

PIXEL  INK



Halloween

BLACK SAND BEACH

Digital Sampler

FREE

Richard Fairgray

INTRODUCTION

If you find a map that's old enough, you'll see a strange word where you expect a place to be. That word is *Finisterre*. It means "end of the Earth" and it was used by explorers to show the edges of the world as we knew them. As time went on and maps joined up, we stopped marking the edges because we stopped thinking there were any. Maybe that's because the edges that remain aren't between one place and another but between shadows and light, between monsters and ideas? Black Sand Beach was a town on the edge.

I'd been researching migration patterns of sheep for a story that went nowhere when I first discovered Black Sand Beach. After a night of fever dreams and week-old chicken wings, I awoke outside an abandoned lighthouse with nothing on my person but my wallet, keys, phone, passport, some gum, some other keys, and assorted detritus from my childhood bedroom that seemed to follow and haunt me wherever I went. I was at the edge of the world, if not physically, then at very least I was close enough to touch a supernatural energy that threatened to break through.

The sand under my nails was black and shimmering, the sky was green and felt darker during the day than at night. I wandered through what used to be a town, where now only a few houses stood. I began to wonder what had happened here, where all the people had gone.

Ghost stories are funny, they get whispered by children and written down by adults. Everyone knows which parts are true and everyone disagrees on which parts are made up. But isn't all truth just layers of story that we repeat enough times? What follows is a collection of tales from Black Sand Beach, from before the sand shifted and buried the whole place.

Richard Fairgray



BLOODY BETTY



Everything is louder in the dark. When the air is still and everyone is sleeping, when there's no traffic or chatter, no music playing, that's when the small sounds become the loudest. The sound of a dripping faucet, for instance. As you lay in bed and hear that *drip, drip, drip* from somewhere down the hall, it stops being a tiny annoyance in the back of your mind. It echoes to the front. It becomes the only sound you can hear.

When you hear that sound, the best thing you can do is roll on your side, close your mouth, and hope it really is just water.

A long time ago—back when Black Sand Beach was still a town, when people would go there on purpose rather than just wind up there and not be sure how, back when the lighthouse was meant to be on—there were a lot of shipwrecks. The sea is rough around the peninsula where the lighthouse is. The currents fight the rocks, and the energy of good and evil that bubbles below the surface makes for choppy waters. So for a lot of reasons, back when ships still tried to sail past, more than a few lives were lost.

Betty, her last name never recorded, was a young girl on one of those ill-fated ships. No more than ten or twelve years old when the waves took hold and began dragging the vessel toward the shore. Some sailors used to say the beach was hungry, the way the water would seem to wrap around the sides of a boat, like the tentacles of a squid, and draw it

toward shore. Many survivors talk about Black Sand Beach less as a place, and more as a sentient beast in the form of a town. Whether that were true or not, Betty's ship was lost.

If you see the wreckage now, if you are lucky enough to be in the dunes when the wind picks up and uncovers it, you'll see just one huge, gaping hole in the side. You'll see nothing of the chaos that happened within, when the crew first felt the pull of the beach.

Betty was in her cabin, in her bed, asleep; it was the middle of the night. Perhaps this is what kept her alive so much longer than the others. Her slumbering body was tossed with the first roll, her scalp was split open and any hope was sunk.

As the crew and passengers and cargo were thrown about, as people screamed and yelled and tried to find something to hold onto, Betty was simply swept up and away from the ship and the noise. Perhaps she was the first one to be bleeding, and the darkness of Black Sand Beach got a taste for her. This is all speculation, but she certainly was in the water for a lot less time than anyone else. Perhaps the ones who simply drowned were luckier.

The ship lurched sideways, the mast cracked, ropes turned from taut lines to flailing wet whips and everything not bolted down became a projectile that headed straight for any person still with their mouth above water. There were no survivors.

The ship slid ashore and, like a stomach that had been sliced down the side, spilled everything out before finally slumping into the sand, to slowly rot into nothing.

If you look inside the ship today, or what's left of it, you won't find any skeletons or broken crates. You won't see where the crew would sit and eat. Because the ship is empty. That one hole in the side was just the right size and shape for everything to fall right out. Standing inside the ship now feels like being in a balloon where all the air got let out but the rubber forgot to shrink. The wood, warped by time and tide, feels more like loose skin. There's a stillness inside, as if the life has been sucked right out, like marrow from a lamb bone.

The furniture, the clothes, the ropes, and the oars didn't make it to the beach. It was only the people who were eventually washed ashore. Every one of them had drowned. Every one of them had been awake, had struggled. Every one of them had fought the water and gasped for air as the cold salty sea filled their lungs. Every one of them had their eyes wide open for that last moment before they closed forever.

Every one of them . . . except Betty.

Betty came ashore first. No water had gone down her throat. She hadn't struggled or fought. Her head looked like the side of the ship. One huge, gaping hole packed with cracked and shattered bone, blood and brain where she'd struck that beam or wall, or whatever it was she hit. It was

impossible to know, because there was no sign of her blood inside the ship. Everything was washed right out.

Everyone was already dead when Betty woke up.

Betty stumbled around the beach, stepping over the corpses of sailors, the passengers, the people she'd known when there was still air in their lungs. Maybe the head wound was stopping her from thinking clearly, because all she thought to do was to try and wake one of them up.

Blood was pouring down her forehead, running into her eyes. Perhaps she couldn't see just how lifeless these men and women were. Maybe if she'd known she would have wandered into the town. Maybe she would have found someone who could have actually helped. Poor Betty, she just stayed on the beach.

She shook them by their shoulders. She pleaded with them to open their eyes. She begged for them to help her. None of them did. None of them could.

By the time Betty finally fell into the sand, she had spilled her blood on every single body there. If you saw it from above, you could tell exactly the direction she had walked by the drippings in the sand.

Betty's body, along with all the others, was buried in the cemetery at Black Sand Beach. It's not there anymore (or rather, it is, but you'll never find the bodies now that the woods have reclaimed the land). But even though her body is under the ground, Betty is still walking among us. Every

night, she wanders in the darkness, when it's still and quiet, looking for people who can wake up and help her.

Betty's head is still bleeding. The blood still pours over her eyes and drips onto whoever she tries to wake up. So, when you hear something dripping in the quietest part of the night, even if you think it's just a faucet down the hall, you must roll onto your side and close your mouth. Otherwise you might wake up choking on someone else's blood.

BURN IT ALL DOWN



When I was a little kid my grandmother told me a story about a man in the woods—a man who wanted to burn the whole world down. She said she met him when she was very young, and he'd scared her so much that she'd never gone back into the woods again.

My grandmother has lived in the same house for her whole life, a tiny little cabin, right next to the woods. Every day, when she gets up, she checks the thermostat on her wall, turns on the morning news, and watches the weather. Then she goes outside and stares up at the sky over the woods. Some days she looks worried, some days she looks relieved. She's always happier on the cooler days.

“Looks like he's still looking for a match,” she always says on the coldest winter mornings.

Maybe it's because my grandmother was so afraid of them, maybe it's because she said I am not allowed in there, but for whatever reason, the woods by her house have always fascinated me. They're so dark and unknown, and when I was a kid and I went to stay with my grandmother, I could hear the ocean, so close on the other side of the woods. The sound was broken up by the trees, and instead of crashing waves, it sounded like broken whispers.

All year long I've been looking forward to the summer break. I've had the worst teachers at school and my friends and I are always getting in trouble for stupid things. When I was in elementary school I'd really enjoyed myself, but

now I'm just bored all the time. I think that's the problem with getting older, you have to do more and more pointless things to fill your time. When you're a kid everything is new and exciting, but as you grow up it all just becomes the same. The same uniform. The same meal schedule. The same kids in the same classrooms getting the same answers wrong. But summer was going to be different, because my friends and I were going to have freedom to do whatever we wanted every minute of every day. That's why it was so unfair that my parents made me go to stay with my grandmother for the summer.

My mom said it was because of what happened with the principal's car, and because of what happened with the abandoned house on the corner of our street, and because of the thing with the cigarettes. My dad just said that my grandmother would be able to "sort me out."

Grandma was always tough, even back when I was a good little kid, when I didn't break the rules. She'd always been tough on me and told me she was keeping an eye out for any signs. Signs of what, I don't know. Grandma had always treated me like I was bad, even when I wasn't. She seemed so afraid that one day I would be.

I guess, according to my parents and my teachers, I am bad. I guess that means my grandma was right all along. Anyway, my dad thought she could fix me. So, instead of playing video games and reading books and hanging out

with my friends all summer, I'm stuck here at my grandma's stupid little cabin on the edge of the woods that according to her rules, I'm not even allowed to go into.

But that's the other thing about getting older—you start to realize that just because someone says something is a rule, that doesn't mean you have to follow it. For instance, it's always been a rule that I have to be in bed before 9 p.m., but that's when my grandma goes to sleep, so she doesn't know that now I turn the light back on five minutes later. It's also always been a rule that I'm not allowed to leave the house without telling her, but I've figured out that only matters if she finds out. So, just because it's a rule that I can't go into the woods, doesn't mean I don't.

Finally last night, I did it. I'd been cooped up in the house with her for almost a week and seen nothing but the same brown walls and dry grass in the front yard. I'd had enough of her strict schedule and healthy meals and chores upon chores upon chores. So at 9:07, I crept out of bed, past her room, out the door, and down the overgrown path behind the house. I guess my dad was better at following the rules than me, because from the height of the grass and how hard it was to see the path, I'd say no one had gone into the woods since my grandmother got scared all those years ago.

I kept my flashlight turned off until I was past a few rows of trees. I didn't want my grandmother being woken by the

light bouncing in her bedroom window. Getting caught before I even got to explore once would really suck.

The woods were exactly like I had always imagined. They were impossible, with tree trunks and branches and roots all coiling around each other so you couldn't tell which was which. One tree would twist into another and into another, and the canopy of leaves was so thick that you couldn't even see the sky above. It was like the trees were holding on to each other to stay upright because their roots couldn't hold in the sand below. I was climbing over one root and under another branch. I had to twist my body around to get by an old gnarled bough that was jutting right out in front of me, and as I did—for just a minute—I couldn't tell which way was up or down.

The sounds I remember from years ago were still there, the broken whispers, bouncing from tree to tree as the waves crashed onto the black sand on the other side of the woods. It was like the whole place was alive and talking to itself, each tree sending a message to another. It was colder there than I had thought it would be. It was the kind of cold you feel in your bones when you feel like you won't ever get warm again—I guess because the sun can't even get in to warm the place up.

After a while I couldn't tell which way I'd walked or which way I was going. It was so dark, the moon couldn't get through the canopy and a flashlight beam didn't go

very far when there are trees in every direction. The bouncing sound and winding tree trunks made me feel like I could be ten feet from the beach or lost in the middle of nowhere forever. Then I pushed past some vines and found a tiny clearing in the woods, with no trees and no canopy, just the black sand and a fallen log and a man sitting . . . shivering.

The man looked up at me. His eyes were old and tired, heavy lines ran down his face. His skin was gray and shiny, like it was being pulled a little too tight over the bones in his cheeks. When he opened his mouth to speak, the gray continued inside to his teeth and tongue. Maybe it was the moonlight. The light at Black Sand Beach has never seemed quite right to me, but if I hadn't been able to see the green leaves behind him, I might have thought I was looking at an old black-and-white photograph, not a living person who was really right there in front of me in the moment.

I can't tell you why, but I felt like I didn't need to be scared of this man. He was just someone else who had come to explore the woods, like me. It was as if we were both doing the same wrong thing, and we could trust each other.

“Hello.”

That was it. He just said, “Hello,” as if it was perfectly normal to see someone else in the woods.

“Hi,” I said back. He stared up at the dark sky and I felt

like I had to help him. I took my jacket off and handed it to him. I was cold, but he was shivering and it seemed like the right thing to do.

“What are you doing in the woods?” I asked.

“It seems like a good place to start a fire,” he said, wrapping my jacket around his shoulders. “These woods are old, they’re stuck, growing into themselves, repeating the same patterns of wood and sand that they always have. The only way for anything to be new is if it starts fresh. The world is the same. That’s why I’m going to burn it all down. I’ll start with these woods and then the rest of the world”

Then I felt colder than I had ever felt. My grandmother telling me about this man had always seemed so distant, so small, but here he was, stuck in the woods, looking for something new by burning it all down.

“Do you have a match?” he asked.

I ran. I wasn’t scared of him, he was old and frail, but I was scared. It was the kind of fear that you feel in your bones when you see something or hear something that just doesn’t seem right and you think nothing will ever feel right again. I don’t know how long I was pushing through the trees, but I ended up in my grandmother’s backyard covered in scrapes and cuts.

I caught my breath and decided to calm down with a cigarette. I’d already broken so many rules that I didn’t see what could be wrong with breaking one more—besides, it

was still hours 'til morning so there was no way my grandmother would smell it on me. I took the pack from the pocket of my jeans and fumbled around for my lighter. Just my luck, it was in my jacket, which I'd left in the woods with the cold man. I imagined my grandmother laughing about that and telling me it served me right.

The next morning I woke up and my grandmother was staring at the news; she looked worried. There was a cold front coming in from the ocean, the high for the day wouldn't be above fifty-five. I told her to cheer up, it was summer, after all. The thermostat on the wall said it was already eighty-three.

There's nothing better than a cold day that turns out to be glowing and warm.



JUST A SECOND

Charlie Malone had died, but just for a second.

It had happened when she'd been playing with her brother at the beach. They'd been running up to the edge of the water as each wave drew out, then fleeing for the high ground as the next one crashed ashore. The water was too rough for swimming at Black Sand Beach, so getting your feet a little wet was the next best thing.

Charlie's brother tells it like this. He was winning, keeping his feet dry every time, even though he was much braver and getting closer to the water before turning to run away. He was in the air, jumping toward the dry sand when he heard his sister cry out. She'd stepped in some softer, sludgier sand, and she toppled forward, into the water. A wave enveloped her and pulled her into the deeper water. Charlie's brother swears he saw her flip over six times before the next crash of the tide threw her limp body onto the beach.

Her brother ran over to help her. She wasn't breathing but her eyes were open. She was just staring up at the sky. That's when she died, but just for a second.

The doctors who saw her later said they'd never seen anything like it. Her brother said he actually saw her life leaving her body, but then she opened her mouth and drew it all back in in one breath.

Charlie had only lost a second, but she never managed to make up the time. She was always just a second too late, just a second off.

At 7 a.m. on the morning after the accident Charlie's alarm clock began to chime. It jolted her from her sleep and left her feeling shaken, as if she'd been pulled from deep sleep too suddenly. It left her a little queasy for most of the morning. The morning before, and every morning for as far back as Charlie could remember, she'd woken up just before the alarm was set to go off.

A few days later Charlie knocked a cup of hot chocolate with her elbow and by the time she reached out to grab it, the cup had already hit the floor.

Little things like this didn't matter so much. Not being the first one to get the right answer, coming in second in running races at school, almost getting caught by every closing door or gate, these were things that Charlie could deal with. But Charlie started to lose her friends.

The other kids thought it was weird the way Charlie would pause for a second when they said hello to her, or how there seemed to be a brief delay when she was talking, so she'd always overlap with someone by just a little bit. Teachers thought she was being rude.

Soon Charlie was eating her lunch all by herself every day.

It was a few months later that her parents decided to go back to the beach for the weekend. They knew Charlie had been having trouble in school and they thought a break might set things back to normal. Charlie's mother had no-

ticed how distant Charlie seemed now, but she couldn't put her finger on why. Sometimes when Charlie was sleeping she'd watch her and wonder why the daughter she used to love now made her feel so uncomfortable to be around. The difference was imperceptible. Her mother could never have found the words to say how strange it was that the sound of her snoring no longer lined up with the sight of her breathing in and out.

Charlie's father, who had always been a quiet and thoughtful man, found it troubling the way Charlie would trip on things one or two steps after her foot hit them. He found himself wanting to yell at her to snap out of it, and he didn't like feeling that irritated at his own daughter, so instead he kept his distance too.

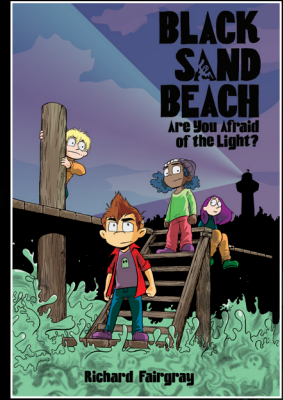
Charlie's brother used to have a lot of fun throwing things at Charlie, but now the way she didn't try and block them until they'd already hit her just made the game feel sad.

So, maybe that's why they weren't really paying attention, because they no longer wanted to. Charlie was playing on the edge of the water again, her pant cuffs soaked through from every wave that she ran ashore with. They looked up just in time to see a much bigger wave about to crash down on her. They called out to warn her, and if she'd moved just a second faster she would have been all right. Charlie Malone died. And it was forever, because there's no such thing as only dying for a second.

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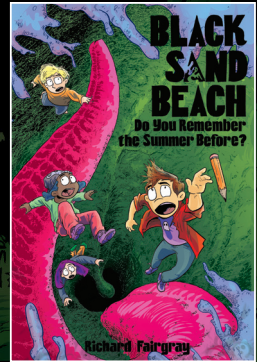


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