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## Lost Words

by Garf Collins

Joe opened his eyes and in that moment of lucidity felt the restriction of many tubes and sensors attached to his body. He shifted the oxygen mask, which was pressing into his eyes and managed to see the display of his heartbeat. Very weak and inconsistent. He remembered that he was dying of a rare autoimmune disease. *Pathetic*, he thought, *just one more of my many failures. Now my immune system is consuming my own body.*

“Hello, Joe. Glad you're awake. Time for your injection,” said a cheerful voice.

“Oh! Nurse. Did you tell him? Is he coming?”

“Yes. He's on his way. He'll be here in twenty minutes or so. Now relax. You shouldn't be trying to lift yourself up.

After the nurse had finished, Joe lay back - now too agitated to relax. He thought about his son Stephen. *I must let him know how proud of him I am. It's so terrible the way I've always put him down and pooh-poohed his achievements.*

“It's his mother's fault,” he said out loud. “She was always praising him and telling me that he had achieved this, won that, gone to uni, got a first, started a successful business etc. etc.”

Before he slipped into unconsciousness again, he thought, *I suppose I was jealous of her fixation and took the opposite view. Always too faint with my praise and absent with any encouragement. But despite us both, he has succeeded. Before I go, I must tell him how proud I am of him and how much I love him, even though I haven't been able to show it.*

Joe was awakened by a gentle shake off his arm. A familiar voice said, “Dad. Dad. I came as quickly as I could. Mum said you wanted to say something to me.”

Joe opened his eyes and recognised his son Steven. He lifted his oxygen mask and struggled to right himself in the bed.

Steven – son. So glad you've come..... I wanted to say..... I just wanted to tell you..... that..... that..... I always.....

Joe subsided into the mattress, and Stephen watched with despair as the trace of his heartbeat sank down to a simple straight line.