

THE MILLION-COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Maeve Binchy

The Lilac Bus

‘Touching, gossipy and as warming as a feather bed’
Sunday Telegraph



The Lilac Bus

Maeve Binchy was born in Dublin and was educated at the Holy Child Convent in Killiney and at University College Dublin. After a spell as a teacher in various girls' schools, she joined the *Irish Times*, for which she wrote feature articles and columns. Her first novel, *Light a Penny Candle*, was published in 1982, and she went on to write more than a dozen novels and short-story collections, each one of them a bestseller. Several have been adapted for cinema and television, most notably *Circle of Friends* in 1995. Maeve Binchy died on 30 July 2012. She is survived by her husband, the writer and broadcaster Gordon Snell.

To find out more visit www.maevebinchy.com

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*For my dear Gordon
with all my love*

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NANCY

Nancy was early, but then she always was, and she didn't like being seen there too soon. It looked as if you had nothing else to do if you arrived far too early for the bus home. The others all arrived rushing and panting and afraid they'd miss it, because if they missed it then they really did. Tom turned the key in the ignition at 6.45 and swung the Lilac Bus out into the road. That way he had them all home before ten o'clock and that was his promise. No point in going home for a weekend if you aren't in the pub by ten, that was his philosophy. It wasn't Nancy's but she was compulsively early for everything. It was just her way. She went into a shop that sold magazines and cards. She knew a lot of the cards by heart from studying them on a Friday. There was the big one with tears falling down it: 'Sorry I missed your birthday.' They had the country papers in this shop too but Nancy never bought one. There'd be a paper at home and she could catch up on everything then.

She examined her new perm in the big round mirror which was not meant so much as a mirror as a deterrent to shoplifting. It was set high on the wall and at a funny angle, or she hoped it was. Otherwise the perm looked very odd indeed. She stared up at her reflection anxiously. Surely she didn't look like some small worried animal with fuzzy hair and huge terrified eyes. That's what she saw in the mirror, but of course that's not what people down at her own level would see? After all, everyone looked silly from this point of view. She patted her head and had another pang about the perm. It looked to her dangerously like those old-fashioned perms that people like her mother got in Rathdoon. The summer perm and the Christmas perm. Frizz, fuzz . . . tight curls growing out into what looked like flashes of lightning or electric shocks as the weeks went by. The girls in the salon assured her that she was mad to think this. She had got a modern perm, one of the newest on the market. Think what she'd have paid if she had to pay for it! Nancy had smiled grimly. Paid for it! At that price! Nancy Morris wouldn't have paid half that price or a quarter of that price for a perm. Nancy Morris had crossed Dublin to go to a salon where she heard they needed people to practise on. *Models* was the expression, but Nancy was more realistic. They needed heads with hair and smart people like Nancy found out which were the big salons with lots of trainees and on what nights their

classes and demonstrations were. She had only paid for two visits to a hairdresser since she came to Dublin six years ago. That wasn't bad going, she smiled proudly. Still it was done now, this perm, no point in peering up at herself and worrying. Better go across and get on the bus. Surely some of the others would be there by now, and it was well after half-past six.

Tom was sitting there reading an evening paper. He looked up and smiled. 'Evening, Miss Mouse,' he said pleasantly and lifted her big suitcase up onto the roof rack with one easy movement. She got in crossly. She *hated* him calling her Miss Mouse, but it was her own fault. When she had rung to ask for a place in his minibus she had given her name as Miss Morris. Well, she was used to being formal on the phone – that was what her job was about, for heaven's sake. How was she to know that she should have said her first name and that he genuinely misheard the Morris bit. But it was very galling that he still refused to call her Nancy, even though he always called old Mrs Hickey Judy and she could have been his mother.

'It's light for such a big case,' he said pleasantly. Nancy just nodded. She didn't feel like telling him it was her only suitcase and she had no intention of going out and spending over a fiver on some kind of nylon holdall like the others had. And anyway she needed a big case: there were always things to take back to Dublin, like potatoes and whatever

vegetables there were, and anything else that turned up. There was the time that her mother's friend, Mrs Casey, was getting rid of her curtains: Nancy brought them back and they were lovely in the flat.

She sat down in one of the middle seats, straightened her skirt under her so that it wouldn't crease and took out her glucose sweets. They had jars of them in the hospital, and they always told her to help herself. She didn't eat them normally but it was nice on a bus journey to have something; the others often bought barley sugar or toffees, but what was the point of spending money on sweets when they were there for the asking? She unfolded a newspaper that one of the patients had left behind in the waiting room. She got a lot of her reading material this way – people waiting for the specialists were inclined to be forgetful about papers and magazines, and there was rarely an evening she didn't have something to read. And it was nice to have a variety, she told herself. It was like a surprise. Mairead didn't understand. Nancy's brow darkened when she thought of Mairead. And all that had to be sorted out. It had been so unexpected and so unfair.

She held up the newspaper so that Tom would think she was reading and she went over it all again. Mairead coming in on Wednesday and walking round restlessly picking things up and putting them down. You didn't have to be a genius to know there was something on her mind. Nancy thought she was

going to ask about the television again. They had a perfectly good black and white set which was a bit snowstormish now and then but usually got a terrific reception. What on earth was the point of paying out a fortune renting a colour set? And even a video: Mairead had once mentioned this as if they were some kind of millionaires. She had looked up from the telly, which was admittedly having one of its bad nights and you had to guess a lot from the soundtrack; but Mairead had wanted to talk about something much bigger.

‘I’ve been thinking all week at work how to say this, Nancy, and I can’t think of any proper way so I’ll just say it straight out. I want to share the flat with someone else, and I am going to have to ask you to leave. In your own time of course, I’m not throwing you out on the road . . .’ She had given a little nervous laugh but Nancy had been too astounded to join in. ‘You see,’ Mairead had gone on, ‘it was never permanent. It was just to see what we thought. . . . that was the arrangement. That was what we said . . .’ Her voice had trailed away guiltily.

‘But we’ve been sharing for three years,’ Nancy said.

‘I know,’ Mairead said miserably.

‘So why? Don’t I pay the rent in time always and the electricity? And I contribute to the food from home and I got curtains for the hall windows and . . .?’

‘Of course, Nancy, nobody’s saying you didn’t.’

‘So why?’

‘It’s just . . . no there’s no reason, can’t we do it nice and easily now without quarrels and questions. Can’t you just find another place and we’ll still meet now and then, go to the pictures, you come over here one evening, me go to your place. Come on, Nancy, that’s the grown-up way to do things.’

Nancy had burned with rage. Mairead, who worked in a flower shop, telling her what was the grown-up way to do things. Mairead who hadn’t got one honour in her Leaving Certificate ordering Nancy out of her flat. *Her* flat. True, she had found it, and when she needed someone to share the rent her aunt Mrs Casey, the friend of Nancy’s mother, had suggested Nancy. Where had Mairead got these notions and more important, why? Who did she want to share with?

The worst thing was that Mairead didn’t seem to know or care, she just said she would like a change. At this point Nancy had turned off the flickering telly and had settled in for what she thought was going to be a heart-to-heart where Mairead would tell her all about some star-crossed love. But no. Mairead was busy looking at the calendar. Would we say just over a month, like the middle of October? That would surely give her time to find somewhere.

‘But who will I share with?’ Nancy had wailed.

Mairead had shrugged. She didn’t know, maybe

Nancy could get a bed-sit on her own. She didn't do much cooking or entertaining, a bed-sit might be just as good. But they cost a *fortune!* Mairead had shrugged again as if it didn't concern her.

The following morning Nancy was having her tea in the kitchen – she never bothered with a breakfast since there was always food in the hospital, and what was the point of being a receptionist for all these doctors unless you got some perks like a canteen and glucose sweets? Mairead rushed in late as usual and Nancy asked her had she forgiven her.

'Forgive you, Nancy? What for? What in heaven's name for?'

'Well I must have done something, otherwise you wouldn't be asking me to leave our flat.'

'It's *my* flat and don't be such a clown. We're not married to each other, Nancy. You came in here to share my rent, now that bit's over. Right? Yes. That's all there is to it.' She was gulping down a bowl of cornflakes and trying to pull on her boots at the same time. Mairead loved these boots; they horrified Nancy – they had cost a week's salary. For a pair of boots.

'What'll I tell them in Rathdoon?' Nancy asked solemnly. Mairead was startled.

'About what?' she had asked, bewildered.

'About us breaking up?'

'Sure who would want to know? Who even knows we share a flat?'

‘Everyone: your mother, my mother, your aunt Mrs Casey, everyone.’

‘Well, what do you mean what will you tell them?’ Mairead was genuinely surprised.

‘But your mother, what will she think? What will I tell her?’

Mairead had lost her temper suddenly. Nancy still felt a shock just thinking about it.

‘My mother is a normal woman; she’s like everyone else’s mother, including your mother. She doesn’t think anything. She wants to know that I’m not pregnant and I’m not on drugs and I’m still going to Mass. That’s all any mother wants to know in the name of God, those same three things. In India mothers want to know that or Russia or wherever, and it may not be Mass for them but it’s something. People’s mothers don’t give two flying damns about their daughters sharing flats with people and whether they get on well or whether as in our case they drive each other up the wall. They just want to be told the essentials.’

‘We don’t drive each other up the wall,’ Nancy had said quietly.

‘No, well, irritate each other. What’s the difference. Why bother your head explaining and telling and reporting back. People aren’t bloody interested.’

‘Do I irritate you?’

‘Yes.’

‘How?’

‘Oh Nancy, *please.*’ Mairead was stricken. ‘We agreed last night to be grown-up and not to have pointless rows and recriminations. We agreed. Now look what you’re starting. Of course people irritate each other. I probably drive you mad. Listen, I must go.’

Nancy had a terrible day: she had looked at the prices of flats and bed-sitters and they were sky high. The further out you went they came down a bit of course, but she had to be within cycling distance of the hospital. There was no way she was going to spend her hard-earned money on bus fares. She had thought too about what Mairead had said. She couldn’t think why she was irritating. She didn’t smoke, she never invited rowdy people in like Mairead often did, people who brought a bottle of wine each and then went out for chicken and chips. She didn’t play records loud – she didn’t have any records. She did everything to help. Often she cut special offers out of the paper and collected vouchers for foods or detergents. She suggested often to Mairead that it would be cheaper to come home every weekend to Rathdoon because people spend a fortune at weekends in Dublin and you could live free at home. How had she been so irritating?

Even this very morning she had asked Mairead if it was definite, and Mairead had nodded wordlessly. Nancy had offered to let Mairead have the weekend to consider her decision but in a low soft voice, unlike

her harangue of the previous morning, Mairead had said there would be no considering and she realised that Nancy would be cooperative and start looking for another place straight away.

She looked up at the sound of voices. Dee Burke had arrived; she wore her college scarf even though she had left UCD two years previously, and she carried a canvas grip which she threw up on the roof herself. Tom was laughing at her.

‘You’ll be a discus champion yet,’ he said.

‘No, it’s to show you that women are genuinely liberated, that’s all – besides there’s nothing in it except a couple of pairs of knickers and some law books I’m meant to be studying.’

Nancy was amazed that Dee, who was Dr Burke’s daughter and lived in a big house covered with creeper could talk about knickers to Tom Fitzgerald in such a relaxed way. It didn’t even sound rude the way she said it. Dee was a law unto herself though and always had been. You’d think she’d have her own car but she said that she wasn’t earning much as a solicitor’s apprentice. Still Nancy would have thought that this minibus would have been beneath the Burkes. They were people of such standing in Rathdoon, they must find it strange that their daughter travelled with anyone and everyone. Dee never seemed to notice. She was friendly with everyone, with that tinker of a fellow Kev Kennedy that you’d try to cross the road to avoid, with desperate

Mikey Burns and his dirty jokes. Dee was specially nice to Nancy; she came and sat beside her and asked, as she often did, about Nancy's work.

It was quite extraordinary the way Dee remembered the names of the doctors she worked for, and knew that one was an eye specialist, one an orthopaedic surgeon and one an ear, nose and throat man. She knew there was Mr Barry and Mr White and Mr Charles. Even Nancy's mother wouldn't know that, and as for Mairead she could hardly remember the names of her own bosses let alone Nancy's.

But then Dee was nice and she had great breeding. People like that were courteous, Nancy always thought and they had the manners to be interested in other people.

Rupert Green arrived next. He was wearing a very smart jacket.

'Merciful God, Rupert, is that Italian? Is that the real thing?' Dee asked, feeling the sleeve as Rupert got in.

'Yes it is actually.' Rupert's pale face flushed with pleasure. 'How did you know?'

'Aren't I worn out looking at them in magazines. It's gorgeous.'

'Yes, it's a second, or a discontinued line or something, but a friend got it for me anyway.' Rupert was very pleased that it had caused such a stir.

'Well, they'd need to be a second or something,

otherwise your father would have to sell his practice to buy it,' Dee laughed. Rupert's father was the solicitor, and it was through Mr Green she had got her apprenticeship in Dublin. Nancy looked at them enviously. It must be great to have such an easy way of going on. It was like a kind of shorthand in professional families, she noticed, they could all talk to each other at the drop of a hat. She felt a twinge of annoyance that her father, long dead, had been a postman and not a lawyer. The annoyance was followed by a stronger twinge of guilt. Her father had worked long and hard and had been pleased to see them all do well at their books and get secretarial or clerical jobs.

Rupert went to the back seat and almost on cue Mrs Hickey arrived. Suntanned even in winter she looked healthy and strong and as if she might be any age. Nancy knew she must be in her late fifties, but that was only by questioning people and piecing it all together. Judy Hickey worked in some kind of mad place that sold herbal cures and grain and nuts, and she even grew some of the things herself which was why she came home every weekend to harvest them and bring them back to this shop in Dublin. Nancy had never been to the shop; Dee told her it was marvellous, that everyone should go and see it just for the experience of it but Nancy took her position as receptionist to three of Dublin's leading consultants very seriously. It wouldn't do for her to be

seen going in and out of some quack's shop, would it?

Judy went to sit beside Rupert in the back and Mikey Burns had begun to squeeze himself in to the front seat. Laughing and rubbing his hands he told them a joke about hairy tennis balls. Everyone smiled and Mikey seemed to be able to settle down now that he had told at least one dirty story. He looked out eagerly.

'Will I be lucky and get the beautiful Celia beside me or do I get Mr Kennedy? Oh dear, just your luck Mikey, here comes Mr Kennedy.'

Kev sneaked into the bus looking over his shoulder as if he expected a guard to lay a hand on him and say *Just a minute* like they do in films. Nancy thought she had never seen anyone who looked so furtive. If you spoke to Kev Kennedy he jumped a foot in the air, and he never said much in reply so he wasn't spoken to much.

And lastly Celia came. Big and sort of handsome in a way, though Nancy didn't admire those kind of looks. She often wore tight belts; as she wore them when she was nursing, she had probably got used to them. They made her figure very obvious. Not sexy, but it certainly divided it for all to see: a jutting out top half in front and a big jutting out bottom half at the back. Nancy would have thought she might have been wiser to wear something more floppy.

Celia sat in beside Tom: the last person always sat

beside the driver. It was only twenty to seven and they set off with five minutes in hand.

'I have you very well trained,' Tom laughed as he nosed the minibus out into the Friday evening traffic.

'Indeed you have. No wee-wees until we're across the Shannon,' said Mikey looking round for approval, and since he didn't hear any he said it again. This time a few people smiled back at him.

Nancy told Dee all about Mr Charles and Mr White and Mr Barry and how they saw their private patients on certain days of the week and how she kept their appointment books and shuffled people around and how patients were often very grateful to her and gave her little presents at Christmas. Dee wanted to know were they well thought of, the doctors, and whether people praised them. Nancy tried to dredge examples but couldn't. She was more on the administrative side, she kept insisting. Dee wanted to know whether she met them socially, and Nancy had laughed to think such a thing was possible. That was the joy of being a doctor's daughter, you didn't think class distinctions existed any more. No, of course she didn't get involved in their home lives. Mr Barry had a Canadian wife and two children, Mr White's wife was a teacher and they had four children, and Mr Charles and his wife had no children. Yes, she sometimes spoke to their wives on the phone; they all

seemed very nice, they all remembered her name. 'Hallo Miss Morris,' they would say.

Dee fell asleep when Nancy was explaining about the hospital switchboard which was very awkward and how they had been looking for a separate switchboard for the consultants for ages, but maybe things would get better with the new set-up in the phone headquarters. Nancy was a bit embarrassed at that. Maybe she had been rabbiting on, possibly she did irritate people by talking too much about little things; sometimes her own mother got up and went to bed in the middle of one of their conversations. Mairead might be right. But no, that couldn't be, Dee had been positively pressing her for details of her working life, she had asked question after question. No, Nancy couldn't blame herself for being boring. Not this time. She sighed and looked at the fields flying by.

Soon she nodded off too. Behind her Judy Hickey and Rupert Green were talking about someone they knew who had gone to an Ashram in India and everyone had to wear yellow or saffron. In front of her Kev Kennedy was half-listening as Mikey Burns explained a card trick with a glass of water. Mikey said that it was better if you saw it done but you could still grasp the point if you concentrated.

In front of them Tom was saying something to Celia; she was nodding and agreeing with it, whatever it was. It was very comfortable and warm, and even if she did lean over a bit in sleep and slump on top of

Dee, well it didn't matter. She wouldn't have let herself doze if she were beside one of the men. Or indeed beside Judy Hickey: there was something very odd about her.

Nancy was asleep.

Her mother was still at the kitchen table when she got in. She was writing a letter to her daughter in America.

'There you are,' she said.

'All in one piece,' said Nancy.

It wasn't much of a greeting between mother and daughter when the whole country had been crossed. But they had never been a demonstrative family. No hugging and kissing, no linking arms.

'How was the journey?' her mother asked.

'Oh, the same. I had a bit of a sleep so I have a crick in my neck.' Nancy rubbed it thoughtfully.

'It's great to be able to sleep on that road, with maniacs screeching past you in all directions.'

'Oh, it's not that bad.' Nancy looked around. 'Well, what's been happening?'

Her mother was poor at handing out news. Nancy would have liked her to get up, wet a pot of tea and come back full of detail and information. She wanted to hear the week's events and who had been home, who had been heard from, who had revealed what. But somehow it was never like that.

'Whatever happens? Nothing's been happening –