

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Petrol Head

by Sue Hitchcock

There is no parking space in our road, for our visitors or any of our neighbours either. In a road of terrace houses, mostly no more than twenty feet across, only one car per household is all that can be accommodated. We – my husband and I – decided never to drive and we never bothered to learn, consequently our neighbours park outside, which is annoying, but no disaster. The narrow central alley is only wide enough for one, so turning in and finding another car facing involves a stupid dance of reversing back, blocking the junction.

Six years ago we moved here from an offshoot of Camberley called Frimley. The 1980s estate was built with cars in mind, every house having a garage and a drive. Most people were reasonable, with no more than two cars per household, but opposite us lived a petrol head. I can no longer remember his name, even though he was friendly. He had been a British Telecom engineer and still had a large van full of equipment. He had been forced to retire early after contracting Lyme's disease after a tick bite while camping in the New Forest and so, apparently young and fit, he worked constantly in the part of the road our front window overlooked. Besides the van, he had an everyday car, as did his wife, but in the garage was his treasure. Without any interest in vehicles, I have no idea what it was, but I was honoured with an inspection of it and its internal workings. To me it was a shiny, blue but otherwise ordinary car. I made appropriate noises, while explaining I knew nothing. Still I was required to admire the engine and it was remarkably clean and gleaming. It was, he told me, a rare model, which he was proud to exhibit it at car shows.

Our house must have been the envy of a car buff. The winding plan of the roads in the estate left us on the corner between two closes. If we hadn't preferred to keep an overgrown hedge of leylandi along one side and the front filled with trees I had grown from seed, an arbutus, a cercis, from a seed in Arles, a walnut from a green walnut bought in the greengrocer and a row of turkish hazels, a drive might have provided the desirable in and out, normally found in far larger houses.

It was a vain hope to protect ourselves. Our neighbour opposite was sociable, even gregarious and weekends when the treasure was not being exhibited, were the time for family visits. His drive and frontage barely accommodated his own cars, so around our diminutive forest, cars would line up, reminding us of the noise and pollution we had so firmly rejected.

The petrol head saw nothing wrong with his behaviour, but at least he never asked to park in our drive.