

Bump

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The absurd is born of the confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. – Albert Camus

p 1-20

A small hill.
At its foot stood a sign.
BUMP

Bump would have liked to have been a symmetrical, domed rise in the landscape.
But it wasn't.
Bump was an irregular bump.
With a single gentle slope.

Two women and one tall slim man.
The three of them each owned a little house on the gentle slope of Bump.
One of the women was older and collected marbles.
The other was younger and collected nothing.
The women's gardens lay side by side with a green wire between.
When the young woman came to live on Bump, she dropped by her neighbour one morning to ask if it would be better to plant a hedge between their gardens. Not beside them, but on the border.

'A hedge in common I mean.'

The older woman laughed out loud and invited the younger in to inspect her marble collection, but the younger woman really wanted an answer to the question of the common hedge as soon as possible.

'I have no problem with a common hedge,' said the older woman pulling a twister from her apron.
'Ever held a genuine twister in your hand?'

That was a beginning.

On the other side of the street, opposite the women's houses, lived the tall slim man. He had a small Phalène, which emphasised his long legs.
In the first weeks that the young woman lived there, she saw the tall slim man walk down Bump and up Bump with his dog. From that first day the young woman felt that the man didn't wholeheartedly love the dog.

'Good evening,' she said when she saw them.

'Good evening miss,' he said.

The Phalène hung its head as always.

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Before the young woman lived on Bump the old woman and the tall slim man had become friendly neighbours.

The old woman had occasionally invited the tall slim man round, but he never accepted. She had also asked him once in a while if he would like to see her marble collection, but he always replied with unusual excuses. 'I'm looking for the right sandpaper to sand down my cabinet' or 'there's a guinea-fowl on the kitchen counter' or 'I need to unpack my silk paper.'

After a while the old woman decided to leave a piece of cake on a plate, covered in transparent cling film, at his door, with a card attached: **For you.**

He always politely ate the cake, returned the plate and said, 'Thanks.'

Thus far. Never further.

The young woman might change life on the gentle slope of Bump.
But that wasn't her plan.
She had just one plan,
her plan for a common hedge.

The old woman collected her marbles in little brown chests of drawers, all sorted according to their type. Each drawer held a black card pushed between the marbles with the name of the marble type written on it in white letters.

Each day the older woman opened a drawer to take a close look at a particular type. She would lay the marbles one by one on her palm. She examined and compared until she'd found a special one, which she would then carry around all day in the pocket of her trousers or apron.

She liked nothing better than to surprise people with 'Ever held a white tiger in your hands?' as she conjured up a white flecked little sphere from her pocket.

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The two women called in a gardener.

He had nine fingers.

They'd decided they would like a *Taxus baccata*.

'Beautiful,' said the gardener, 'a beautiful but vicious hedge. With green needles and poisonous little red berries. Not the first variety I'd recommend if you have children or animals.'

'We don't have those,' said one woman.

'There won't be children or animals visiting often either,' said the other.

And the gardener believed that. Although he then stared at the younger woman's navel. Something might still grow in her.

'I have no problem with a *Taxus baccata*,' she said.

'Nor me,' said the older, popping a large chunk of rhubarb cake into her mouth.

'Coffee?' she asked.

That, too, was a beginning.

When does something begin?

One day the old woman said she was thinking of the end.

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The young woman was gentle.
Fragile and frail and pale,
unable to be abrasive.
She was goodness through and through.
She'd never been rough or harsh.
Only her hands were calloused,
for she went climbing every Monday.
Since the age of five she'd climbed everything that beckoned,
anything to avoid holding her feet on the ground.
She'd been a dangling child.
So her father made so bold as to sign her up for a climbing club.
'Club seeks climbers', he was sold.
Not for the climbing.
For the falling.
How many times had he cried, 'Fall!'
When she was on the point of reaching the top, he bellowed from beneath, 'And now fall!'
And she did.
She fell with utter abandon.
She fell spellbound.

She'd been a clever, quiet child.
When she spoke it was to ask an unusual question or make an extraordinary remark.
Much later, when she was a young woman and the climbing club was looking for volunteers to whip up spectators and climbers at competitions, everyone was shocked that she put herself forward.
Along with a couple of other volunteers she donned a long-haired white bear suit and there she was on the first Saturday of the month.
At the climbing wall.
Thumbs in the air.
Shaking hands.
Waving.
Hysterical laughter was not required.
It was ok to be sad.
The mischievous bear's head
did the job.

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During the planting of the *Taxus baccata* the older woman asked the gardener with nine fingers if he missed the tenth.

‘I miss my brother,’ he said and showed her his hand.

Four beautiful fingers and a little stump.

‘The year my brother died, I also lost a finger. And we were a family of five.’ He held his hand up and stared at the little stump.

‘You see?’ he asked. ‘And my younger sister is terminally ill,’ he told her, allowing the left little finger beside the little stump to fall.

He was sweating a little from the planting.

‘Coffee?’

They drank coffee.

‘A young hedge feels a yearning,’ said the gardener. ‘Those who attain high hedges too fast, do not have beautiful hedges. The more frequently you trim it in the early days, the more beautiful and full it will grow over the years. I recommend you give it a trim in June, August and September.’

The two women looked at each other.

They laughed.

Never before had they trimmed a hedge.

‘Would anyone like a slice of apricot cake?’

‘Yes please,’ said the young woman.

‘No, thank you,’ said the gardener.

And he left.

‘Long ago two brothers decided to build two identical houses here side by side,’ the older woman told the younger. ‘Their mother had told them they must let each other go. So they built two houses. Side by side. They pretended to go their separate ways and their mother was satisfied. But the day she died they made a hole in the connecting wall. Never again did they speak of their mother.’

‘How do you know that?’ asked the younger, gently pronging an apricot with her fork.

‘When one brother died I came to live in the empty house with my father,’ said the old woman. ‘I remember how the two of us looked at that hole. My father and I. That hole had remained a hole all that time. In the early months we had it boarded up. Later it became a wall, but my father always made sure you could see the outline of the hole. He thought it poetic. But I couldn’t understand him.’

‘Where you live now,’ said the old woman, ‘a lonely man lived for a long time. We often heard him crying through the stones of that hole.’

They both looked at the wall.

The old woman traced the lines between the yellow and orangey-red stones with her crooked finger, drawing an irregular hill in the air.

‘Bump,’ she said.

‘And where was your mother then?’ asked the younger.

‘Ever held a dragonfly in your hands?’

If the dragonfly hadn’t been there, the old woman would have told her that her mother had died when she was a little girl, one afternoon when she’d painted her first still life. Her aunt had placed two apples and a nut in a dish. And she had painted. With lots of red and yellow and green and brown. Then the telephone rang.

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If the dragonfly hadn’t been there, the old woman would have told her that she used to live by the sea, but that her father didn’t want to stay a single day longer after his wife’s death.

That he went in search of a house on a hill.

That he found a house on Bump.

That it had seemed as if he would stay there forever.

That when his daughter was old enough to stand on her own two feet, he'd said he would actually prefer to live on a mountain rather than a bump.

That he then moved with his new wife to Mamungkukumpurangkuntjunya – which means 'where the devil urinates' and is a mountain village in Australia.

That her father gave her the house on Bump.

That she could live there as long as she liked.

That that was the only thing she's been glad about back then.

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In the old woman's house hung an eye with the words **God can see you** in gold letters underneath. Between **can** and **see** hung a little canary-yellow card with the word **not** written in pencil on it.

The woman had climbed a ladder one day to hang the card there and never regretted it. Perhaps for the canary-yellow alone. You couldn't overlook the fact that God cannot see you.

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When the young woman had lived on Bump for a couple of months, one evening she spoke to the tall slim man and his Phalène:

'Good evening gentlemen.'

The man looked up. The dog as usual did not. His wet nose drooped, not quite touching the tarmac.

'It's my dead mother's dog,' said the tall slim man. 'The morning after my mother died I drove home with him on the back seat. I could get rid of him,' he said, 'but then how would I sleep at night? How do I live with the idea of having given away something my mother loved so much to a stranger? There are people who say it's my own choice to care for him. But I feel I can tell you that I've chosen something for which I have no interest whatsoever. Choices rarely consist of a straightforward yes or no.'

Silence.

'How,' he said again, 'how would I sleep at night then? And I'm so tired as it is.'

He crossed the street.

'Good evening,' he said.

The young woman was following a dove's feather carried along by the wind.

'Good evening,' she said.
