that circle, Gold read as formal, even cold. Patients called him intelligent, well-read, cultured—but also a know-it-all. Holier-than-thou. A hint of God complex.

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

Maintain authority.

Whatever the case, Steven Gold seemed to possess a golden

touch. He was wildly successful. Was it brilliance—or mass delusion, *folie à plusieurs*?

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

Gold had been a wunderkind—a Rhodes Scholar who deferred Oxford to complete his undergrad at Harvard, his master's at 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 Wilshire high-rise office overlooked UCLA: a modest reception opening to a spacious suite with a discreet rear exit.

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 office was spacious, its gray sisal wallpaper and bright white-framed window offering a sweeping 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—except for the art. Personality came from the visual cacophony—paintings, sculptures, framed prints jostling like guests at an overbooked salon. Each piece seemed to compete for attention, the chaos curated—perhaps intentionally.

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

The few items atop his desk and credenza were chosen deliberately—to spark imagination and provoke conversation. In one corner stood a freestanding sculpture of a nude young woman—touching herself. It raised 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 hadn't even heard of the artist, Amar D'Izarny, but the figure was clearly a modern riff on Titian's Venus of Urbino. She'd challenged him when he bought it.

“Steven, I don’t know. In a gallery, yes, but in your office? It’s sexist. Many of your female patients will feel objectified the second they see it.”

“That’s exactly the point,” he said.

“If you like, I can sculpt you something more abstract, not so graphic.”

But Gold insisted. Of course he was drawn to it. That’s why she’d called it *Galatea*.

Rachel deferred to him, as usual. She assumed he knew best. She’d always been his biggest supporter—his personal cheerleader, he used to say. She knew him. Or thought she did. He needed that. Balance. Grounding. But things had begun to tilt.

Gold wasn’t an introvert—his ego wouldn’t allow 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. He felt safest behind the bulk of his oversized desk—what Rachel mockingly dubbed “Hadrian’s Wall.”

She knows me so well. As much as I let her.

I sit, reading, trying to find meaning.

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

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

From each other.

Me behind my wall, her behind oil and clay.

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

Gold’s gaze drifted to the books lined neatly across his ebony credenza. He loved this little library—each spine bore personal weight.

Know the man by his books.

There was no system. He’d often be reading two, three—sometimes four—at once. After reading—more often rereading—he slid each book wherever space allowed. He took pride in the collection, convinced its authors would be flattered to find themselves

shelved in Gold's private library.

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

He read only physical books, scoffing at electronic ones: “That’s not how a book is meant to be used. You have to feel it. Smell it. Hear the page 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 reveled in showcasing his erudition through epigrams and aphorisms he found apropos.

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

Clarity performs well on camera.

His large four-tiered bookshelf, stuffed with volumes, offered a glimpse into who Gold believed he was—and who he needed others to believe. The collection sprawled across disciplines, a bridge spanning psychology, theology, poetry, philosophy, and pulp.

The *top shelf* leaned into psychology and therapy: *Affirmation and Reality; Gestalt Therapy Verbatim; Being and Caring; The Dissociative Mind; The Interpretation of Dreams; The Psychopathology of Everyday Life; Civilization and Its Discontents; Moses and Monotheism; The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis; The Unconscious Observed; Disorders of Sexual Desire; Cluster Headache: Mechanisms and Management; The Mask of Sanity*. Nestled among them was Frieda Fromm-Reichmann's *Principles of Intensive Psychotherapy*, a reminder of the analytic lineage Gold simultaneously revered and resisted.

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

Letters to a Young Poet, and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

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

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

And on the *bottom shelf*, meticulously arranged in multiple

copies, were his own works. The fiction and experiments—*The Little Boy Who Wouldn't Go to Sleep; The Image Teleporter; Bark; Trees; Dave King & Asgard: Chronology; Solip; DietWrite*. The clinical and scholarly—*Eulogies & Headstones; The Psychosocial Correlates of Adolescent Substance Ab/Use; Schizophrenic Hallucinations: A Psychodiagnostic Tool?* And the academic foundations, preserved like relics of identity: his pretentiously titled undergraduate honors thesis, *A Phenomenological and Neurophysiological Study of Schizophrenic Hallucinations, with an Original Hypothesis for the Etiology and Pathogenesis of Schizophrenia Based on the Mesolimbic Dopamine System*; his master's thesis, *Schizophrenic Hallucinations: A Psychodiagnostic Tool?*; and his doctoral dissertation, *The Psychosocial Correlates of Adolescent Substance Ab/Use*.

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

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

Gold clenched his jaw and exhaled, remembering when his doctoral advisor quit—after reading only 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, score higher on self-concept and life satisfaction than non-users or abusers. They’re the ones who feel accepted. They belong. Statistically, they are the norm. These days, it’s the strict abstainers who stand out as the real deviants.”

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

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

A strict non-user, Gold knew he was one of the deviants his study had labeled. He rationalized his abstinence: he didn’t want to

be one of *them*—the blissfully ignorant lemmings.

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

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

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

Bradbury would call it too many butterflies. Who's to say where that path would have led?

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

No regrets. I'm still here.

He pretended that simply calling them “mistakes” made them

truth—as if naming alone could absolve him. Thinking too long on it made him nauseous. It was more truth than he liked. But he was beginning to understand.

I tell my patients—understanding isn't the same as changing. My stomach's growling. I shouldn't have skipped lunch.

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

Sartre named it mauvaise foi. Barnes softened it to “bad faith.” But Kaufmann nailed it: self-deception.

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

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

Ha. That's why I'll always have work.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, as Pink Floyd's "Brain Damage" drifted from his iPad speakers.

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

BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ.

His Apple Watch buzzed and vibrated—another interruption.
6:30. Five-minute warning. New patient: Samael Light.

Samael? Had to be a typo.

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

He always had new patients complete both the Suicide Probability Scale and the Psychological Screening Inventory. The forms only took twenty minutes, but new patients were always

anxious. And he hated having to cut them off when their fifty minutes ran out.

Some first interviews had stretched past two hours.

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

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

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

[Typing]

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

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

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

Walls hold.

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

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

Not a rolling brownout, I hope.

He walked toward the reception room door. A ripple—something between dizziness and dread—passed through him. His fingers twitched on the doorknob.

Jumped up too fast?

He released the doorknob.

PVC, probably. Not AFib. Right?

He raised his wrist and tapped the ECG icon.

Normal sinus rhythm.

Right.

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

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

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

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

Déjà vu—not mere familiarity. Primal. Like the mark of

Cain: invisible, unmistakable. Ridiculous.

As he approached, he caught himself—somewhat sheepishly
—noticing the enviable gleam on Light’s black Prada crocodile-effect
leather Oxfords.

He glanced down at his own shoes, disappointed.

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

CHAPTER THREE

Epigraphs

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

— Galileo Galilei, *Il Saggiatore* (1623)

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

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

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

-3-

Truth Hides In Shadows

Wednesday, early evening

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

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

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

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

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

pleasure.”

“Nice to meet you, Samuel.”

His handshake was firm, steady—decisive.

A cold thread traced Gold’s spine.

Shit—COVID?

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

Gold stiffened.

That breaks the choreography.

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

And Light had stepped across it.

What the fuck?

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

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

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

I never sit on the couch.

Is this a power move?

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

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

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

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

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

Impressive.

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

Most patients wouldn’t catch that.

He’s perceptive.

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

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

This guy knows his shit.

I might actually enjoy this one.

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

He looked across the room.

“That oil painting—who’s the artist?”

Rachel.

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

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

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

An art student... or collector.

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

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

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

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

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

Interesting.

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

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

Definitely loaded. Worth revisiting—but not now.

This isn't an art class.

Gold shifted in his seat.

“Okay, Samuel—let’s begin.”

He handed Light the clipboard.

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

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

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

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

Gold seized the moment to study him more closely.

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

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

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

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

Heat prickled across his scalp. Light was watching him.

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

Gold hesitated, then took it.

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

Shit. My whole scalp's probably glowing.

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

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

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

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

He seems uncomfortable.

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

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𐤀𐤕𐤕𐤕𐤕

“Looks like something from a cave wall.”

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

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

Light squirmed, clearly uncomfortable.

He’s lying. Shifting more than his story.

“What does it say?”

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

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

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

That’s the trigger.

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

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

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

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

ㄹㄱ ㄷ+ㄷ ㄷㄱㄴㄴ ㄴㄷ ㄹㄷ

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

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

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

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

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

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

Be careful.

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

He wrote just one word—stark, bold.

RING.

He circled it hard.

CHAPTER FOUR
Epigraphs

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

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

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

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

-4-

An Anchor Chained To Your Heart

Wednesday, evening

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gold snapped his notebook closed and set it aside.

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

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

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

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

“Just finished. Here you go.”

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

Light slowly swiveled the club chair to face him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s annoying.”

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

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

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

Light smiled faintly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Or something darker—sociopathy?

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

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

The SPS and PSI revealed nothing remarkable—screeners clean.

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

And that bothered him most.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rachel gets it. She watches Real Housewives, and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

step.

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

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

“I’m not sure,” Light said softly. “I’m not happy. Honestly... I don’t think I ever have been.”

He looked up. “Maybe it’s naïve... wanting to feel wanted. Or loved. You’ll tell me.”

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

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

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

“Him?” Don’t interrupt. Let him go on.

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

“They?”

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

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

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

Gold said nothing.

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

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

Just shut up and listen.

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

He spoke gently. “Go on.”

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

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

What the hell?

Was this sexual abuse?

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

His hands clenched—tight, white-knuckled.

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

because of him.”

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

What the hell did he do?

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

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

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

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

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

Gold shifted in his chair—uncomfortable.

That’s... unexpected.

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

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

Maybe he's gay.

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

Hard to believe this is still the intake. Unreal.

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

Yes.

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

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

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

vindictive—he made sure I took the fall.”

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

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

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

This is his narrative—but it lacks texture.

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

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

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

Let him talk. Don't dam the flood.

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

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

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

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

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

becomes truth. *Their truth.*

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

“I never want to see him again.”

But here you are.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Don't challenge him yet. Win him first.

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

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

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

Did I misread this?

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

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

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

One reason for the high divorce rate.

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

Should I go here? Why not.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Light nodded in agreement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What evil did he actually do?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sounds familiar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Light accepted this with a slight nod.

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

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

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

Light nodded in agreement.

Inherited guilt—my father’s silence.

Neurotic guilt—Jane’s shadow.

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

Light nodded again, slowly.

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

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

Light nodded. “Yes.”

Good.

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

into the abyss.”

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

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

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

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

Check in. Ping him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Okay. The horse is dead. Enough.

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

Ha. Guess I didn't listen—to him.

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

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

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

What things did you do?

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

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

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

He paused.

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

Not because I lied.”

He glanced down.

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

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

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

He stopped spinning the ring.

His voice barely escaped—a whisper.

“My real name is... Satan.”

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

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

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

AFTERWORD

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

To the Reader—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Knowing when to stop is the rarest form of control.

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

David S. Sherman
September, 2025

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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

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

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

This novel is a thought experiment—an imaginative lens

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

circumstance—the most truthful.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The story is not a theory, but a descent.

One man. One room.

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

The demand it makes: a cost no one escapes.

Some mirrors don't reflect. They expose.

David S. Sherman
September, 2025
