

JUST ONE NIGHT

The day after my birthday party, they started the demolition of next door. For a year, we'd objected to the new owner's plans but eventually he lowered the roof by a metre and the council approved the new build.

Two years later, next door boasted a house twice the size, with five bedrooms all on-suite, a completely glazed open-plan ground floor, a cinema room and a lift. Shortly after, the owner accepted a job in North Carolina and the house was offered for rent at £5k per month. That's when we met Sunni.

He was renting next door and invited us to a house warming party at the weekend.

"There'll be food, music and a firework display," he promised.

"Are you expecting many?" I asked.

"Probably between twenty and thirty if all the neighbours come."

I can't remember if Sunni told me his life story then or next time I saw him outside, cleaning his red Ferrari. He'd sold a chain of supermarkets up north and was moving south to be near his new girlfriend whose two sons attended the prep school down my road. He'd offered to buy next door but they'd declined and suggested he'd buy my house if I wanted to sell. He was separated from his wife and son. He wanted to move them to his farm in Australia otherwise his wife might take his son to India and he would never see him.

I have lived in this road for nearly 40 years and party night was only the second time I have been next door. The first time was an emergency visit to help my aged neighbour lift her husband from the floor. This time, it seemed the Great Gatsby had come again in Northwood.

Lamps of many colours turned the garden in a fantasy. A sari-clad singer played a violin to the accompaniment of a drummer, enticing food odours floated in the breeze and costumed waiters readily replenished our champagne flutes. We drank freely. We could walk home.

Sunni brought the neighbourhood together. We met a solicitor and his wife from across the road, a banker from two doors down and a young couple from further along.

We only saw the ground floor area, a design worthy of a magazine article. Everywhere, heart-shaped balloons shouted "I Love You." Their significance became clear when later in the evening the partygoers formed a circle around Sunni and his girlfriend and gasped when he presented her with a necklace from Tiffany's.

Back in the garden, before the Neighbourhood Watch deadline, we marvelled at the best firework display since the Millennium.

We never saw Sunni's girlfriend again. A month later, his wife and son moved in. He asked me again if I was interested in selling my house. I might be, I said. But I missed my opportunity. Sunni was gone by Christmas. Off to Australia, I was told. Three years on, I have only seen the neighbours again when we clapped for the NHS.