

**Bourne**  
**toWrite...**  
creative writing  
workshops

## Last Words

by Ivor John

It was a very plain, handwritten document, sealed with a single staple in a recycled A5 buff envelope. Rev McCauley, St Saviours written above the crossed through address, Oakland Care. The forms were obviously photocopied, many times so that the text was faded.

'Please complete with residents family and return to the admin office asap following bereavment'.

'Residents Name' Patrick Palmer. The form had been completed by one of the carers and the handwriting, in blue felt pen, was difficult to read. It could be made out with some effort. A guide, to writing an obituary for residents who had died. Three pages, divided into boxes, which apart from biographical information, which you would expect. Surviving Partner, Children, Grandchildren, with a small box after each.

The small section of the third page, inviting the family to provide stories or anecdotes had been completed by the care home staff. A brown ring showing that a mug of tea or coffee had been put down on it. 'Patrick was a very popular resident, who made many friends during the two and a half years living at The Oakland Care Centre. He enjoyed his jigsaws, reading the papers and watching the television in the lounge. He particularly liked quiz shows, and often got the answers before anyone else. He always enjoyed and looked forward to visits from his family'

There was no narrative in the box 'deceased biography', but in the same blue pen, there were some bullet points. 'Wife Angela died three years ago, when he moved into Oaklands'. 'Worked on railways as a track engineer'. Daughter Susan, two grandchildren, Kyle and Josh'.

The funeral service was on Tuesday next week. A few days to write a suitable eulogy. It didn't trouble Simon too much that there was so little on the form. There was a time, when he would have tried to phone a family member. To offer his support, he found that when face to face with death, in bereavement, even non believers would often find comfort in his spirituality. The power of the clerical collar.

Nowadays, the care homes, from where most of his work came, would often decline to give him contact details in case they broke some disclosure rules. No, he would go with what he had. He could add a psalm and a religious passage. An optimistic was generally preferred nowadays he observed. Funerals he found, were more cheerful affairs than they used to be. The emphasis now on celebrating a life rather than mourning a death.

He was used by a few of the local undertakers, looking for a reliable C of E service. He could be relied on not to go on for too long. It caused them problems if the service over-ran the twenty five minute time slot in the crematorium chapel. As well the £199 fee was always useful, since he had been forced to give up his parochial responsibilities. He got more for a graveside service, but they were few and far between.

Sitting down at the small desk, he picked up his fountain pen, an old Parker cartridge pen, he had been given it by his parents when he had graduated from Birmingham University with a first in theology and religion. Lacking the charisma of the evangelicals or the ambition for the church of England, he had enjoyed a modest career as a parish vicar. He had a short secondment as Archdeacon in a city parish, but had never felt comfortable with the ruthlessness required and had requested to return to rural ministry.

The service in remembrance of Patrick had been fairly well attended he thought. His eulogy, short as it was, seemed to be sufficient. One or two of the mourners had thanked him for his words. Patrick's daughter hadn't attended, which was unusual. He had understood from Oaklands that she lived reasonably locally. She had visited him a few times. One of Patrick's cousins asked him if we would come to the wake. He never enjoyed doing so, but felt it was expected from him. He wouldn't stay long.

He found the address, a semi-detached house perhaps ten minutes drive. There were around twenty people there he thought. He recognised Shirley the manager of Oaklands and chatted with her for a while. He responded politely to cousins and friends who one by one came to speak to him. He didn't understand why they would. He had never known Patrick and knew very little about his life. An elderly man who introduced himself as George told him that he had been in the Army with Patrick. He was surprised he had't mentioned his service in Aden.

When he had finished Peter looked at his watch, and announced to anyone who was listening that he would have to leave for another appointment, thanking nobody in particular for their hospitality. He realised he didn't even know who's home it was.