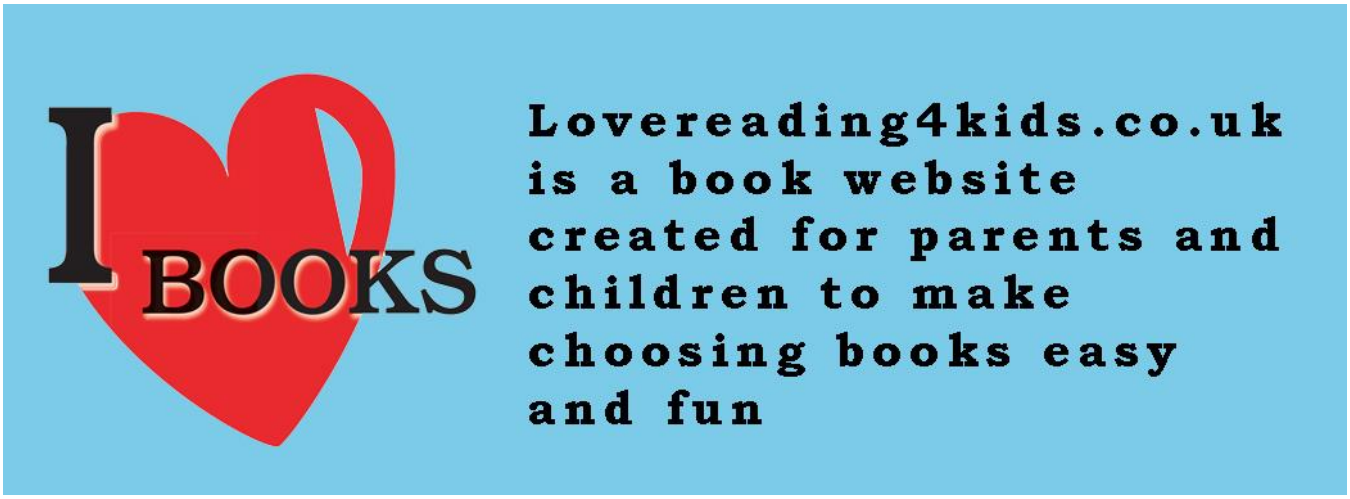


Opening extract from

Chasing the Stars

Written by

Malorie Blackman

Published by

Doubleday Children's Books an imprint of Random House Children's Publishers UK

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

DOUBLEDAY
UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Doubleday is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

www.penguin.co.uk
www.puffin.co.uk
www.ladybird.co.uk



First published 2016

001

Text copyright © Oneta Malorie Blackman, 2016

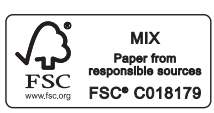
The moral right of the author has been asserted

Set in Sabon 12.2pt/18pt and Franklin Gothic 11pt/18pt
by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–857–53141–4 (Hardback edition)
978–0–857–53142–1 (Trade paperback edition)

All correspondence to:
Doubleday
Penguin Random House Children's
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

1



'My turn!'

Dad jumped to his feet, straightening out his right arm in front of him. He moved his hand from right to left, nodding his head as he did so. Pumping his arm out to the side, then up, then out, then up, he then switched to his other arm to move it slowly but steadily before him, his head still nodding.

'*Grease*!' I shouted.

'Ah, but which bit?'

'Please!' I said, insulted. 'The song, *Greased Lightning*.'

Dad straightened up, disgruntled. He was just winding up to mime the moves to the entire song and I'd spoiled his fun by guessing so quickly. He tapped his nose, pointed at me and smiled. 'I should've given you a harder one.'

'My turn.' I sprang to my feet as Dad sat down.

I loved playing film charades with Dad. We were the only two people on board who loved old twentieth- and twenty-first century films. Pressing a make-believe switch to activate my imaginary lightsaber, I leaped high into the air whilst performing the side splits, all the while fighting off the imaginary foe who was trying to split me in two.

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

'*Star Wars*!' Dad bounced in his chair.

'Ah, but which one?' I challenged.

'Which one of the whole series?' Dad exclaimed.

I nodded.

'Really?' Dad raised an eyebrow. 'I'm supposed to guess which one of the *Star Wars* films you're re-enacting?'

'Yep! And here's a clue, it's not one of the animated ones.' I continued to jump around, swirling my arm to deflect imaginary blows.

'Number eight!' said Dad.

My mouth fell open as I stared at him, stunned. 'How in the world did you get that?'

'Now if I told you that, you'd know as much as I do,' laughed Dad. 'My turn again. You'll never get this one.' Dad was already on his feet, his smile wide. I loved his smile. It was wide and infectious and made everyone else around him smile too, guaranteed.

'Why are you watching that? Again.'

At the sound of Aidan's voice, I stopped the recording, swiping my hand downwards to dismiss the image playing in front of me. Dad's laughing face vanished. I turned my face away, quickly brushing my fingertips across my cheeks to smooth my expression.

'Vee, are you all right?' Aidan walked over to me.

I shrugged. 'Of course. I just like to watch recordings of Mum and Dad.'

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

A reminder of better times.

There were recordings of the whole family together but far fewer than I would've liked, and very little footage of just Mum and me. Her job had meant that she'd had very little free time.

Aidan frowned, his gaze intense. 'I don't understand. Watching them hurts you. So why do it?'

'They make me smile,' I replied. 'I don't do much of that any more.'

Puzzled, Aidan tilted his head as he regarded me.

'I laugh a lot. I don't smile much,' I explained.

'What's the difference?' asked Aidan seriously.

'Not enough to worry about,' I replied at last.

Aidan reached out, one of his fingers brushing against my cheek just beneath my right eye. When he drew back his hand, a single tear lay on his index finger. He studied it for a moment.

'I don't like to see you sad.'

'Watching the recordings makes me happy too,' I said. 'That's the point.'

Aidan scrutinized me, those dark brown eyes of his not missing much, as per usual.

'Aidan, I'm OK.'

'True?'

'True.'

He stepped forward and gave me a hug. As he stepped back, I dredged up a smile which Aidan accepted at face value.

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

'No more recordings?' said Aidan.

'No more recordings.'

For today.

Aidan smiled and nodded, relieved. 'Now how about a nice game of chess?'

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

2 NATHAN

Son-of-a-bitch! Agony detonated inside me, raw and devouring. I'd never felt anything like it. I wasn't so much crying out as screaming out in pain. My left foot and lower leg were completely crushed beneath the weight of fallen rocks and boulders. Gasping, panting, I had to make a superhuman effort to get myself together. If I gave in to the pain and panic slicing through me, I'd stand no chance at all. Grabbing hold of my left leg at the knee, I tried to pull myself free. I used my right foot to push and kick against the fallen boulders.

Nothing doing. The rocks weren't budging.

I was going nowhere.

Trapped.

The left leg of my environment suit was in shreds. Ironically the self-same boulder that had pinned my leg and ripped my suit in the first place was also the object now sealing the breach. But I'd lost a lot of oxygen from my suit in the process. When I came down into the mine thirty minutes ago, I'd had over ten hours of oxygen left in my suit. The heads-up display of my helmet now showed I had less than fifty minutes of air left. Which would see me off first? The intense cold, the carbon

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

dioxide atmosphere down here in the mine, or the blood loss from my crushed foot?

Having fun yet, Nate?

The sickly yellow lights which marked our route through the mine flickered and dimmed. In a few hours they would be switched off completely – not that I'd be alive to see that if I didn't get the hell out of here.

The trouble was, Anjuli was the only one who knew I'd come back down here to retrieve my tablet. That fact did me no good at all as she'd gone back to the barracks to get some rest. Knowing Anjuli she was already fast asleep.

And the filling in my life's-a-vindictive-bitch sandwich?

The moment I'd heard the ominous creaking and cracking which signalled a cave-in I'd started to run, but had dropped my damned tablet as I stumbled and fell. The tablet was about one metre behind me, buried under the same tonne or more of rubble as my leg, and undoubtedly sharing the same fate – smashed to pieces.

'HELP!'

Stupid to call for help when I knew there was no one around to hear me. But it made me feel like I was doing something. A pathetic something, a useless something, but something nonetheless.

I needed to do more.

The next shift was due to start mining at least seven kilometres away from my current location. The seams in the vast mines which criss-crossed this area were only excavated for a few months at a time before we moved on to a new section. The

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

known seams were worked in a strict rotation. That's the reason I'd come down here to retrieve my tablet. I knew if I didn't get it now, I'd have to wait too many months before they opened up this section again. No way could I go that long with no lifeline to the world outside this mining colony.

But now I was trapped and alone.

If I didn't find a way to get out of here and fast, my buff and perfectly preserved but incredibly dead body would not be found for several months. I needed to figure something out. *Now.*

Forty-one minutes of air left.

'HELP! HELP ME!'

Nate, don't panic. You'll just use up your oxygen faster.

The agony in my leg made it difficult but I tried to compartmentalize the pain, fold it up and put it to one side, so that I could come up with a way out of this.

My DE torch.

I dug into the side pocket of my suit over my thigh.

Please let it still be in there.

It was, thank God! I changed the setting from light to heat. The faint, high-pitched whistle told me it had activated properly. It gave out a concentrated beam that we used in the mine for precision cutting when necessary. Where would be the best place to cut into the boulders and rocks pinning my leg? If I got this wrong, the whole tunnel would come tumbling down on top of the rest of me. It dawned on me that cutting into the rocks that held me captive wouldn't work. Displacing any of them would just bring down more. The only way I was going to get out of here was to slice through my leg, just above where it was

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

pinned, through skin and my shin, and muscle, blood and bone. The torch would cauterize as it cut but the pain would be excruciating.

Son-of-a-bitch!

I was going to have to cut off my own foot.

I couldn't do it.

How could I?

But it was that or die for sure.

I switched off the DE torch, shaking my head. I simply couldn't do it.

I tried kicking against the rocks with my right foot again, heaving to pull my left leg free. All I got from that was a renewed blast of searing pain. In my panic, I was breathing too fast. I was going to use up all my remaining oxygen in double-quick time at this rate.

Thirty-seven minutes of oxygen left.

Face facts. Whatever happened, rescued by others or rescue myself, I was going to lose my foot. Damn! And I was so attached to it too.

Come on, Nathan.

Do it.

Get on with it.

You're not getting any younger.

My head was beginning to swim. Black spots were darting before my eyes.

I was going into shock. About to pass out. Wow, the good times just kept on coming. If I fainted now, these black spots would be the last things I ever saw.

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

Gritting my teeth, I switched on the DE torch again, adjusting the setting back to a focused beam of heat rather than light. Before I could change my mind, I directed it at my leg . . .

I woke up screaming.

'What the hell, Nathan?' said Mike, switching on his lamp.

I wiped my forehead, which was pouring with sweat. Pain, remembered but no less real for it, lanced through me. Damn it! I sighed as I sat up.

'The same dream?' Mike asked.

'Yeah,' I admitted.

'Why won't you let Doctor Liana give you something for that? Practically every other night you go through this. And when you go through it, so do the rest of us.'

'Some of us are trying to sleep over here!' An irate Pearl shouted from across the barracks. That was all I needed. She was a misery at the best of times. Deprived of sleep she'd be yet another nightmare to contend with.

'Sorry,' I called out.

'Nathan, shut the hell up!' Corbyn shouted from further along the room.

I was feeling the love.

A ripple effect was happening throughout the barracks as more and more people began to stir. Time to escape before my arse got kicked. I threw back my bed cover and bent my left leg to rub halfway between my ankle and my knee. My real lower leg was back in the mine, probably still buried under a ton of rock. This bionic replacement, covered in synthetic skin, looked

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

and behaved the same as my real leg and was certainly better than nothing; I could still feel the indented scar right around my calf and shin where the prosthesis had been attached to my body.

Knowing that sleep and I would be strangers for a while, I sighed and got out of bed. Slipping on my boots, I made my way out of the dorm. Mike waited until I was at the door before switching off his lamp. He was a good mate that way. After a brief smile in his direction, I made my way out into the compound, taking a deep breath of the still night air. The air here smelled and tasted different to what I was used to. More . . . citrusy. Maybe something to do with the plants and trees that grew around here. God, I sounded like Mike now. Mike would much rather hang out with the trees on this planet than any of us people.

I glanced up at the sky, full of stars I didn't recognize. That didn't make them any less awesome. Good word that. Awesome. And definitely under-used. I liked old, nearly obsolete words. That was one of the things I'd missed on the mining colony – access to words, new and old, especially the written kind. God knows this place was better than life back on the mining colony but there was still something empty inside me, a void that ached to be filled. This life, this place, it wasn't enough.

But for a while at least, it would have to do.

I looked around, trying to decide where to go. A light shone from the meeting house at the centre of the compound. Frowning, I made my way towards it. Wasn't it a bit late to be holding a meeting?

As I got closer, my steps grew quieter. Whatever was going

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

on, it was obviously not meant for common knowledge. I crept over to an open window, ducking down beneath it to stay out of sight. I heard Darren's voice, but then that wouldn't've been hard. The guy, who was Mum's second-in-command, had never been shy about speaking his mind.

'Cathy, this is madness. We need to activate the distress beacon,' Darren insisted. 'It's our only chance.'

'We've been here for over three Sol months. This is our home now. Are you really in that much of a hurry to be at the mercy of the Authority again?' Mum argued.

'No, but better the devil you know at this point. Quite frankly, I'd rather take my chances with the Authority than with the Mazon.'

My heart leaped. The Mazon? What was Darren talking about? Were we in danger from the Mazon? They were an enemy very few had seen but everyone knew about. I didn't know that much about them, but the stories of what they did to their victims had travelled fast, far and wide. Their hatred for all us humans was well-known.

'If the Authority get their hands on us, we won't be sent back to the mines, we'll be publicly executed,' Mum snapped. 'You do know that, right?'

'Catherine, I know it's a hard choice between the lesser of two evils but we can't stay here,' said another voice. Sam this time, if I wasn't mistaken. 'The Mazon have made that perfectly clear.'

A moment's silence.

I risked raising my head to peer through the open window.

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

Mum, Darren, Sam, Hedda, Akemi, Doctor Liana and Beck sat at the round assembly table where most, if not all, of the decisions on behalf of us settlers were made. Almost directly opposite me, Mum began to turn her head my way. I ducked out of sight again, my heart thumping.

'I know it won't be easy but there has to be a way to reason with the Mazon,' Mum insisted. 'I'll keep sending out the transmissions. We've got to convince them that we're not the enemy. Quite frankly, they're our last hope.'

'Then we're in deep shit,' said Darren. 'Cathy, activate the beacon.'

'No. Not yet.' Mum dug her heels in. 'Not until we have exhausted every other option.'

Oh my God! We were in Mazon territory? Mum and the others had kept that quiet. And Mum was going to try and reason with them? Seriously? Well, good luck with that.

'The Mazon have only given us until the first sunrise to clear out,' said Sam.

'Cathy, we should activate the emergency distress beacon,' Darren urged.

'Not yet.'

'At least put it to a vote.'

'Darren, I didn't ask to be leader. You voted me into the role. You all did. So let me lead,' said Mum. 'I'm not going to activate the distress beacon until we have no other option.'

'By then it may be too late,' Darren said, exasperated.

'I refuse to believe that a race with the obvious intelligence of the Mazon can't be reasoned with,' said Mum.

Property of Penguin Random House 2016

‘And if you’re wrong?’ asked Hedda quietly.

‘We have to try,’ said Mum. ‘I’m willing to take that chance.’

I raised my head again, just in time to catch the shared looks exchanged around the table.

Darren shook his head. ‘Just as long as you remember you’re taking a chance with all our lives, not just your own.’