

The Mighty Esox

A Supernatural Mystery Novel



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The Mythos Americana

Book 1



“All great fiction writers—those whose works have withstood the test of time—were philosophers in their own right.”

- G. Edward Martin

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Introduction



James H. Roslyn

Saturday, September 2nd, 2022.

The following is the most important story that is mine to tell. However, I do not know whether this is the story of my greatest mistake or the story of the most valuable thing I have ever done. There is still so much I do not know. There is still so much I may never know.

Perhaps that is why this story happened—because I did not know myself, and I did not know the world. I learned the hard way that regardless of whether I know something or not, my understanding does not make anything less true. I learned that regardless of whether I believe in something or not, my beliefs—or lack thereof—do not make that something any less real.

In the end I had to learn the hard way that no matter how badly I desire some end, there is no excuse for cheating my way to it.

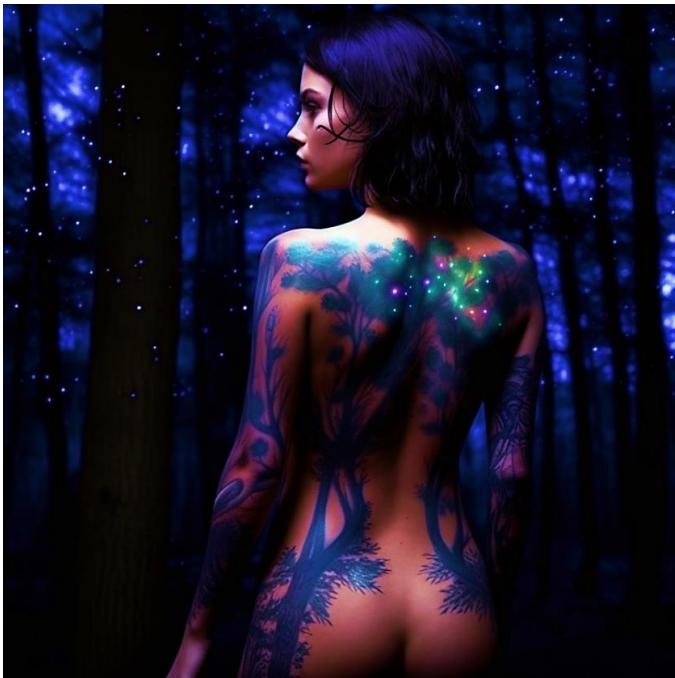
But perhaps none of that even matters. Even now, I do not know whether I could have prevented what happened. Deep down, I knew that I was vulnerable during that season, but I could not see that my vulnerability was being manipulated. I was influenced by forces I could not understand, but I still do not know whether those were forces of good or ones of evil.

However, I know that I made choices. I had a say in things; I was always in control of my own thoughts and actions. There is no denying that.

But perhaps everyone has a destiny, and the river is going to take us wherever we are meant to go. Perhaps all our paddling only determines *when* we arrive, but it does not dictate *where* we arrive.

The events I am going to explain took place five years ago, in August of 2017. I am choosing to tell this story now because I believe I have as many of the answers as I will ever have. I will do my best to tell you this story as I remember it. I will strive not to let who I am today influence my recount of who I was back then. There is much I have learned since these events, and it is difficult to knowingly write beliefs I once held, but which I now know to be false.

With these points in mind, I will lay out the facts as best I can. I will let you be the judge.



Chapter 1:
The First Dream



Monday, August 7th, 2017

I laid down in bed, heartbroken and exhausted. It was the most difficult single day I could remember, and one I will not forget. I tossed and turned to my left and right, trying to get comfortable, but my restless mind would not give me peace. The bed I was laying in was one I knew well, but it had been many years since I slept in it.

It suddenly seemed foreign to me. In fact, it felt as if the entire world had become an unfamiliar place.

My grandparents had saved the bed for all those years, and they had left my old room mostly untouched. It was the room I grew up in, but it had been over a decade since either Alan or I had last lived in it.

The reason for my return was that it was the evening after my grandfather's funeral, and I decided to sleep at my grandparents' house one last time. Specifically, I did not want my grandmother to spend that night in the house alone. Although she had spent the previous week by herself since his passing, I could not bring myself to drop her off in the driveway after his service and simply drive away.

She and grandpa had lived together in that house for forty years. Up until his passing, she had never been alone. Sometimes my grandfather traveled for work, or he would take my brother and I on fishing trips. He would be gone a few nights here or there, but he always came home. I was slowly beginning to understand that those days were behind us.

As I tried to sleep, my restless mind was reflected in my restless body. I moved from one position to another trying to find some sweet-spot where I could let go of the day, but I could not let go. I could not turn off the anxious thoughts or accept all the uncertainties that nagged at me.

I knew it was time to sell the house I grew up in. I knew we needed to move my grandmother into a new home for her final season. I knew it would be safest for her to go into an assisted living community—a place where she would be surrounded by people of her own generation, have friends to talk to, and people to check on her every day. *She's still sharp, and she gets around well, but it's only a matter of time before something bad happens*, I thought.

I knew that eventually it was inevitable. She would take a bad fall and break a hip or hit her head, *and who would be there? How quickly would anyone find out?* I wondered.

I knew I could not live with that guilt. I already carried too much.

I planned to discuss the idea with her in the morning, and I expected she would not be receptive. She would resist losing her independence and her home. She would reject the timing of the talk, being in the midst of her grief.

And who wouldn't? I wondered. But it's for her own good. How can I convince her that it's time to move on? Am I even ready to move on?

I knew she would not go quietly. My grandparents had raised two generations of children in that house, and it was their home for decades.

How can she just walk away? But what choice do we really have? The world is always changing, whether we want it to or not, I thought.

Finally, my mind gave me a small window of respite and I drifted asleep without realizing. It was early in the morning, but when I did fall asleep, I found myself immediately thrown into a strange dream.

In my dream I was standing in the woods and staring into the flames of a campfire that was illuminating a small clearing in a forest. I seemingly could not move my body, but I could turn my head. I peered around the area, trying to recognize where I was, but I could not discern much. I managed to turn around to see what was behind me in the woods, but all I saw was an infinite blackness. The forest was too dark outside of the firelight to recognize anything.

When I turned back toward the campfire, I was surprised to see two women sitting there, one to my left and one to my right, situated across the fire from each other. Each sat on a bench made of a bark-less tree trunk. The women looked so similar that I took them to be twins. They were both youthful and very beautiful. Although they looked nearly identical, I could distinguish between them through their clothing and accessories.

The woman on the right wore robes that appeared red in the dim light. The robes had some quality that made them appear to shimmer or sparkle in the flickering and ever-changing firelight. I could see that she had dark, braided hair with multiple feathers woven into the braids and dangling down past her shoulders. She wore bracelets and a strange necklace, but it was too dim to get a clear look to tell what it was.

By contrast, the woman on the left wore robes that appeared as dark gray with black tones, the color of charcoal and ash. She had golden beads woven in her hair and a strange necklace like her twin. I focused my eyes on the necklace through the darkness and it appeared to be made of human teeth with each tooth separated by a golden bead that shimmered in the campfire's light. The pendant of the necklace was triangular and pointed at the tip like the tooth of some predatory animal.

I was astonished to see them in that strange place. I studied their faces closely trying to recognize them, but I could not recollect from where I might have known them.

Interestingly, although I took them as twins, they each had certain differentiating qualities that were too subtle to precisely identify but too

profound not to notice. The woman in red gave off a warm and tranquil aura, almost *saintly* or beatified in her grace.

By contrast, the woman in gray gave off a foreboding and ominous energy as if an actual cloud of darkness was hovering over her and poisoning the air all around her with its heavy and suffocating quality.

Perhaps I was just outside of the light cast by the fire, but the two women did not seem to even notice me. I was glad for it, as I did not wish to be seen by the woman in gray. I listened quietly, like a fly on the wall, as the twin sisters began to converse. I immediately sensed that they were in the middle of some long-standing argument.

"It's been a long time," the woman in red began. "I think of you sometimes. Have you finally found peace?"

"Peace? Peace is not what I seek. I have come to balance the scales," the woman in gray retorted. "Our reckoning will be my peace and my justice."

"Revenge is not justice," the woman in red replied. "And the retribution you seek is not justified."

"You've taken everything from me and stripped me of my entire future. You know I won't rest until I've taken everything from you," the woman in gray threatened. "I will come for you—every day and every night—for all my days. You will have no rest until I get what is owed."

"I have taken nothing from you. You sit within the grave you have dug with your own hands. You have made choices, and you have been judged for them. You dwell in the hell of your own creation," the woman in red calmly answered.

"No, it is you who has cursed me. Your very existence is a curse to me," the woman in gray snarled.

"It pains me to see you this way. So much time has passed, and yet nothing has changed," the woman in red replied sadly as she put her head down. "I never wished to see you this way."

"You usurped me, and then you stole my inheritance. You robbed me of my birthright and everything I was!" the woman in gray yelled, her voice almost rising to a screech.

As the woman in gray yelled, her robes transformed from gray to jet black, and the ethereal cloud that hovered over her grew thicker and darker to the point it could actually be seen and not merely sensed.

Seemingly in response, the other woman's red robe seemed to gain a glowing carmine tinge. "I have not cursed you. And I have no enmity toward you. It is not I who keeps you here. It is your own heavy soul that has chained you to this place. Until you forgive me and admit your own nature, you will never move on. You blame others, but you are sustained

only by hatred. That is why you will never fly,” the woman in shimmering red replied.

For a brief moment, the face of the woman in black transformed into the face of something horrible and vicious, like a snarling wolf or bear. Then she held out her two hands from within her robe. “You did this to me!” she screamed with rage shaking in her voice.

As I looked at her hands, I could clearly see blood running down from her palms to her fingers, and old burn scars tracing up the inside of her forearms. She abruptly stood and stalked toward her sister, extending her arms as she moved forward. She stopped when she reached the campfire, and she held her hands over it with blood continuing to drip from her fingertips—hissing and sizzling as the drops hit the blazing logs.

“I wish I could give you solace for all your pain. It weighs heavy on my soul to see you like this,” the woman in red answered. “I have always loved you. Even now, after all this, I still love you. And I forgive you.”

“You forgive me? You? I’m the one who’s been stripped of my home—of my legacy! You have always been self-righteous, self-important, and pompous. You are no savior; you are a usurper and a thief,” the woman in black snarled. “Someday I will be staring down at your corpse!”

“I have no doubt that someday you will,” the woman in red sadly agreed.

Then a malicious grin came over the face of the woman in black as her robes turned back to gray and her temper seemed to cool slightly. “*Someday* may not be so far off,” she sneered.

Being drawn inextricably into this confrontation and momentarily forgetting myself, I took a step toward the fire, only to hear a twig snap under my foot. At that moment, the woman in red turned her head in my direction—her eyes boring into me through the darkness. For some reason, when she looked at me, she did not look surprised to see me. It was as if she knew I was there all along.

Reacting to her sister’s movement, the woman in gray also turned toward me. Both women fixated upon me intensely, and I felt a cold chill run through my body. It was as if I was caught red-handed, eavesdropping upon something that I was not meant to hear. I could feel my heart beating like a war drum in my chest as the twin sisters stared.

Without warning, the two women returned their gaze to each other, yet I could sense they were both still watching me in their periphery. They paused momentarily—each seemingly waiting for the other to make the first move. Then there was a dead silence as if even the flames from the fire momentarily froze. Slowly they both began to lean slightly in my direction before they suddenly sprang toward me with incredible speed like

they were racing to see who could reach me first. They were on me before I even had a chance to react.

I remember lurching backward as both women tried to grab ahold of me. Then the three of us went flying back. Just as soon as I hit the ground, I instantaneously awoke—leaping up in my former bed in a single, full-body convulsion as my muscles defensively flexed and my eyes sprang open. I awoke gasping and panting for several seconds as my mind adjusted.

I slowly came to my senses as I looked around my childhood room, finding comfort in all the familiarity. *It's just a dream*, I thought.

I licked my lips several times, wincing slightly as I tasted the coppery flavor of blood. I had bitten my tongue so hard while I was dreaming that I broke the skin. I stood up and left the room, tiptoeing down the hall to the bathroom to rinse out my mouth and trying not to wake Gus, my grandmother's cat. I knew that if Gus heard me, he would begin to relentlessly meow and paw at my door, insisting that it was time for breakfast. *If that happens, I'll never get any sleep*, I thought.

I ducked my mouth under the running faucet and swished the water around to rinse out the blood. When I was finished, I looked at myself in the mirror. For a long time, I just stared.

I recognized the man I saw, but I no longer knew who he was. I no longer understood the world he was living in. Most of all, I did not know where he should go next. His entire world was changing, and he felt powerless to stop it.

Eventually, I left the bathroom and made my way back into my old room and laid down—staring at the ceiling for a time.



Chapter 2: The Northern Lights



The next morning, I woke up disoriented and confused, peering around the room for several moments because my mind had forgotten where my body

fell asleep. When I regained my bearings, I focused on all the familiar trinkets and posters on the walls. For a moment, they comforted me. For a moment, I had peace. Then I remembered why I had slept there.

I slowly got up, dressed, and made my way to the bathroom. Turning on the hot water for the shower, I waited for it to heat up before stepping inside and pulling the curtain behind me. Reaching for the bodywash, I noticed its red color, and suddenly remembered my strange dream from the night before and the sister in shimmering red. I visualized the strange women, trying to remember the details and sequence of events. As I thought about it, the entire dream slowly came back to me, and I struggled to understand what it meant.

It was not like other troubling dreams I was used to—memories I wanted to avoid, dreams about losing my teeth, or hurricanes, tornadoes, and fires—dreams of neglecting myself or losing control of my world. That dream about the sisters was different, and I could not give it context or understand what it was about.

I began to shampoo my hair as I continued to think, and I forcefully massaged the gel into my scalp until it was all foam. When I pulled my hands away, a tuft of my hair was tangled up in my fingers. *Great, even my body is turning on me now*, I thought. *Isn't it enough for me to feel it, now I have to wear it too?*

A few minutes later I dried off and left the bathroom, returning to my bedroom to grab a baseball cap. I fitted it onto my head and looked in the mirror to check it. “I guess this’ll be my look for a while,” I said as I studied myself.

Then I left the bedroom and went to the kitchen. As I walked in, my grandmother was already cooking breakfast. “Good morning,” I said to her warmly as I entered.

“Good morning, James,” she replied as she turned around to look at me. “Did you sleep okay?”

Then she went into the cupboard and grabbed me a coffee mug—pouring me a cup and handing it to me.

“For the most part. The bed is a little smaller than I remember,” I answered with a smile.

“You must’ve grown two or three inches after you moved out,” she said. “I thought you were done growing, then you came back from the Marines, and I couldn’t believe it when you were taller than grandpa.”

“It was all those pull-ups they had me do. I think I stretched out my spine,” I teased.

She smiled at me, and I smiled back as I sipped my coffee. Then I turned my attention to the back yard, looking out through the sliding glass door. I watched as a chubby squirrel came up to the glass and peered inside

looking for my grandmother. When she saw him, she opened the door and threw a few scraps of bread out into the yard.

She had done this every morning for as long as I could remember. It was one of her daily rituals—something I must have witnessed thousands of times. It had been several months since I was last over for breakfast to see it happen, and it made me smile as I watched. It was grounding to me—like an anchor that keeps a boat from drifting too far, or how seeing Orion’s Belt reassures someone that the world is not spinning out of control.

Squirrels darted forward from every direction as soon as she made her offering. After all the years of her feeding them, those supposedly wild critters were practically domesticated. They came and patiently waited for her, every morning, and they probably would have come inside if she ever invited them.

Gus, the cat, came sauntering over as soon as he heard the sliding door move and took his observation post by the back door to watch the squirrels come and go. My grandmother had her routines, and Gus had his, crouching by the door to watch. His jaws chattered together excitedly as the squirrels ran back and forth and his ears pointed straight forward as he fixated on them. Though he was an old cat—too lazy and slow to chase the squirrels anymore—he could not deny his instinct to fantasize about going after them.

I had found Gus fifteen years earlier when I was a junior in high school. He was just a kitten at the time, and I found him hiding under my car one day. Although I had never been a cat person, he was frightened and hungry, so I took pity on him and brought him home to my grandparents’ house. I left him with them after senior year when I went off to the Marine Corps.

Suddenly, a blue jay dive-bombed in from nowhere, announcing its arrival with a loud screech and momentarily startling me and breaking my focus. The squirrels scattered in every direction when he swooped and screeched. I grinned slightly at the small show, but Gus was not amused—signaling his disapproval by whipping his tail back and forth.

As Gus and I watched these goings on, grandma quietly worked on breakfast. When the scrambled eggs were ready, she put a large scoop on my plate and brought it over to the table.

“Thank you, grandma,” I said as she set the plate down.

“I’ve always loved to cook for my boys,” she replied as she went back by the stove and put a few slices of bread in the toaster.

I didn’t have much of an appetite, but I did not want to insult her. *Maybe she needs this, I thought, some normalcy. Maybe it’s a reminder that life goes on—even if the whole world has changed.*

That morning was the first time I had sat down at that table without my grandfather sitting across from me. It was *his* table, and I was slowly understanding that he would never sit at it again. *And no amount of waiting will ever change that*, I thought.

I pushed the food around on my plate and forced myself to take a few bites. Little by little, I made a polite dent in what I had been served.

"Can I make you two more eggs?" my grandmother asked.

"No, I'm okay," I replied. "But thanks for getting up early and cooking."

She could plainly tell that I was disturbed, but I chose not to talk about it. She continually turned around to glance at me—studying my face and trying to fill in the blanks to read my mood.

She knew I was grieving, but I knew that she was too. She wanted to comfort me, but I did not know what I needed. And I wanted to comfort her too, but I did not have the words for either of us.

"Did you know you were sitting right there when you said your first words?" she asked as she turned again to look at me. "Right where you are now. Have I ever told you that story?"

"Dozens of times," I teased with a small smile.

Refusing to be put off she said, "You were sitting right there, just like this, and you said, 'more eggs.' Those were the first words you ever spoke on this green earth. You were always so hungry."

"And I've been asking for more of your cooking ever since," I replied warmly.

"Hard to believe that was thirty years ago," she said. "Can't believe how fast it all goes."

"I know what you mean. Every year feels faster than the one before," I answered. "It always feels like we have more time... until suddenly we don't."

"You know he loved you very much," she said gently.

"I know," I replied. "I just miss him."

"I miss him too," she said as she turned away and busied herself at the stove.

We both fell silent then, each retreating to our own memories. She continued to fuss around the stove, even though there was no one left to feed. I went back to watching the squirrels, the birds, and the cat.

We were silent for several minutes, with only the sounds of the bacon sizzling in the pan and Gus's subtle whining and chattering teeth. Then grandma turned everything off and came to sit down with her breakfast and coffee, focusing her attention on me with a concerned expression.

"I thought it was a lovely eulogy," she said, breaking the silence. "I liked what you had to say."

"At the service?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered.

"Thank you," I replied. "I hope so. But I honestly don't remember much of what I said. I was just floating. The whole thing felt like a bad dream."

"I appreciated it. I thought your words were lovely," she said.

"Thanks, grandma," I replied. "It just happened too fast, you know? He was here, and now he's not."

She did not reply, so I just continued to stare out of the back window. After a few minutes, it started to feel like my troubled thoughts were contaminating the room. I was reminded of the woman in gray from my dream and the toxic cloud that emanated from her. The air around me began to feel thick, and I felt guilty even being around my grandma with such a pall being cast from me.

"I miss him too," she said, trying to comfort me. "But he was an old man. We will all go sooner or later. It's not something any of us can avoid or run from. And he was a man of faith. He's in a better place. He believed that, and I believe that. You shouldn't take it too hard."

"It's not that," I answered. "I mean, it is that, but not *just* that. It's just—I thought I had more time. I would've been here. If I had known, I would've done things differently. And I wouldn't have said no to that trip."

"Trip?" she asked.

"He asked me months ago to go fishing with him in the Northwoods. He mentioned a place he had visited back when he was my age. He said it was time for him to go back, and he asked me to come with him," I answered. "But I didn't know that offer would be our last chance."

"What stopped you from going?" She asked.

"I was trying to save my marriage," I replied. "I decided I couldn't walk away just then—not even for a few days. But I thought we'd be able to go in the spring. So, I gave him a raincheck."

"Please don't beat yourself up. It sounds like you tried to do the right thing," she said. "And I know he understood. Don't forget, he was once a young man."

"Even if he did understand, how can I forgive myself? He's gone, and my wife still walked away," I replied. "I missed my last chance to make a new memory with grandpa. And now I feel like I lost everything."

Then she took my hand and squeezed it. "Not everything. You'll get back on track with your son," she said, referencing the recent outcome of my divorce. "I'm old, and I've seen so much in my lifetime, including more than a few miracles. I've learned that no matter what, things have a

way of coming back into balance. As long as you're still willing to try, you can fix pretty much anything that's broken."

"I'm still trying, but I don't even trust myself anymore. I thought our marriage was going well, but I was a fool. I thought I could save it, but I failed. I thought I had more time with grandpa, but I was wrong. How can I trust myself right now?" I asked. "I've been wrong about almost everything lately."

"James," she began with a sigh, "I'm trying to call upon all the wisdom of my years to guide you, but honestly, it may not be enough. The world you grew up in isn't the same as the one I once knew. The rules aren't the same. People aren't the same. I wish I had more that I could give you. Your grandfather and I did the best we could for you and Alan, but we didn't understand the world we were raising you in. All we could do was encourage you to be honest, courageous, kind, and reliable. And we tried to give you faith and an example to follow. We hoped and prayed it would be enough."

"You two did an amazing job," I told her as I gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "You taught us what's right. And no one could have done better."

"I hope that's true," she said. "And I hope you give your mom some grace too. She worked two jobs from the time your dad passed, up until you boys enlisted. All she wanted to do was make sure you two had what you needed."

"I miss her," I replied. "She passed when we were both in the service. That hit me hard too."

"I miss her too, James, every single day," she agreed as we fell into another brief silence.

"It's been so long since I set out to do something and succeeded; you know? I just keep failing and losing. I feel like I have nothing left to give. All of it's been taken," I said, continuing to stare out of the back window.

"You know that's not true," she answered. Then she tapped on the top of my hand. "Things will turn around, they always do. You'll see; the tide can only go out for so long. And now you have grandpa watching over you. Please try to have faith."

"I would sacrifice my entire future just to feel one genuine moment." I replied so softly that it was almost like I was talking to myself.

"A genuine moment?" she asked, picking up on the comment.

"Something real," I answered. "I don't even know what I mean."

I stared at my coffee, grappling with my thoughts for a moment. My grandmother watched me closely, patiently waiting as I formulated the words.

“I want to look at the world how my son does—with hope and curiosity and genuine awe. I want to witness something real—something that can break through all this heaviness and help it all to make sense. You said you’ve seen miracles in your life; I want to see one, too. Even if it’s only for an instant, I’ll take it. I just want one real thing—to witness something miraculous—something I can carry in my memories for the rest of my life. Otherwise, none of this makes any sense,” I answered.

My grandma studied my expression as my glance shifted between her eyes and my coffee mug. She wore her concern plainly upon her face, but I suspect that she did not mean to. As I watched her, she reflexively reached for the small crucifix around her neck and gently squeezed it.

“Jay, you’ll have your moment. Things might not make sense right now, but if you can put enough time between you and all these things, they will. That’s one thing I’ve learned in my years, hard times always pass. God is good. Just hold strong, and keep looking forward,” she answered.

“I know you’re right, but I feel like I’ve been sitting and waiting for so long. I feel powerless. I keep waiting and waiting, but what am I even waiting for? I can’t keep sitting around,” I said. “For God’s sake, I’ve been living in a dumpy motel for months.”

“There’s always a place for you here,” she offered. “I would love the company.”

“I may have to take you up on that. I think it’s just my pride holding me back, but honestly, I don’t know how long I can keep going like this. If it wasn’t for my son...” I began to say but then my grandmother interrupted me.

“You two made a beautiful child, and I adore Zachary. You gave me a wonderful grandson and I cherish him. I guess, maybe sometimes, two people aren’t meant to stay together, but you two *were* meant to make a child. You couldn’t have made Zachary with anyone else,” she explained. “And he’s supposed to be here.”

“I know he’s supposed to be here,” I said. “That may be the only thing I still know. But I’m losing him.”

“Try to have faith. You’re a good father; God knows that,” she replied as she continued to hold her cross.

God? I thought. God who?

She continued, “Why don’t you go spend some time in your grandfather’s study. Spend some time with him. Just talk to him for a bit.”

I smiled as I once more squeezed her hand. Then I walked out of the kitchen and into my grandfather’s old study.

I peered around the room as I opened the old wooden door and entered. It was my favorite place in the entire house, perhaps my favorite place in the entire world.

The study was lined on three walls with dark walnut bookshelves that came up to shoulder height. Under the windows sat my grandfather's old desk with his antique inkwell pen and old drawing pad that he had been messing with right before his passing. I hovered over it and began to reminisce in my mind.

The sun was poking through the hazy old windows running along the left-hand wall, casting a dim light about the room. I walked over to the old windows and looked out at the creek running through the backyard. I thought of all the distant memories that my brother and I made, traipsing through the creek. We would catch frogs or crayfish, then run excitedly into the study to show our grandfather what we had captured.

Grandpa would set down whatever he was doing and wheel around in his chair to have us show him whatever critter we had brought. He always made time for those little moments, cultivating and encouraging that childish wonder and curiosity that came naturally to young boys.

I smiled, remembering those moments.

I continued to quietly move about the old study, taking in the smells of the old leather books and the faint aroma of bourbon and the matches he used to light his pipe when he was deep in thought. The smells flooded my mind with fond memories and familiarity. For a moment, it was as if he was there with me, as if no time had passed at all and the world was still a simple place that made sense.

The walls above the bookshelves were decorated with dusty, framed photos and items my grandfather had collected from his travels—wood carvings, paintings, and different awards or certificates.

It had been a long time since I really stopped to look at it all. In that moment, I felt the conscious urge to take it all in—to notice all the things that were so easy to overlook because they had always been there—the obvious things that felt so permanent that they were easy to neglect.

I sat down at his old desk chair and tried to see the world through his eyes. There was one wall in particular, the one directly across from his desk, which meant the most to my grandfather. He adorned it with his most prized possessions that he had gathered from throughout his life. It was decorated with an old peace pipe, a Native American stone tomahawk, and his medals from his service in Vietnam. He had also hung several important photos—from the first photo he and my grandmother ever took, to their wedding photo, to ones of my brother and me, our parents, and even one of my great grandparents.

I studied that wall for an extended period, lost in his memories. I thought about how as a boy I used to sit at his desk and stare at those same items. Back then I did not know what they all were or realize what they meant. *Perhaps I still don't*, I thought.

“This is all that’s left of the greatest man I’ve ever known,” I said to myself. “A few photos, a few objects, and three walls of old books. This is his identity—if the soul of a man could be hung on a wall.”

I remember feeling a dull sense of regret that I did not know the full story behind each item. As I looked around the study, there were so many memories. There were so many stories—stories I could not decipher, and the only person who could translate all of it was gone. *Too late now*, I thought.

The sheer number of books in his study room was astonishing. If my grandfather had purchased even one more book, it was not obvious where he could have put it. The books were packed so tightly on his shelves that there was not a single slot left for a new one to join the collection.

I used to joke with my brother that if society collapsed, we could rebuild the world with the contents of grandpa’s library. It was not that he had a copy of every book, but the quality of his book collection was stunning.

He had most of the more renowned literary classics, but he also had at least one great book on all the key subjects. There were books on calculus, as well as physics, astronomy, statistics, chemistry, and medicine. There were books on history, autobiographies of important historical figures, books on cultures from around the world, and catalogues of world art and architecture. Among the more practical works were various books on different fields of engineering, but also gardening, identification of wild plants, and even books on hunting and fishing. He had a little bit of everything.

However, there was one section of books that always meant more to my grandfather than all the rest. In that section he kept his books on philosophy, psychology, mythology, secret history, and world religions.

I always knew that section held a special place in his world, but he was always a little private about it. As a boy, I often found him sitting in his study late in the evening, going through one of *those* books. But he rarely spoke of them. In ways I may never understand, those books were personal to him. They were like secret mentors or guides; their authors were dead friends and ancient teachers.

As I sat there behind his desk thinking of him, I realized that his mind travelled in a world that none of us could see. He was a man who could never be fully known. He was the most complex man I had ever met, but he made it all seem so simple. From the outside, his life appeared humble, direct, and subtle. But on the inside, there were infinite and invisible worlds, like everything that lives beneath the surface of a calm ocean. He lived a quiet life of quiet contemplation. Any demons he had were locked away tightly.

As I continued to peer about the room, I noted the two old burgundy-colored leather chairs that were situated between a small walnut table and stone chessboard—items my grandfather had in his study since before I was born.

I looked at the chessboard and felt tears well up in my eyes. There was still an unfinished game on the board—started but never concluded. My grandfather and I had begun that game months earlier, but I had to leave that day before we could see it through. That was the same day he had asked me to drive with him to the Northwoods, but I had rejected his offer. He left the pieces exactly where they had been, so that we could come back to them later. *I guess we'll never know*, I thought wistfully.

I stood up and walked along the periphery of his bookshelf like a ghost examining old haunts. I floated my fingers across the spines of the old books, gently brushing each of them as I moved about the room. Eventually, I came to an old book about fishing for pike and muskie. It was an old book and an old memory—a friend from my childhood.

I slipped the book off the shelf and sank down into one of the leather chairs to flip through it.

As I settled in, I felt a certain comforting nostalgia. I had done this exact thing hundreds of times before. That was not just any old chair; it was *my* old chair. It was my old chair next to *his* old chair. It was my refuge.

One of my first childhood memories was curling up in that exact chair, staring at all the books while he was working. I used to sit and look at them all, wondering what all was in them. When I was too young to read, I would grab a book on fishing and go through it just for the pictures. That was one of my favorite things to do when my brother and I first moved into my grandparents' house. That was how I adjusted to a changing world that I did not understand.

As I flipped through that familiar old book, I thought back to all the times my grandfather took my brother and me fishing. Of all the time I spent with my grandfather, the days we went fishing were my dearest memories. My grandfather loved to fish, perhaps above all other things, and he took us as often as he could. For him, fishing was more than just catching fish. There was something about it that he considered almost *religious*.

Although he and my grandma went to church every week—and took my brother and I with regularity when we were kids—he confided in me more than once that his real church was out on the water. That was where he felt *connected* to something larger. As a child, I did not have any real context to understand what he meant. To some extent, even at thirty-two, I still did not.

As I sat holding that old fishing book, I closed my eyes and thought of one vivid memory from one of our trips. It was the closest thing to a religious experience I had ever had.

When I was ten and Alan was twelve, grandpa took us up to Eagle Lake in Ontario to fish for walleye. One night, when Alan had already gone to bed, my grandfather and I stayed out on the porch of the cabin to listen to the night sounds. We sat in wooden rocking chairs in companionable silence, looking down at the lake that stretched out before us.

Our cabin was situated on a small hill overlooking the lake, and I remember hearing the wild and haunting calls of the loons. They echoed across the water and bounced off the rocky hills that were cloaked in timeless pines. One would call out in the dark and then others would answer. I remember wondering how such a small bird could make such a big sound.

As we sat quietly, grandpa gently patted me on the shoulder and pointed to the north. In the distance I could see a faint, green-colored glow dancing in the northern sky. At first it was dim, but it slowly grew brighter.

“Aurora Borealis—the Northern Lights,” he said to me. “Looks like they’re just forming. Let’s go down to the dock to get a better view.”

There was not a cloud in the sky, and it was a new moon. I remember it was so dark that I could not even see my own feet as we walked. My grandfather took me by the hand and we walked together—slowly navigating through the pitch-black night. The feel of the pebbles on the gravel path guided our steps as we made our way down to the water.

The dock floated on the lake instead of being anchored down, and it bounced slightly with each step as we walked onto it. As we looked up, I had never seen so many stars. The entire sky appeared to be alive. Everywhere I looked, there was an incomprehensible array of stars, and between every bright star I could see even more distant and fainter stars. I could not fathom the number I was looking at or process the sheer beauty of our galaxy with its milky color and endless layers.

There was not even a gentle breeze in the air and the water was so still that every star had its own perfect twin reflected in the water—an exact counterpart or an eternal dancing partner.

Standing on that floating dock I was momentarily convinced that I was actually in space—quietly floating amongst the stars that were above us, below us, and all around us. I was transformed into a pair of eyes just floating through the infinite—observing it from the center of existence. For several minutes, we transcended beyond space and beyond time. Suddenly, I felt I was everywhere—almost overwhelmingly so.

As I felt myself dissolve away, the Northern Lights shifted and writhed in the night sky—growing bright green and steadily extending over our heads. The aural lights waved and flowed like a giant ethereal river, as if they were themselves made of water. I had never before or since seen anything like that. That was religion—the gnostic religion--the experiential kind.

This, I realize now, was what my grandfather set out to show me that night. Looking back, I knew it was what he always hoped he could show me and what he hoped I would recognize when I was blessed enough to witness it.

I will never forget him looking up to the stars, then looking down at me and noting the speechless awe upon my face. He looked back up to the sky and said, “Thank you,” to the heavens for giving us that moment.

As the memory subsided, I continued to flip through that fishing book—looking at all the pictures of giant muskie and northern pike. A small smile grew as I browsed, until I came to the last page, and it was time to close that book once again.

I sat back in the chair and looked about the room once more. *What now?* I wondered. *How can I ever part with these books and these memories? Grandma can't live here alone forever, and there's no way these can all come with her, but how can either of us let these things go?*

For a long time, I just stared blankly and let my eyes lose focus. I gazed forward and brooded about an uncertain future. No matter how badly I wanted things to revert to an earlier time, I understood that the river of time only flows one way for people.

Suddenly, my trance was broken when I heard a faint sound in the room, like fingernails scratching on something. I looked about the room, not knowing where the sound had come from. I listened for a time, but the room was silent once more. Losing interest in the continued silence, I began to stand up. But then I heard it once more. I looked over toward the bookshelf, but I could see nothing. I held perfectly still for several seconds as I stared, but right as I looked away, I heard it once more.

I walked over to where I thought the sound had emanated, but I could not see anything out of the ordinary. I scanned the different books—my eyes slowly passing over each one until suddenly one of the books caught my eye.

The book stuck out one half of an inch from the others, and it caught my attention because it looked out of place, like a crooked picture on a wall looks out of place.

I slipped the book out to take a look. It was an old textbook by Dr. C.G. Jung about dream interpretation and ancient but universal symbols. I recognized the book and knew I had seen my grandfather perusing it in the past. He loved Jung and he owned a copy of every book Jung had ever written or contributed to.

As I examined the book, I realized it was not on the correct shelf or in the correct section. Instead, it was situated in among the various books on mythology and cultures of the world. “Why are you over here?” I asked the book.

As I went over to the correct bookshelf from whence it had come, I could see the slot where the book was supposed to be. I wondered why my grandfather had not put it back in the correct place—especially when he had put in so much time to arrange and maintain their order.

As I went to shelve that book into its correct slot, I noticed it had an earmarked page. *Maybe this is the last book grandpa picked up*, I thought. *Maybe that’s why it was out of place. Maybe he set it down in a hurry.*

I turned to the marked page to see what he might have been reading during his final days.

To my surprise, tucked within those pages I found a folded-up note. I unfolded it, finding the paper soft and faded as if it were several decades old. I sat down at grandpa’s desk and carefully spread the note out—delicately handling the fragile paper as I began to read.

