

THE SIGIL OF TRUTH

CHAPTER 1

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An interesting fact about the Moon is related to the phenomenon called libration, this oscillating motion of the Moon that allows observers on Earth to catch glimpses of small parts of its usually unseen side. There are three types of libration—longitudinal, latitudinal, and diurnal—each one influencing how the phenomenon unfolds. This motion manages to bring together people from all walks of life, all united by their love for astronomy. I believe I can count myself among the enthusiasts of this art, an art that is scarcely practiced by my peers today, and it is precisely for this reason that, at this very moment, I am gazing through the living room window at the lifeless celestial body, which often seems to speak to me. Tonight, it seems to possess a certain energy, as if it is spinning too quickly, as though it knows my secret. As if it knows me and is trying to tell me that the time has come. I'm still unsure what I—a nobody—can do for the grandeur of the universe, to restore a balance that seems long lost, but I feel watched. First, by guilt... And then by an everlasting unease that controls my entire pained being. If someone had told me that, now a few years past forty, I would be this alone, without another soul to keep me company or warm my mind, I would have said they were talking nonsense and urged them to mind their own business. Yet everything has become real. It feels as though life has never forgiven me for simply existing. For seeing evil with my own eyes and doing nothing to silence it. Or at least to warn others of its existence. No, I chose to carry on without uttering a word, blaming it all on a fate too lazy to save everyone. Still, I feel obliged to do something—perhaps it's not too late.

I rose from the corner sofa I had placed next to the window, anticipating its need, and directed my heavy, time-worn body—ravaged by cigarettes, alcohol, and other harmless pleasures of youth—toward what I call my study. I opened a window, as I always think much more clearly in cooler temperatures, and slowly settled into the chair in front of my desk, an old piece of furniture worn down by various animals that had passed through my life. Instead of the central light from the room's ceiling, I chose to use the lamp within my workspace—a behavior that, if you knew me, you'd know defines me and is very much a part of who I am. My thoughts continued to drift toward the Moon's gentle motion

and the desire it had instilled in me to begin my small project, one that should have been a priority for me at this stage of life. But, truth be told, the motivation was vanishing from my eyes more and more with each passing day, until soon there would be nothing left. Even so, after lingering for a few minutes in front of the blank pages waiting to be filled with words from my trove of memories, I picked up the pencil from my desk (for it's the only tool I consider useful for my work) and began raising and lowering it in smooth, wave-like motions. And then everything started to make sense, and the words came pouring out of me, chaotically, in a way they hadn't in a very long time.

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I don't know what percentage of the planet's population still considers myths and legends important—this forgotten world full of mysticism that has always been an essential part of our history—but I can assure you that it exists, and it is larger and stronger than ever. You just need to believe, even a little. The things I'm about to tell you happened over 20 years ago, when I was a young man, but they still haunt me to this day. And when it comes to past experiences and memories, it's impossible to completely rid them from your system—they become part of you until you draw your last breath. And believe me, I've tried different treatments, even going to what's called a psychiatrist, an entity most people fear, but the results weren't what I had hoped for, so I gave up and came to the realization that I would have to live with it. Back then, I was a young man with big aspirations, just beginning to truly delve into the depths of the academic world. But before we get to that, I should probably tell you a little about who I was before then.

I graduated at the top of my class in a small town near Sacramento, and thanks to my numerous extracurricular achievements and an almost perfect score on the final exam, I could have been accepted anywhere I wanted. And not just in the States, but abroad as well. However, at that point in my life, I wasn't exactly drawn to the idea of frivolously leaving my homeland, so it wasn't really a consideration. A few offers came in, but for me, it had been simple from the start. My dream was to better myself as a person at Harvard, even though it was very far from home. You can probably imagine that my parents weren't exactly thrilled to hear that their son was going to live more than six hours away by plane—the equivalent of 45 hours by car, though I'll tell you honestly, I've never been in that second situation. There was also another issue—my parents

had graduated from Stanford, another prestigious university in the States, which, to make things even more complicated, was much closer to home—but I wasn't having it. I knew that's where they had met, and as they told me countless times, they had had some great years there, but I was resolute in my decision. I had always envisioned studying literature on the East Coast, and a big advantage was that New York was so close—a city I was fascinated by at the time. I'd only been there once, but it was enough to understand that deep down, I had the heart of a resident of that world. I was a lover of urban crowds, I adored anything related to events, and I had my own romantic notions of the times I would spend there. I can tell you that, 20 years later, I live in the heart of the city, in a cozy apartment I bought with the money I made from selling my last book. And yes, my love for the city hasn't changed at all, and I wouldn't change anything about that decision.

In any case, I told you I dreamed of studying literature at Harvard, but I wasn't entirely sure about the program I wanted to pursue because there were so many that attracted me. I thought it over for a while, but the decision came naturally in the end, and by that fall, I had enrolled in the Folklore and Mythology program, which over time became a true fortress of dreams and shaped me in every way. From the dreamy boy who didn't know much about reality, I became, by the end of my studies, a man trained to succeed in life no matter where I went, because I had already gone through so many fascinating experiences. A cornerstone of this remarkable transformation I underwent was the event I'm about to tell you, although immediately afterward, I fell into a depression worthy of suicide movies, from which I emerged—if it can be said—with the help of specialists in the field. But that's another story, and I don't want to burden you with my problems.

A few days before I was set to embark on the next major chapter of my life, my mother, a naturally delicate and tactful person, knocked on my door. She knew, just as I did, that my room would soon be empty. After a brief response from me, she sat on the bed and gestured for me to join her.

"Oh, my dear Brandon. Soon, you'll be leaving the nest."

"Mom, let me stop you right there. You know I have immense love for you and Dad, but I really don't want to turn this into one of those tearful, dramatic moments. Why not think of this event as a continuation of what's come before, rather than some kind of ending? It's all part of life."

"And I completely agree, son. I'm not here to bring down the mood. In fact, I hope that after this conversation, you'll feel even more excited about starting this new chapter. When I see you in this room, packing up all the things that have defined you for the past 18 years, it reminds me of my own time. Your grandmother—God rest her soul—once told me that no matter what I did in life or who I spent my adventures with, I should always remember that there are people at home who expect things from me. That's what I want to pass on to you. And I don't mean you shouldn't try new things—quite the opposite. Be my guest, experiment as much as you want, experience everything you can, but stay true to what you believe in. Don't let yourself be influenced by people you don't consider trustworthy, and always be the good one. You'll find that not everyone you meet will have the best intentions."

"But I already know that, Mom. Even here, not everyone had the best intentions."

"Of course not, but this familiar environment shielded you from some of the harsher realities. Out there, everything will be different. For the first time, you'll face life on your own, without the training wheels you've had here in our hometown. When I first enrolled at Stanford..."

"Is this your way of making me feel guilty for not following in your footsteps? Because if it is, I don't feel guilty about my decision, just so you know."

"And that's perfectly fine, son. Harvard is a great institution, and I'm sure you'll adapt quickly to the campus life. What I wanted to tell you is that when I first arrived at college, I was eager to discover all it had to offer. But then I went through a phase where I felt lonely. If that happens to you, know that it's completely normal. Don't give up. Just get used to the idea that there will be days like that. Of course, you can always call us, but also learn to live with loneliness. At some point, it'll even do you good. That's how it worked out for me. And then I met your father, and you already know the story from there."

I must admit, I wasn't in the best emotional state at that moment. I had just learned that the girl I'd liked for nearly all of high school, and who I had recently grown closer to, had turned down Harvard to study in Europe, at another prestigious university in England. Naturally, I took it personally, thinking that if she had felt something for me, she would've joined me in Massachusetts, but it no longer mattered. So, I tried to wrap up the conversation

with my mom as quickly as possible, cutting her off with those abrupt interruptions that are unlike me. My mother has always been brilliant—she has a PhD in psychology from Stanford and runs her own practice in town. She knew exactly how to hit the nail on the head and make herself understood. After her final remarks, I felt put in my place in the most loving and intimate way, so much so that I couldn't argue anymore and finally listened.

"I won't bore you with more memories and advice I've gathered over the years. I just hope you'll create your own, and when you're ready, you'll share them with me."

My mother's favorite weapon, reverse psychology, had struck again, and I never knew how to resist such a method, so I asked her to stay and keep talking. In this regard, I always felt several levels beneath this goddess of human intellect. We spent the next hour together, dissecting various subjects, making me once again a slave to my own emotions. After she left the room, leaving me as alone as I had been an hour before, I felt overwhelmed by a great sense of longing, even though I hadn't yet left the comfort of my childhood home. The following days did nothing to ease this feeling as I remained trapped in the same state of confusion, lost in my thoughts.

It wasn't until later that I understood the purpose of that conversation—she wanted me to go through feelings of loneliness while I was still at home, rather than facing them when I truly would be alone, in a far-off part of the country. Don't get me wrong, I don't mean to imply that every conversation with my mother had a predefined goal. She's the most empathetic and loving woman I know, but her visits were often therapeutic, and if she played the role of psychologist with me, many times without me even realizing it, it was because I needed it.

When the time finally came to leave for Cambridge, Massachusetts, all three of us—my mother, my father, and I—were standing by my dad's Mercedes, the car that would take me to the airport. Mom had already said everything on her mind, and the farewell was definitely easier than it could have been. After a group hug that lasted far too short, I loaded my suitcase and backpack into the back seat, and we set off. When we arrived at the airport, my dad tried to have an emotional moment with me, but it fell flat. That's the thing with my dad—and really, with fathers in general—they are rational beings, with an extraordinary sense of practicality, though their words aren't always in the right

place. He was a doctor too, a PhD in quantum physics no less, another person with incredibly high capacities, but he didn't always know how to navigate a conversation. He seemed to manage best when he had a drink or two, and then, amidst endless technical discussions, the emotional side would sneak in, encouraging him to express his feelings more openly. I never held it against him—each person has their strengths, and both my parents taught me never to judge anyone. So that day, in front of the airport, I gave him a strong hug and held on until we both felt a little too emasculated. To regain our manliness, we shook hands just as firmly, though our eyes were still a bit misty, and I headed off to the gate for my flight.

For those who don't know, I'm not the biggest fan of flying, this mode of transport that everyone regards as so safe and comfortable. I admit I've always been somewhat afraid of the many variables that could occur in an aviation accident, but there was nothing I could do. If I had chosen Stanford, these trips would have been significantly less frequent, but even so, my heart always led me to that place, and something tells me that's where I was meant to be. In the meantime, I can tell you that I've mostly overcome that irrational fear, although somewhere deep in my adult self, castrated and of little importance, a tiny bit of it remains.

That flight wasn't particularly memorable and passed relatively quickly, even though it lasted almost seven hours. Not to mention that I even managed to sleep for a while, something that rarely happens for me during any type of trip. I landed at Boston Logan International Airport, the closest point to the dormitory where I would be spending the next few years of my life. After a short taxi ride, I arrived at the grand focal point, Harvard University, which, I confess with my hand on my heart, struck me as an architectural marvel from the very first moments. I felt almost frozen in time, staring at the brick brown of the main building. Or at least what I thought was the main building at the time. After a while, since it was already getting dark, I decided it was time to head to the dormitory where I had been assigned to live with another student.

I say "in theory" because, for the first two months, I was alone in that small, colorless room, which led to a slight depression that I experienced at the time. But it didn't take long before I pulled myself out of it and focused on what I had to do. After getting everything set up, I took a short walk to get familiar with my new surroundings, and believe me, the city in autumn is pure gold for

melancholy souls. When I returned to the dorm, the place I would soon come to call home, I collapsed onto the bed and fell asleep. My first sleep as a student away from home. And many more would involuntarily follow.

This is the end of the excerpt. To read the entire manuscript, I invite you to visit the website <https://emilienteodor.com/> and uncover its secrets.