



# OVER THE ROAD

*Bel Mooney*

Over The Road by Bel Mooney

1



Bel Mooney has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of these works.

## OVER THE ROAD

They moved in quite early one morning.

Simon had gone, and I was pulling off the bed linen when I heard the van change gear, then the piercing chatter as it reversed, just opposite my flat.

The furniture the men were carrying was predictable. Sofa and two armchairs in a floral print, a couple of antique side tables, reproduction dining suite in rosewood, pine kitchen table....Last of all came the double bed - a large, deep divan, with a padded headboard in pale blue damask. King-size, I thought, so they've plenty of room to escape from each other.

I never wanted to be married.

At that moment the phone rang. It was Simon. 'I just want to say I love you', he said.

'Yeah - thanks', I replied. One of my nails was splitting.

'What about tonight?'

'Darling - I have to stay in. My mother's going to ring, and you know how she goes on when I'm never in,' I said.

'Why not 'phone her?'

I yawned. 'She's ringing me. It's all arranged'.

'But I could come round. Look, Caro...', he began.

I loathe supplication.

'I just *have* to go, ' I said, and put the phone down.

You can tell people by their furniture. I value houses and pay a game before I enter, guessing from the curtains what the people will look like, what colours they will have chosen, because I know how the selection of a kitchen or a cushion is a sure indication of the human heart. And if underwear is still on the bedroom chair, and a coffee cup from the night before on the glass table, you know these are the upper middle classes. The rest are neat and nervous, wanting to impress, even though they may never meet you again.

I knew, even before I met them that the new people over the road would never leave underwear on the bedroom floor. Just before I left, I saw them emerge together and stand arm in arm, watching the van pull away. Mr and Mrs



Dormouse, I thought. He was tall, she was short, but both wore spectacles, and identical baggy jeans and navy sweaters. Mrs Dormouse had a neat straight bob, and Mr Dormouse's hair was curly, giving him the air of a tousled schoolboy, the swot of the sixth. He was certainly the more attractive of the two, I thought - although that was giving a hamster the edge on a mouse.

The next day was Saturday. I woke early, and leaned on one elbow, looking at Johnny as he lay asleep. He was marvellously handsome, but I sighed - then frowned as I gazed about the room, where my clothes lay strewn about the floor, mingled with his. Easing myself off the futon I collected them, leaving his where they lay, and threw them all in the linen basket. Then I went to shower.

After a few moments he put his hands playfully round the curtain, seeking me. 'Can I come in?', he whispered hoarsely, in that voice which excited me over restaurant tables. 'No', I snapped. 'Look, Johnny, you've got to go. I can't even give you breakfast, because my mother's arriving in half an hour.'

'Can't I meet her?', he asked.

'Don't be ridiculous', I said.

When he had gone (looking deliciously sulky and begging me to see him soon) I made coffee, put on Vivaldi flute sonatas, and stretched out on the kelim, looking at the

ceiling. I love to be alone in my flat, among the cushions, low chairs, good rugs and paintings (I buy something each year, taking advice). With no one to talk to me or come up behind, to hug me or ask me for something I simply can't give, I feel myself again.

Of course my mother wasn't coming. I see her as little as possible, which makes me guilty, of course, but there is nothing to be done.

About forty minutes after Johnny left I heard my buzzer. 'I'm sorry to disturb you', said the timid female voice on the intercom, 'I'm from over the road. Just moved in....'

She stood on the doorstep, pink and shy. Today she wore a longish gathered skirt in a tweedy material, with a plain grey turtle necked sweater, and looked even dumpier than at first. Her glasses were round. That face had never felt the loving touch of makeup, on that I would bet. Her plainness repelled me. To look at that face in the mirror, to be imprisoned within that form....Intolerable.

'I pressed all three bells', she said, 'but you're the only person in.'

I explained that the other two flats, one beneath, one above, belonged to businessmen who travel a good deal.

'Yes, it must be the same with the houses each side of us', she sighed, 'because I can't get a reply. Well, anyway, I only

wanted to introduce myself. I'm Jane Renshaw and my husband is Paul. We thought, as we're neighbours now....'

How quaint, I thought, nobody does that sort of thing in this street. I felt at a loss, but told her I was pleased she had made the effort.

Jane Renshaw was looking wistful. 'We've come from a little village in Cheshire where everybody knew each other. But Paul got this wonderful chance of a partnership - he's a solicitor, you see - and we thought it would be an experience to be in town, until we want to start a family. Then we'll move out again, I expect.' She blushed, looking momentarily confused, as if already she sensed that people don't tell each other things like that. Not in my street.

'What do you do?', she asked, after a pause.

'I work with Barrett and Brown, the estate agents down the road.'

'I'm a teacher - primary - so it was easy for me to find a job'.

Just then her husband appeared at their front door. 'I've made coffee,' he called, 'Come over - both of you.'

I suppose that was the beginning. Ten minutes later I was sitting at the pine table in their white kitchen, drinking vile instant coffee from a thick pottery mug, and telling them stories about my job. Even in the ordinary morning light I know I glittered at them, dressed in my rose velour

jogging pants with the baggy matching top which always slips off one shoulder... How could I help it?

‘You’ve a good-sized kitchen’, I said, guessing correctly that Jane Renshaw liked to cook. In a second she was up, pulling open cupboards with enthusiasm.

During the moment Paul Renshaw and I were alone at the table I leaned forward so that my hair fell over my face in a golden curtain and one shoulder gleamed near him. It had nothing to do with *him*, this need to dazzle a mousy solicitor who wore rather thick, gold-rimmed glasses, ill-fitting cords and a chain store sweater. It was what I did.

Anyway, it was then I felt my first tremor of disquiet - or, at least, confusion. As I glanced at him through my hair I saw that Paul Renshaw was not looking at me at all, but fixedly at his wife’s rear as she bent over to rummage in a cupboard. I could have been a hundred miles away.

Then, when she returned to the table with a plate of biscuits she leaned against him briefly. That was all. But there was something in that small movement that left me feeling uncomfortable.

I didn’t see much of the Renshaws in the following weeks. My life was full: work each day then out most evenings with Simon or Johnny or David or William, and then occasionally

with Alexander Brown, my boss's son. Alexander is three years younger and newly married, which gives his hurried visits an added piquancy. Sometimes, pulling the curtains across at one in the morning, I would forget, in a terrifying moment of amnesia, which man lay on the futon waiting for me. Then I would glance across to the Renshaws' darkened house and pity them - locked into their dormouse life.

About five weeks after my first meeting with the new neighbours I treated myself to a rare evening in, to put a pale auburn rinse on my hair and generally recover from too much champagne and sex.

It was October; at nine the street was dark - the warm, purple darkness of autumn which always makes me restless. I stood at my window, just behind the curtain, staring absent-mindedly into the road, when my eyes were drawn to the Renshaws' place. Their sitting room light snapped off, and a few minutes later the bedroom window blazed, exactly opposite where I stood. As I watched, a figure crossed the room, visible through the filmy nets. It was Mrs Dormouse.

Entertained, I thought how characteristic that she should go to bed so early, to pull on a thick flowery nightdress, no doubt, and curl up with a worthy book. She went to one side as if to draw the heavy curtains, but stopped suddenly and turned towards the figure who came

up behind her, curving her body into his arms with a movement that was almost desperate. 'Aha, a lover!' I said aloud in amazement, not really believing the notion. Then, a second later, I recognised the man. It was, of course, Paul Renshaw.

They swayed together, his hand pressed passionately into her buttocks, until at last they broke apart. Then, very slowly and deliberately, with a movement of indescribably tenderness and sensuality, Mr Dormouse raised his wife's loose arms and peeled off her sweater. I couldn't breathe. Then, realising the curtains were open, he turned abruptly to jerk them closed. I was left staring at the dull glow of light through fabric, reminded suddenly of walking up the garden path at home when I was a child, knowing that the fire would be lit and tea on the table - that everything wholly comforting lay behind the curtained sitting room window, to be possessed by me within minutes.

But not now. I stood there alone, imagining what was going on in that bedroom over the road. Their bed had been large and opulent....and there they were now, Mr and Mrs Dormouse, making love. I had seen the beginning, seen how their bodies folded together. Now I pictured the consummation, in the warmth of that bed, while I stood alone at my window. After a long time I moved across to my futon, to lie staring up at nothing.

It is hard to explain why this accidental act of voyeurism shocked me as much as it did. They were a married couple of some five years' standing; naturally they went to bed together. But I thought of little else all next day.

The next evening I cancelled Simon and stayed in - lingering near the window at nine-thirty to see if they would go upstairs early again. They did. But this time Jane closed the curtains immediately, so I could not watch them embrace. Yet in my mind I did. I saw it clearly.

The pattern of my evenings changed. Turning down date after date, deaf to the protests of my admirers, I would find myself drawn to the window to spy on the people over the road. Their bedroom light would stay on for a long, long time - no fumbling in the dark for these two, no hasty coupling under the covers before immediate sleep. I pictured their spectacles resting side by side on the bedside table, and Mr and Mrs Dormouse reaching fuzzily for each other, not able to see properly - which was just as well, I thought, considering how unglamorous they both were....

But such mental attempts to ridicule my neighbours worked no longer. No - I was beginning to understand that what went on within that curtained bedroom was grave and deliberate as much as it was sensual: each night they returned to celebrate each other's bodies. It was something I had never known.

Occasionally they would be so absorbed in each other they would forget to pull the curtains at all; then I would observe their kisses through the nets - their erotic ballet - before the gradual withdrawal into the depths of the room and the bed which remained beyond vision. But I tried to see, craning my neck until it ached as much as my heart.

From time to time Jane would wave cheerfully to me in the street, and once she shouted, 'We must get together!'. And indeed, I became consumed with the desire to see them meet them again, to be in the same room and talk, as if such contact would give me access to..... But what?

So I wrote a note and posted it through their letterbox, inviting them to supper that coming Saturday. Beaming with pleasure, Jane appeared on my doorstep ten minutes later to accept. During the intervening days I astonished myself by poring over previously neglected cookery books, and making lists - I, who always assumed the next man would take me to the most fashionable new restaurant in town and pay the bill, in the full knowledge that he'd be rewarded later.

When the day came I went to a great deal of trouble: smoked salmon wrapped around a herb and horseradish mousse, lemon chicken with just a hint of Thai, accompanied by saffron rice and a rocket salad, a black grape flan, and



then my favourite *dolcelatte torte* with rye biscuits. There was mineral water and plenty of excellent chablis. I receive the Renshaws' Bulgarian Cabernet with murmurs of suitably muted pleasure, left it on the kitchen table and opened a bottle of Moet.

Clearly my guests had expected me to invite a man; they glanced questioningly at the table set for three, then at each other - a mere second, but I caught it. It occurred to me suddenly that they might be disappointed, might have wanted to meet 'people', since they were still quite new to town. But how could I introduce them to those I knew? Simon or Johnny or Trish at work would have taken one look at this meek, matching couple, and yawned.

Besides - they were mine.

Jane exclaimed over the meal, while Paul ate in silent concentration. I found myself staring at him; there was a rumped, professorial look about him that was so much at odds with the lean, athletic, sometimes half-naked figure I had glimpsed through the nets, it made me dizzy with curiosity.

I let my knee brush his leg beneath the table, as delicately and accidentally as my scent pervaded the air. When I crossed my legs the purple silk of my trousers made a tiny, slithering sound he must have heard. At one point I fancied I caught him examining the flimsy fabric of my black

embroidered Indian shirt, and congratulated myself on the black french lace bra I'd chosen with care. Mrs Dormouse, on the other hand, was wearing a navy-blue cotton dress my mother would have described as a 'shirt-waister'. For that matter, my mother might have worn it. Her pleasant, round face was naturally shiny, the hair brushed smooth like a cap.

I listened as Jane talked about the local church they had found, with evangelical tendencies of which they approved. They worshipped each Sunday, she said, and it was rather like the atmosphere in their church back in Cheshire. He nodded agreement.

Suddenly this became too much for me. As much confused as repelled, I suddenly felt I did not know anything any more and floundered as the anodyne conversation stumbled on. I had nothing to say, while he discussed the rising divorce rate and its terrible effect on children, and she nodded grave agreement. She told anecdotes about her pupils, while he watched her fondly.

'She gets very tired at school', he said to me.

Was that a hint? I wondered.

'Please...if you want to go...', I began, biting off the following phrase '...to bed early' - unwilling to put the idea in his head. Then, cunning, I went on, 'I mean - Jane, dear, if *you* want to slip home I'll quite understand. All those yelling kids would make me shattered!'

‘We’re not late night people’, Paul said.

Fifteen minutes later, as if by a prearranged signal, they both yawned and pushed back their chairs.

‘Well, it’s been lovely...’ she began.

‘Coffee?’ I asked.

‘We’re not late-night people’, said Paul.

‘Yes’, I said flatly, feeling the emptiness of my flat close around me once more. But a little later I noticed with satisfaction that their bedroom light went off immediately. With some satisfaction I knew I was the cause of that exhaustion.

A few days later I saw Paul in the market, wandering from stall to stall, choosing vegetables with deliberation. I watched him for a while, noticing his laconic ease as he frowned with concentration over a tumble of avocados, reaching to touch one, assessing ripeness. His fingers were long.

Turning, he saw me, and I felt myself colour, like a schoolgirl following a boy she has a crush on. And was that it? I wondered in amazement - only to reject the thought at once. I knew I did not love this man from over the road. I simply wanted to know what it would be like to have him turn to me as he turned to her. I hankered after the mystery play I’d glimpsed on their curtained stage.

He was talking about the price of food, and I kept my

eyes fixed on his all the while, as if fascinated by the subject of tomatoes. Then he said, 'Anyway, I'll be cooking for myself for a couple of days.'

'Why?'

'Jane's father's ill. It's not easy for her to take time off school but the headmistress understands. He's really quite bad. So she's going to see them.'

Exulting, I murmured stock commiserations. 'But you could come and have a meal with me if you like.'

'That's kind', he said, 'but I'm snowed under at work. Some really complicated cases. I told Jane it'll be a good chance for me to catch up. It's peaceful working at home late at night.'

'Ah, burning the old midnight oil', I said foolishly.

He smiled, as if he had already forgotten I was there and was at home with his wife. 'Oh, look at me!' I wanted to shout, 'Look at my breasts, smell my skin, see how beautiful I am!'

But he had gone, clutching his shopping bag like a good husband.

I saw her leave, hefting a small, battered hold all. For a long time they hugged on the doorstep and when she turned to the taxi I thought I saw tears, but it might have been the

morning sun on her thick lenses. That evening I glanced out of the window from time to time and saw their front room light was on until well after midnight. Mr Dormouse really was working. I wondered if the insistent throbbing of my Ravel might carry across the street.

All through the next day I brooded, wondering what to do. Then something Simon or Johnny had said lightly slipped unbidden into my head. 'If you want something badly all you have to do is ask.' Suddenly the remark seemed profound.

I was home by 5.45 and watched for Paul Renshaw. At 6.30 he was standing on his doorstep, fumbling for keys. I allowed him half an hour, then telephoned.

'Paul - it's Caro, from over the road. Look, I don't want to be a nuisance, but I've got a problem, and I wondered....'

'Oh - what sort of problem?' he asked. I detected a trace of weariness.

'Well, it's a sort of legal matter. To do with my mother. You see, she's made a will, and I'm not sure we're doing the right thing....Oh, I'd much rather explain properly, if you can spare me half an hour. I wouldn't impose, but she gets easily upset because she's been feeling ill just lately, and if I don't phone her tomorrow....'

I allowed myself a sharp little intake of breath, and heard the answering concern in his voice.

'Look, of course. I understand. Shall I pop over?'

‘No’, I said, ‘I’ll come over to you. In about an hour?’

When I put the ‘phone down I glanced at the Renshaws’ dark bedroom window. *There*, not here. That was what I wanted. I bathed then stood naked by my wardrobe, wondering what would be suitable. I chose skinny black pants over my black lace G-string, and a sweater in scarlet angora, with a plunging V neck. The soft wool tickled; I wore no bra. Flat velvet shoes with gold and red embroidery on the toes - and I was ready. The outfit was simple but sexy, I thought, but not elaborate enough to frighten Mr Dormouse. But then I stood, staring at my own beautiful image and realised that nothing could intimidate the man whose body moved with the confident sensuality I had so often witnessed. The thought was disturbing.

Paul had changed too. The black corduroys and fine black polo-necked sweater made him look like a philosophy student. He suggested coffee, but I hesitated for just the right amount of time, so that he offered wine instead, suggesting we sat in the kitchen.

‘Wouldn’t we be more comfortable...’, I murmured, thinking a sofa infinitely preferable to the spirit of Mrs Dormouse among the pots and pans.

The sitting room was conventional. Boring I would have said, before this obsession. In one corner was a tapestry on a wooden frame. Paul saw me glance at it and smiled. 'Jane's new hobby,' he explained, picking up a finished cushion from the sofa and waiting for admiration. I gave it in gushing abundance, but was forced to sit in the armchair he indicated, rather than beside him as I intended.

I spent fifteen minutes telling him about the informal, home-made will my mother had made, and he explained the legal situation I knew already. He suggested I bring her into the office to regularise matters....and I sipped my wine faster and faster until the glass was empty. There was a moment's silence. Then he noticed, coughed and said, 'Oh well....' and drained his own glass, coming across to refill mine generously.

'What about you?', I asked.

'Well, I shouldn't really...' he said, filling his own glass too.

'Oh, isn't this cosy?' I said, snuggling back into my chair, conscious that the wall light must be falling very prettily on my red-gold hair.

'Yes it is. To tell you the truth I didn't much feel like working tonight,' he said, stretching out his long legs.

'Well, I think you do enough in the daytime. In my book, evenings are for enjoying yourself, especially at this time of year.'

‘Why?’ he asked.

‘Well, you know, there’s not much to do and you don’t want to go out....Isn’t that why lots and lots of babies are borne in the summer? It’s these chilly Autumn evenings.’ I giggled, clutching scarlet angora around my breasts.

The truth was, I felt nervous. Such silly chatter was not my normal style, but then normally I would not find myself in the position of...of....but what was I? The word ‘supplicant’ came into my mind.

Paul Renshaw was laughing. “Oh, yes, I hadn’t thought of that’, he said. I was getting somewhere, I knew it. He splashed some more wine into my glass, and I smiled back at him over its rim, feeling a part of myself dissolve slowly as the wine worked, the room grew warmer, and I could feel both of us relax. We talked a little of work and ways of easing tension, and I told him that I was very good at massage. The conversation was going along the lines I wanted.

I got up then, and crossed the room on the pretext of examining one of the bland watercolours - a muddy little landscape - on the wall above the sofa, leaning forward so that my sweater gaped, and he had to be aware that I wore nothing underneath. Then I eased down beside him, murmuring that it was beautiful in a tone which invited him to think the same of me. I knew he had to think the same of



me. Reaching for the bottle, I smiled at him.

‘Oh no’, he said, ‘It’s going to my head. I’ve had no supper’.

I wanted the wine to go to his head. I wanted my perfume to go to his head. I wanted his head to go to me. I wanted it all. And Simon or Johnny had said all you have to do is ask.

We were silent for a few minutes. I could hear Paul breathing. I knew he must find me desirable, and imagined how shy he must be feeling, wondering how to make the first move. So I put my glass down on the table and swivelled, so that my knee pressed against his.

‘Can I ask you something, Paul?’

‘Of course. What is it?’

‘Go on - try to guess’, I wheedled, tossing my hair back.

‘Oh, I know,’ he said ruefully, ‘It’s the sort of thing you women always want to know - can I cope on my own or am I one of those men who goes to pieces when the wife is away?’ I sat back. ‘Well, the truth is, Caroline, I’m not very good on my own. Jane and I hate being apart. I’m pretty hopeless when she’s not here’. He smiled. ‘I bet that’s what you expected me to say’.

‘Mmm...no.’ I mumbled, ‘I expected you’d be more....independent’.

‘Not me,’ said Mr Dormouse seriously. ‘The thing is, Jane and I haven’t really been apart since we married. I had to go to a

conference once and it was murder. I came home a day early, in fact’.

This was not what I’d planned at all. I knew I had to change the subject. Teasingly I said, ‘Actually, Paul, that *wasn’t* what I wanted to ask you.’

‘No?’

‘No. I wanted to ask you something really silly...like....Do you think I’m attractive?’

As if stung, he flinched and stared at me with embarrassment. ‘Of course...er... I do’, he said, ‘Um - I mean to say, I can’t imagine any man not finding you attractive, Caroline. You’re a....a...very pretty woman.’

‘Well then - will you go to bed with me?’, I whispered, taking his hand.

He gazed at me with horror that intensified at the seconds passed. The silence lengthened as he stared first at me, then down at our hands, then back. Widening my eyes I held his gaze, then slowly smiled - a knowing smile that spoke of a thousand successful seductions. I had won, I knew it. I could tell from the tingle beneath my fingers, and the crimson that spread up from his neck. I saw him swallow hard, and waited for his kiss.

Then, gently, as if he were handling a tiny, fragile creature, he took hold of my hand with his free one, lifted it and replaced it in my lap. Then he folded his own hands

together primly.

‘I’m afraid...’, he said.

‘Don’t be...’, I said

‘No, I don’t mean that. I mean - I’m afraid there’s been a terrible mistake’.

Pain jabbed my stomach, but I did not understand its source. ‘No mistake,’ I said, then leaned towards him, rubbing my face on his shoulder like a cat. ‘Oh come on, Paul - you admitted you find me attractive. I’m alone tonight and you’re alone, so why don’t we try to make each other happy? What’s the problem?’

I wanted to shout at him, ‘For God’s sake, I’ve been watching you! It’ll soon be nine-thirty, so come on, Mr Dormouse, let me show you something beautiful, for a change. Let me make you forget that little frump you live with. Let me try....I *know* you, Mr Dormouse, and I know you must want it as much as I do. You must want *me*.’

But all the time I just went on caressing his shoulder silently with my hair.

I heard him cry out, as if impatient. He pulled away, and sprang to his feet, so that I was in danger of overbalancing, then quickly crossed the room to stand by the fireplace, putting the coffee table between us. I half expected him to pick up a chair and level its legs at me.

‘What’s wrong, Paul?’, I whispered, my hair falling over my

eyes, 'Don't worry, it'll be all right, she'll never know....'

He looked at me sadly and shook his head. 'You don't understand, Caroline,' he said.

'Understand what?'

'You see - *I love my wife*'.

'Of course you do', I replied, in a soothing voice, 'It's all right, I don't expect...'

'No - you don't get it at all. You can't possibly. You just think....Oh no, that's cruel'.

I stood up and faced him. 'What's cruel? What are you talking about? Say what you were going to say.'

'No - but I have met women like you before. You think that because you're beautiful....oh it's so *crass*. You simply don't understand - I love Jane, *really* love her. You don't know about that. It's like something warm in my stomach, there inside me, all the time, growing. It's the most wonderful feeling, and it means I could no more touch somebody else than I could fly. Oh Lord, this is terribly embarrassing.'

'Yes, it is,' I said flatly, 'I'd better leave'.

'Look Caroline, I do understand you a little. You didn't mean any harm. You're just lonely. Jane and I, we've talked about you a lot - and your life. You seemed to have lots of boyfriends, we noticed them at first, er, different ones - but not lately. So something's gone wrong in your life, and I know Jane would be happy to talk...um... woman to woman. You

know, sort it out. Don't be lonely over the road in your flat, come to us. And if you feel you need *real* help, you could come to church with us one Sunday. There's a woman lay preacher who's a counsellor and I'm sure you'd like her.'

I was fleeing into the hall. He followed me and I heard him sigh. I knew my face was as scarlet as my sweater and wanted to hide. At the door he said, 'I'm sorry if I've spoken out of turn.'

'It's me who should be sorry', I said coldly, 'Look, let's not mention this again, OK?'

As I crossed the road he called, 'Don't forget, if you need us just 'phone. We're always here...'

That night I could not get warm. Sleepless, I stared for a long time at the house over the road, my eyes dry and hard. Over there Paul Renshaw was lying alone, reaching out into the space normally occupied by his wife's round body, to find nothing. And he would turn over in his sleep, I knew, and pull a pillow to his hollows, wanting her, needing her, missing her...

*I love my wife.....*

But she would return soon, and their lives would go on the same - happy and together. In that second I saw my own life stretching out ahead, as I grew older, and married Johnny or Simon as I was bound to do, decorating our dinner parties with my presence, and turning over at night in my expensive

silk nightie, turning my back quickly, and never knowing what Mr and Mrs Dormouse knew.

*...really love her.*

Lying down I felt the pain again. At last I fell asleep and did not wake until late. I looked at my clock in a panic, saw it was ten, sat up, then realised it was Saturday. Remembering the night before, I groaned aloud, curled up into a ball, and ground my fists into my eyes in rage. I cursed Paul Renshaw and his hideous little wife, and wished them back in Cheshire, where they could have rows of bespectacled children just like themselves.

My buzzer was sounding. Assuming it must be the postman I pulled on my dressing gown and padded downstairs. But someone else was standing on the doorstep, brandishing a small bunch of freesias. I stared at the flowers, then up at my mother.

‘Hallo, Caro dear - these were on the step,’ she said.

‘But Mummy, what are you doing here?’ I asked, smelling that sweet, pure smell.

‘There’s a note attached. You’d better read it. From one of your many admirers, if I know you, my girl! Well, we haven’t heard from you for so long, so I said to Daddy, I’m jolly well going to get the early train on Saturday, to surprise her. I thought you might be ill, or something might be wrong....*Have* you been ill, darling? Is that why someone’s

left you flowers? Aren't you going to read the note?'

I unfolded the small piece of paper that nestled amongst the delicate pinks, lilacs, yellows and whites. It read, 'I'm so sorry. Let's be friends. Best wishes, Paul.'

The smell caught in my nose, my mouth, my eyes, and I heard my mother's voice from miles away. 'Anyway, you really should keep in touch, darling. I know your life's very exciting and you're very popular and busy, but still. We do worry about you, because you never know what can happen, nowadays. Well, aren't you going to ask me in? I could just do with a cup of coffee.....Oh dear, what's wrong? Oh, Caro, Caro, why are you crying?'



© Bel Mooney