

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

## Neighbours

by MaryPat Campbell

Once Lawrence was dead, Freida made her plan. She hired an architect, engaged the builders, increased the premium on her house insurance and spent a year doing up the house. Four or five Polish workmen arrived every morning at eight sharp, and were to be seen moving in and out of the house. Mugs of tea were made morning and afternoon, and brought out on a tray by Freida along with a plate of homemade shortbread biscuits.

The men downed tools and tucked in before resuming their labours. They even came on Saturday mornings, once the structural work was finished and the plastering and painting stage of the work began. Freida smiled secretively when the neighbours stopped to ask her how the refurb was going, while she stood on a ladder to clip her front hedge to the exacting standard we neighbours had come to appreciate and admire.

Freida invited a number of us round when it was all finished. We were summoned one Friday evening in early June at six o'clock, and were given a tour of the ground floor. We admired the polished parquet flooring, the sparkling bevelled windows and sturdy new teak doors. We were very impressed by the contemporary hidden lighting and latticed window shutters. Not one but two new Belfast sinks had been installed in the kitchen and an impressively sustainable power shower in the downstairs bathroom.

The floors were beautiful and chic new curtains adorned the large glass doors, which led out to the patio in the back garden. Our attention was directed to the architectural shape of the door handles and the stylish finish on the kitchen fittings. The rugs and cushions were the essence of modern good taste and fresh flowers filled the house. Freida appeared to be in her element as we raised our sherry glasses to her future health.

There was of course one thing missing. Frieda would have loved if Lawrence had been there to join in what she liked to think would have been his congratulations, his admiration of her project management and clever designs, his pride in her eye for detail and her choice of colours. But we remembered their loud and frequent fights, mostly on summer evenings. When the shouting started, Freida would hurry around the house closing all the windows, so the sound of Lawrence's vitriol could be muffled. We used to worry about her sometimes.

At Christmas time, she liked to invite some of us over for drinks, the two of them on their best neighbourly behaviour. Lawrence enjoyed regaling us with stories from his career as a well-known theatre critic before he retired, along with his travels to unusual European cities like Dubrovnik and Trieste with Freida over the years. We neighbours listened politely while sitting back and enjoying her wonderful mince pies and Christmas cake, alongside Lawrence's generously large gins and tonics.

On the occasion of Freida's house refurb celebration, after we all went home again, she suddenly became aware of the space we had left behind in the summery dusk. Lawrence's angry voice would never again reverberate around Freida's house. It was silent now and beautifully refurbished, but she felt like a stranger.