

By the time people in Bellmere realized the lake was taking its people, it had already learned how to give them back.

Not completely, though. Never completely.

The first one to return was a fisherman in 1987. He disappeared during a storm, and three days later, he walked out of the fog near the shoreline wearing the same green raincoat he vanished in. His wife said he came home quieter after that. Different somehow. Some nights she'd wake up and find him standing beside the bedroom window staring toward the lake like he was waiting for something.

A month later, he walked into the water and never came back again.

After that, the town stopped talking about disappearances very often. Adults lowered their voices whenever kids were near them. People double-checked the lock on their doors earlier in November. And nobody liked looking at the lake when the water was too still.

Sometimes the reflections looked wrong.

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This year, it took my brother.

Owen disappeared on November 16th near the old dock behind our house. The police blamed it on the storm and said that the rain probably made the wood slippery, but Owen had grown up around Bellmere Lake. He knew every trail through the woods and every shallow spot near the shore by heart.

He used to joke that the lake acted like a person. Calm one day, angry the next.

When we were young, he'd sit on the dock for hours, throwing rocks into the water and talking like the lake would respond.

Maybe it could, and maybe it did.

The search lasted six days.

Boats crossed the lake from sunrise to dark while divers searched beneath the surface. Neighbors came by with food we never ate and spoke in soft voices, like they were afraid saying the wrong thing might make everything worse.

By the end of the week, people had already started looking sorry for us.

My mom barely left her room anymore. My dad spent most of the nights pretending to watch television without actually looking at it.

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Late at night, I started hearing water dripping somewhere in the house.

At first, I thought it was a leaking pipe.

But the sound started moving.

Some nights it came from the hallway. Other nights from right outside my bedroom door.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

The night Owen came back, the power went out across the entire town.

Rain slammed against the windows while wind shook the trees hard enough to scrape branches across the roofs.

Then came three knocks at the front door.

Not loud.

Slow.

Patient.

My mother ran to the door before anyone could even stop her.

When she opened it, Owen stood there, soaked from head to toe.

Mud clung to his shoes. Water dripped from the sleeves of his sweatshirt onto the welcome mat. His face looked pale beneath the porch light.

But he was alive.

My mom started crying immediately. Dad grabbed Owen so hard I thought he might crush him just to make sure he was real.

I was relieved too.

But something was off.

Owen hugged them back a second too late, like he was trying too hard to act normal.

And he smelled like the lake.

Not fresh water, but old water.

After that night, things changed around the house.

Owen barely spoke anymore. He stopped listening to music. Stopped leaving half-finished bowls of cereal around the living room like he used to. Sometimes I'd catch him standing by the kitchen window late at night, staring toward the woods behind our house, leading to the lake.

And every night at exactly 2:16, he walked down to it.

Always alone.

One night, I decided to follow him.

Fog drifted through the trees as Owen stepped onto the old dock. The lake was completely still, smooth as satin beneath the moonlight.

"Owen," I called quietly.

He stopped walking.

For a few seconds, neither of us said anything.

Then he asked, "Do you ever feel like a place can remember things?"

I frowned. "What are you talking about?"

He kept staring at the water.

"When I fell in, I saw people."

A chill crept over me.

"The fisherman," he continued softly. "That teacher who disappeared a few years ago. That girl who everyone thought ran away."

He swallowed hard.

"They weren't trapped."

I stared at him, waiting for him to laugh or tell me he was joking.

He didn't.

"It was like the lake knew everything they wanted to forget," he said. "All the heavy stuff they carried around."

The fog drifted slowly across the water around us.

"I think some people get tired," he whispered. "And the lake lets them leave parts of themselves behind."

The dock creaked beneath him as he took a small step backward away from the edge.

For the first time since he came home, he looked scared.

“I think it almost kept me too.”

Wind brushed across the surface of the water, then breaking the stillness.

For a second, I thought I saw something that looked too much like people moving beneath the water.

Then they were gone.

Owen looked back at the lake one last time.

“I don’t think it’s evil,” he said quietly.

Cold air wrapped around the dock behind him.

“I just think it gets lonely.”

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After that night, things slowly started to go back to normal again.

Owen laughed a little more. Ate dinner with us again. Started to act like himself more.

Mostly.

But even now, sometimes I still catch him staring toward the lake when he thinks nobody is watching.

And every November, the people in Bellmere close their curtains a little earlier.

Nobody talks much about the disappearances anymore.

Still, everyone in town knows the exact same thing.

Bellmere Lake had a way of keeping things. People included.