

# The Phantom of Horseleech Pond

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A tale

by

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# The Phantom of Horseleech Pond

## Characters

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<b>Elliot</b>	A fledgling architect and devoted father. This is his first family vacation to the Cape.
<b>Matty</b>	Elliot's five-year-old son.
<b>Dale</b>	A free spirit who "roughs" it on the Cape every summer to earn enough money to survive the winter.

## Setting

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### Place

Horseleech Pond, Wellfleet, Cape Cod

### Time

Autumn (Full Hunter Moon)

## Production Concept

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This tale can be performed in a number of ways - as an in-person or Zoom reading, a staged performance, a radio play, or a video with accompanying illustrations and/or animations. A soundtrack and sound effects should be included to bring the viewer or listener into the action.

## ELLIOT

I had never been to Cape Cod before. So when we crossed over the Sagamore, I expected to see... I don't know, a Cape... sand on both sides of the highway.

Justine drove. She likes to be the one to drive the Prius. That way I can take care of... in the back... I can take care of our little boy Matthew. We call him Mattie. Two summers ago... he was five... this happened two summers ago. I'm Elliot. People call me... Elliot. I guess I'm not the kind of person who gets a nickname.

She's from a family... Justine... Big name in New England. Phillips? A private school on the North Shore. Probably heard of it. I met her at Yale. I was at the Design School. She was studying law. She's a partner in a big name firm in Back Bay.

Her family had a place... A great uncle... He went to Harvard... studied architecture with a bunch of Germans. Gropius... Breuer... you probably heard of them. The Bauhaus School?

Justine's uncle... John Phillips. They called him Jack. He had property in Wellfleet and he built a bunch of cabins. The Turkey Cottages.

I'm not sure why he called them that. Because they were little boxes? A cluster of hens?

He sprinkled them along the shore of a pond deep in the woods. Horseleech Pond. Probably called it that to keep people away. Wellfleetians do things like that.

The Germans came to the Cape and saw his cottages and got inspired. They built a bunch of Bauhaus jewels scattered in the woods and dunes of Wellfleet... Jewels... if that's what you would call a bunch of square, radically designed homes. That's what I would call them. Jewels. Beautiful, because they're so simple. They don't try to be anything but what they are.

After we graduated and got married, Justine got a position real quick. I... it's not always easy to start out... for an architect. She had a great job and I was... still working on that.

We had Mattie and it just made sense for me to be home... work on my designs... be close to my son. So that's why I was the one who... That was a big issue that people brought up later in the media... after....

I was working on a book. If I couldn't get a job, I could maybe write a book about design. And I read about the Turkey Cottages... the other Bauhaus homes in the woods. And Justine... she remembered going there when she was a kid. So she got ahold of her cousins and we got one... right on the pond... for the month of August.

We turned off Route Six... onto a dirt road and headed into the woods... passing the handmade signs nailed to the trees at every fork.

*Grossmans, Rush, Lundberg...*

Road? More like a footpath.

It looked like no one had been out there in years. I guess that's the way Wellfleetians like it.

After five forks, one sign left... *Private Property. No Trespassing. J.C. Phillips.*

I think she was happy... Justine. As I pulled Matty out of his car seat, she ran down to the pond, looked around, inhaled, and closed her eyes. I kicked off my docksiders and carried Mattie into the water. We splashed around.

He jumped and laughed. Justine smiled.

I think that was the last time I saw her smile.

She had planned on working out of the office. I asked her beforehand if the place was connected and she said it was. But there was no coverage in the cottages... no router... not even a television.

Turns out there is a dead spot in that neck of the woods.

Justine is someone who can't breathe without a phone signal.

She got in the car to hunt down the nearest bead.

By the time she came back, I was serving dinner on the picnic table. Mattie's favorite... Hotdogs, potato chips, and goldfish. I had grilled some chicken breasts for Justine... Her glass of Pino Grigio waiting.

The plan wasn't going to work. The nearest signal was back at the highway next to the Mobile station. She had a big case and had to be connected. Not even one night with us... one weekend night... unconnected.

She had picked up supplies at the little store with striped awnings across from town hall.

More than enough to last a week.

She grabbed her bags.

Matty waved as she drove toward the highway on her way back to Cambridge.

I don't recall her kissing either of us goodbye.

I had planned on visiting all the Bauhaus properties. Take some pictures. I didn't think I would need a car.

She left my bike, but I couldn't leave Mattie alone and the path was too sandy... too dangerous to put him in the child seat. I tried. Nearly killed both of us.

So I decided to do something I'd always fantasized about. Back to nature. The whole week. No connectivity. No communication with to the outside world.

Just us. A man and his son and the elements. Roughing it. For a week this little pond and the woods that surrounded it would be our home. Which was new to me... being a city kid with no experience whatsoever in the wild.

The sunset was amazing. The pond was like a mirror. And so quiet. I had never heard anything so quiet.

One of the boxes had a queen-sized bed and a small room about the size of a closet. It had a little cot with a window... way up high.

I tucked Mattie into bed in the little closet with the high window then went to bed and turned off the lamp.

But I couldn't sleep.

The quiet. It forces you to hear things in a new way... maybe at a decibel we aren't used to. Tiny, little sounds. A leaf dropping into the pond. A cricket in the woods. frogs... an owl? Hundreds of tiny, invisible sounds. They surround you.

What if she had known about the signal beforehand? Maybe it was an excuse.

You think about stupid stuff like that when you can't sleep because you're alone in the woods with only your thoughts.

I was woken in the middle of the night by a loud racket. Outside in the woods.

A dog fight? Coyotes?

From one side to the other. They had cornered something.

Rabbit? Fox?

I felt Mattie's arms around my neck.

**MATTIE**

What's that, Daddy?

**ELLIOT**

Some dogs playing. That's all.

I thought about the door... only an eye hook. One solid lunge at the door by a large animal and...

But he was in my arms. I was his father. Keeping him safe was my job. I would protect him no matter what came through that door.

(Laughs:) This is what a city boy thinks about late at night when he is alone in the woods for the first time.

The next day I explored the cottages. The furthest one into the scrub... toward where I heard the sounds. There were empty cans of food... ramen noodle cups... silverware and cutlery scattered across the counter... a pair of board shorts in the corner.

The previous tenants must have been pigs...or they had left in a hurry.

There was a path behind the cottage... You follow it up the hill through the scrub pines. As you get higher, they thin out and the trail gets sandier and you come to the top. It kind of knocks you out. You're on top of a bluff... a dune really. Behind you can see the fresh water of horseleech pond. In front... straight down the dune... 60 feet below...

...the ocean beach.

It makes no sense. Just a hundred yards apart. Only a dune separating them. Impossible... and glorious. I guess this is why people find the Cape so...

That's where Mattie and I spent the next few days. We'd pack for the day. A blanket. Some food. He'd wear his plastic jewel necklace and pink sunglasses. Matty likes shiny things and the color pink. I'd bring a nerf football in case he wanted to play catch. He didn't. I'd slick him up with sunscreen and we would play in the surf. I tried to show him how to skip rocks. But he didn't.... I guess it's the easiest thing to pick up right away.

I had decided to teach him to swim that summer. I'd hold him and walk into the surf. Tell him to hold his breath and we would dunk. Then I would put him on his back and try to get him to float. But the waves were too big. He'd get splashed and roll over and wrap his legs around my waist.

He really liked the water.

We had it the entire beach to ourselves. The next day we didn't even bother with suits. Primal men. A father and his son.

That day we spotted seals in the surf. At first I thought they were black labs. (Laughing:) 800-pound black labs.

20 feet off shore. Swimming around and diving in the waves. Two adults and a little one. A baby. They'd stop and look right at you. On the third day they hauled themselves out... up the beach... maybe 50 feet from our blanket. The baby between them.

Matty wanted to go say hi. I stopped him before he got too close. I'd read in a National Seashore guide that you're supposed to give them their space when they haul out. They aren't afraid to bite.

One kept his eye on us. Making sure we stayed to ourselves, I guess.

When we got back to the turkey cottages that evening, Mattie couldn't stop drawing them. I loaned him my sketchbook. The drawings were really good.

Taking after his father? Maybe?

He wanted to label one of the drawings but all he knew were his letters. So I spelled it out. He wrote in his five-year-old hand: B A B Y S E A L.

The next day was perfect. Our seal family had decided to join us. The waves were high, so I told Mattie not to go in above the knees. The seals came up to greet us. I skipped stones. As the stones darted over the waves, the seals would follow their path. Maybe they thought they were fish? I sneaked up on Mattie and grabbed him and threw him in the air...

**MATTIE**

Again, Daddy!

**ELLIOT**

The seals watched us roughhouse in the surf. Mattie's necklace... the one with the plastic jewels... came loose and was thrown into the water. I was about to wade out to find it.

(Pause.)

You'd think you'd see a fin. Like in the movies. You don't. What you see is something huge emerging out of the water at great speed. Something gray. And thrashing. With sharp teeth. You see something black thrown into the air. The splash follows. Then you see the little black thing try to swim away... its parents charging... trying to distract. Then you see the blood.

The gray fish swims off, chomping the baby seal in its mouth.

Not something you want your child to see.

Especially a sensitive child like Mattie.

It was gruesome and horrifying... everything about nature that we think we have risen above... that we think we can control in the hermetically sealed little boxes we call our homes.

It's okay to be afraid, Mattie. But no monster is going to hurt you. I'm here to protect you.

**MATTIE**

What happened to the seal?

**ELLIOT**

He died. That's what happens in the ocean. Sharks eat seals. It's how they survive. Like we eat animals...chickens... cows... pigs...

**MATTIE**

Hot dogs, Daddy?

**ELLIOT**

That evening we had salads for dinner.

A cold front came through that night and a thunderstorm hit. If you've been on the outer cape during a storm...you know what I'm...

When it hits, it's like setting a match to a box of fireworks.

I woke up to the rumbling from far off.

As it got closer, it shook the cabin. Rattled the windows. Mattie was snuggled up in my bed... too exhausted to wake up, I guess.

Something caught my eye in the middle of the pond. Through the window beside my bed. A ripple spreading from a single point. I could see it in the flash of the lightning bolts. The point was moving. Another flash... moving toward... flash... toward the turkey cottages... toward me.

I put my hand to the window pane and watched in the dark.

Flash.

A fish?

Otter?

Closer.

Flash.

A deer?

A long flash lit up the sky and still I could not tell what was disturbing the waves. But I knew it was getting closer. A few yards out in the pond.

I waited for the next strike.

I waited.

And then a flash.

Something had emerged.

Flash.

A woman.

A woman with wet black hair.

Staring into me with the darkest eyes I have ever seen.

Only the pane of glass separated us.



The next flash was so intense that I could only see blue after.

Stumbling, I rushed to the lamp at the side of the bed. I turned it on.

I ran to the door, but I pulled the cord out. I found another outlet. I shined the light out into the blackness. Panned across the pond from side to side.

Nothing.

**MATTIE**

Daddy?

**ELLIOT**

Just a storm, baby.

I latched the door. I yanked the windows closed and locked them

**MATTIE**

Can you hold me, Daddy?

**ELLIOT**

I reached to the bed stand where my phone was plugged in.

No beads.

The next morning... on the patch of sand where she had stood... lay Mattie's necklace.

After lunch I set Mattie up at the picnic table with my sketch book. I sat on the lawn chair, poured myself a glass of wine and began to read one of the architecture books I had brought along.

I must have fallen asleep.

I woke and looked to the pond. Mattie... tumbling through the air, his legs kicking. He landed with a splash.

Someone was in the water. A man. He grabbed Mattie as he resurfaced.

Mattie!

I ran into the water. The man pushed my son toward me.

Mattie?

Mattie dove under. By the time I reached him he was at my knees. I grabbed him.

You okay?

**MATTIE**

I could see under the water... Like a fish...

**ELLIOT**

When I reached the grass, I was afraid to put him down. The man was wading toward us.

I'd seen his board shorts before.

**DALE**

He's a natural.

**ELLIOT**

You don't just grab a kid like that...

**DALE**

...Name's Dale...

**ELLIOT**

...Not without permission. Do you have any idea...

**DALE**

...Whoa...

**ELLIOT**

... what you did?...

**DALE**

...Hey...

**ELLIOT**

I should have called the police...

**DALE**

...Okay... yeah... I wasn't thinking...

**ELLIOT**

...What the hell are you doing here...?

**DALE**

...I should have made sure it was okay...

**ELLIOT**

You shouldn't be standing there right now.

**DALE**

... I figured...

**ELLIOT**

... Did you see the signs?

**DALE**

...it's the National Seashore...

**ELLIOT**

You are trespassing...

**DALE**

...public land...

**ELLIOT**

This is private property... It has been for decades...

**DALE**

Your last name *Phillips*?

(This stops ELLIOT.)

We are all just renters in life... know what I mean?

Sorry... I was taking a dip and little dude saw me and came down. But you're right... I was out of line.

**ELLIOT**

Nice board shorts.

**DALE**

Thanks?

**MATTIE**

He found my necklace, Daddy.

**DALE**

Saw him lose it on the beach.

I was with my woman... walking her to work. We saw the whole thing from the trail along the bluff. The shark? Lorelei didn't take it so good.

**ELLIOT**

When did you bring it back?

**DALE**

The necklace? After a hard shift Lori likes to take a dip in the pond. She works at the Beachcomber. About a mile up the beach. I'm between gigs right now. August... Hey... I mean if you can swing it. Right?

**ELLIOT**

There was a tattoo of a woman etched into the smooth skin of his arm... A dark-eyed woman with long, wild hair. *Lorelei* inked below in an old-fashioned script.

How you like the cabin... the one near the woods?

**DALE**

Oh... Yeah... So, you noticed that. We cleared out when you drove up. No one has been here all summer. We figured...I mean, you ever try to rent a place out here during the season? We camp out. Save our money so we can rent a place after everyone goes home. Maybe Florida this winter. Who knows? We're easy.

**ELLIOT**

Where's your camp?

**DALE**

A tent back in the woods. It's kinda on the down low. (To MATTY:) Don't tell anyone, little dude. Okay? (Back to ELLIOT:) We make it work. Lori brings home leftovers from the bar. They're just going to throw it out. Right?

(Pause.)

If I had a boy like him... if something ever happened... Really tear me in two. So I get it.

(Pause.)

Sorry to make you freak.

**ELLIOT**

He left, swimming the length of the pond and following the trail into the woods.

That night... before I went to bed, I latched the eye hook and pushed a musty old chair up against the door.

The next day I was about to give Mattie his swim lessons in the pond, when Dale walked out of the woods. He was tossing around a small plush toy.

**DALE**

Don't freak... Just here to say hi.

**ELLIOT**

He handed the toy to Mattie. It was a baby seal.

**DALE**

Saw it at the Truro swap shop and thought Little Dude would like it.

**ELLIOT**

It seemed reasonably clean.

**DALE**

Lori says I trust people too much... so I assume they trust me. I'm an idiot that way.

(Pause.)

You're a good dad. What Mattie needs... you know... someone who's strong enough to let him be who he is. He's a quirky little dude and he's going to need that.

Wish I had a dad like you.

**ELLIOT**

Mattie and Dale sat at the picnic table and took turns drawing pictures of the baby seal.

Mattie wanted to know what the little seal's name should be.

**DALE**

Ronan, of course. R O N A N.

**ELLIOT**

Mattie wrote the letters under his drawing.

**DALE**

With two marks here and here.

**ELLIOT**

Why Ronan?

**DALE**

It means *little seal* in Gaelic.

**ELLIOT**

You hungry?

**DALE**

Only if you have enough.

**ELLIOT**

When I returned with the food, Dale was weaving a seagrass bracelet around Mattie's wrist.

**DALE**

Little dude liked the one around my ankle. I hope it's okay.

**ELLIOT**

Just as long as he doesn't like your tattoos too.

**DALE**

It's going to look pretty on you, Mattie. Like your necklace.

**MATTIE**

What are the sounds, Dale?

**DALE**

What sounds?

**MATTIE**

The ones at night that make Daddy scared?

**ELLIOT**

I'm not...

**DALE**

The night sounds? They can be scary if you're not used to them. Are you scared of them, Mattie?

**MATTIE**

No.

**DALE**

I didn't think so.

**MATTIE**

What are they?

**DALE**

Just a bunch of night creatures. They wait for the sun to set before they come out to play.

**MATTIE**

Why do they come here?

**DALE**

Because this pond is special... like nowhere else on Earth.

**MATTIE**

What makes it so special?

**DALE**

Well... It's filled with the most delicious fresh water and it's just a few hundred yards from the ocean... The perfect place for creatures of the land and the air and the sea to come together. Some fly here from the other side of the equator. Others swim all the way from the old country. They've been coming here since the beginning of time.

**MATTIE**

What do they do when they get here?

**DALE**

Dance under the light of the moon.

**MATTIE**

What kind of creatures?

**DALE**

Magical creatures. Ferries and elves and trolls and changelings and shape shifters.

**MATTIE**

What are shape shifters?

**DALE**

Creature who can change from an animal into a human. They could be a swan... a wolf... or even a seal.

**MATTIE**

A seal?

**ELLIOT**

Dale knotted in the bracelet around Mattie's wrist and picked up a pencil.

**DALE**

Want me to draw one?

**ELLIOT**

Mattie nodded his head.

**DALE**

In the old world... in the wild north of Scotland... there is a group of shape shifters who are known as the seal people - or *Selkies* in Gaelic.

**ELLIOT**

Dale began to draw a picture of a woman draped in black fur.

**DALE**

They spend most of their time in the water. But occasionally... If they see something on land that catches their fancy...

**ELLIOT**

How do they catch a fancy?

**DALE**

(Laughing:) Like if they were to fall in love with a mortal, Mattie. If a human were to catch their fancy, a selkie may shed his skin and walk the earth as a human.

**MATTIE**

Are they dangerous?

**DALE**

Some can be mischievous... Not as mischievous as ferries, though. Ferries are trouble. Stay away from ferries, Mattie.

**MATTIE**

Okay.

**DALE**

But sulkies... well... They can go either way. You see... they are very beautiful... and charming... So alluring it's impossible not to be enchanted by them. They've caused many a shipwreck by...

**MATTIE**

Like mermaids!

**DALE**

Exactly! They don't want to cause trouble...

**MATTIE**

...They just can't help it.

**DALE**

It's part of their nature. But you should never try to cross them.

**MATTIE**

Like don't do bad stuff to them?

**DALE**

Like if you were to try to trick them by stealing their seal skin after they come out of the water.

**MATTIE**

They need it to return to the sea?

**DALE**

So they have to be real sneaky. If you were ever to meet one, Mattie, it's best to give them whatever they want. They are old souls and will always be a step or two ahead of you.

**MATTIE**

And they come here to the pond?

**DALE**

I suppose they could. It's not unfathomable. These woods hold all sorts of wild and mysterious creatures.

**MATTIE**

Why do the creatures make those sounds at night?

**DALE**

They are calling you... to come out and play.

**ELLIOT**

He handed the drawing to Mattie.

**DALE**

Keep this for me. Okay?

**ELLIOT**

Mattie took the sketch. The fur-draped woman in the drawing resembled the beautiful creature etched into the tattoo on Dale's shoulder.

**DALE**

You like your new bracelet, Mattie?

**ELLIOT**

He nodded his head and gave the biggest smile.

**DALE**

I could make one for you too, El.

**ELLIOT**

El?

**DALE**

People don't call you that?



**ELLIOT**

No.

**DALE**

Then it will be special. Just between you and me.

**ELLIOT**

After he had finished his hot dog, Mattie waded out into the pond. Looking for changelings and shapeshifters? Dale wove another bracelet around my wrist.

I had never had someone do this to... for me before. But for Dale it was like the most natural thing in the world.

**DALE**

When is your wife due back?

**ELLIOT**

Tomorrow night.

**DALE**

Miss her?

**ELLIOT**

Tell me about Lori.

**DALE**

We've been together forever.

**ELLIOT**

She get upset that she's working and you're...

**DALE**

We take turns. It works out. What do you think of the bracelet?

**ELLIOT**

I like it.

**DALE**

Right?

**ELLIOT**

We went into the water and spent most of the afternoon in the pond. The three of us. Playing frisbee. Throwing around the football. Giving Mattie swimming lessons. By the end of the afternoon, Mattie was swimming like a fish.

He needed to go meet his woman... that's what he called her... and asked if he could use our shower. I pointed him in the direction of the outdoor one around the corner of one of the boxes.

A few minutes later I noticed that Mattie was missing. He had followed Dale and was watching him. Dale had hung his board shorts from the towel hook and was shampooing his hair.

Mattie? Give Dale his privacy.

**DALE**

It's okay... Little dude is just curious...

**ELLIOT**

That night I told Mattie that he had to sleep in his own bed. He put up a fight.

I need you to be a big boy, Mattie. Okay?

The next day we were excited about Justine's return. I tried hard to make the place look better so that she wouldn't fixate on something trivial and decide not to spend time with us. Like if the floor were dirty. Or maybe spiderwebs in the corners.

Sometime in the early afternoon, Dale came walking down the path from the ocean. He carried a half-empty bottle of vodka. Slung over his shoulder were three striped bass strung with a piece of twine.

**DALE**

Something special for you and your woman tonight.

**ELLIOT**

You caught these?

**DALE**

With my bare hands.

(DALE and ELLIOT laugh.)

**ELLIOT**

You didn't have to.

**DALE**

Know how to clean them?

**ELLIOT**

Not a clue.

He went to the cottage nearest the woods and returned with a filet knife. Mattie didn't want to watch.

**DALE**

If you want, Lori and I can take Mattie off your hands... let you and your woman have a romantic evening... you know...

**ELLIOT**

Mattie misses his mother too.

Dale left a short time later.

I cooked the filets... sautéed some vegetables. Put a few hotdogs on the grill. Everything was ready at 7:30... when I figured she would drive up the sandy road...

At 7:45 I let Mattie eat his hotdog and potato chips.

At 9 I brought the food inside, blew out the candles, and put Mattie to bed.

She'll be here soon, Mattie. She'll come in and kiss you goodnight. Okay?

At 10:30, I put the plates and silverware away. The food in the refrigerator. I saw the half empty bottle of vodka on the table. Dale's gift. It was tempting, but the last thing I needed was to be wasted when she walked in at midnight.

But Justine didn't walk in at midnight.

At about 1am, the wind changed to a sea breeze that blew a thick mist off the ocean. It climbed the dune, crested the top... like a wave... and whispered through the pitch pines as it settled heavy over the pond.

As I sat waiting at the window, I had a sick feeling in my stomach. The fabric of mist was thin enough for the moon... a white ghost of a moon... to illuminate the edge of the pond. Tiny concentric ripples flowed to the shore. Our little valley was still. Not a sound. But I knew there was something out there. In the water. Swimming back and forth. Watching me.

I set the latch on the door and waited.

At some point, I must have fallen asleep.

When the sun rose and burned its way through the mist.

I looked to the water. The phantoms of Horseleech Pond were not there.

In the light of day, it looked so normal. Perfectly beautiful.

Was it all in my head? Planted there by the silly folktales Dale had told Mattie. Maybe I was going a little crazy out here on my own in the woods.

After breakfast I grabbed a backpack, took Mattie by the hand, and we trekked back up the road toward the highway.

We're going on an adventure, little man.

It was a sweltering day. A long walk for a five year old. But he was a trooper and I only had to carry him twice.

We had lunch at a lobster shack on the highway. That's where I was able to get a connection for the first time in a week.

A text.

*Can't make it til Sunday morning. Work. Will take Monday off. Miss you.*

That was it.

A text.

We walked into town. I picked up some groceries at the little place with the awnings. We stopped at the hardware store. Then rested on a bench overlooking a rickety bridge

The walk back was not pleasant. Mattie was cranky and tired. It was impossible to carry him and a backpack full of groceries at the same time. At one point about a half mile from the Turkey Cottages, he sat down in the middle of the sandy road and refused to go any further.

I got angry. I'm not proud to say it. I lost my temper.

**DALE**

Hey, little guy. You're almost there.

**ELLIOT**

Dale stepped out of the woods. He picked Mattie up and we walked. By the time we got back the sun was setting and Mattie was asleep in Dale's arms. He laid Mattie on his bed and reached up to open the window and let air into the little room.

Thanks.

**DALE**

Long walk for a little dude. How'd it go last night?

**ELLIOT**

She'll be joining us tomorrow.

He found the stuffed seal on the floor.

**DALE**

(As though looking at the toy, with a bittersweet smile:) Ronan.

**ELLIOT**

He placed it under Mattie's chin.

We both stood there for a moment and looked at my son... holding the stuffed seal to his chest. And a feeling of great loss filled the room. Maybe it was me... something I was bringing... the way I was feeling... about... Justine... my life... where I was going... nowhere... how I had failed... in so many ways. But I turned to Dale and looked into his eyes. I could tell he felt it too.

**DALE**

He loves you.

(They have a moment of connection.)

Do you ever feel like you don't belong here? I mean... not just here... the whole thing. You know... your life?

**ELLIOT**

I couldn't answer.

**DALE**

There's something else for you. It's out there. Don't be afraid of it.

**ELLIOT**

Ummm... You know... I've got... some stuff... I have to do. To get ready for Justine.

**DALE**

Yeah... Uh... No problem.

**ELLIOT**

He crossed out the door, ran into the water, and dove below the surface. He came up forty feet further and looked back at me one more time. He swam the length of the pond before exiting into the woods.

I know what I said about the Bauhaus jewels in the Wellfleet Woods. Their simplicity. How they were perfect because they didn't want to be more than what they are?

I was wrong.

The deadbolt I bought at the hardware store was more difficult than I thought it would be to install. I purchased a cheap hand drill and a screw driver, but I needed real equipment to do the job quick.

As I drilled the damn thing into the door, I couldn't stop thinking about Justine. What she had texted. Not even a phone call. It was like we were in her way. What if this was all her plan? What if she wanted to spend the summer alone... away from me and our son? Maybe there was something else back in Cambridge. Or maybe this place was really messing with my mind.

My hand slipped and I caught a sharp edge.

Blood. Fuck.

I grabbed a kitchen towel. I heard Mattie whimper from his room. I went to him.

It's okay, little man... I just scratched my hand. That's all.

As I kissed his forehead, a few drops of my blood must have spilled on his pillowcase. Another on his white t-shirt. I didn't notice it at the time.

When I had finished the last screw, I tested the bolt. It would hold.

There was no moon or mist or stars that night, but from the light shining through the window, I could see... out on the picnic table... the half empty bottle of vodka. The

one Dale brought. It was cool outside. That's the thing about the Cape... It can be 100 in the afternoon and 62 at night.

So cool you shiver.

I brought the bottle back inside, set the deadbolt, closed the windows, locked them... pulled a chair in front of the windows...

I didn't even use a glass. Straight from the bottle.

I turned off the light... sat there... and waited.

For what, I'm not exactly sure. The creatures?

Nothing was going to come out of those woods... emerge from that water and enter this cabin. I'd had enough. Book be damned. I decided that we would leave this place as soon as Justine drove up. We would pack the car, grab Mattie, and get the hell out. Away from Horseleech pond. Never come back.

I began to feel it after a few gulps. I thought it was just vodka on an empty stomach.

But then I felt something different. In my gut and in my head. The room tilted a little one way... and then swerved to the other. I fell off the chair.

The world went upside down and started to spin. I felt like I was going to be sick.

There in the window.... watching me writhe in agony... her hands on the pane of glass.

The windows... the doors... locked.

I tried to crawl to Mattie to make sure he was okay, but I didn't make it to his room.

The last thing I remember before I passed out. I looked up... above Mattie's bed...

The window...

It was open.

When I woke up the next morning, I couldn't find him. He was not in his room. He wasn't out on the picnic table. He wasn't swimming in the pond.

Mattie!

He was not in any of the cabins. I ran like a madman around the pond.

Mattie!

Up over the dune.

Mattie!

Across the beach.

Mattie!

He was gone.

Mattie!

Gone.

So was the bottle of vodka... my sketchbook... the little stuffed seal.

My son.

Mattie.

He was gone.

As I run up the road toward the highway, I met the Prius. Justine was behind the wheel.

(Pause.)

They couldn't find him... the police... the national guard... the search dogs....

They dragged the pond... trapped and eviscerated three coyotes looking for.... They found nothing.

No one at the Beachcomber had ever heard of a Dale or Lorelei.

In a clearing on the edge of White Cedar Swamp, they found a campsite... of sorts. A fire pit... animal bones strewn about the perimeter. That's where they found the grass bracelet... the bracelet that matched the one I wore. Where they found the little stuffed seal, the filet knife, my sketchbook, and Mattie's t-shirt... with my blood on it.

The last page of the book had a drawing of a three seals swimming in the water. In Mattie's childlike hand were the words, *Come swim with us, Daddy*.

But those two... the phantoms of Horseleech Pond? They were gone.

The police... the criminal psychologists.... the media... *How does it feel to live off your wife? When did you find out about her boyfriend back in Boston? Did you blame your son? Did you give your son dolls to play with? Did you encourage your son to go naked at home? Why did you let your boy sleep with you? Do you have unnatural feelings for him? Why was your blood on his shirt? Did you lose your temper? Did you hit him? Maybe a little too hard? Where did you put his body?*

None of the questions... none of the police footwork... none of the forensic research... nothing could bring my son back.

Everything you thought you had.... Your friends, your family, your home, your job prospects, your marriage... your life? Nothing survives something like this.

Mattie. My little boy. Did he survive?

Was he out there?

Did he miss me?

I missed him so much.

Fall. Winter. Then Spring. No place to live. No job. Down to my last couple of hundred dollars. Nothing. Just the Prius.

I parked in front of the Turkey Cottages. The police tape was gone. They had removed the deadbolt... looking for traces of my blood.

I walked to the top of the dune. The pond behind and the ocean below. Like a miracle.

There was something swimming just beyond the breakers. A seal?

I walked into the water... and began to swim.

The water... cold... and crisp... and clean. Clean enough to wash everything away... your past... your future... your life...

I swam.

Beyond the breakers.

I swam.

The large waves carried me up and down... rocking me... like you rock a baby to sleep.

I dove underneath and swam deeper... deeper.

I let my breath out.

This is what I had come for. To end it. My story. I shut my eyes, thinking I had breathed my last.

And then I felt a hand on my neck.

**DALE**

We've been waiting.

**ELLIOT**

Dale. I stared into his black eyes. He held my head still as we slipped into the immense blackness.

**DALE**

I'll teach you.

**ELLIOT**



I felt his lips on mine. A sudden blast of air filled my lungs. I gasped and exhaled. Dale pressed his lips to mine again. Another blast... and with it... a change... a shift... a transformation.

That's when I saw the two seals... circling me. A mother and a little pup.

Simple. Nothing more than it was ever meant to be.

I knew I had found it.

My home.