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Lost Words

by Richard Lewis

Jimmy had learnt his lesson well. He knew that words were dangerous and to be spoken only with extreme caution. Seen and not heard, were the watch words in the unforgiving hallways of his childhood. Mother's fat rule book sat firmly on his tongue. Others might speak with bullet proof certainty but Jimmy could only fire duds. The words never came out right, so were best not said.

Sometimes he would forget himself, allowing a few syllables to escape, like hapless felons, fleeing a bank robbery, the police waiting outside ready to pounce. Words ricochet inside his head like a pin ball searching for the jackpot, only to be rejected and disqualified, as if he'd nudged the tilt mechanism.

On rare occasions he'd consider launching a short sentence across the dinner table, or into the solid air of the classroom. Usually they never passed the inner censor but even if they did, by the time they left his mouth they'd already be out of date. His lips having missed the moment, the utterings made no sense. Jimmy watched them fall like a cloud of bewildered bats, unable to relaunch themselves.

When asked a question that demanded a reply, he felt extreme discomfort and would usually respond by shrugging his shoulders. When pushed further, a whispered sentence might fall from his reluctant lips. "Speak up Jimmy", his teacher would say. "I can't hear you, cat caught your tongue". This would only drive Jimmy further into himself.

He would think, if only I could untangle myself and let the words flow, like the way I run through fields or ride along the dusty tracks, stones flying from under the bicycle tyres as freedom called.

As an adult little changed in the speaking department, but he married Fay, who seemed to have all the right words and accepted Jimmy and his silent self. She could speak for both of them.

Jimmy wondered if one day the dam might burst, releasing the lost words in a torrent, like a flood of alphabet soup. Yet he knew that his resistance to speaking had been hard wired into him and couldn't really imagine being different. He thought, that would not be me, I'd have to be another me. As the years passed, he came to accept himself and found peace. Jimmy no longer felt he had anything to prove.