

Humming Through My Fingers

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Permission pending

Malorie Blackman

HUMMING THROUGH MY FINGERS

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 recognized 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 favorites." 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

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of a lie. Not a liar, but a lie. But there was something else there. Something that 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

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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 colors." 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 colors," said Kyle.

Tasting shapes, hearing colors . . . 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

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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 Gigger 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 favorite. They whispered amongst themselves, using the wind as cover. At one end of the upper field was the redbrick 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."

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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 synesthesia. 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-meter 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-racking, how I'd be teased and bullied—stuff like that."

Kyle sniffed. "Sounds like excuses to me."

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"It's a school for the blind. It's about twenty-five kilometers 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-meter, and the four-hundred-meter 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!"

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"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.

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"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?"

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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 colors. I would've been able to tell the colors 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.

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

"What d'you think of that tree?"

"What tree?"

"The one right in front of us. It's my favorite 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 forever 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."

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"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 meter 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 meter and she's got bad knees—always assuming I've led us to the right bit of the stream, of course."

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"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," he admitted. "I know the water is
 only a few centimeters deep, but it suddenly felt like it was
 kilometers deep and kilometers down."
 "And how did you feel when you landed on the other
 side?"
 "Relieved!"
 "Anything else?"

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"Yeah. Kind of proud of myself."
 "Being blind," I began, "is like jumping off a cliff with
 the water below kilometers deep and kilometers 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 him 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.
 He 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?"

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"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.
 "Just use your index finger and your thumb to touch this," I said.
 When Kyle's fingers were on the object I let go of his hand.
 "What is it?" he asked, his voice more than curious.
 "What d'you think it is?" I asked.
 "I don't know . . ." Kyle said slowly. "It feels like a bit of velvet, but there wouldn't be velvet around the tennis courts."
 I reached out and touched the object, my fingers next to Kyle's. "A deep yellow velvet."
 "How can you tell what color it is?"
 "Yellow has got quite a high voice. This yellow's voice is slightly lower, which means the shade is deeper, but it's definitely yellow," I told him.
 "Do you know what it is I'm touching?" Kyle asked.
 "Yes, I do." And all at once I didn't want to do this any more. I felt wistful and sad. "Take off your tie now. Have a look at what you're touching."

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Kyle removed his tie at once and gasped. "It's . . . it's a flower . . ." he said, shocked.
 "Beautiful, isn't it?"
 "A yellow flower," Kyle whispered.
 "There's more to seeing than looking, Kyle," I told him. "Your eyes work. Never forget what a gift that is. I can taste light and feel colors and I'm grateful. But to see . . ."
 "A flower . . ." Kyle's voice was awestruck. I didn't have his full attention. I wondered if he'd even heard me.
 "Kyle, touching that flower and seeing it with your fingers—that's what seeing with my other senses is a tiny bit like. I see things in ways that you can't or won't because you don't have to. I'm grateful for that as well. Because I can still appreciate the things around me. Maybe even more than a lot of sighted people do."
 I sensed Kyle looking at me then. Really looking—for the first time. I wondered how he saw me now. I smiled at him as he straightened up.
 "I . . . look, I have something to tell you," Kyle began uneasily.
 "Forget it."
 "No, it's important. I . . ."
 "Dean and Joseph bet you that you couldn't get me to go out for a burger with you. But just so you know, they've each asked me out and I turned them down flat, so they reckoned you had no chance."
 Silence.
 "Stop it! You're staring!" I laughed.

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"How did you know that?"
 "What? About the bet or that you were starting?"
 "Both."
 "'Cause I'm brilliant!" I teased. "And by the way, I wouldn't tell my brother about the bet if I were you. He's a bit overprotective where I'm concerned and he'd probably want to punch your lights out."
 "I . . . I suppose you don't want anything more to do with me?"
 "I knew about the bet before you'd even said one word to me—remember?"
 "I still don't understand how."
 "I heard you."
 "But we were practically across the field," Kyle protested.
 "No, you weren't. You were only several meters away and the wind was blowing in my direction."
 When Kyle didn't answer I said, "Are you OK?"
 "We'd better go back," he said, his tone strange.
 Now it was my turn to be surprised. "What's the matter?"
 It was a long time before Kyle answered. We started back to the sports field, my arm lightly resting on his. I knew the way back without any problems, but I had wanted to sense what he was feeling. And it didn't take a genius to guess from the way his muscles were stiff and tense what was going on in his head. He wasn't happy.
 "Kyle?"
 "I'm sorry, Amber. I guess you hate me now. And I don't

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blame you. I behaved like a real jerk." The words came out in a rush of genuine embarrassment. And there was something else, something more, behind them.
 "Why should I hate you?"
 He looked at me then. And his eyes hadn't changed back—I could tell. He was still looking at me with the eyes of someone who could see me. Not a blind girl. Not someone to be pitied or patronized. Not someone who had less than him. But a girl who could see without using her eyes.
 "So d'you still want to go out for a burger later?" Kyle's voice was barely above a whisper. If it wasn't for my bat ears I doubt if I would've heard him.
 "Course. I'm starving."
 There was no mistaking the sigh of relief that came from Kyle. It made me giggle.
 "D'you know something?" Kyle stopped walking. He looked all around him, then straight at me. "I hadn't noticed before, but everything around me is . . ."
 He shut up then. I could feel the self-conscious waves of heat radiating from him. I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing, which made Kyle even more self-conscious.
 "Come on," I said. "Let's go and watch my brother come last in the four-hundred-meter relay."
 And we walked over the bridge together to join the others.