

**Finding Stories and How to Catch Them** - Sarah Teter  
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Grades 9-10

I glared down at the paper that seemed to be glaring back at me. Neatly typed in black ink, every word had been spell checked and every comma was in its place. Rough drafts had been written and discarded, written again and revised, and now the final copy was before me. Now that I was done with the story, I despised it, yet I had no alternatives. The story wouldn't be improved either: I think it resented being ill written. It was now 12:00 a.m. and I had school the next day.

I flipped off the light, but it hardly made a difference because the moon was full and bright in the sky. It peeked in my window and seemed to stare at me as I lay there thinking about my flop of a story. Why in the world did I have to care so much about a stinking story? Why couldn't I enjoy rock collecting, or organizing my sock drawer, or something requires no creativity whatsoever? I closed my eyes for a moment, but then they opened (almost against my will) and I was wide-awake. I started back at the moon and suddenly decided to do something absolutely crazy: I would go outside and find a story. I knew it was out there just waiting to be written, and I could write it, I just had to find it first.

I went quickly through the house and out the door. The air was warm and smelled of that deep, earthy smell that seems to belong in forests, deep valleys, near streams, and is always in the air on gorgeous nights. I breathed it in deeply as I headed for the forest, which I figured would be the most likely place for a story to be lurking. As I entered the forest, stepping carefully in my bare feet, I felt like Alice in Wonderland and fully expected a rabbit with a waistcoat and watch to hop out of the trees. The moon sent shoots of silver through the branches and made everything look like something magical just quivering to burst into magic.

I came to a sort of clearing and stopped short in shock. I may have been expecting a rabbit, but I certainly wasn't expecting this. There were hundreds of glowing "things" whisking around in the air, like impish fragments of light. In the middle of the clearing was a very short, curious looking person. He looked like a very old gnome with huge glasses, giving him owl-like eyes, and he had long, wild hair. He saw me and beckoned me over. I went, staring at him as I made my way through the moving imps. I had no idea what to say, so I just said the first thing that popped into my mind.

"Are you ... human?" I asked hesitantly.

"Ish," was his reply. I took this to mean somewhat.

"Do you have gnome in you?" I asked again, guessing from his appearance.

"Ness," he replied. This left me confused, but I figured he might have meant he had "gnomeness" in him.

"What do they call you?" I asked once more, feeling slightly rude.

"*They* have nothing to do with it," he said sharply. "I call me Ishness and I think it suits whether you do or not. And frankly I don't care," he added. "I'm a story catcher," he offered abruptly.

"A story catcher? What do story catchers do?"

"Catch stories, dimwit."

"But how do you catch stories?"

"Well, it's a pretty difficult business I can tell you," he said professionally. "First you have to locate them, which you've done, then you have to be more clever than they are in order to catch them." I was incredibly confused at this point and had to ask where they were if I had located them. "Why, they're all around you! The stories are the Poltergeists in this clearing."

I looked in shock at the little lights that had been bobbing around the clearing ever since I came. Ishness ran, weaving here and there with amazing agility, and then caught one in his hand. He brought it over and showed it to me. It was a sort of translucent blob and inside I saw the words, “There stood a wall through which nothing could pass but the imagination.” Evidently Ishness was rather philosophical.

“Now you try,” he encouraged. I started to run, then stopped and looked back at him.

“What on earth is the matter?” he asked.

“Well, it just seems kind of like ... cheating almost, to catch a story instead of thinking of it,” I said sheepishly.

“Cheating! Didn’t I say you had to be cleverer than the story you catch? It’s not easy to capture a good one.”

I ran off again, satisfied with his answer. It took me a while, but finally I found one that prompted my imagination and I chased it until I caught it. I raced back to Ishness, excited about my success and anxious to see what I caught. Before I had time to read the small sentence, Ishness distracted me by saying, “Now eat it quick while it’s still fresh.”

“Eat it?” I replied, surprised.

“Well, it’s not exactly like eating, but you do stick it in your mouth and swallow. Sometimes it has curious effects, but it always work. Go on now, while it’s still fresh,” he urged.

“What effects?” I wondered, but it never entered my mind to distrust him. I opened my mouth and put the story in.

I woke with a jolt, back in my own bed. Wait – was I beck, or had I never been? I really couldn’t be sure. It seemed too outrageous to possibly be true, yet it was so vivid – and now I had a story. I decided to write it “while it was still fresh.” And I did.

