

“Tremblay is most interested in the in-between places,  
in feelings that are indeterminate and perhaps unknowable.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

DISAPPEARANCE AT

DEVIL'S

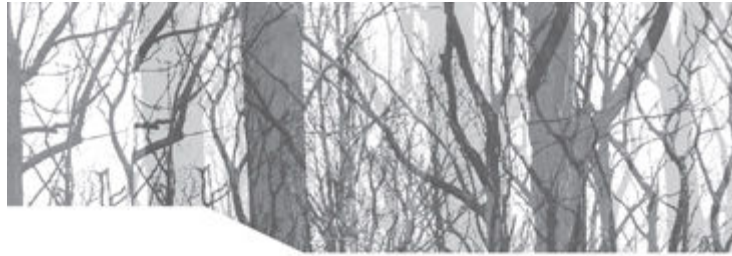
A NOVEL

ROCK

PAUL  
TREMBLAY

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF  
*A HEAD FULL OF GHOSTS*

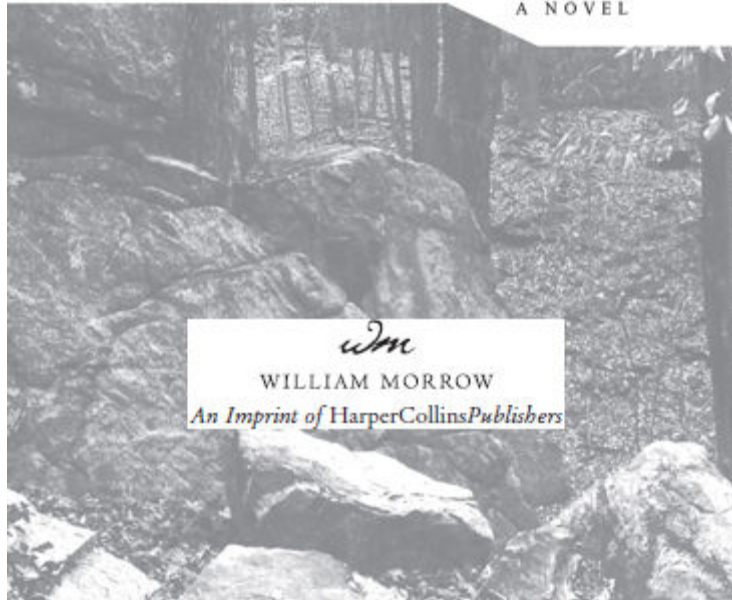
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& MORE...



Disappearance  
at Devil's Rock

Paul Tremblay

A NOVEL



*Wm*

WILLIAM MORROW

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# Dedication

*for Cole, Emma, and Lisa; the ones who keep me found*

## Epigraph

Yet at no point is the work of the seer associated with the diabolical . . . She is the mouthpiece of God.

—GERALD MESSADIÉ, *A History of the Devil*

You will feel the way I do.

You'll hurt the way I do.

He's easily abused.

The devil in his youth.

—PROTOMARTYR, "The Devil in His Youth"

# Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Elizabeth and the Call

Josh at Home and with the Boys at Split Rock

Elizabeth at the Park, at Home with Janice, Kate, and a Ghost

Kate Eavesdropping and Finding Coins

Elizabeth Finds Notes from Tommy

Elizabeth, Out of the Corners of Her Eyes, and More Notes

Luis Goes to the Sandersons, Kate and All the Apologies, Luis Asks Questions

Elizabeth at Split Rock, Camera Set Up, Notes About a Man Named Arnold

Allison and Luis, Luis and the Devil at the Rock

Elizabeth Talks to Dave, Dinner for Two, Notifications at Night, a Fight, a Sketch

Allison at the House, Kate Visits Josh, Hobo Nickels

Elizabeth and Felt Presences, the Last Entries, Kate and Josh Twice

Allison Driving in Brockton with the Boys, He's Not Feeling Too Good, Three Horrors

Elizabeth at Home and at the Station, Three Statements

Elizabeth and Kate and the House and the Notes

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An Excerpt from *GROWING THINGS AND OTHER STORIES*

Growing Things

P.S. Insights, Interviews & More . . .\*

About the author  
About the book  
Read on

Praise  
Also by Paul Tremblay  
Credits  
Copyright  
About the Publisher

## Elizabeth and the Call

Elizabeth is not dreaming. There's a ringing sound coming from far away, from elsewhere in the house, not the ringing of actual bells but the digital trill of the landline phone. The phone is cordless, cheap, neglected, often left uncharged and to be found, more times than not, wedged beneath the couch cushions alongside pistachio shells, pens, and hair elastics. Elizabeth actively despises the landline's inefficiency in regard to their everyday lives. The only calls the phone receives are credit card offers, scam vacation prizes, charities and fringe political groups looking for money, and the occasional mass recorded message from the town of Ames broadcasting the closing of school during snowstorms.

When the kids were little, Elizabeth wanted to keep the landline so that they'd be able to dial 911 should "anything bad happen." That was the phrase she used with her moon-eyed munchkins as she flailed at describing the nebulous and exciting emergency protocol of the Sanderson household. Fast-forward past those early years, which were harder than she would ever admit, and all three Sandersons have smartphones. There's really no need for the landline anymore. It survives because it is inexplicably cheaper for her to keep the phone bundled with her cable and Internet. It's maddening.

There's a ringing sound coming from far away, from elsewhere in the house, and not from the cell phone under her pillow. Elizabeth fell asleep waiting for the *Star Trek* phaser tone that announces a text from her thirteen-going-on-fourteen-year-old son Tommy. A simple text is a nonnegotiable part of the deal when sleeping over at someone else's house, even Josh's. She has already seen an evolution, or devolution, of communication from Tommy over the course of the summer reflected in his sleepover texts: In mid-June it was *I'm going to bed now mom*, which a few weeks later became *night mom*, then became *night*, and then *gn*, and if Tommy could've texted an irritated grunt (his subverbal communication method of the moment, particularly whenever Elizabeth or his eleven-

going-on-twelve-year-old sister, Kate, asked him to do something), he would've. And now in mid-August, the exact date having changed to August 16 only a collection of minutes ago, there's no text at all.

One twenty-eight A.M. The landline stops ringing. The silence that replaces it is loaded with the dread of possibility. Elizabeth sits up and double- and triple-checks her cell phone, and there are no new texts. Tommy and his friend Luis are sleeping over at Josh's house. They've been on a sleepover rotation for a month now. Tommy, Josh, and Luis: the three amigos. She called them that earlier in the summer when the boys were over and watching all three movies of the Batman trilogy. Tommy groaned at her. Luis said, "Hey, is that a Mexican joke?" and Tommy's face turned redder than a stop sign while the rest of them laughed their asses off.

Elizabeth is out of bed. She is forty-two and has large, dark brown eyes that always look a little heavy with sleep, and straight, shoulder-length brown hair going gray on the sides. She wears thin shorts and a tank top, and the pale skin of her arms and legs is chilled now that she's out from under her blanket. The noisy air-conditioning ticks into life, swirling winds of cold, stale air. Kate must've sneakily turned the thermostat down below seventy degrees, which is totally ridiculous given she sleeps in a sweatshirt and covered with two comforters. You have to pick your battles.

No good news ever calls after midnight. Elizabeth knows this from personal experience. Instead of wading into the swelling sea of the blackest of what-ifs, she dares to think that maybe the call is a wrong number, or a prank, and Tommy just forgot to text her, and she'll yell at him tomorrow about his selfish forgetfulness. Getting mad is better than the alternative. There are other maybes, of course. There will be thousands more.

The phone rings again. Elizabeth rushes into the hallway and past the kids' rooms. Tommy's door is closed, sealed. Kate's is open halfway, and she's still asleep. The ringing phone doesn't wake her, doesn't even make her twitch.

Maybe Tommy's phone ran out of juice, lost its charge, and he's being a good boy, calling home on the landline to say goodnight. But if his phone died, then wouldn't he text her from Josh's or Luis's cell phone and not wake her so late with a call? She wonders if Tommy even remembers his own home phone number anymore. He's been so absent-minded and self-consumed in that new teen world he has just begun exploring, there's no telling what he's thinking anymore.

She's in the living room, hardwood floor cold and grainy under her feet. Kate was supposed to vacuum up the sand she and her friend Sam tracked all over the house after they'd come home from the pond. Elizabeth finally reaches the end table and extends a hand out to the phone. Its small display screen glows a sickly green. Caller ID reads *Griffin, Harold*. It's a call from Josh's house. So it's not the hospital or the police or—

Elizabeth says, quickly, "Yes, hi, hello?"

"Ms. Sanderson? Hi. This is Josh." Having read Josh's father's name on the display screen, Elizabeth was expecting Harry's cheerful baritone. It's like the phone itself is breaking a promise. She wasn't expecting Josh and the way his voice sounds: so light, careful.

"What is it, Josh? What's wrong?"

"Is, um, is Tommy there? Did he go back home?"

"What do you mean? Why isn't he with you?" Elizabeth hurries back into the hallway and to Tommy's room.

"I don't know, don't know where he went. We went out to Borderland tonight. Just to hang out. And he took off into the woods . . . Is he there? There with you? I was hoping maybe he went home . . ." Josh is talking fast now, reckless with words spilling over each other, overlapping.

"Josh, slow down. I can't understand you. I'm checking his room now." Elizabeth opens Tommy's door without knocking, which is something she hasn't done all summer, and she's thinking *Please be home please be home please be home* and clumsily slaps at the wall switch. She squints into the obnoxious light, and Tommy's bed is unmade and empty. "He's not in his room." Elizabeth quickly walks back out into the hallway, turning on lights wherever she goes, looking to see if Tommy is randomly somewhere else in the house, like a misplaced pair of sneakers. He's not in Kate's room. He's not in her room or the kitchen or the living room. She turns on the floodlights to the back porch, and there's no one there.

"No. No. He's not here."

"He's not? You sure?"

"He's not here, Josh." She's not quite yelling, but there's that same undercurrent of *You're a dumbass* Tommy's been using with his sister too often lately. Elizabeth runs downstairs into the musty basement, calls out to her son, but he's not there, either. Why would he be there, anyway? *Because*. He has to be somewhere.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Ms. Sanderson. Oh my God . . .” Josh says and then breathes heavily into the phone, sending sharp blasts of static. He’s crying or working up to it. Elizabeth clings desperately to annoyance and anger at Tommy’s clever, gregarious, best friend who has inexplicably morphed into a mewling child, a child who has stupidly lost her son.

She says, “Okay, wait. Quickly, tell me again. Let’s figure this out. You were at Borderland? What were you doing?”

Josh spins through his quick and sloppy story of their hiking through the woods behind his backyard and into Borderland State Park, and then Tommy going off into the woods by himself and they haven’t seen him since. Elizabeth hears Josh’s parents talking in the background.

“When was the last time Tommy was with you?”

“More than an hour. Maybe two.”

“Jesus Christ. And you’re only calling me now?” Elizabeth is still walking around her one-level, ranch-style home, fighting the urge to open closets and cabinets, to look under the beds. The landline is pressed against her cheek, and she watches her cell phone screen for a text, for anything from Tommy.

“We tried to find him. I swear. And we called for him, waited, looked around, but he didn’t come back and we didn’t know what to do, so then we walked back thinking he doubled back on us, but he wasn’t here and he’s not answering his phone or anything.”

“Did you try calling anyone else? Where’s your mom and dad?”

“Mom is right here.” Josh is crying for real now. “She wanted me to call you. Hoping he was there. I’m sorry he’s not there. Oh God, oh God—”

“Okay, shh. We can’t panic. Listen. It’ll be okay, Josh.” She regrets saying that, even if it’s only to placate Josh. She can’t help but feel like she’s jinxing her son by saying that out loud when clearly there is nothing okay about any of this.

She asks, “Did Luis try calling his parents?”

“No, not—”

“Tell him to call his parents. Then call Tommy’s other friends, see if he went over to one of their houses.” Elizabeth is not sure who those other friends would be, whose house he would go to instead of Josh’s, Luis’s, or home.

“I will, Ms. Sanderson.”