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Humming Through My Fingers

Malorie Blackman

My hands slowed, then stilled on my book as I listened. I turned my head and sniffed at the wind. Mum always said I had ears like a bat, but if it wasn't for the wind blowing in my direction I doubt if even I would have heard this particular conversation. I listened for a few moments until I'd heard enough, then returned to my book – which was far more interesting. Nine pages on and I was interrupted. I'd thought I'd get at least twelve pages further on before he plucked up the nerve to come over.

'Hi, Amber. It's Kyle. Kyle Bennett.' He didn't have to tell me his name. I recognised his voice. Kyle Bennett – the new boy in my brother Matthew's class. Well, when I say new I mean he'd been in Matthew's class for over a month now. Kyle had been to our house once or twice with some of

Matt's other friends, but this was the first time he'd actually said anything to me. I sniffed the air. I could smell a lie. Not lies. Just one lie. Even if I hadn't heard, I would've known.

'Can I sit down?'

'I don't know.' I shrugged. 'Can you?'

'Huh?'

I smiled. A teeny-tiny smile for a teeny-tiny joke.

'No, I . . . er . . . I meant, d'you mind if I sit down?' Kyle's voice was anxious, eager for me to understand.

'Help yourself.' I carried on with my book.

'What're you reading? Is it good?'

'*Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier. And yes, it is good. I've read it before.'

'If you've read it before, why're you reading it again?' asked Kyle.

'It's one of my favourites.' All the time I spoke I carried on reading, my fingers skimming over the page. But then my fingers unexpectedly touched Kyle's and an electric shock like a bolt of lightning flashed through my fingers and up my arm.

'Ouch!' Kyle exclaimed.

With his touch still humming through my fingers, I snatched my hand away. 'Are you OK?'

'Yeah, I just got a shock.' Kyle dismissed it easily. I could hear that he was still shaking his sore fingers. 'I don't see how we could've been shocked just sitting on grass.'

I said nothing. It was there in his touch too. The touch

of a lie. Not a liar, but a lie. But there was something else there. Something which stopped me from telling him to get lost.

'Sorry about that,' Kyle said. 'I just wanted to see what Braille was like.'

'Why?' I could smell his surprise at my question.

'I've never seen a Braille book before. How does it work?'

Here we go again. I sighed. Another explanation. Another embarrassed pause followed by a murmur of sympathy and, under normal circumstances, a sudden mumbled excuse to leave. But these weren't normal circumstances.

'Each of the series of dots represents a letter or number,' I explained. 'I use my fingers to read the dots rather than my eyes to read the words on a page, that's all.'

'Can I have a try?'

'Go ahead.'

I picked up the book and held it in Kyle's direction. He took it from me, careful not to touch my fingers this time.

'It must take ages to learn all this lot. It would take me years.' Kyle whistled appreciatively. 'How long did it take you?'

'Quite a few months,' I replied. And I admit, I was surprised. No pity, no sympathy, just two people talking. I like surprises. If only it had been some other boy besides Kyle who had managed to surprise me.

'Were you born blind?'

Another surprise. No one outside my family ever discussed my eyes – not directly with me at any rate. It was a taboo subject, conspicuous by its absence. I wondered who else was present, who else was listening? I sniffed the air. I couldn't smell anyone else nearby.

'No.' I was going to say more, but the words didn't seem to want to leave my mouth.

'So how did you become blind, then?'

I forced myself to speak. 'I'm a diabetic and I'm one of the unlucky few who became blind because of it.'

'What d'you miss most?'

'People's faces – and colours.' Silence stretched between us as I listened to Kyle search for something else to say. 'What would *you* miss most?'

'Pardon?'

I repeated the question and smiled as I heard Kyle frown. 'I don't know,' he answered at last. My question had disturbed him. 'Matt told me that you see things with your other senses, though.'

I didn't reply. Slowly I closed my book and waited.

'He said that you can taste shapes and hear colours,' said Kyle.

Tasting shapes, hearing colours . . . Even to my ears, it sounded bizarre.

'Is that true?' he continued.

I shrugged. I'd have to have a serious word with Matt when I caught up with him. He wasn't meant to tell

anyone about that. It wasn't even his secret to tell, it was my secret.

'I hope you don't mind me mentioning it,' Kyle said anxiously. 'Matthew swore me to secrecy and he hasn't told anyone else – at least that's what he said.'

'Why did he tell you?'

'We were talking and it slipped out,' said Kyle. 'I've never heard of anything like that before.'

'It's called synaesthesia. About ten people in every million have it so don't go thinking I'm a fruit loop.' I couldn't keep the edge out of my voice.

'I didn't think anything of the kind.' Kyle laughed. 'What's it like?'

'What's it like to see using your eyes?'

'It's . . . well, it's . . . it's a bit difficult to explain.'

And I knew he'd got the point. 'Exactly,' I said. Then, wanting to change the subject, I asked, 'So what d'you think of Belling Oak?'

'It's not bad actually. It's a lot better than my old school. How come you don't come here with your brother?'

Instantly my face flamed, in spite of myself. I turned away, listening to the distant cheers and the shouting as the one hundred metres sprint race started.

'I was here for a while, but . . . there were problems,' I said, still listening to the race.

'What sort of problems?'

I sighed. I'd say one thing for Kyle: he was persistent. 'If

you must know, the teachers spouted on and on about how it would be too dangerous for me, too hazardous, too nerve-wracking, how I'd be teased and bullied – stuff like that.'

Kyle sniffed. 'Sounds like excuses to me.'

I turned to face him again. 'It was. I already had friends here and Mum and I kept telling them that I was willing to put up with the rest, but they wouldn't have it. Then they started quoting health and safety regulations at us and they said it would cost too much to have the school converted so that I could find my way around without help. Plus the school's insurance company insisted that I left. So that was that.'

'Were you very disappointed?'

'Course I was. I loved it here.' I looked around, seeing it with my memory. All around me were the acres of grounds, divided by a trickling stream known as 'The Giggler' because of the sound it made. I remembered how green the grass was, even in winter, and how in spring and early summer it was always covered in daisies. From the classroom windows the daisies looked like summer snow. And then there were the tall, sprawling oaks fringing the stream on both sides. The oaks had always been my favourite. They whispered amongst themselves, using the wind as cover. At one end of the upper field was the red brick school building and way across on the other side, past the lower fields, were the tennis and netball courts. And the

whole thing was so beautiful. I'd been to Belling for two years before I started to lose my sight. A whole two years to drink in the sights and sounds of the place before I got bounced out.

'So where d'you go now?'

'Aranden Hall.'

'Never heard of it.'

'It's a school for the blind. It's about twenty-five kilometres from here.'

I turned back towards the sports field. I was seated near the stream, under the arms of one of the huge oak trees that gave Belling Oak its name. Every sports day, I always sat in the same spot. Far enough away from everyone else so that I wouldn't have to worry about being pushed over or swept aside by overly enthusiastic crowds, but close enough to hear what was going on. Some of my Belling friends thought it strange that I should want to sit by myself for most of the afternoon, but they were used to me by now. To be honest, I liked my own company. Besides, my friends made me remember . . . different times.

I forced my mind away from those thoughts and concentrated on the here and now. Matthew, my brother, was due to run in the next race – the two hundred metres, and the four hundred metres relay after that. He was bound to come last, as always, but he didn't mind and neither did anyone else. It would've been good to see him run, although my friends said he didn't so much run as plod frantically.

I had to take their word for it.

'I'm sorry if I asked too many questions,' said Kyle. 'I didn't mean to upset you.'

'It's OK,' I said. But I didn't deny that he'd upset me, because I couldn't. 'Can I ask you something?'

I heard him nod, then catch himself and say, 'Yeah! Sure!'

'Why're you over here? I mean, why aren't you with everyone else, watching the races?' *Please tell the truth. Please.*

'I saw you over here and I just wanted to say hello.'

'I see.' The heat from his lie swept over me like lava.

'Would you . . . er . . . I'm going for a burger after all the events are over. I don't suppose you'd like to come with me?'

Silence stretched between us like a piece of elastic.

'Yeah, OK,' I said at last.

'Great! Great!' I would've laughed at the relief in his voice except that at that moment I didn't feel like laughing. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out why I'd said yes.

'Are you going to go back to your friends and watch the rest of the events?' I asked.

'No, I thought I'd stay here with you, if that's all right?'

'Sure. Let's go for a walk.'

'A walk?'

'Around the grounds. Away from everyone else,' I said.

'Can you . . . ? I mean, do you want . . . ?'

'I can walk, you know.' I laughed. 'It's my eyes that don't work, not my legs.'

'Yeah, of course it is. Sorry.' I heard Kyle get to his feet. I stood up, ignoring the hand he put out to help me.

'Let's walk downstream then cross over the far bridge and walk around the tennis courts,' I suggested.

'Fine.'

We started walking. Kyle stuffed his hands in his pockets.

'So tell me what you can see,' I said.

'Huh?'

'Describe what you can see.' I smiled at Kyle. 'Unless of course you'd rather not.'

'No, I don't mind. I just . . . OK. Well, we're walking beside the stream now and there are oak trees on either side of the stream and way over there is the car park and over there is the school and . . .'

I put my hand on his arm. 'That's not what I meant. Tell me what you can *see*.'

'But I just did.'

I gave him a hard look. 'Kyle, have you got a scarf or a tie or something on you?'

'I've got my school tie on. Why?'

'Is it around your neck?'

'Yes.'

'Take it off and put it around your eyes.'

'Come again?'

'You heard right the first time,' I said, laughing.

'Why d'you want me to do that?' Kyle's voice was wary, suspicious.

'I'm going to take you around the grounds.'

'With my eyes blindfolded?'

I laughed at the panic in his voice. 'That's right. You're going to have to trust me.'

'But you . . . you can't see.'

'So I've noticed,' I teased. 'So are you going to do it, or are you going to chicken out?'

Slowly Kyle removed the tie from around his neck and tied it around his eyes.

'You've got to do it so you can't see anything,' I told him.

'I have.'

'No, you haven't.'

'How did you know . . . ?' Kyle was amazed. It was very gratifying. 'OK! OK! My eyes are totally covered now.'

'Let me touch your face,' I said.

I heard him lean forward. I ran my fingers lightly over his face. My fingers began to hum again as I touched his skin. He had a large forehead and a strong nose and a firm chin and his lips were soft. I couldn't tell about his eyes because they were covered with his tie. His tie smelled of sweet green and sharp, tangy gold. Belling Oak colours. I would've been able to tell the colours even if I didn't already know what they were. Satisfied that his eyes were

indeed covered, I linked his arm with my own. He instinctively stiffened at that.

'Don't worry, your friends won't be able to see us over here.'

'It's not that,' he lied. 'But suppose we end up in the stream or something?'

'Then we'll get wet!'

There was a pause, then Kyle laughed. His body relaxing, he said, 'All right, then. D'you know where you're going?'

'I know this school like the back of my hand. Don't worry,' I assured him.

We walked for a minute, listening to the distant cheers and the occasional bird song.

'What d'you think of that tree?'

'What tree?'

'The one right in front of us. It's my favourite of all the ones here,' I said, adding, 'No, don't,' when I felt his other hand move upwards to remove the tie from around his eyes.

'But I can't see the tree. I can't see anything.'

'See it without using your eyes,' I told him.

'How do I do that?'

I took Kyle's hand and stretched it out in front of him until it touched the tree trunk. 'What does it feel like?' I asked.

'Rough.'

'What else?'

'Cool. Sharp in places. Here's a smooth bit.'

'And what does it smell like?' I asked.

Kyle turned his head towards me.

'Go on!' I encouraged. 'It's National Hug a Tree Trunk Day! Tell me what it smells like and feels like.'

Reluctantly, Kyle moved in closer to the tree. He stretched out his arms to hold it. I could feel he felt very silly.

'It feels very strong. Like it could be here for ever if it was left alone.' Kyle's voice grew more and more quiet, but more and more confident. 'And it's got secrets. It's seen a lot of things and knows a lot of things, but it's not telling. And it smells like . . . like rain and soil and a mixture of things.'

'Come on,' I said, taking his arm again.

'Where're we going?'

'To our next stop.'

I led Kyle further down the stream before I turned us to our left and walked a few steps.

'Now you have to do exactly what I say,' I told him, leading him down a gentle slope.

'Are we going to cross the stream here?' he asked, aghast.

'That's right.' I smiled. 'We're going to jump across.'

'But . . . but I can't see where I'm going,' Kyle protested.

'Then use your other senses. I'll help you.'

'Why can't we use one of the bridges?'

'Because everyone does that. We're going to be

adventurous.' I grinned. 'I want you to jump from here like a long-jumper. It's less than half a metre to the other side at this point. Just jump, then let your weight fall forward and grab hold of one of the tree roots sticking out of the ground. OK?'

No answer.

'OK, Kyle?'

'D'you really think this is a good idea?'

'You'll just have to trust me. Once you've grabbed the tree root, haul yourself up out of the way 'cause I'll be right behind you.'

'OK,' Kyle said dubiously.

I straightened him up and said, 'Don't worry. My nan can jump half a metre and she's got bad knees – always assuming I've led us to the right bit of the stream, of course.'

'You mean you're not sure?' Kyle was appalled.

'I'm only winding you up,' I told him gleefully.

'You're enjoying this, aren't you?'

'You'd better believe it! Now then. After three. One . . . Two . . .'

'Three . . .' Kyle shouted.

And he jumped.

To be honest, I was impressed. I didn't think he had it in him. I heard an 'Ooof!' followed by the mad scramble of his hands as he sought and found a tree root. He hauled himself up the bank to the level ground beyond.

'Here I come,' I shouted.

And I jumped. In a way, I'm sorry Kyle didn't see me. A sighted person couldn't have done it better. I landed cleanly, then stepped up the bank.

'Are you OK?' I asked.

'I think so.'

I turned towards his voice. 'How did it feel to jump?'

'I don't know,' said Kyle.

'Yes, you do.'

His sharp intake of breath told me that I was right. 'I was . . . a bit nervous,' Kyle admitted. 'I know the water is only a few centimetres deep, but it suddenly felt like it was kilometres deep and kilometres down.'

'And how did you feel when you landed on the other side?'

'Relieved!'

'Anything else?'

'Yeah. Kind of proud of myself.'

'Being blind,' I began, 'is like jumping off a cliff with the water below kilometres deep and kilometres down – except you jump never knowing what's on the other side of the cliff. Everything's an adventure for me. Walking along the street, going into a shop, meeting new people, even reading a book. I never know what I'll come across or what I'll find, whether I'll be delighted or disappointed, hurt or happy. Does that make sense?'

'I think so.' Kyle didn't sound sure at all. But it was a start.

I reached out to link arms with Kyle again. 'Have you still got the tie around your eyes?'

'Yes.'

'Then it's time for our next step.'

I led the way along the fence towards the tennis courts.

'I have no idea where we are,' Kyle said, perplexed.

'That's OK. I do.'

We walked on for another few minutes before I stopped.

'Where are we now?' asked Kyle.

'What can you hear?' I asked.

Kyle was still for a moment. 'Birds and a faint whirring sound.'

'That whirring is the traffic on the other side of the school building,' I replied.

Kyle turned his head slightly. 'I can hear some cheering now from the sports field, but it's very faint.'

'Anything else?'

'I don't think so.'

'OK. Kneel down.'

'Why?'

'Trust me!'

'I wish you'd stop saying that!' Kyle's tone was dry, but he still knelt down.

I smelled what I was looking for. The scent was overwhelming. I took Kyle's hand and put it out to touch the thing I could smell.