Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

Water Music

by Francesca Ryan

All my boys are home. My husband is writing, grandma is playing patience, counting the time till David her favourite arrives. He has her cigarettes; she's already down two schooners of Harvey's Bristol cream. I love to hear the boys playing. Soothes my nerves. And my nerves are bad tonight. It's fifteen years since we lost our youngest. Little Dicky, the sweetest natured of them all. There he is, in his sailor suit. Tell me, did you ever see such a bonny lad? But life goes on, the brothers grow up, the music plays on.

But it hurts my heart tonight. I know Bill will be thinking of him. But he buries himself in his endless letters to the council, about the new council housing estate down the road. We don't know who'll be coming in, he says. Riff-raff from east London, most likely. But people need homes, I say. Families like ours. He just lights another tab. Does the music soothe his heart, or pierce it like mine? Does he even have a heart? Perhaps if we'd had a daughter.

It wasn't his fault, the accident. Dickie loved to go swimming. He and his friend Peter used to go with Bill to the reservoir. Bill likes to fish, and he always kept an eye on the two of them. Until he didn't. Peter wasn't a strong swimmer everyone knew that. And Dickie was. He saved Peter, but the water took him instead.

Bill had a hard war. Doesn't talk about it much. Three years in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. It would unravel anyone. He didn't cry when Dickie died, I did it for us both. Howling in the garden. I think it embarrassed him more than anything. Has his heart died? And why are the boys practising Handel's Water Music right now?

I'm going to go into the garden in a minute. While the potatoes are boiling. No howling. Just a cigarette to numb the feeling. Sometimes I wish one of the other boys had died instead. Is that terrible of me? But I loved my first born so much. You never get over it, never.

Grandma knows. But like mother like son. Cut of the same cloth as my husband. I could have died of grief, but I didn't. I'm still alive. But only just. Only on the surface. I'm waiting. To be with Dickie again one day. One day.