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L O V E

H U R T S

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MARKUS ZUSAK MAUREEN JOHNSON JAMES DAWSON JENNY DOWNHAM

You can't help who you fall in love with ...

MALORIE BLACKMAN

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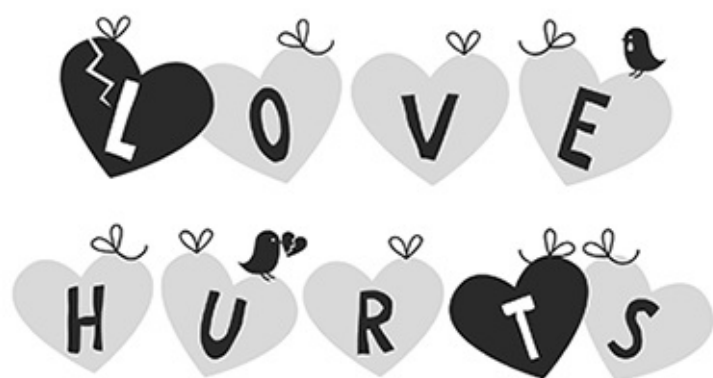
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About the Book

Have you ever fallen for someone the rest of the world thought you shouldn't have?

Malorie Blackman brings together the very best young adult authors writing today in a stunningly romantic collection of love against the odds.

Featuring stories and extracts about modern star-crossed lovers, *Love Hurts* looks at every kind of relationship, from first kiss to final heartbreak. This is a collection for anyone who has ever loved and lost – and loved again . . .



Chosen and introduced by
MALORIE BLACKMAN

RHCP DIGITAL

INTRODUCTION

Love Hurts. Sometimes. If it didn't, a significant proportion of the stories throughout the world would disappear.

So what is love? Chemical reactions in our brains? Electrical impulses? A universal energy? The manifestation of our souls? An intertwining of our ephemeral existences? Yes, I know that last one is vomit-inducing! But seriously, what is it? Is love the one true unifying force that links all of us? Is it any, all or none of the above?

Maybe reading about love is our way of trying to figure it out. It's one of those intangibles that you can't hold in your hand and which words cannot, perhaps ever, adequately convey, but is shown in how we act towards and speak to and treat others. And while we may never find the words to effectively express just what love is, that certainly shouldn't stop us from trying.

Star-crossed lovers have always been at the heart of our stories, from Orpheus and Eurydice, Kintu and Nambi, Paris and Helen, Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, the butterfly lovers Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, Lancelot and Guinevere, Layla and Qays (Majnun), Heathcliff and Cathy, right up to Buffy and Angel, Spider-Man and Gwen Stacy, Katniss and Peeta.

I have never described my own book *Noughts & Crosses* as a love story, but the relationship between Callum and Sephy lies at the very core of it. It is the beating heart of my story. Without that, the rest of the plot just wouldn't work. Our relationships with others are an integral part of our lives. Surely love provides a point and purpose to life? Those who cannot find it or do not have it perhaps seek lesser and maybe more destructive alternatives, or are resigned to a life which doesn't reach its full potential.

Stories serve many purposes – to illuminate, educate, entertain. Love stories let us know that sometimes, in spite of many and varied obstacles thrown in our way, love can triumph. But sometimes it doesn't. That's love – and life. In love stories, it's the journey, not the destination, that is all important. The stories in this anthology aren't all hearts and flowers. God forbid! I like my love stories to have a bit of spice and bite! These stories contain love lost, love found, the start of love, the end of love, love bitter and love sweet.

The stories and extracts of stories contained within this anthology are old and new favourites of mine, as well as some wonderful new stories. They show that 'the course of true love never did run smooth' (thank you, Lysander from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). I hope the extracts and short stories will whet your appetite and encourage you to seek out more books by these authors.

I know these stories will amuse, entertain, surprise, and maybe provoke thought and discussion. I really do believe there's something in this anthology for everyone.

Enjoy!

Malorie Blackman

HUMMING THROUGH MY FINGERS

BY
MALORIE BLACKMAN

My hands slowed down, 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. He stood directly in front of me, blocking the sunlight, making my arms and face feel instantly cooler. I'd thought I'd get at least twelve pages on before he plucked up the nerve to come over.

'Hi, Amber. It's me. Ethan. Ethan Bennett.'

I sniffed the air in the direction of his voice. He didn't have to tell me his name. I recognized his voice. Ethan Bennett – the new boy in my brother Joshua's class. Well, when I say new, I mean he'd joined Josh's class last September and been to our house four or five times when I was there, but this was the first time he'd said anything other than 'Hi' to me.

The last time he left our house, I had tried less than subtly to ask Joshua about him. 'Josh, what's Ethan like?'

'Why?' asked my brother, suspicion lacing his tone.

'I like his voice,' I replied.

'He looks like Quasimodo and he's constantly farting,' Josh replied. 'He's lactose intolerant so God help you if you're around him without a gas mask after he's had a pizza or a glass of milk.'

So much for trying to get a straight answer out of my brother.

'Hello, Ethan.'

'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 . . . meant, d'you mind if I sit down?' Ethan's voice was anxious, eager for me to understand.

'Help yourself.' Why ask me if he could sit down? Did I own the field or the grass in it? I carried on reading my book while he parked.

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

'It's *Misery* by Stephen King. I've read it before, and yes, it is good.'

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

'It's one of my favourite books.' As I spoke I carried on reading, my fingers skimming over the page. But then my fingers unexpectedly touched Ethan's and an electric shock like summer lightning stung through my fingers and up my arm.

'Ouch!' Ethan exclaimed.

With his touch still humming through my fingers, I drew my hand away. 'What happened?'

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

I said nothing. There'd been something unexpected in his touch, something more interesting than the obvious, but harder to read. It was this that stopped me from telling him to get lost.

'Sorry about that,' said Ethan. '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 inwardly. Another explanation. Another embarrassed pause followed by a murmur of sympathy and, if the usual pattern was followed, a sudden mumbled excuse to leave.

‘Each of the series of raised dots represents a letter or a number. 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 Ethan’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.’ Ethan whistled appreciatively. ‘How long did it take you?’

‘Quite a few months, actually, and I’m still learning.’ OK, I admit it, I was surprised. No pity, no sympathy, just two people talking.

‘Were you born blind?’

Another surprise. No one over the age of ten ever asked me about my eyesight – not directly, at any rate. It was a taboo subject, conspicuous by its absence. How come Ethan had never got round to asking my brother or one of his other friends? Too afraid they’d mistake his questions for interest? I wondered who else was present, who else was listening. I sniffed the air. I couldn’t smell anyone else nearby. Just Ethan – and his lie. Not lies plural. Just one lie.

‘No.’ I was going to say more, but the words didn’t seem to want to come out of my mouth.

‘Here’s your book back.’

I reached out my hand. Ethan placed it in my upturned palm.

‘So how did you become blind, then?’ he asked.

Wow! Direct much? Truth to tell, I kind of liked it. It was refreshing.

‘I’m a diabetic and I’m one of the unlucky few who developed diabetic retinopathy.’ I faked a nonchalant shrug. ‘I played fast and loose with taking my insulin and watching my diet. My vision started going fuzzy and I didn’t put two and two together until it was too late. So here I am.’

‘What d’you miss most?’

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

‘Pardon?’

I repeated the question and smiled inwardly as I felt Ethan frown. ‘I don’t know,’ he answered at last. My question had disturbed him. ‘Josh 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 hear colours and sense certain things that most people can’t.’

Hearing colours – was that why I’d been singled out by Ethan? Was that all there was to it? Check out the weird girl and have a laugh while doing it?

‘Is that true?’ Ethan persisted.

I shrugged. I’d have to have a serious word with Josh 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. Who else had my brother blabbed to?

‘I hope you don’t mind me mentioning it. Josh swore me to secrecy and he hasn’t told anyone else at least, that’s what he said.’

‘Why did he tell you?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe he thought he could trust me.’ Pause. ‘He could see I wanted to know more about you.’

Hhmm! I shrugged noncommittally, careful to keep my expression neutral.

‘I’ve never heard of anything like that before,’ Ethan stated.

‘It’s called synaesthesia. I’ve always had it but it became heightened when I lost my sight. About ten people in every million have it, so don’t go thinking I’m a fruit loop or something.’ An edge crept into my voice.

‘I didn’t think anything of the kind,’ Ethan 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. Ah! OK!’

And I knew then that he’d got the point. ‘Exactly.’

Wanting to change the subject, I asked, ‘So what d’you think of Belling Oak, then?’

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

Whoosh! Instantly my face flamed, in spite of myself. I turned away, listening to the distant cheers and the shouting as the 100 metres sprint race started.

‘I was here for four years, but . . . there were problems,’ I said, still half listening to the race.

‘What sort of problems?’

I sighed inwardly. I’d say one thing for Ethan: he was persistent. ‘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. The Head insisted Belling just wasn’t set up for students who were visually challenged. He couldn’t even say the word – blind.’

‘Sounds like excuses to me.’ Ethan sniffed.

I turned to face him again. ‘It was. I already had friends here, I’d already been here for four years since junior school and after the first year I could’ve found my way around blindfolded. Mum, Dad and I kept telling him that I was willing to put up with the rest, but he wouldn’t have it. Then he 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. So it didn’t happen.’

‘You must’ve been disappointed.’

‘Of course. I’d set my heart on staying at Belling.’ 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 the intensity of the green of the grass in spring, how in spring and early summer it was always covered in daisies and buttercups. From the upper classroom windows the daisies made the ground look like it was covered in summer snow, they were that thick on the ground. 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 for 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 which doubled as basketball courts. And the whole thing had been so beautiful. I only started appreciating its beauty when I started to lose my sight. Precious little time left to drink in the sights and sounds of the place before I got bounced out.

‘So where d’you go now?’ asked Ethan.

‘Arenden Hall. We’ve already broken up for the summer, though.’

‘Never heard of it.’

‘It’s a college for the blind, about ten kilometres from here.’

‘D’you like it?’

I shrugged. ‘Yes, I do. They treat me like I’m more than my eyesight there. They know that my blindness isn’t the one and only thing to define me.’

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 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 knocked over or swept aside by the enthusiastic crowds, but close enough to hear what was going on. Some of my Belling friends

thought it strange that I would 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. That and the fact that my friends made me remember . . . different times. I forced my mind away from the past to concentrate on the here and now.

Joshua, my twin brother, was due to run in the Upper Sixth 200 metres later on. He'd come last, or close to it. He always did, 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 saunter. Josh always said that he was built for endurance, not speed. In cross-country runs, he invariably crossed the finish line first and fresh as a daisy while his friends collapsed all around him several minutes later.

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

'It's OK.' But I didn't deny that he'd upset me. 'May I ask you something?'

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

'Why are you over here? I mean, why aren't you with everyone else watching the races?'

Please tell me the truth. Please.

'I saw you over here and I just wanted to say hello. We've never really had the chance to have a proper conversation before.'

'I see.' The heat from his lie swept over me like volcanic ash, tasting bitter and acrid against my tongue.

Ethan cleared his throat. 'Actually, I wanted to ask you something. Would you . . . er . . . I'm going for a pizza after all the events are over. I don't suppose you'd like to come with me?'

Silence stretched between us like a rubber band.

'You're inviting me to go for a meal with you, my brother and your friends?'

'Well, I thought if you agreed to have a pizza with me, we could go by ourselves?' Ethan cleared his throat again at the end of his rushed sentence. He obviously did that when he was nervous. Useful to know.

'OK,' I said, at last.

'Really? Great!'

The obvious relief in his voice made me stifle a smile. It meant that much to him?

'Aren't you lactose intolerant, though?' I said. 'Is a pizza wise?'

'What did Josh say about me?' Ethan sounded mortified.

'Is it true?'

'I have a mild case and it's cumulative. I'm OK with just one pizza.'

'You will keep away from the ice cream with your dessert though, right?' I teased.

Ethan didn't reply but I could've been on Mars and still felt his embarrassment.

'Are you in any of the races?' I took pity on him and changed the subject.

'No, athletics isn't really my thing.'

'What is?'

'Rugby. And tennis sometimes.'

'Oh, I see. Are you heading back to your friends to watch the rest of the races now?' I asked.

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

Whoa! So he was going for it, was he? Two could play that game.

'Sure. Tell you what, let's go for a walk,' I said.

'A walk?'

'Around the grounds. Away from everyone else.'

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

I laughed. 'It's my eyes that don't work, my legs are fine.'

'Yeah, of course. Sorry.' I heard Ethan get to his feet. I stood up, ignoring the hand he put out to

help me.

~~‘Let’s walk downstream towards the car park, then cross the stream and walk round behind the tennis courts,’ I suggested.~~

‘Fine with me.’

We started walking. Ethan stuffed his hands in his pockets until I placed my hand on his bare forearm. He must’ve been wearing a short-sleeved shirt. And there it was again, that strange humming through my fingers. Ethan’s arm started to flap about like a fish out of water. He didn’t know what to do with it, where to put it so I could rest my hand on it. I stopped, withdrawing my hand as I waited for him to figure it out. After a moment or two, he took my hand and placed it on his forearm, which was now steady. We carried on walking in a strangely amiable silence.

‘So tell me what you can see,’ I said.

‘Huh?’

‘Describe what you can see.’ I smiled at Ethan. ‘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 over there is the car park and over there is the school and—’

My hand gently squeezed his arm. ‘That’s not what I meant. Tell me what you can see.’

‘But I just did.’

I gave him a hard look. ‘Ethan, are you wearing your school tie?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘Could you take it off and put it around your eyes?’

‘Come again?’

I smiled. ‘You heard me right the first time.’

‘Why d’you want me to do that?’ Ethan asked.

‘I’m going to take you around the school grounds.’

‘With my eyes blindfolded?’ Ethan asked, aghast.

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.’

‘Oh my God! Thanks for telling me. I hadn’t noticed!’ I teased. ‘So are you going to do it, or are you too much of a chicken?’

Slowly, Ethan 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 d’you know?’ The amazement in his voice was very gratifying. ‘OK! OK! My eyes are totally covered now.’

‘Let me touch your face.’

I felt him lean forward. I raised my hands to run my fingers lightly over his face. My fingers began to hum again as I touched his skin. He had a large forehead (lots of brains!), a strong nose and a firm chin, and his lips were full and 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 completely 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 denied. ‘But suppose we end up in the stream or something?’

‘Then we’ll get wet!’

There was a pause, then Ethan 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. Now . . . which way are we facing again?’

A sharp intake of breath from Ethan had me cracking up.

‘You’re not funny,’ he grumbled.

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

‘What d’you think of this tree?’ I asked.

‘What tree?’

‘The one right in front of us. It’s my favourite of all of them 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 it. I can’t see anything.’

‘See it without using your eyes.’

‘How do I do that?’ Frustration began to creep into Ethan’s voice.

I took Ethan’s hand and stretched it out in front of him until it touched the tree trunk. ‘What does it feel like?’ I asked, my hand resting lightly over his so I could feel what he was doing.

‘Rough.’

‘What else?’

His fingers began to move slowly across the tree bark. ‘Cool. Sharp in places. Here’s a smooth bit.’

‘And what does it smell like?’

Ethan looked over towards me.

‘Go on!’ I encouraged. ‘It’s international hug-a-tree day! Tell me what it smells like and feels like. Don’t be shy.’

Reluctantly, Ethan moved closer to the tree. He stretched out his arms to hold it. Waves of ‘what-the-hell-am-I-doing?’ rippled out from his entire body.

‘It feels . . . strong. Like it could be here for ever if it was left alone.’ Ethan’s voice grew more quiet, but 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 Ethan 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, a frown in his voice.

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

‘But . . . but I can’t see where I’m going,’ said Ethan, horrified.

‘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 more adventurous. I want you to jump from here. 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, Ethan?’

‘D’you really think this is a good idea?’

‘Trust me. And once you’ve grabbed the tree root, haul yourself up out of the way ’cause I’ll be right behind you.’

‘All right,’ Ethan said dubiously.

I placed my hands on his shoulders and turned him slightly to straighten him up so he wouldn’t be jumping at an angle. ‘Don’t worry, Ethan. 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?' Ethan 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!' Ethan shouted. And he jumped.

To be honest, I was impressed. I thought he'd need a lot more coaxing. I heard an 'Ooof!' followed by the mad scramble of his hands as he sought and found a tree root. The ground here was covered in exposed tree roots so I knew he'd have no problem. He hauled himself up the bank to the level ground beyond.

'Here I come!' And I jumped. In a way, I'm sorry Ethan didn't see me. A sighted person couldn't have done it better. I landed cleanly, then stepped up the bank, pushing against the roots beneath my feet. No need to get my hands dirty.

'Are you OK?' I asked.

'I think so.'

'How did it feel to jump?'

'I don't know,' said Ethan.

'Yes, you do.'

His sharp intake of breath told me that I was right. 'I was a bit nervous. 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 is like jumping off a cliff – except you jump never knowing what's on the other side. Everything is an adventure for me. Walking along the street, going into a shop, meeting new people, even reading a book. I see things I never saw before. D'you know how much I hate reading the phrase "How could I have been so blind?" when the author is using it to mean stupid? That really pisses me off, but I never even noticed it before losing my sight. I travel through life never knowing what I'll come across or what I'll find, whether I'll be delighted or disappointed, hurt or happy. Everyone else travels that way but most take it for granted. I don't. Not any more. Does that make sense?'

'I think so.' Ethan didn't sound sure at all. But it was enough.

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 stop.' I led the way along the fence and past the car park.

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

'That's OK. I do.'

We walked on for another few minutes before I stopped.

'Where are we now?' asked Ethan.

'By the tennis courts. What can you hear?'

Ethan was still for a moment. 'Birds and a faint droning sound.'

'That drone is the traffic on the other side of the school building.'

Ethan 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!’

Ethan shook his head but he still knelt down. I smelled what I was looking for. The scent was overwhelming. I took Ethan’s hand and put it out to touch the thing I could smell.

‘Just use your index finger and thumb to touch this,’ I said. ‘Rub it gently between your fingers but don’t touch anything else except this bit.’

When Ethan’s fingers were on the object, I let go of his hand.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘What d’you think it is?’

‘I don’t know . . .’ Ethan 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 Ethan’s. ‘A deep yellow velvet.’

‘How can you tell what colour 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.’

‘Do you know what it is I’m touching?’

‘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.’

Ethan removed his tie at once and gasped. ‘It’s . . . it’s a flower . . .’ he said, shocked.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’

‘A deep yellow flower,’ Ethan whispered.

‘There’s more to seeing than just looking, Ethan,’ I told him. ‘Your eyes work. Never forget what a gift that is. I can feel colours and I’m grateful. But to see . . .’

‘A flower.’ Ethan’s voice was awestruck. I didn’t have his full attention. I wondered if he’d even heard me.

‘Ethan, 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 Ethan looking at me then. Really looking – for the first time. I wondered how he saw me now. I smiled at him.

‘I . . . look, I have to tell you something,’ Ethan began uneasily.

‘Forget it.’

‘No, it’s important. I—’

‘Harry and Jacob bet you that you couldn’t get me to go out for a pizza with you and get a kiss out of me. But for your information, they’ve both asked me out and I’ve always turned them down flat, so they reckoned you had no chance.’

Silence.

‘Stop it. You’re staring!’ I laughed.

‘How did you know that?’

‘What? About the bet or that you were staring?’

‘Both.’

‘I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you,’ I teased. ‘And by the way, I wouldn’t tell my brother about the bet if I were you. He’s massively over-protective where I’m concerned and he’d probably want to punch your face into next week.’

‘I’m sorry, Amber. 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.'

'You couldn't have. We were practically across the field,' Ethan protested.

'Exaggerate much? You were only a few metres away and the wind was blowing in my direction.'

When Ethan didn't answer, I said, 'I have ears like a bat. Always have done. And I've always had a sixth sense when it comes to spotting when people are lying to me.'

A profound silence followed my words. How I wished I could see Ethan's face at that moment.

'We'd better get back,' Ethan said at last, his tone strange.

Now it was my turn to be bemused. 'What's the matter?'

Ethan took my hand and rested it on his arm. His touch lingered a little longer than was necessary on the back of my hand. We started back towards the sports field, my hand lightly resting on his arm. I knew the way back without any problem but I wanted to sense what he was feeling. From the way his muscles were bunched and tense beneath my fingers I could guess what was going on in his head. He wasn't happy.

'Ethan?'

'I'm really sorry, Amber. You must think I'm a real dickwit. And I don't blame you.' His words came out in a rush of genuine embarrassment. And there was something else, something more behind them.

'Why would I think your wits are dickish?' I smiled.

Ethan looked at me then. And his gaze 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 and nothing else. Not someone to be pitied or patronized or mocked. Not someone who was less than him. But a girl who could see without using her eyes.

'Can I . . . can I touch your face?' said Ethan.

Surprised, I nodded. He moved to stand in front of me. A moment later his fingers were exploring my face, starting from my forehead and working their way down, skimming over my eyebrows, my closed eyes, my nose, my cheeks, my lips, my jaw, my chin. He leaned in closer. I could feel his warm breath on my face. He smelled of mints and chocolate. Was he going to kiss me? Ethan's hands dropped to his side as he straightened up.

'Why did you do that?' I asked, wondering why I felt so disappointed.

'I . . . I don't know.' He took my arm in his and we carried on walking.

'What about Jacob and Harry? Didn't you have to kiss me to win your bet?' I asked.

'Those two can go . . .' Ethan swallowed the next word. ' . . . themselves. If I kiss you it won't be win some stupid bet.'

I smiled. 'So where are we going for this pizza, then?'

Stunned, Ethan stopped walking and turned to look at me. 'You still want to go out with me?'

'Course I do. I'm starving.'

The sigh of relief that came from Ethan made me giggle.

'D'you know something?' Ethan looked around. 'I never noticed it before, but everything around me is so . . . so . . .'

He shut up then. I raised my hand to touch his radiating cheek.

'I could fry an egg on your face.' I grinned. 'A couple of rashers of bacon too.'

'Shut up!' said Ethan.

I burst out laughing. 'Come on,' I said. 'Let's go and watch my brother come last in the four-by-one-hundred relay.'

And we walked over the bridge together to join the others.

FROM

MORE THAN THIS

BY
PATRICK NESS

‘Don’t you think I hate it, too?’ Gudmund whispered fiercely. ‘Don’t you think it’s the last thing I want?’

‘But you can’t,’ Seth said. ‘You can’t just . . .’

He couldn’t say it. Couldn’t even say the word.

Leave.

Gudmund looked back nervously at his house from the driver’s seat of his car. Lights were on downstairs, and Seth knew Gudmund’s parents were up. They could discover he was gone at any moment.

Seth crossed his arms tightly against the cold. ‘Gudmund—’

‘I finish out the year at Bethel Private or they don’t pay for college, Sethy,’ Gudmund practically pleaded. ‘They’re that freaked out about it.’ He frowned, angry. ‘We can’t all have crazy liberal European parents—’

‘They’re not that crazy liberal. They’ll barely look at me now.’

‘They barely looked at you before,’ Gudmund said. Then he turned to Seth. ‘Sorry, you know what mean.’

Seth said nothing.

‘It doesn’t have to be forever,’ Gudmund said. ‘We’ll meet up in college. We’ll find a way so that no one—’

But Seth was shaking his head.

‘What?’ Gudmund asked.

‘I’m going to have to go to my dad’s university,’ Seth said, still not looking up.

Gudmund made a surprised move in the driver’s seat. ‘What? But you said—’

‘Owen’s therapy is costing them a fortune. If I want college at all, it has to be on the faculty family rate where my dad teaches.’

Gudmund’s mouth opened in shock. This hadn’t been their plan. Not at all. They were both going to go to the same university, both going to share a dorm room.

Both going to be hundreds of miles away from home.

‘Oh, Seth—’

‘You can’t go,’ Seth said, shaking his head. ‘You can’t go now.’

‘Seth, I have to—’

‘You can’t.’ Seth’s voice was breaking now, and he fought to control it. ‘Please.’

Gudmund put a hand on his shoulder. Seth jerked away from it, even though the feel of it was what he wanted more than the world. ‘Seth,’ Gudmund said. ‘It’ll be okay.’

‘How?’

‘This isn’t our whole lives. It isn’t even close. It’s *high school*, Sethy. It’s not meant to last forever. For a goddamn good reason.’

‘It’s been—’ Seth said to the windshield. ‘Since New Year, since you weren’t there, it’s been—’

He stopped. He couldn’t tell Gudmund how bad it had been. The worst time of his life. School had been nearly unbearable, and sometimes he’d gone whole days without actually speaking to anyone. There were a few people, girls mostly, who tried to tell him they thought what was happening to him was unfair, but all that did was serve to remind him that he’d gone from having three good friends to having none. Gudmund had been pulled out of school by his parents. He was hanging out with a different crowd and not speaking to him.

And Monica.

He couldn't even think about Monica.

~~'It's a few more months,' Gudmund said. 'Hang in there. You'll make it through.'~~

'Not without you.'

'Seth, please don't say stuff like that. I can't take it when you say stuff like that.'

'You're everything I've got, Gudmund,' Seth said quietly. 'You're it. I don't have anything else.'

'Don't say that!' Gudmund said. 'I can't be anyone's everything. Not even yours. I'm going out of my mind with all this. I can't stand the fact that I have to go away. I want to *kill* someone! But I can take it if I know you're out there, surviving, getting through it. This won't be forever. There's a future. There really is. We'll find a way, Seth. Seth?'

Seth looked at him, and he could now see what he hadn't seen before. Gudmund was already gone, had already put his mind into Bethel Private, sixty-five miles away, that he was already living in a future at UW or WSU, which were even further, and maybe that future included Seth somehow, maybe that future really did have a place for the two of them—

But Seth was only here. He wasn't in that future. He was only in this unimaginable present.

And he didn't see how he'd ever get from here to there.

'There's more than this, Sethy,' Gudmund said. 'This sucks beyond belief, but there's more. We just have to get there.'

'We just have to get there,' Seth said, his voice barely above a whisper.

'That's right.' Gudmund touched Seth's shoulder again. 'Hang in there, please. We'll make it. I promise you.'

They both jumped at the sound of the door slamming. 'Gudmund!' Gudmund's father shouted from the porch, loud enough to wake the neighbours. 'You'd better answer me, boy!'

Gudmund rolled down his window. 'I'm here!' he shouted back. 'I needed some fresh air.'

'Do you think I'm an idiot?' His father squinted into the darkness where Seth and Gudmund were parked. 'You get back in here. Now!'

Gudmund turned back to Seth. 'We'll email. We'll talk on the phone. We won't lose contact, I promise.'

He lunged forward and kissed Seth hard, one last time, the smell of him filling Seth's nose, the bulge of his body rocking Seth back in the seat, the squeeze of his hands around Seth's torso—

And then he was gone, sliding out of the door, hurrying back into the glow of the porchlight, arguing with his father on the way.

Seth watched him go.

And as Gudmund disappeared behind another slamming door, Seth felt his own doors closing.

The doors of the present, shutting all around him, locking him inside.

Forever.

FROM

THE INFINITE MOMENT OF US

BY
LAUREN MYRACLE

The park, when they arrived, was inhabited by drunk college kids – Wren assumed they were college kids because of their Georgia Tech T-shirts, and because they looked old in a way that even Tessa and P.G. couldn't yet pull off – and they were as loud as the bat killers back at the graduation party had been, if not louder.

There could be no talking here. No nice boy to unsadden her. Her heart felt heavy, and after a Frisbee flew at her out of the darkness, making her duck, she exhaled and said, 'We should go.'

'Already?' Charlie said. 'We just got here.'

'Yeah, but . . .' She gestured at the partiers by the swing set.

One of them cupped his hands over his mouth and called, 'Yo! Frisbee! Sorry 'bout that!'

Charlie knelt, grabbed the Frisbee, and threw it deftly back at the group. To Wren, he said, 'One second.' He started for his car, then stopped. Came back for Wren and took her hand. 'Actually, come with me.'

Wren's tummy turned over. Charlie was . . . why was Charlie holding her hand? She'd held his arm earlier, but that was to get him away from Tessa, and she hadn't thought about it first. She'd just done it. But unless she was mistaken, he was holding her hand on purpose.

She looked at their linked hands as if the answer lay there. She noticed the stitches on his thumb from his visit to Grady Hospital two days ago. She took in, again, how strong and capable his fingers were. With his hand curled protectively around hers, she felt safe – only, as soon as she recognized the feeling, she tugged her hand free. Or tried to. He tightened his grip, striding across the grass.

'What about Starrla?' she said.

Charlie stopped. She bumped into him.

'Ow,' she said, rubbing her nose with her free hand.

'Why are you asking about Starrla?' he said. He held her hand tightly.

'Uh, because you two are going out?' Wren said. A guy wasn't supposed to hold another girl's hand when he had a girlfriend. Even if he was handsome. Even if he smelled like pine needles. Even if he looked dismayed at the very thought of . . . well, whatever he was thinking of.

'I'm not going out with Starrla,' he said. 'I thought . . . well, no, I guess he couldn't have.'

'Huh?'

Charlie's shoulders relaxed. 'Nothing.'

'Well, good,' Wren said. 'I mean—'

Hush, she told herself. She was glad, very, that Charlie wasn't claiming Starrla, even if she was fairly certain Starrla still claimed Charlie. This morning, before the graduation ceremony, Starrla had caught Wren looking at Charlie and narrowed her eyes. *Back off*, Starrla's expression had said. Her lips, curving into a smile, had added, *Don't even. You are weak, and I am strong.*

But Charlie was with her, holding her hand, and Wren had her own brand of strength, brought to the surface by the dim glow of the streetlight and the whisper of night air on her skin. It was new to her. Her heart beat with a low, thumping exhilaration.

'Starrla and I did . . . date,' Charlie said. 'Once. A long time ago. But now we're just friends.'

'Oh,' Wren said. 'Um, thanks. For explaining.'

The moon was full, lighting up Charlie's face. He looked as if he wanted to say something more, perhaps to make sure she truly knew they weren't together anymore. Then he furrowed his brow adorably – he *was* adorable – and squashed the thought, whatever it might have been. He fished in his pocket for his car keys and popped the trunk, all the while not letting go of Wren's hand.

What am I doing? she wondered. What is happening?

Go with it, she told herself. For heaven's sake, stop *thinking* for once.

With a coarse army blanket tucked under his arm, Charlie shut and locked the trunk. 'This way,' he said, and Wren allowed herself to be led across the far corner of the park and into the bordering grove of trees. Cautions from her mother burred through her – never, ever go to an isolated spot with a stranger, you don't do that, Wren – but Charlie wasn't a stranger. Also, Wren wasn't her mother.

'You carry a blanket with you everywhere?' she asked. She was trying to tease him, as in, Just how many girls do you take into the woods when the sun sets?

He looked puzzled, and Wren felt dumb. She wasn't her mother, but she wasn't Tessa or some other flirty girl, either. She needed to just be Wren.

'One of my . . . um, at one of the houses I was in, the dad was a scoutmaster,' he explained. "Always be prepared." That was his motto.'

'Oh. That's cool.' To try and normalize things, she added, 'Was he a nice guy? That dad?'

'No,' Charlie said.

'Why not?'

He was quiet, and she wished she hadn't asked.

They were thick in the woods behind the park now, and she had to watch her footing. Then the ground sloped down, and the trees thinned out. They reached a small ditch – maybe a ravine that had been eroded by running water? Behind them were trees, and on the other side of them were trees, but the ditch itself was clear and dry. There were leaves and a few sticks and a mat of prickly grass, but once Charlie let go of Wren's hand and spread out the blanket, none of that was a problem.

He had climbed to the bottom of the hollow on his own, and now he held out his hand. Wren accepted it, grasping him as she slid-hopped down. Following Charlie's lead, she sat on the blanket. Gingerly, she leaned all the way back, her body at an incline on the ditch's banked slope.

'Oh,' she said, enthralled. Through the gap in the trees she could see the sky. The moon, luminous and huge, peeked through the leafy branches. 'Beautiful.'

They lay next to each other, not speaking. Wren could feel the heat radiating from Charlie's body. Tiny hairs on her neck and on her forearms seemed to prickle awake and stand alert. Wren felt very strongly that, since he had brought her here, to this secret place, it was her job to keep the conversation going. Just not by talking about foster families. At first she thought, Guatemala, but she realized she didn't want to talk about Guatemala, either.

Guatemala would work itself out. She'd bought her plane ticket the very day she got her Project Unity acceptance letter – and yes, she probably should have used her savings to pay back the money her parents had spent on her college fees, but she didn't – and either her parents would get used to the idea of her leaving or they wouldn't. She hoped they would.

But she didn't want to think about Guatemala, or leaving for Guatemala, right now. Right now, amazingly, she was exactly where she wanted to be.

'Your thumb seems better,' she said.

Charlie held out his hand, examining it in the pale moonlight. His fingers, splayed against the stars, seemed . . . more than. More than fingers. More than a part, or parts, of a whole. Just as one plus one more than two, she thought, not knowing where the idea sprang from, or why.

'Good as ever,' he said. He turned his head towards hers just enough so that she could make out his grin. 'Better.'

She smiled back. She felt her pulse in the hollow of her throat, and she felt the night air on her throat as well. She didn't think she'd ever noticed that sensation in that specific location.

'Bodies are funny, aren't they?' she said.

'How so?' Charlie asked.

She stared at the sky. She was nervous. She didn't want him to laugh. 'Just . . . are they us? Are we

them?’

Charlie was silent long enough for Wren to regret her words. Then he said, ‘Do we have souls, you mean?’

Relief pressed her deeper into the scratchy wool blanket. ‘Yeah. I guess. Or are we just, you know, chemicals? Brain cells talking to brain cells, talking to lung cells and spine cells and thumb cells?’

‘Like when Ms Atkinson compared us to computers with organic hard drives?’ Charlie said. ‘A blow to the head can create a system failure? A disease, like Alzheimer’s, is a computer virus?’

Wren nodded. She didn’t like that concept, because if it were true – if a human was a highly specialized computer, but a computer nonetheless – where did that leave the ‘human’ part?

‘My dad’s an atheist,’ she said. He wanted Wren to share his beliefs, but she didn’t.

‘My foster mom teaches Sunday school,’ Charlie replied. ‘And during the church service, when it’s time for “A Moment with the Kids,” she plays “Jesus Loves Me”.’

‘“A Moment with the Kids”?’

‘When the youth minister calls up all the kids and tells them a story that has to do with the day’s Scripture.’

‘Didn’t know,’ Wren said. She rolled onto her side to face him. ‘So, you go to church?’

She bent her knees slightly to get more comfortable, and her thigh touched Charlie’s. She inhaled sharply. Charlie didn’t move his leg. Neither did she.

What passed between them, even through the fabric of their jeans – it felt like way more than computer circuitry.

‘Sometimes,’ Charlie said. ‘Pamela likes it when we do, me and my brother. But Chris usually stays home and works. When I can, I like to stay and help out.’

‘In the wood shop?’

‘The cabinet shop, yeah.’ He raised his arms and clasped his hands beneath his head, and she saw the hard slope of his biceps. The expanse of skin stretching from his bicep to his shoulder, paler than his forearm and more vulnerable, disappearing into the shadow of his sleeve. Not an entirely private place, but not a part of this boy – *Charlie* – that everyone had seen, either.

And, again, not just a part. More than.

‘I think souls are real,’ Wren said in a burst. ‘Maybe they’re not things you can measure or hold or feel—’

‘You can feel them,’ Charlie said in a low voice. He turned his head, and she saw his cheek meet her upper arm.

I would like to feel that arm, Wren thought. I would like to touch that cheek.

She swallowed. ‘What about trees?’

His lips quirked. ‘Trees?’

‘Do they have souls?’ she asked, because at that moment they seemed to. Leaves rustled, saying *shushhhh, shushhh*. Branches formed a canopy high over their heads. Add in the matted grass below them, and Wren and Charlie were nestled in . . . a set of parentheses. They were in a moment outside of time. Just the two of them. Their eyes locked. Their bodies, as Charlie rolled onto his side, forming parentheses within the parentheses, and within the parentheses, their souls reached out. Like roots. Like fingers. Like wisps of clouds and slivers of radiant moonlight.

Wren shivered.

‘They probably don’t,’ she said. ‘That’s just in fairy tales, right? Druids and dryads and alternate worlds?’ She was babbling, but her heart was fluttering, and she was helpless to stop her string of words from issuing forth. ‘Anyway, I’m a scientist. Or will be, probably, since doctors are scientists. I know that’s silly – trees with souls – but I just . . . I guess I just . . .’

She waited for Charlie to jump in and rescue her from her stupidity. He didn’t, and when Wren

checked his expression, when she let herself truly see his expression instead of hiding from it, she realized he was waiting for her to finish. Not because he was enjoying watching her make a fool out of herself, but because he cared about her thoughts and was interested in hearing them.

His auburn eyes weren't auburn in the dark ditch. They were dark and liquid. A well to fall into. The ocean.

'I guess I think the world is more connected than people realize,' she said, choosing her words carefully. You're allowed to have thoughts, she reminded herself. Just because others might scoff, that doesn't mean Charlie will.

She tried to steady her breath. 'I think . . . sometimes . . . that scientists . . . *some* scientists . . . want to package things up into neat little boxes. Explain, explain, explain, until there aren't any mysteries left.'

'I think you're probably right,' Charlie said.

'Well . . . I like the mysteries,' she said. Her skin tingled. Those little hairs stood up again, all over her. It wasn't as if she were undressing in front of him, and yet that's how it felt. And she wanted to keep on going, even so. What had this boy done to her?

'I want to understand them, or try to,' she said, 'but I don't want to put them away in boxes. And if there doesn't seem to be any explanation for something, I don't want that to scare me away. I don't want to force an explanation to fit or throw my hands in the air and give up. You know?'

He nodded. A faint shadow of stubble ran from his hair-line down and along his strong jaw.

She swallowed. 'Does that make any sense?'

He pulled his eyebrows together endearingly, like a little boy trying to act grown up. 'You're saying the mysteries are worth examining, even if they're too big to be understood. That maybe they're bound to be too big to understand, but that doesn't take anything away from them, and in fact just adds to their beauty. Is that close?'

'That's it exactly,' she said. He put it into words so beautifully: Marvel and wonder all you want. There will always be more. She laughed, and the surprised smile she got from Charlie was a pure gift.

Then he grew serious. He pulled his eyebrows together again, but this time he didn't look like a little boy at all.

'Hey,' he said. He propped himself up on one elbow. With his other hand, he reached out and lightly, lightly stroked her cheek.

Wren's chest rose and fell. She almost felt as if she were out of her body, except she was very much in her body, and her body knew what it wanted.

Charlie leaned in, and she leaned to meet him. His mouth found hers, and her thoughts flew through her, as loud and raucous as magpies. My first kiss. I am eighteen, and this is my first kiss, unless I count Jake What's-His-Name in eighth grade, which I don't. Because this is . . . different. So different.

And then her thoughts dissolved into lips. Breath. A soft sigh, a shifting thigh. She gave herself over to Charlie and the night and the world, full of mysteries. She allowed herself to just be.

More than.

Charlie wanted to see Wren again. She was all he could think about – kissing her, touching her, being with her – and he wanted to do it again. Right away.

He called her the morning after P.G.'s party.

'Charlie?' she said when she answered, and his heart jumped.

'Hey,' he said.

'Hey.'

'How are you?'

'I'm good. How are you?'

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