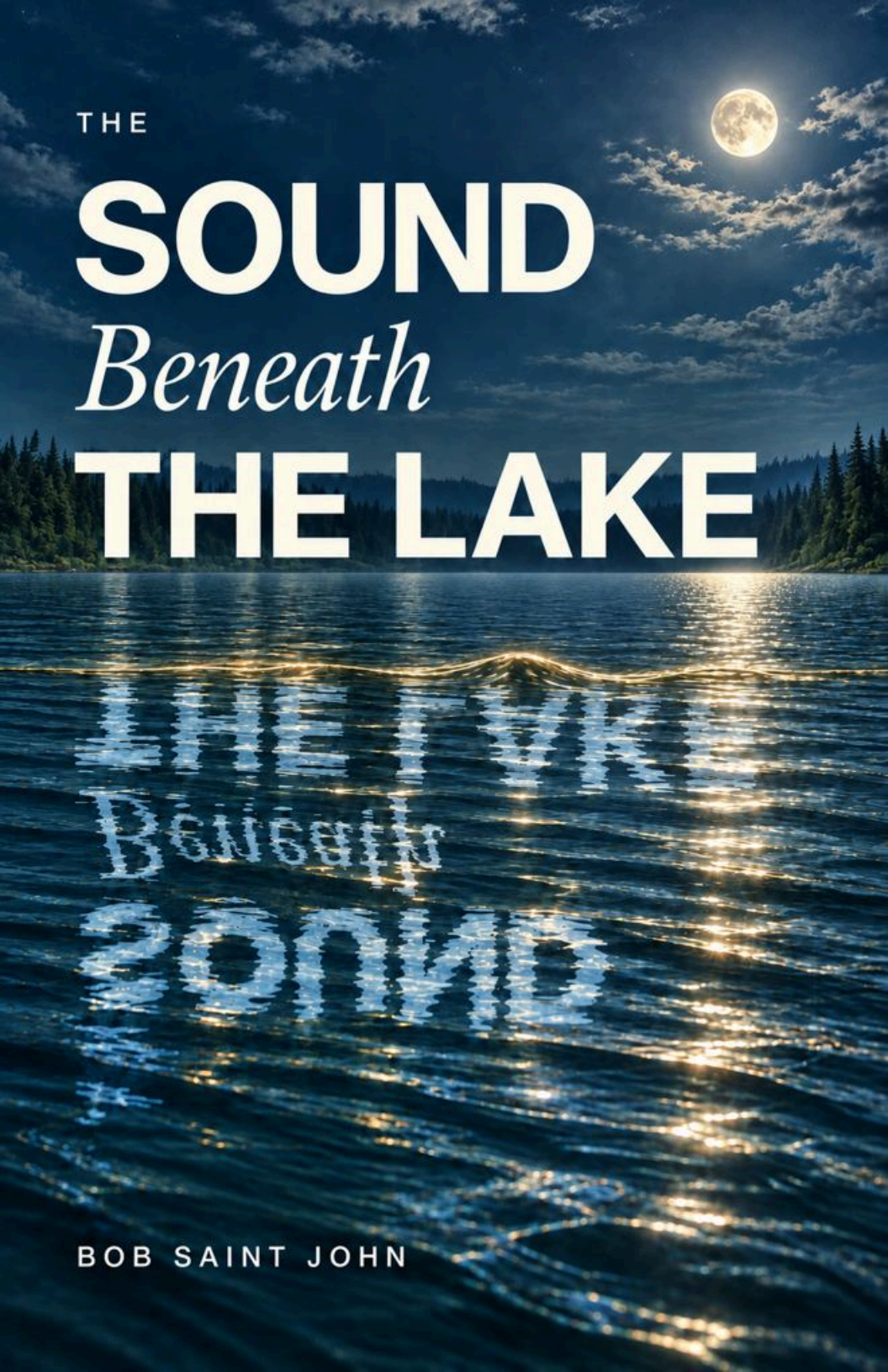




THE

SOUND

Beneath

THE LAKE

BOB SAINT JOHN

THE SOUND BENEATH THE LAKE

The Sound *Beneath* the Lake

Bob Saint John

SAINT JOHN STUDIO

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The Sound Beneath the Lake

The rain had been falling for three days, but the lake hadn't swallowed enough of it.

Even now, long after midnight, the waterline stopped a foot short of the rotted pier, leaving a strip of exposed mud that gleamed like oil under the porch light.

Nathan stood barefoot on the boards, hands in his pockets, counting the thunder. Five seconds meant a mile. One meant you'd better get inside. He was up to three when the sound came again, but it wasn't thunder. It was deeper. Slower. Like the ground exhaling.

He leaned forward, peering through the rain. Ripples started near the middle, spreading uneven circles that tugged at the half-submerged rowboat. For a bare moment he thought of the stories—the drowned bell, the thing in the depths—but he blinked them away. Sleep deprivation made myths easy.

The screen door creaked open behind him.

"You're not still out there," Mara said. Her voice carried the kind of tightness that tried not to sound worried.

"I thought I heard something," he said. "From the water."

She stepped onto the porch, tucking their father's flannel closer around her. The sleeves were too long; she pushed them back with the heel of her hand.

"You always think you hear something. It's wind through the valley. You know that."

He didn't answer. The circles on the surface had gone to glass again, the silence after the rain wider than the noise. When she touched his arm, he flinched before he could stop himself. She glanced at his face and let her hand fall, saying nothing. Instead she pointed down the slope to the old toolshed. Its single bulb burned a puddle of yellow through the mist.

"Did you leave that?" she asked.

"No."

They watched it for a while. The shed had been padlocked since their father disappeared six months ago. The police had cut the lock and then put their own on, which Mara had broken off the morning they arrived. Neither of them had gone near the door since, which didn't explain the light.

A low hum moved up from the lake—soft, steady, not the weather. It touched the boards through Nathan's soles and climbed his legs like an old memory. Mara stepped back.

"Nate..."

"I hear it."

The bulb in the shed flickered once, twice, went out. The porch felt colder without the yellow down-slope, as if that small circle of permission had been pulled away.

"Get inside," he said.

But she didn't. She was looking at the lake again, at a faint blue light beginning to pulse just beneath the surface where the ripples had started. It was the size of a dinner plate, then a washtub, then the lake's own pupil dilating toward them.

"Don't," he said.

"I'm not doing anything."

He listened for the shape beneath the hum—machinery, maybe, or storm. What came back was slower than both. It had weight. The blue flared, sharp as lightning but without sound. For a clean instant he saw a geometry behind it—something symmetrical that did not belong to fish or current—then darkness.

Mara's voice thinned. "What if he's still down there?" Nathan kept his eyes on the water. "Then we're already too late." The ground exhaled again, a patient animal under the world.



The Wake

Morning pulled itself up the valley on a gray rope. The rain had spent itself into a mist that beaded on the cedar shingles and hung between trees like the webbing of some weathered spider. The lake lay flat, a sheet of pewter pressed onto earth.

They moved through the cabin without speaking much. The kitchen window was fogged, the faucet coughed before it ran. A pale vein of light threaded the plank floor where the boards had separated over years of cold and warmth.

Mara made coffee. It smelled like iron and bitter mud, which was as close to home as either of them would admit. She set Nathan's mug on the table and stood, arms folded, as if the house might bolt.

"Do we talk about last night," she said, "or pretend we slept through it?"

Nathan stared into the cup. A ring of light trembled on the black surface when the refrigerator kicked on. "We can talk," he said.

“Good. Start with the part where the shed light turned itself on.”

He rubbed his thumb against the mug’s handle. “We’ve had power issues here every year.”

“And the blue under the water is...an extension cord.”

He let the joke pass. “There are vents under this lake. It was a quarry before the flooding. Water moves.” “So it glows now.”

He looked up. Mara’s face had his features set wrong—their father’s nose softened by their mother’s mouth, the whole arrangement held in patience. He wanted to say it was too early for certainty, that certainty had never lived in this house.

He said, “You want to check the shed?”

“No,” she said, quickly enough that she heard herself. “Yes. With you.”

They took the slope in boots, careful steps through wet grass. A line of mud showed where the waterline had been before the long summer. The shed crouched at the edge of the trees, its roof leaning left. The padlock hung on the hasp like a brass tongue.

Mara put her hand on the door and stopped. “Do you smell that?”

Wet cedar. Old oil. The repair shop that their father said lived in every outbuilding whether you put one there or not. Nathan nodded.

He pushed the door. The hinges complained in a voice he recognized. Inside, air held the dampness of tools and time. A workbench ran along the back wall. Their father’s

handwriting stuck to peanut butter jars of screws and nails. A coil of extension cords engineered into a nest.

The bulb in the ceiling socket looked ordinary. Mara held a finger under the pull chain but didn't tug it.

"Don't," Nathan said, and she nodded.

The bench had a cleared space in the middle, careful in a way that made itself look casual. A cardboard box sat there, its flaps bent back. Inside lay a reel-to-reel player, the heavy kind with brushed steel and glass, its power cord neatly looped. A grease pencil lay beside it, a habit single as a signature. Under the machine, two reels in paper sleeves. Someone had written on them with that same square script Nathan knew as well as he knew the sound of his own step on these boards.

A word. Then a date.

AEON—07/11.

AEON—07/19.

Mara didn't breathe. "He didn't have this when we were kids."

"No," Nathan said.

"Do you remember him ever running reels?"

"No."

She touched one of the paper sleeves and drew her hand back as if it were hot.

"Why would the police leave this?"

"They didn't look like us," Nathan said. "They didn't know where to look."

Mara put both hands on the bench's edge and leaned down until her forehead touched the wood. He watched

her spine rise with each inhale and lower with each exhale, counted them, reached four and stopped himself.

"Let's bring the deck up," he said. "I'll check the wiring before we run power to it."

She raised her head and nodded, the movement small.

"And the blue," she said. "We're not pretending that didn't happen."

"I'm not pretending."

They carried the machine between them like a sleeping animal. It had the weight of the past—dense, less than human but near to it. Mara kept looking over her shoulder toward the lake. The surface wore morning the way old glass wears silver.

Inside, Nathan wiped the table clear with a dish towel and set the player down. He ran a hand along the case, settled the reels on their spindles without threading them. His fingers remembered this without remembering why. He traced the power cord to the outlet, paused.

Mara said nothing. He plugged it in.

The machine did not switch on by itself. A small humility moved through the room. Nathan turned the knob. A light came up behind a tiny green window. The reels waited.

"Not yet," Mara said.

He nodded. "Not yet."

He let the machine hum alone—an appliance's hum, nothing lake-like in it—and listened for any sympathetic sound from outside. The house heard them and stayed quiet.

He unthreaded the tape, threaded it again, building ceremony where none was needed because one had always been there. He rolled the right tension with two fingers, felt the edge of the acetate push back.

"Do we—" Mara began.

The glass in the window made a small sound. They both looked up. It was a sound he wouldn't have noticed before last night—a sound of something outside adjusting to something inside, the air's hinge. The lake, holding its breath.

Mara pulled a chair beside his and sat. She folded her hands in her lap and told them to be still.

"Play it," she said.

He pressed the switch.

The tape moved. A soft hiss rose, the kind that says nothing for a moment so the listener can measure their own silence. There was a flutter where someone had spliced badly or cut on a diagonal and mended later. Then a voice through distance.

"If this answers," their father said, "do not speak back."

The hiss went on. Nathan felt his mouth open without permission. He closed it.

The voice again, low, as though not to wake something: "—testing Aeon twelve at two point four kilohertz. Depth at nineteen feet. Water temperature eleven degrees. Surface pressure—"

The hiss fell under a sound like whale song dragged through wire. Not a whale's pitch—higher, brittle, as if something larger than a mammal had been taught to say I

am here with a machine's mouth. It entered the room the way fog enters a tree line—quietly and then all at once.

Mara's eyes shone as if she'd been crying. She had not. Her hands did not shake. When the sound lifted, she said, "Again."

Nathan rewound the tape to the same mark and let it run. The sound came the same way and the room took it like rain. When it finished, Mara placed her hand on the deck and left it there.

"What is Aeon?" she asked.

"The project name," Nathan said. His voice felt wrong in his throat. "It has to be."

"His, or someone else's?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you do," she said softly. "You just don't want to yet."

He waited for the old anger to stand up inside him, to show the shape it had learned in this house—the shape that could talk just like his father. It didn't. Something else stood instead. He did not know its name.

Outside, the mist had thinned enough to show the far bank. The tree-line there did the ordinary thing trees do in weather—swayed and kept their places. A loon called once, its long throat draped over water, then stopped. The tape's reels turned, turned, stopped at blank leader.

Mara took her hand off the machine and pushed her hair behind one ear, a motion that used to belong to when she was fifteen.

"Play the second reel," she said.

"Not yet," he said. "We make a map first."

"A map of what?"

"Where we stand."

She looked at the deck, then at him. "All right," she said. "We draw lines on a floor that shifts. But we draw them."

They took paper from a drawer that always had paper, the same yellow pad their father had used for lists. Nathan wrote AEON at the top and under it: dates, water temps, the beautiful nonsense of numbers when you want them to mean more than they do. Mara made a column for questions. She filled it quickly, then crossed out half with a small laugh that had no mirth.

"Here's one," she said, tapping the list. "If this is real—if he recorded it—why did he tell us the lake killed him and then go missing? Which is the lie?"

"I don't think he told us the lake killed him," Nathan said.

"He told us for years that this place would eat a man who thought he could measure it."

"That's not the same as—" He stopped. The house waited. The coffee went cold.

"Let's walk," Mara said. "Before we make any more maps."

They took the path down, slow, hands in pockets like the children they were not. The lake lay in its bed. The air smelled of soaked leaves and electricity gone to ground. When they reached the shore, the blue from last night was not visible. Water showed them back in broad strokes—two figures and the long underside of a porch.

Mara put her toe on the mud line. "He's not here," she said. "I can feel that much."

"You can feel a lot," Nathan said.

"I'm not wrong often."

"No," he said. "You're not."

She stepped onto the pier. Boards gave under her weight with their old complaint. "Do you remember when he taught us to measure the distance of a storm? We counted between lightning and thunder and he said we were measuring nothing less than the time it takes sound to find us."

"I remember," Nathan said.

"And you said, what if the storm didn't want to be found? What if it stood still and waited to see if we could stand still longer." She smiled at the water. "You asked better questions when you were nine."

He let that one hit and sink. He was tired of defending the man who wasn't here to be defended. He was tired of indicting him, too.

"Let's check the dock line," he said. "If the lake rises again, we'll lose the rowboat."

Mara crouched and retied the cleat with an efficient figure-eight. The rope hissed when it slid. She stood, wiped her hands on denim, and looked toward the middle.

"Do you hear that?" she asked.

Nathan had been listening. "No. What?"

She tilted her head. "Nothing. That's the problem."

They stood with that for a while—the kind of nothing that has shape and patience. When they went back up the

slope, the house looked smaller than it had in childhood, but denser. It watched them return the way an animal watches the ones who feed it.

Inside, Nathan hung the flannel Mara had draped over a chair. He could not put it back on the peg where his father had left it. He did not know why. He sat at the table, the tape deck humming lightly at his elbow. Mara set the second reel near his hand and left it there.

"Play it after lunch," she said. "I want to know what kind of hunger I'm bringing to it."

He nodded. "There's a list of names in the back bedroom. People we should tell we're here."

"You mean the people who will be mad we're here."

"That too."

She looked at the lake through the fogged glass. "We tell them after."

"After what?", "After the next sound," she said.

Keep listening.

Continue with the complete novella.

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by Bob Saint John

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