

# Bumping



# Bumping

Tony Bianchi

ALCEMI 

# To Ruth

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Academi for a generous bursary which bought three months of writing time, and to Emma Turnbull, Ruth Dineen and Gwen Davies, who helped me knock the story into shape.

First impression: 2010  
© Tony Bianchi, 2010

*This book is subject to copyright and may not be reproduced  
by any means except for review purposes  
without the prior written consent of the publishers*

Published with the financial support of the Welsh Books Council

Editor: Gwen Davies

ISBN: 9780955527289

Printed on acid-free and partly-recycled paper.  
Published by Alcemi and printed in Wales by  
Y Lolfa Cyf., Talybont, Ceredigion SY24 5HE  
e-mail [yloffa@yloffa.com](mailto:yloffa@yloffa.com)  
website [www.alcemi.eu](http://www.alcemi.eu)  
tel +44 (0) 1970 832 304  
fax 832 782

## **Part 2**

**Tom**

# 1

‘Not a nice day to be out, Tom.’

Tom sits in the back of the car with a woman he’s sure he recognises but can’t for the life of him remember where from. Every once in a while he sneaks a glance at her, wondering what she’s doing here, why she’s being so familiar. But mainly he looks out of the window, at the level fields blurring to a misty horizon, at the leaves streaming from the trees, and now, on a tight bend, at a long terrace built of yellow sandstone.

‘Remember this, Dad?’

Tom’s son is driving. There’s no-one in the passenger seat but he feels safer like this, his father in the back, where Helen can keep an eye on him. As they slow down, Tom catches sight of the elegant row of arches which fronts the terrace.

‘The ice-cream shop,’ Tom says, animated by the sudden recognition. ‘Are we havin an ice-cream then?’

But by the time he gets the words out, they have already turned the bend and the woman at his side says, ‘Bit cold for ice-cream today, Tom, don’t you think.’

Tom thinks about this for a while. He looks up at the sky. Because he is a tall man, he needs to bend forward to do this. He looks at the trees, at the bare fields, and nods his head.

‘Too cold,’ he says. But he has forgotten about the ice-cream.

A minute later, Tom begins tapping his fingers on his knees. ‘The geraniums,’ he says, because this is what is in his mind now. ‘It’s too cold, you see.’

The woman looks at him, her lips tightening slightly, as though anticipating what is to follow.

‘I need to get the geraniums in.’

Tom sits back and stares at the picture composing itself behind his eyes.

‘And the marguerites.’

And then, leaning forward again, and speaking with urgency now, so that his son can feel his father’s breath on his neck: ‘Or the frost’ll get them.’

Tom raps the palm of his hand on the top of the driver's seat.

'We'd best get back now, son, don't you think?'

Tom doesn't see the eyes looking back at him, anxiously, in the rear view mirror, but continues his tapping, wanting the outing to come to an end now, needing to tell the driver, this is far enough, this is his stop.

'Dad!'

The woman at his side puts her hand on his right arm and says, in a slow, deliberate voice, as though she is repeating a formula: 'The geraniums are in, Tom. And the marguerites. All the non-hardies are in. Every one of them.'

Tom shakes his head.

'They can't be, man,' he says. 'Not Mrs Robson's. She's too old.'

The woman squeezes his arm gently.

'She's dead, Tom. I'm sorry. Mrs Robson's dead.'

## 2

'Now there's this old fella lives out Wylam way,' says Tom. 'And it's time for him to dig over his garden, y'see, to plant his seed potatoes.' Tom's sitting in a maroon, upholstered armchair with Queen Ann legs, the middle in a row of five identical chairs arranged in a semicircle to face the large picture window and, through it, the boats, moored in the marina, and the far shore. He's sitting forward, because he's performing. He needs to be able to look around him, to see everyone.

'Now, up until then,' says Tom, 'the old fella had always been able to ring his son, who lived down the road, and say, "Howay over, son, it's time to plant the tatties," and that's what he'd do, his son would come over, every year, to help his dad. But this year, the year I'm talkin about, the young lad cannit make it because he's in jail, y'see, on account of his committin a serious robbery. So what can the old fella do? Well there's nowt he can do but get out his pen and paper and write a letter.'

Tom turns the fingers of his right hand into a pen, the palm of his

left into a sheet of paper.

‘And in the letter he says, ‘I’m sorry, son, I’ve tried me best to dig ower the garden, but I daen’t knaa if I can dee it aal meself, it’s that heavy. Mebbes I can manage a wee bit at a time.’”

‘So the son reads the letter,’ says Tom, and he writes back straightaway and says, “Dad, whatever ye dee, divvent dig up the garden, cos ye divvent knaa where I’ve buried the stuff.” So he doesn’t. No, he doesn’t go near the garden, the old fella. He just sits there, twiddlin his thumbs.’

Tom sits back in his chair for a moment and twiddles his thumbs, to show what he means.

‘And that night,’ he goes on, ‘just as it was gettin dark, all the police cars in Northumberland turn up outside his house, sirens screamin, CID, the works. And away they go, diggin here, diggin there, all over the place, spades, shovels, metal detectors, the lot. And what do they find? Eh? What do they find?’ Coming in through the door, as the care assistant is now doing, pushing a tea trolley, it is possible to see only the dome of Tom’s head, bobbing from side to side as he speaks, tufts of white hair protruding above his ears. And now, also, the right hand beating a staccato accompaniment on the arm of the chair as he approaches the end of his story. ‘What do they find? Eh? I’ll tell you what they find,’ says Tom. ‘They find nowt. Not a scrap. So next day the old fella gets a letter from his son. “Dear Dad,” says the son, “Dear Dad,” he says, in his letter, “sorry, but that’s aall I can dee for the moment. Hope it’s aall reet t’stick the tatties in now.”’ The other chairs are occupied by women. Tom looks at them in turn, first to the left and then to the right, and then back again.

‘Hope it’s aall reet to stick the tatties in now.’ He repeats the punch-line, beating again on the arm of the chair, thinking the story is worth better than this, it’s surely worth more than a few feeble smiles, and wondering, has he left something out?

Tom, the newcomer, looks much too big for his chair, whereas the others have become too small. The contrast is accentuated by their clothes. Tom is wearing blue denims and a red and blue check shirt, sleeves rolled up as if ready for manual work. The women, in their pale blue cardigans and grey woollen skirts, their blouses buttoned at

neck and wrist, are dressed only to sit. They are all one in his eyes. So when he whispers to the assistant, as she pours his tea, 'I meant to tell you, sister, me son's brought us to the wrong place,' it's easy to see his point. Tom looks at the women on either side of him, the as yet nameless women, and tries again. 'I told the lad,' he says. 'I told him, I cannit go back to Shields. There's no work for us in Shields.'

The care assistant smiles and nods. 'Can you reach the biscuits all right, Tom?' she asks.

Time passes.

'So he brought us here instead,' says Tom. 'So's I can be near. You can see his house down there. Coble Court they call it. His flat, I mean.'

'Nice,' says a woman called Kate, from the end of the row, leaning forward, looking through the window, trying to be helpful. She has seen men come and go in this place and knows they don't cope well, that they can't get used to being cooped up, to being amongst women.

'I said it's nice,' says Kate again, thinking that Tom is cupping his ear, that he is hard of hearing. But in fact there's not much wrong with Tom's hearing, for his age, or with his eyesight, for that matter. And he isn't cupping his ear. He's rubbing it with his index finger, up and down, up and down, gently at first and then more vigorously. His eyes have turned inward now, far away from the potato field, from the bobbing boats. Presently, he pinches the ear between finger and thumb and gives it a swift tug.

'Cannit get the buggers off,' he says, shifting a little this way and that as though to get a better purchase, a more effective angle of attack. And Kate asks, does he need help, or can she get the assistant, perhaps. And Tom says, pointing to his ear, 'Put your finger there, just there.'

But Kate is too infirm to rise from her chair. Tom sees this, because he's used to doing jobs for women such as Kate, elderly women who can't fend for themselves. Perhaps he also sees, in her long pale face and white, brushed-back hair, the shadow of something that was once beguiling. So he says, 'Sit still, hinny, I'll be there now.'

And he gets up, wavering only slightly, placing a hand on the wing of his chair, just in case, and draws himself up to his full height. The women's eyes follow him. He looks around the room in search of a

stool, a small chair, anything that will allow him to sit next to Kate. The women's eyes look where he looks. Finding nothing, Tom gives a small sigh of resignation and walks the few paces to where Kate is sitting. He limps slightly. Then, leaning with both hands on the arm of her chair, he lowers himself, first onto his right knee, the stronger of the two, then the left, and bends his head to the level of her lap, where her hands are folded.

'There,' he says, moving his finger up and down behind his right ear. 'The wires. Can you feel them?'

### 3

'"Look out for the light," he said.'

It's six o'clock. Tom is sitting in front of the window, waiting to show Kate that they can see where his son lives even at night.

'"Look out for the light," he said, "and you'll know I'm at home."'

And he's got to be very careful he gets the right light, because there's that many of them. There's the white lights and there's the orange lights. There's the lights that flicker and there's the lights that don't, they just come on and stay on. There's the lights this side of the river and the lights the other side, and you can't always tell, from up here, looking across, which is which. So he's got to keep he's eyes fixed on that one block, that one floor, that one window, as the dusk gets deeper. And in a short while the light does, indeed, come on and Tom wants to say, 'There it is, see?' because he can stop concentrating now, he can relax, he's done his job. But Kate is asleep now, her head on her chest, her face even paler now in the fluorescent light, and there's no-one else in the lounge.

'Not goin down there,' he mutters to himself, meaning his bedroom and knowing that's where everyone else has gone, for a nap before supper, or just to be alone, because being with other people is tiring. 'Plenty of time for sleep when you're dead, hinny,' he says, looking at Kate, whose eyes are still shut. Her lips mouth something inaudible.

'Seven bells soon,' Tom says.

But mainly he doesn't like going to his bedroom because it's downstairs. It's not right, he thinks, going downstairs to bed. Like going into the fo'c's'le. And it's hot in the fo'c's'le. Under the hatch. Hot and cramped. Even now, he thinks, in the dead of winter, when you cross the Line. No winter there. On the Line. Sleep on deck rather than go down there, he thinks, with the flies and the bugs and the mosquitoes. It might be better, he thinks, if he could open his bedroom window, but he's on the ground floor and he's seen lads going by through the day lobbing cans into the bushes. At night, who knows? But it's not just that, not just the window, the heat. There's more room up there too, on the fore-hatch, spread your gear about a bit. Bit of tarpaulin against the sun.

'Three weeks to Buenos Aires, mebbes four,' says Tom, noticing that Kate has stirred a little. 'Fray Bentos,' he explains. 'For the meat.'

Kate has woken up now. She looks at him.

'For the corned beef,' he says.

'That's nice,' she says, weakly, thinking he means supper.

The bell rings.

'Seven bells,' says Tom.

'Six,' says Kate. 'Six we eat here, Tom.'

'Aye, aye,' Tom says. 'You might as well. You might as well.'

Time passes. Another day.

'I told you, man,' says Tom. 'I told you. There's no point sendin us back to Shields.'

'They won't listen,' says Molly, who's in a wheelchair. A care assistant has just brought her to the window.

'Come again,' says Tom, unaware that anyone was listening. Unaware, even, that he has spoken.

'Kids.'

Tom sits up and looks around the wing of his chair. Molly has been placed a little behind him, so that he must crane his neck to see her properly. He is surprised at her wavy hair, her lipstick, her round face; he is surprised, in particular, at the absence of hawk in her face. And he thinks, They've got you too.

‘You got boys, then?’ asks Tom.

‘No. Two girls. That was your lad just going out, was it?’

Tom is taken aback by the speed of the reply. He knows he’s expected to say something in return but, for the life of him, he can’t think what, so he just says, ‘He’s brought us to the wrong place, y’see.’ Hoping that will do.

‘The wrong place?’ Molly says.

And there he is, on the back foot again. So he’s got to give it another go.

‘He says she’s brought them in herself, but I don’t think so.’

‘Brought what in, Tom?’

‘You don’t know?’ says Tom, surprised. But thinks, then, no, you wouldn’t, would you, because you’re new here, too.

‘He says she’s brought her geraniums in, but she’s too old, y’see, she’s gettin on for ninety, Mrs Robson. The geraniums. Yes. And there’s others. There’s others need bringin in an all.’

Molly waits, to see whether Tom means to name any more flowers.

‘So you’re a bit of a gardener, then,’ she says, flatly, telling not asking. And Tom would like to show her that he’s really a lot more than that, he’s more than a bit of a gardener, yes, he could show her a thing or two about gardening, but she’s altogether too fast for him. So he begins to work his index finger, the right index finger, up and down the back of his ear, up and down, up and down. Yes, he would like to tell her a thing or two, but today he can only say, with a bit of a chuckle in his voice, because he doesn’t want to make too big a fuss, ‘It’s the blasted wires, y’see. That’s what did it.’

But Molly’s not interested in wires. She says: ‘There’s gardens in the Dene. Jean takes me to sit there when it’s fine.’

And she tells Tom to go and look out of the window, because she can’t get up.

‘All the way up the bank,’ she says. ‘Tulips. Wall flowers. And... and...’

She stops and thinks. Tom gets up, places a hand on the wing of his chair, stretches to his full height to get rid of the stiffness, and walks over to the window. He looks out. At a ferry crossing the river, down

to his left. At the far bank and its jumble of warehouses and new flats. And then, over to his right, the reclaimed grain store, jutting out into the river. Coble Court. He thinks, the light will go on soon. At the end, right by the river. Not the top floor, but the next one down. He looks at his watch. Half-past three. No, a while yet. By the time it gets dark. By the time he gets back from work. And he leans on the rail that extends the full circumference of the room, even across the window, and wonders why he's standing here, what he's supposed to be looking at. It's too soon, he thinks.

'And pergoliums,' says Molly, decisively.

'Pelargoniums,' says Tom.

'Not now, of course,' says Molly.

'Come again,' says Tom, looking back at her, taking his left hand off the rail.

'Not in November. You wouldn't get them in November, would you?'

This is a question. So Tom answers it. He tells Molly about pelargoniums. He tells her about the several varieties. About the Red Cascade, which will certainly have faded by now, but also about the Bredon, which flowers throughout the year in milder latitudes. And the Dolly Vardens, of course, which are prized more for their foliage, but which are rather delicate and need to be wintered indoors. And Tom starts to fret again, not about the Dolly Vardens, he doesn't recollect having any Dolly Vardens out this year. Nor about Mrs Robson's geraniums, because Mrs Robson is dead. But about the others. About Doris Simpson over by Kirkley Mill, whose mignonettes should have been put in cloches by now, and her phacelia too. All that blue so late in the year. And the Nesbitts at Heugh House. He needs to plant next year's daffs and crocuses and tulips and grape hyacinths, he needs to fill all those gaps in the borders, or else what will there be to look forward to, what a disappointment it'll be, come springtime, with nothing to see, and no colour anywhere.