



SCHOOL JOURNAL STORY LIBRARY

# BREATHLESS

BY BERNARD BECKETT • ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHEL MULIPOLA



School Journal Story Library is a targeted series that supplements other instructional series texts. It provides additional scaffolds and supports for teachers to use to accelerate students' literacy learning.

*Breathless* has been carefully levelled. While the contexts and concepts link to English, health and physical education, and social sciences at level 3 of the curriculum, the text has a reading year level of year 4.

Teacher support material (available at [www.schooljournalstorylibrary.tki.org.nz](http://www.schooljournalstorylibrary.tki.org.nz)) contains key information to help teachers provide the additional support and scaffolding that some students may need to meet the specific reading, writing, and curriculum demands of *Breathless*.

**Lotu** (law-to)

**Asafo** (ah-sah-fo)

**pālagi** (pah-langee) a white person  
or pākehā

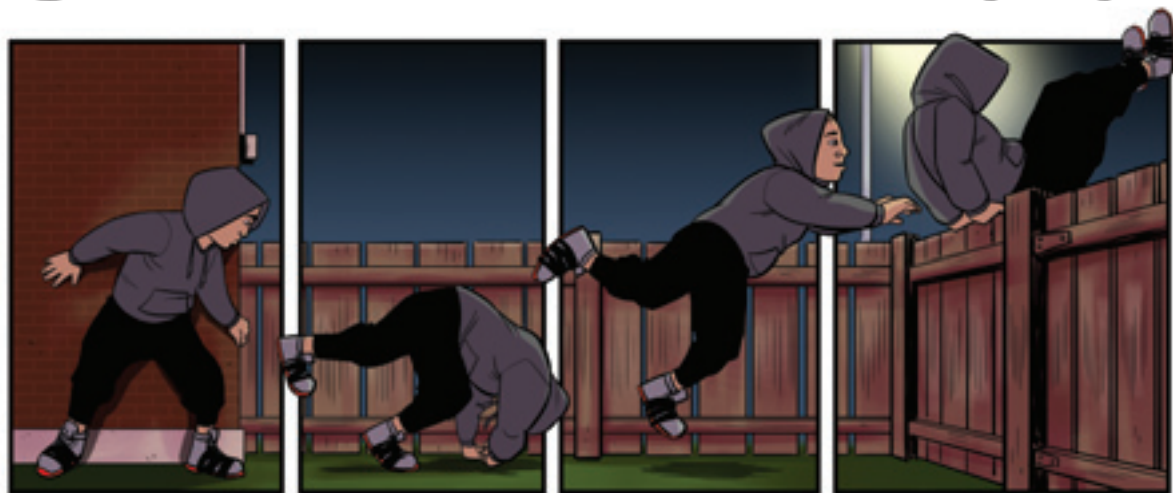
**Tesa** (teh-sah)

**Rupi** (roo-pee)

**Tala** (tar-lar)

For more support with pronunciation, go to [www.schooljournalstorylibrary.tki.org.nz](http://www.schooljournalstorylibrary.tki.org.nz) to hear an audio version of the text.

# BREATHLESS



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I came home from hospital on Thursday night. Twenty-four hours later, I was lying face-down in a puddle of mud. The shopping trolley was lying next to me – on its side at the bottom of the hill. Lotu and Asafo were there, too, of course. They were laughing. Laughing so hard they were crying. Neither of them could stand up straight. It was the first time in three days that I'd felt really happy ...



Going to hospital is no big deal to me. I get asthma, especially in winter. Most of the time, it's not too bad, but sometimes the doctor needs to take a look. I had an asthma attack on Thursday morning and didn't leave hospital until that night. It was the week of the Under-11 Western Zone rugby final, and my team was playing. We had only lost one game all year, against the Bay Tigers – I couldn't forget it.



The game was two months ago. We were leading with a minute to go, when I threw a no-look pass straight into the hands of the Tigers' winger. He's the only pālagi boy in their team. He's skinny, and he's fast. He ran half the field and scored under the posts.

After that, things changed in the team. The ball didn't come my way as often.

"Don't worry," Asafo said. "It wasn't your fault."

"Yeah, could've happened to anyone," Lotu tried.



But they were both lying. It was my fault. It happened to me. For two months I dreamt how I'd make everything all right in the final. I'd score the winning try, and it would be the Bay Tigers who felt like crying.



It was a very bad week to end up in hospital. Thursday was our day for rugby practice, and I'd spent it breathing into an oxygen mask. On Friday morning, Uncle T, our coach, came round to give me the bad news himself.

"I'm sorry, but you know the rule. If you're not at training, you can't play."

"My breathing's all good, Uncle" I told him. "The doctor said exercise is the best thing for it."

"Sorry, but there are no exceptions."

He looked really sad, like he hated doing it. Then again, Uncle T's a good actor. I acted too. I bit my lip and said, "That's OK."

My family did their best to cheer me up.

"If you are feeling unwell, you can have a day off school," my mum said.

"You can choose the Friday night takeaways," my sister Tesa said.

"I rang the pastor, and he's praying for you," my auntie Rupi said.

"You'll be fine," my father said. That's his way of helping.

But no one really understood – no one except Asafo and Lotu. They're my best mates, and they knew how much I was hurting. They knew I needed an adventure.

Nobody likes the Bay Tigers. I'm not just saying that because they beat us. They come to their games dressed in white shirts and black ties, like they think they're the All Blacks. Lotu calls them the Almost All Blacks because of their winger.



Last year, they won the grade, and they bring the trophy to every match. They also bring their mascot, a tiger that's really just a soft toy. It's as tall as me. The real Tigers sit the stuffed tiger on a chair on the sideline and put the trophy in its lap. Asafo and Lotu's idea was to wait for dark, sneak into the Tigers' clubrooms, and dress the mascot up in our team's jersey.

Anybody can be your friend when you're happy. It takes true friends to be there when you're sad.



On Friday night, I told my mum that I didn't feel like going on the takeaway run. My little brother, Tala, could tell I was lying. But I know he lies about losing his lunch money, so he couldn't say anything. Once they'd all left the house and Auntie Rupi was on the phone, I headed down the street.

I love adventure. It speeds up your pulse and makes your fingers tingle. Asafo and Lotu were waiting at the corner, dancing on their toes. Their eyes were shining in the street light.

"Where're your shoes?" Asafo asked. I looked down at my bare feet.

"Couldn't find them," I replied. "I think Tala wore them to the shops."

"Check out Lotu's shoes," Asafo said. Lotu had put black tape over the reflector strips of his high-tops.

"Why the tape?" I asked.

"Because I'm a pro," Lotu giggled. "Come on, we have to go the careful way."

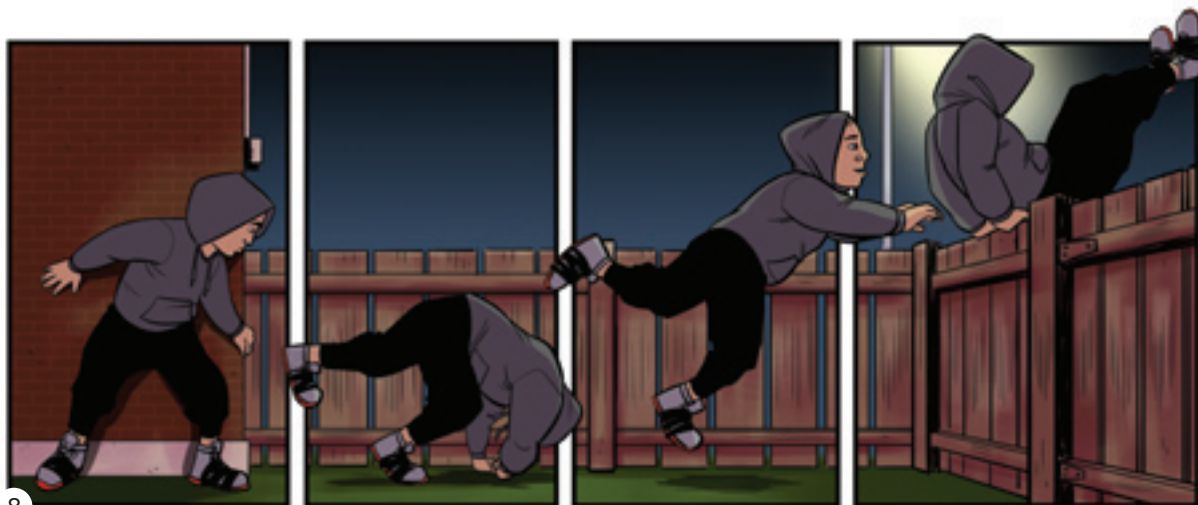




The “careful way” meant running through a field. It involved climbing two fences and disturbing three dogs. It was getting cold, but we didn’t complain. Lotu spent the whole time crouching in the shadows and peering into the darkness, running from spot to spot like a goofy Samoan ninja.

“You got your inhaler?” Asafo asked. His sister gets asthma, too, so he knows all about it.

“In my pocket,” I said. It wasn’t.



From the outside, the Bay Tigers' clubrooms looked empty. The backdoor was unlocked. We thought that was just our good luck. We tiptoed across the floor, trying not to make the floorboards creak.

Then we heard the noise. It was sort of like a groan, the kind you hear in a horror movie. We all froze. There was another sound, like someone taking a long, slow breath. Then the groaning again.

"Oh, no!" Lotu said, louder than he should have. If he'd stayed quiet, we might not have been seen.

The man groaning was Darrell. Everybody knew Darrell. He had wide shoulders, a small head, and mean little eyes. The skinny winger was his younger brother, and people said Darrell was the reason the winger had learnt to run so fast. Darrell was groaning because he was in the club's weights room. He had chosen a weight so heavy it was nearly killing him. I think it was his choice of weight that saved our lives.

"Oi, you!"

"Run!" Asafo shouted.



Darrell slipped trying to get the barbell back on the stand. The bar crashed loudly to the ground, and he fell with it. By the time he'd got back up, we were already gone. Of course, this didn't stop him from chasing us.

I'm a winger, too, and normally I'm pretty fast. But asthma gets worse when you're barefoot and cold.

My chest tightened, and my legs wobbled. I knew

I had to slow down, but I could hear Darrell's feet getting louder behind me.

Darrell doesn't get asthma, so he had plenty of breath left for swearing at us.



Lotu spotted the shopping trolley. It was upside down on a front lawn. As soon as he grabbed it, we understood. The Bay Tigers' clubrooms are at the top of a hill. Asafo and Lotu threw me inside the trolley and gave it a massive shove. I suppose they thought they'd catch up before the corner. There was nothing I could do except hold on and hope the pastor had told the truth about praying for me. Somewhere in the dark, I could hear my two friends running behind me. By then, Darrell had given up.

It's hard to steer a shopping trolley from the outside. It's impossible from the inside. The road turned. I didn't. Asafo and Lotu slowed down. I didn't. I went from the road, to the air, to the mud. They were laughing even before I landed. Laughing until they cried. I was laughing, too. Laughing so hard I was breathless.



The next day, on a chair on the halfway line, the Bay Tigers' mascot sat with the trophy on its lap. I sat on the halfway line, too, on the other side of the field. I didn't have a chair – I had a shopping trolley. I wore our team jersey and a multi-coloured afro that Lotu had found. At the end of the match, when the Tigers had to hand the trophy over, the boys brought it across to me. They put it in my lap and took turns pushing me to our clubrooms.

Asafo and Lotu were more careful this time.

“Don't worry,” I grinned. “Could've happened to anyone.”



# **Acknowledgments**

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Publishing services: Lift Education E Tū

Editor: Isaac Snoswell

Designer: Jodi Wicksteed

Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop

Consulting Editor: Emeli Sione

Published 2016 by the Ministry of Education

PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.

[www.education.govt.nz](http://www.education.govt.nz)

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

Dewey number NZ823.2—dc 23

ISBN 978 0 478 16498 5 (print)

ISBN 978 0 478 16500 5 (online PDF)

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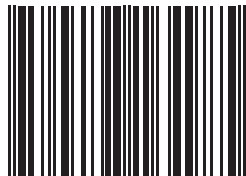
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ISBN 978-0-478-16498-5



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