

Lily Banks sat on a bench overlooking the little harbour that made her town so pretty. Charlie, a wiry terrier of the type so beloved by elderly folk, pulled at the leash, not wanting his walk to be halted this soon but Lily was tired. She remembered a time when she had run for an hour with the dog of the day but that was long ago. Now she paid the price in burning hip joints when she walked or even sat for too long.

Sleep was an odd visitor these days, catching her unaware in the most embarrassing of places. She would nod off anywhere, any time but rarely in the bedroom. She could sleep now, just place her arms on the picnic table and put her head down. So tempting. Charlie, who Lily thought had a well developed mind-reading ability, jumped up and dug his sharp little claws into her knees, right on cue. "I'm up Charlie!" she exclaimed and stood once more.

Together they walked down the grassy incline to the shore. Wavelets crept in and out, begging for a playmate. Lily released Charlie and watched him splash in the shallow depths. The little dog pranced up and down happily as Lily made her slow progress on the shore beside him. Every now and then, he raced over and shook himself vigorously, generously sharing the sea water with his mistress. Lily wished Ed would walk the dog sometimes, then, in mid glower, remembered that Ed had been dead and gone for ten years. Indeed, he'd never known Charlie who'd been adopted as a companion by the lonely and newly widowed Lily. How could she have forgotten, even momentarily, that Ed was gone? Was this the beginning of dementia, she wondered, not for the first time.

They walked on, the sun beating down with increased intensity as they did so. Lily looked back to see how far they'd come. Behind her, a wandering line of footprints in the sand was slowly being erased by the incoming tide. Lily's thoughts turned to the fragility of things, how quickly lives, like footprints, could be washed away into oblivion. She chided herself for the bleakness of her thoughts and searched instead for a stick to throw for Charlie. He danced excitedly as she found and threw a piece of skeletal driftwood into the sea foam. Lily didn't throw it far as she had a dreadful fear of Charlie swimming out and being taken by a shark. She knew it was highly unlikely; indeed, there had never been a shark attack in the harbour – or at least, not within her memory. But still the fear persisted. Her own children had swum in the harbour as youngsters and she had not been as afraid for them as she was for Charlie. 'Perhaps', she thought, 'old age makes one more nervous about everything.'

It was not a new thought.

Behind her she could hear voices and turned to see what was happening. On the beach close to where she had been sitting, a small crowd of people stood talking excitedly. "Call an ambulance!" one shouted.

"It's on its way." A different voice this time. Lily stared but could not see what or who was at the centre of the small crowd. Charlie turned around and barked shrilly. He began to run back to the people and Lily hastened to catch him. She clipped the lead onto his harness and made her way back to a bench. "We'll stay here Charlie," she told him firmly. "If someone's hurt, they won't appreciate you running in for a look see."

Along the highway came the sound of an emergency vehicle. Lily could never pick between the various sirens but presumed this one was the ambulance as the depot was very close. She watched

with interest as the paramedics parked on the grassy incline then made their way down to the group.

Two police officers pulled up behind the ambulance and walked briskly over to the growing mob. They began to move people on. The original mob, feeling a vested interest as they had been first on the scene, were most reluctant to be moved on but moved they were. As they straggled off, Lily saw a paramedic draw a green sheet over someone on the stretcher. Lily wondered who the person was. She'd lived in this town for many years, knew nearly all families here. Unless it was a visitor, she'd most likely know them. What happened – did someone collapse, were they killed, body washed ashore – what?! There were many dangerous rips along this stretch of the coastline and drownings were almost a regular event in summer. Often too, the victims were unwitting tourists who underestimated or had little knowledge of local conditions.

The paramedics tilted the stretcher and slid it into the ambulance. Unfortunately, the angle of the tilt caused the sheet to slide and Lily saw a familiar face. She stared numbly at the still figure.

The door closed and the vehicle drove slowly off, no hurry now. A small dog, leash trailing, ran behind the vehicle barking hysterically. Someone wondered aloud if the dog belonged to the victim.

Along the shoreline, the last of Charlie's footprints succumbed to the tide and the beach returned to its pristine smoothness. It was as though no-one had ever walked there.