‘Blinking, not drowning’

'What's he up to?' muttered Ted, lowering the binoculars.

'Don't know' responded Mary, distracted. She was opening an egg-and-cress sandwich and the packet was proving tougher than she had anticipated.

After a brief pause Ted muttered to himself again.

'Nutter.'

The man was standing on the beach, facing out to sea. He had been there when Ted and Mary had pulled up in their car on the promenade, about half an hour earlier. He stood still and upright, maintaining his seaward gaze. Or at least so Ted assumed, having sight only of the back of his head.

Ted shifted in his seat. The car was parked on the prom above the beach. To Ted and Mary’s left was a sward of grass. Between the nose of the car and the beach was a wide sloping path, along which ran iron railings. Directly below the railings was a six-foot drop, but every so often concrete steps allowed access down to the sand.

Ted and Mary drove here most days during the week. They would sit in the car sharing a flask of milky coffee and looking out at the sea. There was always something happening to keep them busy – ships on the horizon, canoeists in the water, the sea either particularly choppy or glassily calm.

They didn’t come at weekends, for that was when the town filled up with temporary visitors, leaving the city for a taste of salty air and sunshine. Even now, in mid-April, the beach
was moderately busy. A few late Easter holiday makers were arranged on the beach behind windcheaters, mothers and fathers trying to absorb whatever heat the sun was able to offer when it emerged from the clouds, children larking about nearby.

Some children were playing near the man, who stood fifteen metres or so from the edge of the waves’ break. Plastic spades and buckets were being used to make castles and other sculptures in the sand. One pair of children had dug a ditch from the sea itself up to an elaborate castle-and-moat structure. The water so far only made it half-way up the ditch, but as the tide came in the channel was increasingly inundated with foamy brine.

The father had shouted a few times, when one of the children had got too close to the man, who continued to stand still, apparently oblivious to all around him. The father had observed that the man was about his height and build, probably his age too. He was not close enough to see what the man was doing.

One of the children, a boy, was rebuilding the ditch at the sea’s edge and sensing how quickly the tide was moving in. The boy looked up at his mother and father and across at his younger sister, who was patting the sides of the castle to make them firmer. He then looked over at the strange man. The man’s eyes were open. Every so often the man blinked but otherwise his face was impassive. The wind occasionally moved the man’s hair, but aside from this he was motionless. He just stood there, staring.

The boy wondered if he should do anything. Who was this man, and why had he been standing so still for so long? The boy did not remember him being there when the family had arrived mid-morning. But perhaps he was there, and had always been.

Now, the sea was coming in at a fair pace. The man was perhaps ten metres from where the waves were lapping. He did not seem to notice.
The boy had a thought. Perhaps he might build a channel cutting across, at ninety degrees from the ditch. The channel would pass in front of where the man stood. Perhaps he could stop the water getting to the man, if he made the ditch deep enough.

He struck out, digging at the sand with his plastic spade. He carried the line of the ditch across, parallel to the encroaching tide. Soon he was nearly as far as the man. But the sea was coming in too quickly. It started to overtop the small ditch. As the water drew back, the boy could see that the ditch had been largely rubbed out. All that was left of his efforts was a shallow impression in the wet sand. Another wave would rub it out entirely.

The boy tried to build another line, a foot or so in from his first attempt. But he was getting closer to the man, and did not want to be too close. The man appeared not to notice, however. He just stood there, regardless.

The boy heard a shout. It was his father, coming towards him.

‘James, we have to go.’

The father was talking to the boy, but was looking at the man. The man did not move but remained still.

Reluctantly the boy abandoned his defences, and allowed himself to be shepherded back up the beach. With the tide coming in, the mother had started to pack the bags. The father pulled out the windcheaters, while the mother got the children dressed in their shoes.

Ted and Mary had been watching all this: Ted through his binoculars, Mary squinting through the windscreen. Neither could hear what was going on, but both got the general idea.
The family packed up and were starting to trudge up the beach. They were going to find somewhere in the town to get some lunch.

The man remained where he was.

The water was now at his toes. He was barefoot, but wore jeans and a tee shirt. The tee shirt was white, with red stripes. The sun, when it was not behind clouds, hit his bare arms which hung limply to his side.

‘I’m going to stretch my legs’, said Ted, opening the driver’s door and stepping out with his binoculars still in his hand. Leaving Mary to her sandwich and closing the car door, Ted walked over to the iron railings. Just to his left, the family were climbing the concrete steps. The father, last in the line, looked back at the man.

The water was now lapping in and out between the man’s feet. It was getting as high as his ankles and the bottom of his jeans. He did not move.

Ted leant against the railing, and raised the binoculars to his eyes. No doubt about it, the man had no intention of moving. He was stood still, facing the sea.

By now, a few other people were standing next to Ted. A woman on her way back from town stood there with her shopping bags.

‘I wonder what he’s up to?’ she said.

Ted acknowledged her, and carried on looking. A couple walking a dog had stopped. The dog was on an extendable lead and sniffed around at the edge of the railings. The couple were looking out at the man, who now had water up to his knees.
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‘He’ll want to move soon,’ said one of the couple to the other. All four of them were perplexed.

Now the sea was up to the man’s waist. He was clearly finding it difficult to stay upright.

‘Do you think we should call someone?’ the woman with the shopping bags asked.

‘Perhaps he’s going swimming,’ said the woman with the dog said.

‘He’s been there for ages,’ said Ted.

The water was now knocking the man to and fro, the power of the waves making him temporarily lose his footing. In and out the water came, continuing to rise up the beach. The man stood there, but each time the wave drew back he was knocked about, causing him to lose his footing.

‘Hey – what are you doing?’ the man with the dog shouted. But it was a futile gesture. The wind carried the noise away, and the man in the water showed no signs of having heard.

By now the water was up to his arms. It lapped about the red stripes on his tee shirt. Each wave over topped his head as it came in, and drew him back as it pulled out. Yet the man maintained his gaze out to sea, despite being slowly swallowed by the water.

‘He must be just going for a swim,’ said the woman with the shopping bags.
At this point, as if to prove her right, a wave hit the man in his face. Briefly, he could not be seen. The water had completely covered him. His head reappeared, but that was all that was visible of him now.

'We'll call the coastguard,' said the man with the dog, and he and his wife walked away.

The man, still trying to stand, was no longer able to. He was floating. But he had no desire to float.

His head, still staring, was slowly slipping beneath the water.

Ted, looking in his binoculars, gave out a gasp.

The man’s head re-emerged and then sank again. But his eyes were still blinking.