

# “THREE LITTLE WORDS”



## Hang On In

Ann's trouble began, as serious things sometimes do, with something trivial. An earache that would not go away. It was a weekend, and she decided to live with it until Monday.

Anyone who has had earache knows the pain can be surprisingly levelling. When paracetamol failed to touch it, she went to the local hospital. The doctor who examined her was not unduly concerned. Earwax, he said. Take some over-the-counter painkillers. See your GP on Monday if it hasn't settled.

Perhaps the discharge from Ann's ear was a sign that something else was happening. But Monday never came. At least not for Ann. For her family, and for the medical staff caring for her, it was a day of urgent decisions. Sepsis had taken hold. She was placed into an induced coma.

She remained there for two months.

I asked Ann what being in a coma was like. At first she couldn't tell me. I probed further asking what she thought when she first woke up. She recalled hearing the steady beep of the patient monitor from time to time as she drifted in and out of consciousness. She thought, "well that's interesting, I'm still alive." The first voice she could hear was that of a male nurse, somewhere in the room, saying quietly to no one in particular: It's a miracle.

Those three words became, for several days, something close to a mantra. Ann felt, she told me, as though she had been chosen. As though she had come back from somewhere others sometimes do not.

The reality, of course, was that there were still months of work ahead. Ann had to learn to walk again. She had to learn to communicate without her voice, which eventually returned. The sepsis left her with some ongoing difficulties, but doctors would eventually call it a full recovery.

When she told me the story, there was no drama in the telling. Just a simple account of what had happened. But I have thought about those three words many times since.

Who knows what might have happened had the nurse not said them? They were not, in all likelihood, intended for Ann at all. Most probably they were simply the private expression of someone who had spent weeks caring for a patient, watching and waiting, and who had just watched her come back. An exhalation. A small private relief.

And yet they mattered. Enormously.

We have a tendency, in the ordinary run of things, to stop noticing the people around us. They are there, day after day, until one day they are not. There is an old saying, the kind that sounds like a cliché until you sit with it, that recognition is something babies cry for and grown men die for.

It carries more truth than is comfortable.

Some years ago I read about a writer who had decided to end his life. On the day he had chosen, he made himself a private bargain. If no one on the journey acknowledged him, no eye contact, no nod, no small sign of recognition from a stranger, he would go through with it. If someone did, he would turn around and go home. Somewhere along the way, a fellow commuter caught his eye and nodded.

That was enough.

The rule of three, beloved of speechwriters and marketers, has an odd power that goes beyond rhetoric. It bypasses something in us. Roots itself deeper than we expect.

**Yes you can** might be precisely what a student needs to hear at the moment they are about to give up.

**I've got you** can hold a friend together through the end of a relationship or the beginning of something frightening.

And then there are the three words that have meant more, in more languages, over more centuries, than any others.

**I love you.**

We all have the capacity to see one another. Not in the literal sense of sight, but in the older, more deliberate sense of the word: to notice, to recognise, to mark someone's presence in the world.

It costs nothing. It is, in the end, rather close to everything.

### **A Moment To Reflect**

Think of someone in your life who is simply there, day after day, so familiar that you may have stopped truly seeing them. What three words might you offer them this week, and what do you imagine it would mean to that person to hear them?

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