

Chapter 2

Wompy

Although the MacBears knew Wompy's house well, they were still often struck by how extraordinary it was. "Just like a wedding cake," Grampa sometimes said, for it was perfectly circular and had three tiers, each smaller than the one below.

"Welcome to the wedding-cake," said Wompy, as he opened the door. "I expect there's still some marzipan left for wee bearns."

The doorway seemed entirely filled with blue. For Wompy was a blue hare - which means that he was white in the winter, but in summer he was usually a very happy shade of blue. To match his fur he was wearing a kind of blue smock, with fancy edges and a wide blue sash around his rather expansive middle.

The front door opened directly into Wompy's library, which filled the whole of the ground floor. Every inch of wall was covered with shelves crammed with books. The tables were piled high with papers, and littered with abandoned cups of coffee and half-eaten raspberry tarts. Here and there were some of the strange objects Wompy had collected to help him with his stories.

He led them across the room and up a little spiral staircase to the first floor. Because the building on this floor was smaller than the tier below, there was a wide circular path around it, where lots of tubs of bright flowers made a fine roof garden. Wompy arranged some chairs here for his guests.

"You must come up for some stargazing one of these nights," he said to the bearns. "It's a while since you've been."

He was referring to the third and smallest tier of the cake, which was Wompy's observatory. He had his telescope there. Bearloch children often came at night time, and Wompy would teach them the planets and the constellations, and tell them stories about comets and astronauts and the weird animals that live on the moon.

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Soon they were all sitting comfortably in Wompy's roof garden. All the bearns had icecream sodas in tall coloured glasses - a regular treat for children in this house.

Baby Brother, as usual, blew down his straw and made a big mess, but Wompy was not the sort of person who fussed about that sort of thing.

"Things used to happen," Grampa MacBear was saying sadly. "Do you remember, Wompy, that time we camped out for a month on one of the skerries to see what really happens when the islands move?"

"For weeks nothing happened, and then one night the island turned round 180 degrees very gently so as not to wake us up. We went to sleep with our feet pointing due east and woke up to find them pointing due west. That was the skerry playing a little joke on us."

"Aye," said Wompy, "that was an experience. But, remember, we did have to camp there for a whole month when nothing at all happened - before something did happen."

But Grampa was not really listening. He was stuck in reminiscence mode.

"And do you remember the flood," he went on, "when the river flooded and the water poured down the mountainside and swept away half the homes in the village?"

"There was furniture and thatched roofs floating all over the loch.

"Animals too. Pinemartins perched on floating tables and whole families of sheep sitting on double beds and drifting out towards the open sea.

"You and I spent days in my boat salvaging what we could and getting people safely back on dry land. That was really something.

"And Mairi MacSheep's wool shop floated intact right down the lock and fetched up on the beach on Wildcat Island. We went in and there was Mrs MacSheep, sitting in her rocking chair in the corner, with her big spectacles on her nose, plying her knitting as though nothing at all out of the ordinary had happened.

"It was like walking into *Alice through the Looking-Glass*. There's something really odd about that shop."

"There certainly is," agreed Wompy. "There's a tale or two to be told about that shop."

"Oh, Mr Wompy, tell us!" said Beth. "You've never told us stories about the wool shop."

"Haven't I?" Wompy replied. "Well, another time, when your Grampa isn't so grumpy.

"Don't you see, my old friend," he said to Grampa, "that wasn't the sort of something happening you should want to happen? Lots of people lost their homes and it was almost a miracle no one drowned.

"Things that happen aren't always good things." And Wompy thumped one of his big hind feet on the floor. He did this when he wanted to stress that something he said was really important.

"But they got to rebuild their houses just as they wanted them, not as their grandparents left them to them." Grampa held on to his rosy view of the past.

Wompy said, "In any case, why should we want things like that to happen? On a perfect summer morning like this I sit here in my roof garden. I see the loch and the mountains and the ocean and the sun sparkling on the water and the heather, and sometimes I just gasp at how magnificent it all is.

"And then this morning I noticed that this yellow day lily here has just burst into bloom. Do you see?

"Nothing special about that, you might think. At this time of year in my garden plants are coming into bloom all the time. But just look at these flowers! They're not like any of the others. Exquisite. Every plant when it comes into bloom is unique and special.

"That's something happening. One happening like that is enough to keep me feeling life is wonderful for the rest of today at least.

"You see, my old friend, truly marvellous things like that are happening all around you all the time, but you don't notice them. You think they're too ordinary to count."

And Wompy stamped first one of his hind feet (clomp!), then the other (clomp!).

Grampa said nothing, but he was clearly not impressed. In fact he looked distinctly disappointed. He had got it into his head that he needed something huge and exciting to happen. And the older he got, the more difficult Grampa found it to change his mind.

After a while, he said grumpily, "Drat it, Wompy, you have spent half your life telling stories about things happening - amazing things, adventures, catastrophes, great discoveries, magical surprises.

"I came to you because you of all people ought to understand that I need something to happen. You of all people ought to be able to make something happen."

"Aye, you have a point there about my stories. Give me a moment to think."

They were all used to what happened when Wompy decided to think. His head bent forward in concentration. His long ears stood bolt upright on the top of his head. Then off he went lolloping round the circuit of his roof garden. Old as he was (even older than Grampa), he could still hop.

After several laps he went inside the house, and they could hear him clomping down the spiral staircase to his library.

When he emerged, he was carrying some books and had a bright 'eureka' sort of glint in his eyes.

"I have an idea," he said rather solemnly. "We shall make something happen, something quite exciting. But it will be something that will show you how wonderful life is even if nothing big and exciting happens."

They all looked puzzled, but Wompy didn't stop to explain.

"We shall hold a haiku contest." (Clomp!) "It will be open to everyone in Bearloch - or, for that matter, to anyone else who wants to enter. It will change everyone's lives.

"And we shall have a grand event to judge the entries and award the prizes, when you, Grampa, and I will be the judges."

Since Grampa had no idea what a haiku contest was, he wasn't sure how big and exciting a happening this was going to be. But he did see that it cast him in a big and important role. Wompy knew Grampa well enough to be sure that as soon as Grampa started feeling important he would stop being grumpy.

It was Duff who asked, "But what is a haiku?"