Never in a Month of Sundays

by Philip Bromley

Following divorce can James escape from his depression and find romance. A twist of fate leads to a fascinating sequence but will this lead him to Love, Friendship or Romance?
1 The Funeral

Spring was such a beautiful time in the South Downs James mused as he drove across country from the A27 towards the A24 which would lead him to his sad destination. The morning sun was already breaking through the mist as he took the turn into the Crematorium grounds.
The long winding tree lined avenue brought him ever closer to the Crematorium with its vast array of Spring Flowers framing neatly trimmed lawns. He had not been to Worthing Crematorium since his father's cremation some five years ago. Little had changed about the place, he reflected, as he pulled into a parking slot at the far end of the car park.

The loss of his father so soon after his mother had affected him deeply. As an only child both parents deaths had fallen as a heavy burden on his shoulders and he sighed involuntarily. At almost six feet tall and of a medium slim built he radiated a quiet confidence which his clients found totally reassuring.

Today at least he was here just to pay his respects to a long standing client and yes, to a friend, as he did particularly like Patrick Brownloe and they met about four times a year in a little Bistro, just off the seafront in Worthing. Patrick had never married and as the youngest of three children had outlived both his sisters.

As James left his car, to follow the stream of arriving mourners as they wound their way towards the front of the Crematorium to await the arrival of the cortège, James felt conspicuous as the only lone figure in the procession.

"Hello James!"

James turned towards the direction of the familiar male voice and was comforted to see the couple behind him were Mike and Miranda Cardwell, the owners of the Bistro, where he and Patrick had regularly lunched together.

"They really do try to make these sad places look so beautiful and serene."

Miranda said in an attempt to involve James in conversation as they reached the main group assembled in small groups engaged in quiet conversations and private grief.
"Yes. Sorry I am not very good on these occasions." said James smiling encouragingly at Miranda.

"Do you know Patrick's Family James?" said Mark in an attempt to open up a simple level of conversation.

"No I have never met his Niece or her family, but he talked about them often. They seemed quite close."

"They came to the Bistro with Patrick for birthdays and other celebration" Mike added.

The sun was shining brightly now on the still gathering crowd of friends and acquaintances but the sun's rays could not warm the hearts of the assembled group.

A wave of silence started to spread through the group as one of crowd caught a glimpse of the cortège winding its sad way along the tree lined avenue from the main road.

As the group started to file into the Crematorium Chapel Mark placed his hand on James' elbow and motioned to him to sit beside them in one of the rear pews. The Chapel was large airy but with the exception of the reserved rows at the front the other pews were quickly filled.

James mind raced from his parents funerals to his acrimonious divorce and his subsequent illness and to the kindness Patrick had showed him when he had to take early retirement from Allied Investments, the Stockbrokers he had worked for since leaving University.

The opening bars of "Praise, My Soul, The King of Heaven" brought the congregation to its feet and tears to many an eye. The procession to the dais was steady and dignified but James could not take his eyes off the coffin. Patrick had always struck James as a big man in every sense of the word yet the coffin looked so small and fragile as it made its way down the aisle.

The Vicar must have known Patrick well as he managed to bring out the humour and joy that Patrick Brownloe brought to all who really knew him. The committal had James deep in thought but the hymn "Now Thank We All
Our God" stirred him back to the present via his old school days when this Hymn concluded the end of the "End of Term Service".

Once more James began to think selfishly about his current situation and to wallow again in self pity. Whether it was the ambience of the chapel, the words of the Vicar or just self indulgence he did not know but he felt ashamed of himself and looked up to see the family members leaving from the side entrance at the front of the Chapel. The congregation was now drifting out from the pews to follow the route taken by the family members. James turned towards the aisle but his exit was blocked by Miranda and Mike who were courteously waiting for an opportunity to move out of the pew. Miranda half turned towards James smiled and said.

"Stay with us, we will introduce you to Patrick's niece and her family"

James had planned to just slip away but he did not want to cause offence to the Cardwells. He politely responded to Miranda's words with a nod.

Outside in the sunshine James generally felt better; still he wished he could just slip away as he had planned. Flanked by Mike and Miranda this was an impossible dream so he join them in an inspection of the floral tributes. James had made his donation to Patrick's chosen charity as he had felt it would do more good.

Now he felt slightly disloyal to Patrick in not showing his respect with a suitable floral arrangement. James had not realised that their progress along the flowers had brought them close to the family.

"Hello Mark, hello Miranda"

said a male voice from the family Group.

"Thank you for coming, Patrick would be so pleased."

"Wild Horses would not have kept me away, Patrick was one of the most genuine people we have ever met"
said Mike in response to Charles Grosvenor's greeting.

"I am sorry I do not think we have been introduced"

said Charles turning his gaze on James.

"Sorry I forgot you do not know James Wardley, Patrick's Stockbroker"

Mike said in an apologetic manner.

"James I am so sorry, Patrick often referred to you but more as a friend than an advisor."

replied Charles, and added

"I take it you haven't been introduced to Patrick's Niece Wendy, my beautiful wife, nor my two adorable daughters Rebecca and Julia."

James shook hands with Charles and his daughters but Wendy was engaged in deep conversation with another group of friends.

"Darling!"

"Darling can I interrupt for a moment, I want you to meet your Uncle's friend and advisor, James Wardley."
Wendy Grosvenor immediately turned in the direction of her husband, starred at James for a split second, blushed, and kissing him affectionately on the cheek as she clasped her hands in his.

"James; is it really you?"

"Hello Wendy, long time no see!"

Wendy was still as attractive and demure as ever and the years had been kind to her with her slim frame and sparkling eye giving her the appearance which women ten years younger would die for.

Charles looked on bemused and he said in a rather startled tone

"Darling I take it you know James?"

" Yes Yes" replied Wendy as she turned to speak to other guests hovering to her left.

Miranda broke the uneasy silence by asking James when he had known Wendy and he replied

"Oh a long time ago at University"

"Didn't you keep in touch them" added Miranda.

"Yes we did but it must be over 25 years since we last saw each other."
"Shall we make our way to the Homestead in Findon?" Charles suggested to the assembled guests, then turning back added.

"Come on Miranda, Mike, James, you must join us; we will see you all down there in a few minutes."

James was still in minor shock after Wendy’s warm greeting but really just wanted to slip away. He was not comfortable at such gatherings and had not planned to go to the wake announced by the Vicar during the service.

Mike interrupted his thoughts

"Do you know the Homestead in Findon James?"

"No I don't ." replied James almost automatically.

"That's OK you can follow us"

As James followed the Cardwell's Volvo he began to panic. Did he really want to relive his recent problems or to have to explain his divorce. If he slipped away would anybody really mind?

Suddenly panic really set in! If he did not turn up at the Homestead what would everyone think? Would it appear that he had something to hide. Wendy and he had had a long affair lasting for almost five years after leaving Uni but that was virtually 25 years ago now.

Charles probably had not even been on the scene when he last saw Wendy on that fateful day when had stormed off ending their affair. Possibly it was meeting Charles that caused her to end her relationship with him?
The Cardwell's car was slowing and indicating a right turn which interrupted James' stroll down "memory lane". Whatever he thought it was now too late, as he followed the Volvo into the car park at the Homestead. The main building resembled an elegant Victorian mansion reminiscent of so many large houses in the Worthing Area. Additional rooms had obviously been added to the ground floor, over the years but sympathetically in keeping with the original building so as not the detract from the original splendour. James felt that Patrick could have chosen the venue himself. A gentle hint of the kitchen was in the air as James joined Miranda and Mark as they walked towards the entrance.

"That smells excellent." commented Mark as he recognised the aroma of fresh garlic sauce.

"The chef is never off duty." teased Miranda.

In the Homestead the rear section of the Restaurant had been set aside for the Funeral Guests with a glass of Sherry on offer to all. A few of the early arrivals were already in the smoking area adjacent to the patio doors leading to the reserved area.

James did crave a cigarette but decided as this had been a bone of contention during his time with Wendy he had better remain within the confines of the Restaurant. Already the family were talking to the guests Wendy in her group and Charles with some of the other guests. Patrick had enjoyed a cigarette and had often recounted that his Grandfather, who had lived to be 98 years old, despite the First World War and his liking for cigarettes.

James had found himself within a group of friends, rather than relatives, and felt a little calmer in this environment. The wake was often a more relaxed affair as loved ones and friends recounted their personal experiences of the deceased. Miranda told the enchanting story about Patrick's first visit where he sat alone in a corner of the restaurant in quiet contemplation and subsequent visits with friends and family where the warmth of his personality shone brightly. It was comforting to James to find such genuine warmth and affection shown by all who knew him.

Gradually friends and acquaintances drifted away leaving just family and a few close friends. Wendy joined this small group and thanked everyone for their support and kind wishes and reassured all present that Uncle Patrick would have been tickled pink by the warmth of the send off he had received. At length she turned to face James eye to eye.

"Well James where is your lovely wife?"
"I am not married Wendy, well not any more!"

"Oh," said Wendy "That was a very deep and telling remark. Are you going to tell me more, James?"

"No, I do not want to bore you with the details. Anyway I must say you are looking well."

"Listen James there are a few questions I need to ask you about Uncle Patrick's affairs. Can we arrange to meet soon?"

"Actually I retired last month, but I can give you the name of a colleague who will be able to help."

"James you have not improved over the years, you are still the pompous ass you always were, I am not asking you as a Stockbroker but as a long standing friend!"

For crying out loud, just give me your telephone number, and I will call you."

2 A Blast From The Past