

Bourne toWrite...

creative writing
workshops

Silence

by Richard Lewis

Silence is so worthy of suspicion. You just never know where it might take you...

Like the old sailor's adage "calm comes before the storm", we seem programmed to expect the worst when silence descends.

With Reggie, a quiet man who rarely spoke unless spoken to, there were occasions when a stillness came over him and from within that silent self, you could feel the tension build.

He would start to shake, then all of a sudden shout out "WATCH IT" or "LOOK OUT" at the same time ducking and pointing with his index finger toward an imaginary threat from above.

Reggie was in his late sixties, short, rotund with a small round head. He bobbed along in the shallow, back-waters of life, looking ship shape, rigging all intact.

When he was just seventeen at the start of world war two, Reggie joined the Royal Navy as a gunner. An anxious young man, not equipped to cope with the rigours of life at sea, never mind attacks from the air. On convoy in the English Channel, he knew it was coming and waiting was the worst. His ship the Prince of Wales suddenly came under attack from German fighters. Reggie, though terrified, did his duty, sending up threads of tracer shells, desperately trying to take out the enemy.

The next moment there was a sickening, rumbling explosion from below. The ship, hit by torpedo, lurching up at an impossible angle. One minute his petty officer mate was standing beside him, the next he lay dead as one of those dolphins beached on Cardigan Bay. Slain by a stray slither of flying metal.

Within minutes the ship had capsized, sending Reggie down into the deeps. Somehow, thanks to taking a last second lungful of air, he managed to resurface and was one of the few to be picked up by a following frigate.

The attack over, safe in the wings of the sister ship, he started to shake uncontrollably. Arms flying about and his head rolling like a dingy in a storm. He had survived and yet on that day, as surely as the ship had been holed below the surface, so he'd taken a devastating hit deep within his being. He would never be the same. Reggie was invalidated out of the service, suffering from what was then known as shell shock. He would spend the rest of his days in psychiatric care. A shadow of his former self.

Silence had become a mask for the terror and fury locked inside him.