


# The Words Unsaid



## Matthew James Friday

As Far As She Knows

I keep Mom's school pencil case  
tribute to her best efforts in school.  
Her contribution to family legends:  
Scoring 1% in a short hand exam.

Pencil case from New Zealand  
stacked strips of kiwi timbers:  
*kahikatea, rimu, matai, totara, pukatea,*  
*kauri*, and *rewarewa sovereign*. Each

She's forgotten what *F16* means.  
As far as she knows, the case  
is from Great Aunt Vera, 1950's émigré,  
unmarried Auckland Post Office worker  
for over twenty-two years. 1992  
the last mention in my grandmother's  
photo books, the family encyclopaedia.  
Then forgotten, nothing left to write.

name a caramel chew of vowels,  
deepening orange to chocolate,  
brown sinewy, one speckled stone,  
the last darkly regal zebra brands.

Post-war case measures in inches,  
hinges open at one end with a creak,  
apologizing for offering two tubular  
slits, room only for writing tokens.

Mum remembers splinters of life:  
Pencil case her daily companion  
in Cheam County Secondary School.  
Her name and *F16* scratched on the back.

Tea and Biscuits

The day started with Radio 4:  
the UK Theme bouncing through  
history, pomp, myths, naval jaunts;  
then the Shipping Forecast deluding  
me into dreaming I could float off  
somewhere other than school. Mum  
served her motherhood: a cup of tea  
and two biscuits, usually digestives,  
my favourite, slightly soppy when wet.

Rich Tea biscuits if supplies were low.  
Crunchie Creams at the weekend.  
The real treat was sitting with me  
while I soggily surfaced to face the facts:  
walk to school, few friends, grow older  
leave school, home, Mum. Every day  
for years she arrived, sat by my bedside.  
Not much to say, nothing new, sipping  
the same tea with me, dunking biscuits.

Tin Cup Letter Love

Unable to speak the words  
I l-o-v-e y-o-u-  
Mum spelt it out using  
plastic letters from a tin cup.

She taught me to read at  
our kitchen table in Norwich  
months before the big move  
south and starting school.

One by one, I lucky dipped  
brightly coloured phonemes,  
chewy sounds in my mouth.  
I learned the tastes quickly

and my appetite grew. Words,  
sentences, pages, whole books.  
By the time I started school  
I was insatiable, the tin cup

overflowing with enthusiasm.  
A lover of reading, Mum  
started me with the second-best  
replacement to spoken affection.

Years on, still searching in books,  
I understand Mum's spelling  
difficulties: post-War parents  
who fumbled parental sentences.

the key words of life self-taught.  
I wish I could return to happy  
kitchen days before school with  
Mum and her tin cup of love.

When he heard his mother had died,  
Dad went out  
for a walk across the Common.  
Alone. He *never* went out alone.  
*I may be some time*, left unsaid  
by the crunch of the closing door.

My brother and I sat stunned  
by our Captain's private grief,  
afraid he would not come back  
from the cold, unsure what to say  
when he did, the British family of few  
words and polar denial. We imagined

him walking alone, bitten by those final  
decaying hospital bed memories,  
trudging through the mud-filled meadows,  
dripping trees, birds quietened, deer  
hidden. I suspected fury and wailing:  
curses and tears for Old Gods,

his mind whitening with acceptance.  
Our Oates came back dry, tears tidied  
away, the farewell to his mother packed  
up with only oak and silver birch as witness.  
Mum made tea and chocolate biscuits.  
We sat together quietly on the settee.