

# Catch

SARAH ELLIS



## Focus Your Learning

Reading this short story will help you to:

- use a comparison chart to organize and comprehend text
- create a dramatic monologue to convey personal perceptions and feelings
- share ideas and information on the text

“It’s a rite of passage,” said my aunt Darlene.

We were sitting in an ice-cream parlour celebrating the fact that I had just passed my driving test.

Darlene raised her Coke float. “Welcome to the adult world. May all your parallel parks be perfect.”

I held up a spoonful of hot fudge sundae. “To a good teacher.” Darlene was a good teacher, patient and funny. She had taken over my driving instruction from Dad, who got so nervous with me at the wheel that he burped all the time.

“She’ll talk your ear off,” Dad warned.

She did, a continuous commentary insulting the behaviour of other drivers. It made my nervousness dissolve. I’ll take talking over burping any time.

“We just don’t have enough rituals for these occasions,” said Darlene. “We really need something in this culture—a chant or a dance or some libation to the goddess of the road.”

“Ice cream is just fine,” I said.

“These passages in our lives are what connect us to the great cycles of existence ...”

French vanilla, black raspberry, tropical fruit swirl. Sometimes I don’t pay total attention to Darlene. I glanced above the list of flavours to the clock on the wall.

“Hey, Darlene. It’s 5:20. We have to go. I have orchestra tonight.”

Darlene slurped the last of her drink and then returned the glass to the counter. She stopped to compliment the waitress on her product and her excellent service.

I jiggled on the balls of my feet. Darlene is a great person with no grip on time.

Just as we were heading out the door, an old man spoke to Darlene. He had grey hair and a dirty khaki raincoat, and he was sitting alone.

Darlene stopped. “What’s that? I didn’t catch what you said.”

The man looked up and said, in a cracking voice, “My little king is gone.”



Oh, no. I glanced back at the clock. It was really time to go. I tried to catch Darlene's eye, but she was pulling up a chair to sit next to the old man.

"Do you know where he is?"

Darlene, he's one of those mumblers. Come on.

The old man shook his head. "He just went away."

"Okay. When did you see him last?"

Why was she having this nutso conversation?

"At the park. I took off his leash and he chased a squirrel."

"So King is your dog?"

The old man nodded and turned away.

Darlene stood up and pushed her chair into the table with a clang. "Come on then. We'll look for him."

"Darlene," I half whispered. "My rehearsal. I have to be leaving from home in twenty minutes."

"Rita, this man has lost his dog. We have priorities here."

The old man didn't walk very well, so Darlene put him in the front seat of the car and we set off into rush-hour traffic. Up streets and down alleys. Darlene talked a mile a minute and the old man said nothing. I cranked open the back seat window to let out the musty, sharp, old-man smell.

Half an hour and several illegal left-hand turns later, we found the dog—a lanky, hairy, off-white mutt nosing in a garbage can. The old man barely waited for the car to stop before he was out the door. Darlene watched him hugging the dog for a few seconds and then we drove away.

By the time we escaped from the snarl of traffic and were on the road home we were nearly an hour late and everything was making me furious. I was furious at the stupid ugly dog for running away. I was furious at the smelly old man who didn't even say thank you. I was furious at Darlene for getting involved. I sat in the corner of the back seat and chewed on my fury. I *hate* being late.

Mum and Dad were out when we got back home. Darlene came in with me and asked if it would help if she fixed me some supper.



“Supper! I don’t even have time to get there now. I’ve missed the bus and they only run every forty-five minutes. I *can’t* miss this rehearsal. It’s the last one before the Christmas concert.”

“Oh, honey, I would drive you but I’ve got my realignment class tonight.” Darlene explained her realignment class to me once. They realign something, their spines or the universe. “Hang on! I’ve got it. I’ll get a ride with someone and you can borrow my car.”

“Alone?”

“Sure, you’ve got a license. Why not?”

I glanced at the clock. There was no time to make this decision. I took a deep breath. “Sure. Thanks.”

I grabbed my oboe and music and ran out to the car. It felt very big and lonely as I slid inside. I adjusted the seat and both mirrors. I figured out the headlights and where the high beams were, in case a dark country road should suddenly appear between my house and the arts centre. I put my hands at ten o’clock and two o’clock and set off.

I drove just under the speed limit, and cars kept coming up close behind and swerving around in a snarly way. I tried one of Darlene’s lines. “Don’t waste those valuable micro-seconds, buddy.” It wasn’t that helpful. At night, when you can’t see the drivers, cars seem alive, like wild animals in the jungle.

When I arrived at the arts centre there was no time to search for parking on the street, so I pulled into the underground lot. It was very full. Must have been some concert on. Four minutes. I corkscrewed down and down and the car clock seemed to speed up.

Finally I found a space. It took me three tries to back the car between a van and a pillar. I grabbed my oboe case and squeezed out the door sideways, grateful that I didn’t play the cello. I ran through the rows of cars to the elevator, caught it just as the door was closing, slid up to the music school, sprinted to the rehearsal room and plunked down in my seat three minutes late.

I slipped off my jacket and started to put together my oboe. My nose began to drip. As I leaned forward to get a Kleenex from my jacket pocket, I knocked the music stand. It started to tip and Yvette,

my stand partner, caught it and set it back in place, very precisely. She gave me a little pitying smile. She looked cool and perfect as usual. Yvette probably has a special drip-free nose to go with her zit-free complexion. I wanted to kick her.

Behind me, Claude, who plays English horn, was sucking his reed very enthusiastically. It was a loud, wet, slurpy sound. I wanted to kick him, too.

Mr. Farland stepped up to the podium and raised his eyebrows. “Quite settled, Rita? Then let’s begin. Now that we’ve got all the double reeds here, why don’t we start with the Bach?”

Mr. Farland had done an arrangement for oboes, English horns and bassoons from Bach’s “Art of the Fugue.” Before we had played it for the first time he had given us a long lecture, all about counterpoint and mirror fugues and canons. I understood the first part okay, how fugues are like rounds or catches, like “Row, row, row your boat.” (“You’ll be chasing each other,” said Mr. Farland.) But then his explanation got very complicated and the whole thing sounded like mathematical snoresville to me.

Snoresville until we played it, that is. Even that first time, with its squeaks and blats and total breakdown halfway through, I knew I was going to love being inside this music.

We had practised a lot and I thought it was ready to go. But something happened that night. Mr. Farland counted us in and the oboes started. We sounded plain and small. Then the English horns took over the melody and we hovered above them. But the best moment came when the bassoons entered below us all. It was like being lifted up by a giant warm wind, our chairs levitated off the floor.

All my leftover fury and the tension of the jungle drive dissolved, and I felt as though my oboe was a part of my body, its sound my voice. And it wasn’t just me. I heard parts of the melody above and below me, before and after me, and I felt the gentle tug of all the lines of sound, a web.

Yvette with her attitude, gross Claude, grumpy me—even

sarcastic Mr. Farland and some composer who's been dead for two hundred and fifty years—we were all connected.

When we finished, Jamal, the first bassoonist, punched the air with his fist—“Yes!”—and we all laughed. I laughed because I had to let the bigness out.

“That was terrific,” said Mr. Farland. “You really reminded us that you are *wind* instruments. Whatever you did tonight, bottle it for the concert.”

The rest of the rehearsal was fine, and the Bach was playing inside me when we finished and I headed back to the car. But when I got off the elevator, Bach vanished as I stared at the two opposite glass doors leading out into the lot and realized I had no idea where the car was. I closed my eyes and tried to remember which way I had come. It was no use. It had vanished in the panic of my arrival.

I took a chance on the left door. How many rows of cars had I run by? And from which direction?

The parking lot was very quiet, except for that big-building hum. It was humming in the key of D. Many of the cars were gone. Spaces appeared like missing teeth. I held my music case a bit tighter and decided on a methodical approach. I would walk down each row.

Minutes later I heard the first squeal, a perfect minor chord. Then three more squeals and a car pulled up just behind me. It slowed down.

“Hey! Want a ride to your car?”

I didn't look. “No, thank you.” I kept on walking. Calmly, not speeding up.

“Aw, come on. Why don't you want a ride? We've got treats in here. Don't you want to see?”

The car kept pace with me, just behind me as I walked, and I started to get a pounding in my ears. I tried to think of the fastest way back to the elevator.

I ducked into the next row. I heard the car squeal around the corner, and it came towards me as I came out from behind a pillar. This time I saw them. Three men in a black convertible.

It was another voice. “I don’t think she likes us. Why don’t you like us, little girl?”

“I think she’s a stuck-up brat, that’s what I think. I think we need to teach her a lesson.”

Oh, please let there be another noise, of another car, or of footsteps. Why didn’t someone come? But there was only the hum and the voices and my heart beating in my ears.

I started to run, weaving in and out of cars. My shoes slapped on the white floor. My shoulder caught the side of a truck and I spun around. The squealing sound was continuous, like an animal being slaughtered, and I couldn’t tell what direction it was coming from.

And then Darlene’s car appeared. I fumbled for the keys in my purse. The squealing was louder, and a voice echoed through the bright, shadowless light, “What is this, hide and seek?”

The key trembled in the lock and then I was in. I turned the key in the ignition and the engine coughed once and died. I tried to breathe and to remember Darlene’s instructions. Pump the gas pedal three times.

And then the convertible was there. In front of my car. Trapping me. The three men got out and in that second I wondered if my back doors were locked. I was frozen in the seat. I couldn’t turn around to look.

There was a crash as a beer bottle hit the pillar beside me. I stared at the brown liquid trickling down the whiteness. Then the car began to rock. I looked in the rear-view mirror. Two men were on the trunk, jumping. I could only see legs.

Where was the third man? I twisted around in my seat. The back door on the passenger side was not locked. I started to reach for it when I heard the door click open. I pulled back sharply. Something was squeezing my lungs.

And then a beam of light came in the windshield. I saw a small grey-haired man dressed in a green coverall. He was carrying a cell phone and a big flashlight. He spoke into the phone. “Section E-3. Section E-3, police emergency.”



The three men scrambled out from the back, yelling. They shoved the green man aside and jumped into their car. They squealed away.

I had to get out, outside, above ground. Pump the gas pedal three times and wait five seconds. But my right foot was dancing wildly and my leg would not obey me. I leaned into the steering wheel and sobbed. When I looked up there was nobody around. I took a deep breath and made myself remember how to drive.

I circled my way up to the pay booth, telling myself out loud how to do it. When I got there the gate was smashed. There was a police car with a flashing red light and two dogs in the back. A policewoman started to ask me questions, but when she saw how much I was shaking she went and got a blanket to put around me.

“I’m just glad that security guard turned up,” I said.

“Hold it,” said the parking lot guy. “We don’t have security guards.”

“I guess it was just a helpful citizen,” said the policewoman.

They phoned home and Mum and Dad came to get me.

I stayed home from school the next day. Darlene came over and gave me soup and a foot massage. She made me tell the story quite a few times. Then she made me go driving with her, even though I had decided to shred my license and stick to buses for the rest of my life.

The concert was the next week. As we fell silent after tuning up and the house lights went down, I noticed three latecomers hurrying into the second row. It was Mum, Dad and Darlene. They had come together because Darlene’s car was in the shop getting the dents bashed out. Darlene was wearing a red off-the-shoulder sequined dress. She gave me a finger wave. I smiled back. I bet she had made them late. I bet Dad was burping.

The concert went well. The Bach, which we played just before the intermission, was fine. All the notes were right and we didn’t drag and nobody squeaked. But our chairs stayed on the floor. Whatever it was that night didn’t make it into the bottles.





After the concert there was hot apple juice and gingerbread in the lobby. Mum got all teary the way she does. Dad got cornered by a whiny woman complaining about the Christmas carol medley. Why had we played all those carols nobody had heard of? What happened to “Silent Night”? I turned my back and kept a low profile. Darlene joined them, so I kept on eavesdropping. Darlene is more than a match for any whiner.

“Don’t you think that it is significant that it is a proven scientific fact that music rearranges our mental syntax, making us much more open to the positive forces of the universe? I find that especially important as we approach the shortest day of the year. I mean, especially if you’re phototropic like I am ...”

I snuck a peek. The whiner was looking hunted and edging away.

As we prepared to leave, Darlene said, “Philip, why don’t you just go get the car and pick us up at the front door.” She flexed one high-heeled foot. “My shoes hurt.” Dad rolled his eyes but he went. Mum kept him company.

I squeezed Darlene’s skinny arm. Sometimes she knows things that other people don’t, like how a person could really not want to go into the underground parking garage, even with three other people.

We went outside and Darlene lit a cigarette. “I’ve been thinking about something. You know the security guard that helped you that night? What did he look like?”

“Darlene, I’ve told you a bunch of times. Short, sort of strong-looking, grey hair, wrinkled forehead and dressed in one of those jumpsuit things that mechanics wear, green.”

Darlene nodded. “Yeah, that would be the old guy from the ice-cream place.”

“What?”

“You know, the one who lost his dog. Did you recognize him?”

“No, but ... I don’t remember what the dog man looked like, and the man in the parking lot, I hardly looked at him. First there was the bright light and then he just disappeared.”

Darlene nodded. “Yes, he did what he came to do.”

“But that would be an incredible coincidence. I mean, why would he be there in the parking lot at that moment?”

“Oh, honey, he just knew he had to be there to take care of you. He’s obviously one of the others, not one of us. But we’re all connected.”

I stared at Darlene as she took a long drag on her cigarette. One of the others. I hadn’t heard about “the others.” I suspected I was going to, probably right after the next puff. It would only take one question. The ancient power of ritual, the realignment of the cosmos, the healing effects of music, the interconnection of all things on the planet—Darlene wasn’t one to keep the good news to herself.

The car pulled up. The passenger door swung open. I grabbed Darlene’s hand and pulled her in after me.

## Activities

1. In a two-column chart, write side-by-side character sketches of Darlene and Rita. How do the two characters compare with each other?
2. Imagine that you are Darlene. Write and perform for the class a one-minute dramatic monologue in which you tell Rita about “the others.”
3. Work with a group. List and discuss reasons why the author chose the title “Catch,” making specific references to the text. Decide if it is an effective choice. Suggest alternative titles.