

# All Hallows' Eve

By Madeleine Thompson

There are those who believe that All Hallows' Eve is the time when the boundaries are blurred between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The residents of Penny Cove believed this.

On Halloween night, they would set a place at the table for their departed loved ones, light a candle in the window, and attend a special mass on the beach.

This was largely a tender and caring ritual, but caution was never far away. For when the door opens to the other world, bad spirits can pass through. Sometimes arriving in a violent rage, consumed with hatred and regret. Sometimes slipping through quietly. Unnoticed.

Preparations began early in the day. Houses were cleaned, the finest crockery and silverware laid out on tables, evening outfits laundered and pressed. People exchanged pleasantries as they went about their business and there was an air of solidarity around the town.

Not everyone found this neighbourliness easy. Ernestine Penny was not good with people. She found them uncomfortable and too forward. She preferred to spend time alone, with as little contact with others as possible. But days like this were a necessary evil. As the last surviving member of the founder family of the town, it would be quite unacceptable if she were to be absent from proceedings.

She returned home after evening mass utterly exhausted from all the pretending and deeply grateful to herself that she had left the food warming in the oven and could eat promptly.

She closed her curtains partly, leaving a gap for the candle, and then ate in silence. Silence was the loudest sound in her house. Occasionally the cutlery scraping her China plate cut through the air, but then silence returned.

Afterwards, once the table was clear and the crockery cleaned, she poured herself a brandy and settled into her armchair, looking out of the window, past the flickering candle, and up to the leaden sky.

That is where she settled, and where she fell to sleep.

And where she woke when she heard the wailing.

Low but lightly pitched, long-drawn-out. Not human.

Ernestine rose from her chair and drew her curtains back. Along the street, her neighbour's lights came on one-by-one as they too came to see what the noise was.

Once they saw the culprit, there were heads shaken and curtains redrawn in annoyance.

Only Ernestine remained at her window. Eyes fixed in the direction of the wailing, the house at the end of the road. A house not inhabited for a long time. A house made of faded bricks and crumbling mortar, of windows long-since boarded up, of a broken front porch and a steel panel where the door used to be.

And on the broken porch sat the owner of the anguished cry. A cat with coal-black fur interrupted by a line of white down its back. It faced the door, appearing to howl up at the house.

Ernestine's fingers clutched the curtain, instinct telling her to close it quickly. Lowering her eyes she blew out the candle and began to draw the curtains slowly. But as they were about to meet, they stopped and would go no further.

Keeping her eyes down, she quickly tried to work the fabric loose, but it would not move. On the sill, the candle flame reignited, lighting up the window. She looked up slowly and saw the face of the cat staring back at her, now in front of her house.

Panicked, she ran to the kitchen and to the furthest set of drawers, the ones reserved for papers and junk. She yanked the first one open and searched desperately until, right at the bottom she found it. A postcard, blank on one side, a name and phone number on the other. She found her phone and dialled.

At the harbour on the other side of town, a different sound filled the air. The sound of ship's horn. Long and low like the wailing, but so deep it felt as if it vibrated through every part of Edward as he stood nursing his too-hot coffee in his tiny hut.

He checked his watch and diary laid out on his desk. There were no arrivals planned until the following morning. Puzzled, he put down his coffee, took his heavy coat from the hook behind the door, and went outside to investigate.

He tried to follow the noise, but it was everywhere around him. On the sliver of sand by the water's edge, he put his binoculars to his eyes and surveyed the horizon. The fog had been thickening all evening, but he could just about make out a picture of calm and still. And no vessel in sight.

Edward stepped back as the water touched the bottom of his trouser leg. And then the wind began to pick up, nipping at his cheeks and making the soft waves at his feet turn from gentle dances to angry spurts.

From his pocket, his phone began to ring. He put it to his ear as he returned the binoculars to his eyes.

And then, silence.

No ship's horn. No wailing cat.

Only quiet. Saltwater closing in on the last patch of sand. Binoculars bobbing along, a phone sinking into the seabed.

And across town, a deserted street in darkness. A cat sitting in a kitchen, licking its paws contently. A phone in pieces on the floor.