

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Mulberry Lane

Elvi Rhodes

## About the Book

The inhabitants of quiet, tree-lined Mulberry Lane take a keen interest in the comings and goings of their neighbours. And when number fifteen comes onto the market the unbelievable news that the house is to be a hostel for young offenders causes feelings to run high. Some fear that they will be murdered in their beds by a 'gang of ex-convicts', while others want to welcome these youths into the neighbourhood.

Brian, the warden of the hostel, faces an uphill struggle to persuade his new neighbours to accept the scheme. He wants to become a part of the community - and in particular, to get to know Karen, the young mother struggling to bring up her two young children on her own. But however friendly Karen may be, there are others in Mulberry Lane who are determined to scupper the scheme at all costs...

A delightful new novel from the well-loved, bestselling author of *Ruth Appleby*, *Cara's Land*, *The Mountain*, *Portrait of Chloe*, *Spring Music*, *Midsummer Meeting* and *The Birthday Party*.

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About the Author

Also by Elvi Rhodes

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# MULBERRY LANE

Elvi Rhodes



**CORGI BOOKS**

*Another for Stephen*

## Acknowledgements

To my son, Stephen, who took part with endless patience in many transatlantic phone calls about this book.

To Elizabeth Morgan, for her usual intelligent and immaculate research.

To Shirley, my secretary, who is never cross, no matter how often I change and rewrite things.

To Mary Irvine, agent and friend, for her wise advice and encouragement.

To Chief Inspector Graham Davies, who answered my many questions about police and court procedures. If any errors have cropped up they are mine, not his.

To Steve Pratt, who did likewise.

# THE RESIDENTS OF MULBERRY LANE





The car drew up and stopped outside Number Fifteen. A woman of smart, even elegant appearance - dark suit, silk blouse, well-cut shoulder-length blond hair - got out of the driving seat, went around and opened the boot and took out a signpost and a mallet. She had already put on a pair of work gloves before she left the car. No way was she going to risk chipping the silver-blue enamel on her newly manicured nails. This was not her job anyway. She was a senior executive in the firm, wasn't she? She was not employed to drive 'For Sale' notices into the ground. There were lesser beings to do that but unfortunately, for various reasons, not one of them was available this morning and since, in any case, it was necessary for her to view the house the boss had decided that she might as well kill two birds with one stone. 'From time to time we all have to do things we don't want to do,' he'd reminded her tersely. 'Anyway, you are quite capable!'

Of course she was capable! That wasn't the point, was it? Manual labour was not in her job description but now she was stuck with it. She picked up the sale board, marched, as well as her slender four-inch heels would allow her to march, into the small front garden, selected the place where the board would make the maximum impact on passers-by whether in cars or on foot, and set to work. Driving the post into the ground was no sweat. Thanks to five sessions a week at the gym she was a fit and strong

lady. Also the very act of hammering relieved her ruffled feelings.

When the sign was fixed to her satisfaction she surveyed it. FOR SALE, it announced, APPLY PROCTOR & SONS, 16 BELL STREET, SHIPFIELD. She next turned her attention to the house. It had been seen briefly by Trevor, another member of Proctor's staff, who had suggested a possible price to put on it and reported that it was awful, but the agency rules were that anyone who might be involved in the selling of a property should be familiar with it, and not just on paper. They had to be able to talk knowledgeably to any client. This went for all properties, large or small, good or awful. So here she was unlocking the front door (badly in need of repainting) and walking in.

Someone would have to do something about the smell, she thought, wrinkling her nose the minute she stepped into the hall. It was damp, dank and fusty, as if the house had very little acquaintance with fresh air. It also smelled of mice. She took a notebook out of her handbag and made an entry. 'Air freshener!' After that she went from room to room. All this awful furniture would have to be cleared out, though furniture hid a multitude of sins. Threadbare carpets or dingy lino still covered the floors and shabby curtains hung at the windows. She moved from room to room making entries - mostly adverse - in her notebook. Trevor was right. It *was* awful. It was diabolical. Chipped sink, ancient bathroom with broken tiles and a brown-stained lavatory, peeling paint everywhere, crumbling window sill in the kitchen, no central heating, almost certainly needed rewiring. Looking out of the bedroom windows she saw neglected gardens front and back, with a dilapidated shed, its door flapping in the wind, at the bottom of the latter. Name the dozen worst drawbacks of any property and this house had them all.

That was not surprising. They knew it had belonged to an old lady who had lived there most of her life and had

never done a thing to it. In the end, too frail to look after herself, she had been carted off to a nursing home and her daughter had put the house on the market, firmly stating that she wanted the best price they could get in order to meet her mother's nursing home fees, and a quick sale. Didn't they all, Rita thought.

So how in the world would she describe it in order to get this good price and quick sale? Impossible! But then every client expected the impossible. They came into the agency with inflated ideas of what their property was worth, gained from rumours of what houses were fetching all over the town, and the farther the rumour travelled the higher the price soared. How would she word the advertisement for the *Shipfield Courier*? And how would she write the blurb which would accompany the photograph in the agency window, and what sort of a photograph could it possibly be? In fact the photograph would be easier. Although the camera could not lie, it could certainly distort or enhance simply by taking whatever point of view it chose. The written description was, however, another matter. The description had to be true. But mercifully, she reminded herself as she descended the stairs where in parts the carpet was so worn into holes that it was potentially lethal, not necessarily the whole truth, not nothing but the truth.

Phrases listed themselves in her mind. 'Scope for modernization.' 'Offers potential, for those wishing to refurbish.' 'A chance to make changes!' And of the garden: 'Back garden - opportunity to redesign.' 'Front garden - walled, hedged, laid to lawn.' Never mind that the only wall was a low one, badly in need of repair, which simply separated the front garden from the street, that the hedge was three yards of dusty privet between this house and the next and the patchy lawn was no more than five feet by six feet. Never mind all that, the facts as stated were true. Also, of course, 'Early possession available.' 'No chain.'

There were a number of minuses which need not be stated. For instance, there were no garages to these houses. Cars were parked right now on both sides of the street, but since the street was wide there was still ample room for two lines of traffic to pass.

And what could one say about the neighbourhood? Rita sighed. She had little personal knowledge of Mulberry Lane. All she knew about it was what she had been told. In the eighteen months she had been with Proctor's she recalled only one house there being on the market and she had not dealt with it. It seemed to be a place where people lived until they died or, like the owner of this run-down place she was looking at, were carried off regardless.

The houses were spacious semis, with room for large families. They had originally been built, she had learned, in the second half of the nineteenth century as suitable residences for the managers of the factories which had sprung up on the level land down by the river when the railways had brought light industry to Shipfield. The workers had lived in streets of small houses huddled close to the factories but it had been thought more suitable for the managers to put a little distance between themselves and their employees.

The speculator of the time had seen Mulberry Lane as just the place to build, and his foresight had brought him a nice sum of money. Also, Victorian houses were now back in fashion, but it was the state of this one which would tell against it.

There was nothing wrong with the position of Mulberry Lane. It turned off to the right halfway up North Hill and less than a mile from the town. North Hill itself climbed steeply, as did everything to the north of Shipfield. Where the semis finished - there were not many of them, it was quite a short street because an untimely death had claimed the builder - Mulberry Lane forked. To the right Bell Lane went back into the town and to the left, where, as some of

the local inhabitants remembered, there had once been no more than a footpath to the fields where one could gather wild flowers - cowslips, coltsfoot, primroses - the former footpath had become Upper Mulberry Lane. Well named. It was undoubtedly superior. To begin with the houses in Upper Mulberry had names rather than numbers. Fairdene, Hill House, Mulberry Lodge, The Beeches (though no beech tree grew or had ever grown there). The gardens were bigger, the lawns greener, the trimmed hedges higher and thicker.

Rita gave a last glance around, then left the house, locked the door, shook herself slightly as if to shake off the smells, looked around her and sighed again.

Now if only this *were* Upper Mulberry! It was so near and yet so far. If it had only been on the other side of the street and just a few yards further along it would have qualified. What faced her across the way as she stood on the steps of Number Fifteen was what had been the last of the semis but in this case the two had recently been knocked together to make one house. That it was recent was obvious from the fact that the stone had been cleaned - a mistake in her view. She slipped on her glasses in order to read the name on the gatepost: Cornerways.

Really, she thought, the house looked quite imposing. Two front doors had been made into one and furnished with a rather splendid oak-panelled double door, with wide steps leading down to the drive. A circular drive had been constructed with wrought-iron gates at each end, though these were an expensive and unnecessary luxury because they were almost always open in order to allow the occupants of the house to drive in on the right, sweep around to the front door and later exit on the left. Right now a Toyota Amazon Landcruiser in a rich green was parked by the front door.

The house, because it was built where the road began to curve around, was actually half in Mulberry proper and half

just about in Upper Mulberry. Could any use be made of that fact, Rita asked herself? 'Adjacent to Upper Mulberry Lane'? 'Facing Upper Mulberry Lane'? She would consider it. She wondered what the owner of the Landcruiser gave as his address. Upper Mulberry, she guessed.

Laura O'Brien, who lived at Number Ten which was on the opposite side of the road to Number Fifteen and two doors along from Cornerways in the direction of North Hill, was sitting in her bay window engaged in a telephone conversation with her mother when she looked up and saw a smart young woman hammering a signpost into the ground. At this distance she couldn't read what the sign said but she didn't need to. She had been closely involved with the whole episode of old Mrs Harper falling down the front steps while picking up a bottle of milk, breaking a leg, being taken into hospital and then finally whizzed off to Bristol (where her daughter lived) to spend the rest of her days in a nursing home. That last day in Shipfield General Hospital had been a sad one for the old lady. Laura, dropping in to wish her bon voyage, had found her in floods of tears and indeed had shed a few sympathetic tears with her.

'I've lived most of my life in Mulberry Lane,' Mrs Harper had sobbed quietly. 'You never know where you're going to end up, do you?'

'I expect you'll settle in quite quickly,' Laura had said. 'You'll make friends. You won't be lonely. And you'll be looked after.' She had tried to comfort Mrs Harper but the old lady was not to be comforted.

She wondered how she was getting on now. It had all happened so quickly; the daughter had put the house up for sale and now, as she watched, the estate agent was going inside, presumably to inspect it.

'Hello!' her mother shouted. 'Are you still there, Laura, or have I been cut off?'

Laura held the telephone several inches away from her ear. When Beryl Moffat was on form her voice was probably audible all the miles from Bath, where she lived, without the aid of a phone. When she wasn't on form her voice would sink to a whining whisper. At the moment she sounded hale and hearty but annoyed.

'I'm sorry, Mother,' Laura said. 'I'm still here. Something in the street caught my attention for a minute.'

'There's always something happening in your road,' her mother said. 'Have you finished then?'

'I was going to ask about Dad,' Laura said.

'I don't mean have you finished talking. I mean have you finished decorating the sitting room?'

'All except for the frieze,' Laura told her. 'I'm stencilling a frieze around the top of the walls.'

'I didn't know stencilling was fashionable,' Mrs Moffat said.

'I don't know that it is,' Laura admitted. 'I just happen to like it. A Greek key pattern in a terracotta shade. It looks quite good on the pale blue walls. So how is Dad? You sound well enough.'

'I keep going,' Mrs Moffat said. 'You have to.' Her voice weakened by several decibels. 'Your father is out playing bowls. Where else would he be?'

Almost anywhere, Laura thought. In his shed at the far end of the garden, where he'd installed a comfortable chair, a radio, an electric fire, a shelf of books and a solitaire board, and put a Yale lock on the door. Or when the weather was inclement, wandering around the inside of Bath Abbey re-reading the memorials. Anything to keep him away from the four walls of his home.

'So what was going on in the road that took your attention?' Mrs Moffat asked.

'Only that the estate agent was putting up a For Sale board outside Mrs Harper's house,' Laura said. 'I told you last week she'd left.'

'I wonder who you'll get?' Mrs Moffat said.

'It's what we all wonder,' Laura told her. 'It's a while since there was anyone new in the road.'

'I hope it's someone decent,' her mother said. 'You never can tell these days. There's a lot of riff-raff about.'

'The students are due back today,' Laura said, changing the subject. 'In fact one of them has already arrived.'

She had seen Jennifer drive her small blue Fiat onto the concreted forecourt next door, which accommodated two cars if they were small enough and took the place of the small lawns in front of the other houses. She had tapped at the window to attract Jennifer's attention as she was unloading the car and they had smiled and waved at each other.

'It will be nice to have them back,' she said to her mother. 'I'll probably pop in later and say hello.'

'You know what I think about young people living on their own away from home,' Beryl said. 'I've said it before and I'll say it again.'

'I'm sure you will,' Laura said. Her mother, though she had only recently touched seventy, had the outlook of someone living before World War One.

'And what about that girl - what's-her-name - having a baby at university! I can't think what she—'

'She didn't have it in the university,' Laura interrupted. 'She had it in the hospital in Brighton. And you know perfectly well that Ruth got pregnant by her boyfriend when she went home for a weekend.'

And had returned and spent the spring term throwing up and the summer term swelling like a balloon while she got on with her studies. And had permission to come back next year and finish her course.

'She had a lovely little girl,' Laura said, rubbing it in.

'Disgraceful!' Mrs Moffat said. 'They'll be having nurseries in universities next.'

'They have had for years,' Laura informed her.



'Anyway,' Mrs Moffat said briskly, 'I can't stand here gossiping. When your father comes in, weary from playing with balls, he'll expect his meal on the table. And mind what you're doing up and down ladders. You could break a leg as easy as not! One thing I will say for your father ...'

'Really?' Laura asked. 'What's that?'

'He didn't leave it to womenfolk to do the painting and decorating. Remember what I said about breaking a leg!'

'I will,' Laura promised. 'Goodbye.'

It was strange how a ten-minute conversation with her mother was more exhausting than a couple of hours of climbing up and down stepladders painting walls. Was my mother always like this, she asked herself? When you were a kid you didn't analyse your mother. You loved her, or occasionally when you couldn't get your own way you hated her. You didn't ask what made her tick. She was just there and she looked after you. Her mother had done all that. Always food on the table. Clean knickers every day, warm baths, pocket money. She had been like any other mother, which was what one wanted. One didn't want a mother who would stand out in a crowd. She had loved her mother because one did love one's mother and of course she still did love her but so often now through a cloud of irritation.

Is that how Therese and Frances love me now that they're no longer dependent on me, she wondered? She hoped not. She loved her children to bits; she would die for them. She had lavished love on them physically and in every way from the moment they were born, partly because her own mother had never been demonstrative. A formal good-night kiss, even a kiss-it-better if she'd fallen and hurt herself, but no quick spontaneous hug for no reason at all except that she happened to be there. And I happen to be stencilling a wall, she reminded herself. And if she didn't get on with it the paint would thicken and the colour would deepen so that the next bit of the frieze would be a rich burnt orange instead of a delicate terracotta and every

time she looked at it she'd be reminded about where she'd gone off into a reverie about parental love.

She moved the ladder along the wall and climbed up it. The walls were high, with nicely curved mouldings. It was one of the things they had liked about the house when they'd seen it for the first time but it was a devil when it came to decorating. She smiled at the thought of her mother's dig about men doing the painting and decorating. Dermot had done it once and it had been a disaster. After that they had agreed that decorating should be her job and Dermot should do the re-upholstering of the furniture they bought cheap in salerooms. He was a dab hand at that, and at rugs and cushions. She was a dab hand with a paintbrush.

Her mother had never approved of this arrangement. She considered it unnatural. In any case Dermot didn't spend all that much time on rugs and cushions. He earned his modest living teaching English at Shipfield Comprehensive. It was a job Laura knew he didn't always enjoy. He was passionate about the subject but he worried that he was not cut out to be a teacher, certainly not of children. Adults, perhaps; he would have been happier as an academic, working in a university.

She climbed down the ladder again and moved it around the corner of the room and was pleased that doing the next bit she could also look out of the window from time to time. As her mother had said, there was always something happening in Mulberry Lane, though it was seldom of world-shaking importance. At the moment the estate agent was standing on the opposite side of the road on the pavement outside Mrs Harper's house, gazing around. Then while Laura continued to watch she got into her car and drove off, turning right down Bell Lane.

Laura was fond of Mulberry Lane, as indeed she was fond of Shipfield. It was a pleasant town which had not grown so big that it had lost its character. From the old

buildings in the centre - the Norman church, the butter cross, the marketplace - it had spread out onto the hills which surrounded it on three sides. On the fourth side the land sloped south to the English Channel. The railway connected Shipfield with Bristol to the west and Bath to the east. When the people of Shipfield wanted bright lights and serious shopping they went to Bristol and when they fancied a bit of culture they visited Bath.

In the busy town centre there was a Marks & Spencer's, a Sainsbury's, Dean & Docker's department store in Bell Street, WH Smith's and all the major banks, as well as several restaurants serving anything from dainty teas at the Spinning Wheel to Italian at Umberto's and a robust roast at the Carvery. Fish-and-chip shops, of course, and a couple of pizza takeaways. There were also pubs to suit every taste, from the upholstered comfort of the old Shipfield Arms to the flashing lights and sounds of the American Bar on Deangate. There were churches and chapels, schools and hospitals, and for the last few years and certainly now the jewel in the crown, the University of Shipfield on its campus at the very top of North Hill. Among the older factories which had survived there was Venables' toffee factory - 'Venables' Cream Toffee travels the world!' - Fairfield & Hartley's biscuit factory and Benson's Box Company which supplied tins and boxes for the biscuits and toffee, and over the years these had been joined by light manufacturing, retail warehouses, an insurance company and more recently several high-tech firms.

She and Dermot had arrived with their two daughters on an August afternoon fifteen years ago, he to take up the job he had been offered at Shipfield Comprehensive and she hoping, since the girls would be at school, to find a part-time job. That she had done quite quickly as one of the team of receptionists at Shipfield's private hospital, where she now worked full time. At first both she and Dermot had

found Shipfield dull, but they told themselves that it was better for the children than living in London and long ago now they had become used to a different pace of life.

Shipfield, however, was no Nirvana. It had one cinema complex, no football team, no longer any live theatre or concert hall, and it was undeniably damp.

She had almost reached the end of the wall, only two metres to go now, thank God! Her back was killing her. For a minute she broke off painting and, insofar as she could while balanced on a step-ladder and guarding a tin of paint, she stretched her body. She had vaguely thought that she might do something around the door frame, but now she had had enough. Anyway, less was more, wasn't it?

Five minutes later she heard Dermot's key in the lock. Once she would have climbed down the ladder and rushed to meet him but now she continued with the painting. Last year they had celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary - they had married the moment Dermot was out of university and had their children quickly - so rushing to greet each other was not really on the agenda. Not that they didn't get on, but mad passion died, or had in their case except on odd occasions.

'I'm in here!' she called out.

Dermot came into the room carrying his canvas holdall which was spilling over with exercise books.

'Is there any tea going?' he asked.

'As you can see,' Laura answered, 'I'm up a ladder which is where I've been most of the day. But if you'd like to make some I might come down and have a cup with you.'

'You didn't *have* to paint the sitting room,' Dermot said mildly. 'There was nothing wrong with it.'

'There was to me,' Laura said. 'It was looking decidedly dingy. You never notice these things. So how do you think it looks now?'

Dermot looked around, nodded his head.

'Well? Is that it? A nod of the head?'

'It looks great,' he said. 'You've done a good job. How about picking out the ceiling rose in the terracotta shade? Just bits here and there, the edges of the petals, the centres of the flowers?'

Laura regarded the centre rose. They had found it in a second-hand shop and their thought was that it had come from a much finer house than theirs. She loved it.

'You're right!' she said. He was always right about colour and design.

'It can wait until tomorrow, can't it?' Dermot queried. 'You don't have to finish today.'

'I want to,' Laura said. 'I thought we might attack the front garden this weekend; tidy it up and plant a few bulbs before it's too late. Have you brought stacks of work home?'

'The usual,' he said. 'A few hours. I'll tackle it on Sunday when we get back from Mass. We can still do the garden.'

'Right,' Laura said. 'Are you going to make that tea?'

He went into the kitchen and came back shortly afterwards with two mugs.

'I'm going to turn the fire on,' he said. 'It's a bit chilly in here.'

'You don't notice it when you're up near the ceiling,' Laura said. 'What sort of a day did *you* have?'

Dermot shrugged. 'So-so! Anyway, it's the weekend. Let's forget it. I'm whacked!'

'You're not the only one,' Laura said. 'I don't feel the least bit like cooking a meal. Can we eat out?'

'We could have a takeaway,' Dermot suggested.

'I don't *want* a takeaway,' Laura protested. 'I want to go out. I've been stuck in the house all week.'

'Whose fault is that?' Dermot said mildly. 'No-one made you spend your week's holiday decorating. It was your choice.'

'I know, I know.' He could be so irritatingly logical. 'So do we eat out or don't we?'

'Of course we do,' Dermot said. 'Where do you want to go? Italian? Chinese? You choose.'

'Right,' Laura said. 'Umberto's!'

'Did you ring Therese?' Dermot enquired.

'I did. The doctor said she should really take another week off work, stay at home and rest. It was a nasty bout of flu and her chest isn't clear. But she wants to get back to work. You know Therese. She blows everything light.'

'She's not going to get her way, I hope?' Though his elder daughter often did, Dermot thought.

'No. Duggie has put his foot down.'

'Good for Duggie!' Dermot drank the last of his tea.

There was the sound of a car stopping, sharp toots on the hooter, doors slamming.

'That can only be Imogen,' Laura said. 'No-one else could make that much noise. You wouldn't think it, would you, I mean being a dainty five feet tall and such a refined little thing?' She moved quickly to the window and looked out.

Imogen was unloading the contents of her car. A large suitcase, untidy bundles of nothing recognizable, boots, a duvet, a radio, a hockey stick. Anyone less like a hockey player than Imogen could scarcely be imagined but, according to the other students, she played left wing and ran down the field like a greyhound. She closed the boot, looked up, caught sight of Laura and waved. Laura opened the window and called out.

'Welcome back! Did you have a good summer?'

'Wonderful!' However enthusiastic she felt, Imogen's voice was never loud but her diction was so clear, so perfect, that she could probably be heard half a mile away. 'Tell you all about it later,' she added.

Laura closed the window. 'Only Grace to come now,' she said to Dermot. 'I mean of last year's. I wonder what the three new ones will be like?'

'I can trust you to find out, dear,' Dermot said. His wife was inordinately – that was *his* word – interested in the students, he felt, but he was wrong, Laura always told him. They were young people away from home, she said. She had a natural interest in them.

'I shall miss Ruth,' she said. 'I do already. She was such a bright spark. Do you think she'll come back and bring the baby to see us?'

'Who knows?' Dermot said. 'It depends on whether she's willing to travel from Brighton with a young baby.'

'I had an earful from my mother today,' Laura told him. 'She thinks all houses shared by students are dens of iniquity. I wouldn't think that about next door, would you?'

'I'm sure you'd know if it were,' Dermot said. 'If we're going to Umberto's hadn't you better pack up and get ready? You know how busy he is on Fridays. And we'll walk down. No point in taking the car if we're drinking a bottle of wine. Anyway we need the exercise.'

'Speak for yourself,' Laura said. 'I've spent the day climbing. OK, I'll do the centre rose tomorrow.' She put the lid on the paint tin and took the brush into the kitchen to wash it.

Leaving the house that evening, they walked along Mulberry Lane and turned left down North Hill, crossing the railway bridge close to the bottom and then the bridge over the River Fern. The river meandered from east to west through the town, popping up in unexpected places before making a leisurely turn south and disappearing from view just at the point where Umberto's came into sight.

'I like Umberto's,' Laura said when they were seated at a table on the ground floor. 'I always feel at ease here.'

'Sure,' Dermot said. He was studying the menu. 'And I like the food and I'm starving. I had school dinner today. You don't have to suffer that.'

'When I'm at work I suffer hospital lunches,' Laura said. 'Don't think because it's a private hospital the staff get the same gourmet meals as the patients.'

Umberto came over himself to take their order.

'*Buona sera*, Signora O'Brien,' he said. 'Signor O'Brien! How are you both?'

'Well but hungry,' Dermot answered. He gave the order. 'And a bottle of Barolo,' he added.

'At once!' Umberto said.

They were not kept waiting though already the place was busy and by the time they had reached the main course there was a queue outside the door waiting for tables.

'Do not rush,' Umberto said as he passed them.

'Isn't that nice,' Laura said. 'I always feel guilty when I see people standing in line.'



'I don't,' Dermot said. 'They should arrive earlier. Anyway, I want a pudding.'

He chose Tiramisu, Laura ice-cream. When they had finished she put down her spoon and sighed happily. 'That was lovely! Thank you very much.'

As they were leaving the restaurant the rain came down, sudden and heavy.

'Damn!' Dermot said testily. 'We should have brought the car.' He hated rain. 'Come on, quick! We'll catch the bus.'

They reached the stop in time to see the rear lights of the bus disappear into the distance.

'Blast!' Dermot said.

He set off at a fast pace, Laura trying to keep up with him. When they turned the corner into Mulberry Lane he took Laura by the elbow and pulled her into a run. The rain was sheeting down now, the lights of passing cars reflected in the wetness of the pavement. Dermot broke into a run.

'Stop it!' Laura gasped. 'I can't keep up with you.'

'Yes you can,' he said. 'We're nearly home.'

Between Number Ten and Number Twelve a small, bright purple car was parked up against their Volvo. It was new to Laura, who reckoned she knew the ownership of every car in the street since they mostly belonged to residents. Only during the day when the North Hill shops were open did anyone look for space in Mulberry Lane. It must belong to one of the new students.

Number Twelve was ablaze with light - no curtains were ever drawn there except in the sharpest winter frosts. The sound of loud music poured out into the street. Figures could be seen standing in the bay window, more bodies Laura reckoned than could ever be living there.

'Oh look!' she cried. 'They're having a party.'

'For God's sake, who the hell cares?' Dermot snapped. 'Find your bloody key and open the door. I'm soaking!'

'So am I,' Laura said, fishing in her handbag, 'only I don't make such a fuss about it.'

They went in. Dermot hurried through the hall and up the stairs, reappearing a few minutes later wrapped in his dressing gown.

'You should change,' he said. 'You'll catch your death.'

'No I won't,' Laura told him. 'I'll go up in a minute. Did you see the little purple car? It must belong to one of the new students. And he must be quite well off. It's new.'

'Who cares?' Dermot said.

'You will in the morning,' Laura said. 'It's jammed right up against yours. You won't be able to get out. Shall I pop next door and ask him to move it?'

'Certainly not!' Dermot was adamant. 'It's not a good enough excuse for gate-crashing a party.' He walked over to the window and looked out. 'I'll manage.'

The last thing he wanted right now was to get involved with the students, not that he had anything against them, but he was tired and wet. Laura's involvement with them was no doubt her maternal instincts coming to the fore again, especially now that they didn't see their own family as often. He missed the family too, especially Frances. He knew he shouldn't have a favourite between his two daughters but he had, and since her marriage Therese had grown away just a little, not from her mother but from him. Duggie was now the first man in Therese's life.

It was as it should be and he was pleased she was happily married. Duggie was just the man for her. He was clever, he was successful. Though not yet thirty he was well up the ladder in Barclays Bank and set to climb several rungs higher. Therese's life suited her: she had an interesting job and she was also a good corporate wife, a charming hostess, and one day, he hoped, she would be an exemplary mother.

Frances was quite different. It surprised him that his two daughters could be so unlike, even in appearance.

Frances was like her mother, small, slender and dark; Therese took after him, tall and fairish. Frances was the brainbox of the family – he didn't quite know where she got that from – with a first-class law degree. She was now in her first year with a practice in Bath. It was not far and she could have made the daily journey but she preferred to live away from the parental home.

'I'll pop around in the morning, when we get back from shopping,' Laura said.

The noise was still coming good and loud from Number Twelve. Laura looked across the road and saw the light go on at Number Eleven and Esther Dean in her nightdress standing at her lighted window.

'Oh dear,' Laura said, 'they've wakened Esther! There'll be trouble – but hopefully not until tomorrow. And it's no use her rapping on the window – which she is doing – because they won't hear her.'

'That won't stop her,' Dermot said.

'Why doesn't she sleep in the back bedroom?' Laura said.

'Because she's lived in that house most of her life and always slept in the front bedroom,' Dermot said. 'And she's not been used to students. We've only had them in Mulberry Lane for the last three years. It used to be a rather quiet road before then.'

'They do bring a bit of life,' Laura protested. 'Do you think I should go across and see to her? Get her back to bed?'

'For goodness' sake, *no!*' Dermot said. 'Come away from the window! And draw the curtains and shut out the racket.'

'It isn't a racket,' Laura informed him. 'It's just that you never take the trouble to listen properly.'

On the other side of the students, at what had been built as Numbers Fourteen and Sixteen and was now Cornerways,

all one large house as viewed from across the road by Rita the estate agent that morning, Gary and Lisa Anderson were not so troubled by the noise coming from their neighbours. For a start, unlike the O'Briens' house which was divided from the students only by a party wall, Cornerways and Number Twelve each had a strip of garden to the side of them. In any case they were used to loud music of their own. It was not quite as up-to-the-minute as that of the students (though they tried hard) but when required it was relayed from the most expensive equipment and poured out in every room in the house, including the four lavatories.

At the moment it was turned off because the two of them were sitting on their cream-coloured leather sofa in their deep-pile carpeted lounge, watching a horror movie on their state-of-the-art television with its Dolby Prologic sound surround system and mega-screen, and the noise level from that was more than enough to drown out the repetitive drumbeats issuing from Number Twelve. Gary, round-faced, shrewd of eye, slightly too plump for his thirty-five years, sipped his sixteen-year-old malt from a heavily cut crystal tumbler. Lisa, though a glass of white wine stood on the low marble table in front of them, preferred to dip into the box of Belgian chocolates on her lap. She was ever so slightly bored by the film. She would have liked to have talked, since most of her day's conversation had been with Nathan and Amber, aged six and four respectively and now fast asleep upstairs in their nursery. Gary, however, preferred to watch his movies in silence. It helped him to unwind, he said.

What he needed to unwind from was his week spent working hard and making lots of money in his computer business. What exactly he did Lisa was not sure. Software, and networking for businesses, but she didn't quite know what that involved. She was not into computers. Gary had once tried to explain to her but she had never really

understood and he had told her not to worry her pretty head about it. She had been a photographic model for a mail order catalogue before meeting Gary. Sometimes she missed that a little. However, though she didn't understand the ins and outs of what Gary did, she was grateful for the results. How else would they afford this lovely home, their top-of-the-range cars, Nathan's fees at a private prep school and his name down for a public school.

So now, good wife that she was, she sat quietly through screams and stabbings and gunshots and blood. She would have liked to skim through *Hello!* and *Tatler* but Gary would have been irritated by the turning of the pages.

In the end her patience was rewarded. The film ended. Gary stood up and stretched himself.

'Right!' he said. 'I'll take Bruno up the road and then we'll call it a day.'

Bruno, a Great Dane of impeccable pedigree, hearing his name and knowing more or less what the time was, picked up his lead from the shelf by the front door and ambled into the lounge. He had been lying in the hall all evening. He did not like horror films. Musicals he could put up with, but not horror.

'Good boy,' Gary said. 'Off we go!'

He always turned left into Upper Mulberry. You met a better class of dog there. Afghans, Dobermanns, basset-hounds, mastiffs. They were mostly large, as befitted their homes. The exception was Frizzie, an exquisitely beautiful Bichon Frisé bitch whose sex appeal made up for what she lacked in size - at least to Bruno, who adored her. Her dog walker habitually disclaimed ownership of the small dog. She was actually his wife's, he explained, but his wife did not like to be out, even in Upper Mulberry, late at night.

To Bruno's disappointment they didn't meet Frizzie on this occasion. It was rather later than usual - it had been a long film - so it was a short, sharp walk to the top of the hill

and back again. When they went into the house Lisa was in the kitchen, making a hot drink.

'I forgot to tell you,' she said, 'there was an estate agent at Number Fifteen this morning. She put up a sale board.'

'Oh,' Gary said. 'Well, we did expect it, didn't we?' He was actually quite pleased. The shabbiness of Number Fifteen had displeased him for some time now. They had been delighted with Cornerways from the moment they'd been shown around it by Bill Marston, who had bought the two houses and made such a good job of knocking them into one (in order to sell at a profit, he had no thought of living there). In addition, he had been fortunate enough to buy an extra piece of land at the back so that there was now a fair-sized garden, and that had caught Lisa's eye. Neither Gary nor Lisa had taken enough notice of the house opposite. It was not like Gary. He usually had a good business head on his shoulders, but Bill Marston was a very good salesman. And as Bill had said, Cornerways was practically in Upper Mulberry. Gary never thought of it as being otherwise. Indeed you could say the back garden was.

'Well,' he said to Lisa, 'let's hope we get someone decent there - and the sooner the better!'

When Laura and Dermot left the house at mid-morning on Saturday there was neither sight nor sound from Number Twelve. The small purple car was exactly where it had been the previous night.

'I said you should have let me ask whoever the owner is to move it,' Laura said. 'It's obviously one of the students. Now we shan't be able to get out.'

Dermot eyed the space between the purple car in front of his Volvo and the Ford parked behind it.

'Yes we will,' he said. 'Not easily, but we will.'

'Do you want me to see you out?' Laura offered.

'No thank you. It only confuses me.'