46 Don’t look now.

As I grandmother I am acutely aware of the great responsibility I have towards my grand-daughters’ safety whilst in my care. How far to let them stray, court danger or flirt with adventure; how to teach them to successfully take risks, yet learn to take responsibility for their own actions? Little did I know that a human disaster had us in its sights and an imminent tragedy was already planned to poise and strike.

That Sunday started out no differently to all the rest. The girls, excited as usual, the weather as balmy as May. The morning had been spent gambolling through the woods, kicking and jumping; excited chatter about Halloween in our thoughts. Leaves had been piled and stored ready for the bonfires to come.

“Can we go to the beach later Grandma? Oh please – it’ll probably be the last time for ages” pleaded Isla.

My usual moans of ‘*not having a spare change of clothes’* and ‘*you will get too wet’* quickly pushed aside in the erupting excitement surrounding a late autumn visit to the coast.

“You’re not going in the sea though” I said.

“No, we’ll only play football and maybe paddle in the stream” said Emma.

“By paddle you mean get yourself soaking wet”, I chuckled.

“No of course not Grandma”.

They laughed.

“Have you got a game for us today Grandma?”

“OK – let’s see who can come up with the best word to describe the sea?” adding after a pause, “and, I have a prize”.

“Oh Grandma, you’re funny; always making us think stuff up” replied Emma grinning, already returned to her iPad, with the ease of wrapping a new baby in a warm blanket; oblivious to the ordinary world, now enmeshed with her sister in whimsical ‘on-line’ adventures.

No surprise to find our favourite North coast resort almost as busy as summer when we arrived; the car park three quarters full. The brisk café and pub trade alive with many late visitors, making the most of this last, mild Sunday afternoon before winter stormed in. Clans’ picnicked; some fished in the lazy river that meanders down the southern end of the beach. Others sat and watched as sandcastles were built, cricket, football or Frisbee played on the vast sands; a million miles from the churning sea. The sea looked far away; the Autumn solstice displayed its signature low tide. Straining my eyes, I could still see a few black dots amidst the swirling white foam. In the past I would have attributed this to reckless visitors, but even the locals, now more than ever themselves prone to indulge in this more recent all-weather pursuit of chasing ‘the perfect wave’. No longer could we locals adopt a superior stance over the ‘emmets’.

The golden gift, given as a summers day dressed in autumnal glory, deceived and soothed us. The bare beach, newly washed by the daily replenishing tide, had not a whiff of winter woes. A scintillating sight, the sea had whipped the waves into an orgasmic frenzy; keeping her rage bottled up underneath. So far out, the usual Atlantic roar was snuffed out by the happy and excited hollers and shouts all round, as families remained hell bent on squeezing the last pleasurable ounce from the jaws of the Autumn day. Abandoned empty life-guard huts stood alone, facing the tempestuous ocean. With statistics of 2.38 deaths per 100,00 annually, surfing beaches failed to be required to provide patrols in the off-seasons.

A salty taste smacked my lips and the wind wreaked havoc with my hair. Ice-cream flavours mingled with burgers and chips, carried to my nostrils on the wild and tangy air. The wind whipped up into unexpected pockets; amidst excited cries and chatter.

We played football. Weaving and darting around in earnest – as important as any cup game – the girls in full flow. Dextrous and skilful. I marvelled at their passing, and ability to sidestep and go around me. I felt fit, but the girls played cannily. Nifty footwork, accurate headers, enviable football skills. They enthralled me. Inheriting their Grandads innate talent, they showed off their agility with ease.

“Goal” said Isla, flinging a regulatory, celebratory high five to her sister.

I collapsed laughing and exhausted as the girls piled on top of me in an unruly heap, shrieking and yelping, enjoying this gifted, unexpected day.

“Catch us, Grandma - if you can” they taunted.

We ran, chased and frolicked. Oh, happy day.

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Like an electrical fault the sunshine cut itself off, taking refuge behind an ominous black cloud, which had stalked the bay with uncanny precision, snuffing out the light. Isla clamped her hands over her ears; a huge black bird with giant wings whirred above our heads. The noise deafened us. Circling the cliffs, intruding on our afternoon privacy; before landing like a butterfly close to the shore.

Another red whopper roared in.

Then a third. A fanfare.

The girls’ ecstatic.

“We’ve never seen a helicopter up close and now there’s three. Can we go and see Grandma?” asked Emma

“Please, please?” joined in Isla.

Rotors now quietened. Everything stalled. The birds fell silent. The wind slowed. The children’s shouts dwindled. The dogs stopped barking. A hush descended like an unexpected eclipse. Everyone stood still. Families became shapes as people huddled together; unsure, wavering. In the vast sandy expanse before us, morbidity descended like a dead bird falling from the sky. Onlookers beat an ordered retreat, both forwards to the sea, and backing away from it; in equal measure. Curiosity for some; for others a protective shield away from the events unfolding further down by the shore.

“C’mon Grandma”. Isla tugged my sleeve. “Let’s go and see”.

“No, don’t look now” I said, for I could see parcels covered in blankets by the shoreline. Other figures were silhouetted against the now darkening sky, close to the helicopters. No black dots in the sea now. Only a wavering ladder from a single helicopter, lifting a black shape from the sea.

“Has someone died?” asked Emma.

“Don’t look now” I repeated in vain as they moved nearer the shoreline; curiosity winning. I didn’t know for sure but feared the worst. The biggest hazard known to all surfers worldwide is death by drowning in a rip current. With the tide so far out and the wide sand channels exposed beneath the cliffs, a rip current would seem the most likely explanation for the unfolding tragedy.

As we got closer I could see then, the once benign sea, baring its angry teeth; surging, tossing, heaving; a savage mess of frothy liquid spewing forth bile; swallowing up the innocent, playing with the bodies, tearing limbs apart, tossing them back in disgust; where they lay as immovable black objects to be collected like other flotsam and jetsam, deposited daily on the sand.

The three of us stood motionless beside the raging sea, deep in thought; aware only of our arms around each other, giving comfort, touching; surety in familiarity and normality, wanting to revert to a normal world, but unable to do so. Our cheeks and eyes stinging, we moved back in silence; the comfort of the café awaited. Normality and safety, but memories still fresh in our minds. We sat in silence for a while sipping welcome hot coffee, no words spoken, the desire to recharge, uppermost in all our thoughts.

“Grandma, I’ve thought up a word to describe the sea. It’s like the foam in my coffee – see – it’s frothy like my cappuccino. I shall remember the cappuccino sea forever.

“Very good” I said. “You win the chocolate flake”.

“I don’t think I want it” she replied. “It will always remind me of this horrid day when I saw a dead body hanging in the air.”

“But you love chocolate” said Emma.

“Not today. I don’t like chocolate today. And I’ll stay away from a cappuccino sea. Always. Why weren’t there any lifeguards today? Or flags? We always have to swim between the flags,”. Isla knew this.

“Maybe they can put up the red flags all the time when there are no life-guards. But do you think those who are searching for adventure and the ‘perfect wave’ will obey them? Do you think we can always protect people from danger? It would cost too much money to have a lifeguard out of season to save one or two lives, against the lives which may be improved for hundreds through the provision of other local services”. I hoped I had convinced them. Isla had the last word on the subject, surprising me with the astute observations of a maturing nine-year old.

“I shall never go in a cappuccino sea, and I don’t understand why anyone else would want to either. Maybe grown-ups just need to need to be a bit more responsible. Like you’re always telling us. Anyone could see how angry the sea was, and how dangerous. Don’t look now, you said Grandma, but you can’t protect us for ever.