

LIGHT CATCHERS



C. C. KIMMEL

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Like many of the stories I write, *Light Catchers* started as a story I told my kids at bedtime. I love encouraging my kids to imagine things beyond what they can experience, make them laugh, think, feel, and delight in the imaginative world.

When I tell stories to my children, I feel a freedom to be more dream-like in the way I tell them. I want the story to serve as a bridge between reality and the subconscious world of dreams, so when I worked this into a story, I tried to maintain that feel.

Light Catchers is a bridge between reality and dreams. It is about a boy's connection to his family in the isolated reality of interplanetary travel. It is about finding the treasure in the field and losing everything to have it.

Ultimately, it's a story about us. Enjoy.

C. C. Kimmel



LIGHT CATCHERS

I grew up on a distant planet where the only light fell like rain on the star dust fields just north of my home. Every morning my father, my uncle, my brother and I traveled to the fields to catch the light, walking with empty woven baskets in the fog-like dark covering our planet, our cart pulled by a blind horse. We chased the light bouncing on and off the ground, sometimes wrestling the drops to the ground to place them in our basket. For most of the star settlers, it was the only way to see—and the only way to survive the wolves.

I remember the first morning I joined my family, waking to the basket my mother wove for me, perfectly sized for my small frame. I accepted the gift with a solemnness beyond my age. I accepted it knowing that the basket would carry not just light, but life to my neighbors, and though I was excited to join my family in its daily task, I treated the task with reverence.

Catching light was not as simple as I suspected, holding out a basket and walking away. Light didn't want to be caught and it would do all it could to evade its capture. I spent months walking home alongside my brother with an empty basket on my back, carrying the darkness with me. I remember watching my father wait with patient eyes as he reached, with seemingly no effort, to catch the light in his palm and place it in the basket slung over his back.

The trick, as I eventually learned, was to catch the light as it bounced, whether it bounced off the ground, or a rock, or the side of a hill. The light was too fast to catch directly from the sky, so it had to be indirect. My father and uncle did it with ease. They could predict exactly how the light would bounce and walked the star dust fields catching light like frogs catching grasshoppers.

We didn't speak much when we were out in the fields. We just watched and anticipated and gathered. I mainly watched my father and my uncle as they watched the light. I could see in their eyes as the pupils glistened from the falling light the joy they carried and I was thankful to be apprenticed in delight.

One day, shortly after I started joining them, I caught sight of my father sneaking up on my uncle with a light drop in his hand. Before my uncle heard anything, my father threw the light drop down my uncle's pants, causing him to jump and scream. My father fell to the ground laughing.

It had never occurred to me that my father wasn't just a father, but also a brother and a man, and I wasn't prepared for it. I stood wide-eyed and confused watching my uncle, a smile covering his face, dance about with a light drop bouncing around in his pants while my father cried with laughter next to him. I looked over at my own brother and he seemed to be in equal shock at the sight.

After months of missing the bouncing light, I caught my first drop. And then my second. Then my third, and eventually, I filled my basket like the rest of them. We caught light throughout the week and then spent the weekend traveling to the planet's villages selling the light. The drops would last for about a week and we sold them in bundles. My father and uncle made sure everybody had light, even those who couldn't afford it because light was the only way most of them could see, and the only way any of them were safe from the wolves who roamed the foggy darkness in the corner of the universe.

For the first year, my mother wouldn't let me go on the selling and distribution trips. She thought I was too young and knew that I would have the rest of my life to catch and give light. She had me help her bake or sew, she even taught me a few card games her ancestors brought from the great migration years before. Despite her best efforts to keep me young, and my best efforts to enjoy my youth, she saw my eyes glance at the road leading to our house, waiting for the dust cloud of red dirt and the glowing backdrop of my father's wagon.

Eventually, my mother relented, and although I felt a deep hollow, an echo-like hole I would later learn was the feeling of loss, I was also excited to finally join the men on the weekend trips. I sat in the back of the wagon beside my brother, our legs touching each other like both sets of legs came from the same body. He kept his arm around me to make sure I didn't fall from the wagon as we traversed the rocky and desolate road that led to the towns beyond the fields.

Every once in a while, a rock structure came into view towering beside the road, indicating a history and development of this ancient planet long before our arrival. I remember as a child staring at the burnt red rocks wondering what other eyes saw them. What other species were forced to land and catch light to survive, far from home, forgetting the songs and colors and smells of the land they left?

We also heard the wolves, shrieking and howling in the distance. The wolves only moved in the darkness and couldn't be near the light drops. We heard stories of travelers and nomads trying to cross the planetary frontier who ran out of light and were found eaten to the bone. One time, a newly settled family living beyond the villages ignored the warnings and let the light bundles run out. A week later, my father and uncle went to check on them and only found a shoe, lying sentinel in front of their home.

My brother knew I was scared, especially when I heard the echoing howls and he would try to make me laugh. He would sneak a drop of light from one of the bundles and put it in his mouth and puff out his cheeks. I laughed silently but sometimes couldn't hold it in and my uncle would turn around and give me a look, which only made me laugh more. One time, when my uncle did this, he puffed out his cheeks to reveal that a light drop was in his mouth as well. I laughed so hard I fell out of the cart and bruised my leg.

When we entered the first town, the dark had almost completely overwhelmed it. The drops of last week's light flickered and ebbed in the glass canisters and baskets strung around the village and a crowd met the cart with anxiousness. My job was to hand out the light bundles after my father or uncle completed the transaction. I watched as my father put his arm on the shoulder of someone who couldn't afford the light and pointed them towards one of the bundles anyway, winking at me as a sign that it's okay. My brother busied himself unloading the light from the cart while reloading the empty sleeves from the previous week's light bundles back into the wagon.

Although I stood tall, my view was predominantly of the legs and waists of the villagers, standing and slowly moving toward the cart, the colors of their clothing only coming into view as they came within feet of the table. I tried to guess if the dark pant leg I saw was red or blue or black or grey before they got close enough to tell. I got pretty good at predicting from a distance which light or dark hue was a certain color up close.

I FELT A THING I COULD NEVER NOT FEEL AGAIN

It was while trying to predict one of these colors that I first saw her. Her hair peeked out from behind a pant leg as her face followed it. Even from a distance, I could see every color in her. I could see her deep green eyes and the slight red on her cheeks, the wispy blonde hair that fell over her face and the light, powdery hands that brushed the hair back behind her ears. I saw the life piercing through her lips and the tiny dimple in her right cheek that only appeared when she shyly smiled and hid herself again behind the dark shaded pant leg of her father or mother.

I was too young to sense anything resembling romance towards her, but I felt something immediately. Something that made the light bundles beside me seem dull and muted, something that made the stardust fields of bouncing, raining light seem no more exciting than guessing which color grey a person's clothes were from a distance. I felt a thing I could never not feel again and from then on, her eyes were the standard by which I judged all light and color.



She didn't speak to me that day and I feared her too much to speak to her. I just watched as she moved closer, passing out of the dull light as her face came into closer and sharper relief. When she stood next to me, I felt the isolation we all felt traversing the distant planet as it fled deeper into space. There were no words and only a few shy glances, but the nanoseconds that our eyes connected held within them an eternity.

As we packed up the cart to move on to the next town, I knew without fully understanding, that my life was no longer mine, but hers.



Although many refused to believe it, there was one other way to see on the planet, another way to be safe from the wolves. Scientists before us jokingly called it the Cupidian effect. They explained it by way of unique pheromones between certain people interacting with the atmosphere to produce a light energy that could only be seen between the two people.

The only reason I knew about it, the only reason I believed it at all, was I had seen my mom and dad walk safely into the darkness without the fallen light. Just as I had seen in one of their picture books, they just held hands and stepped forward, as though walking along a river in the middle of a city.

From that day in the middle of the village, I had a singular focus. I was transfixed and undone. Every day, as I collected light, I thought about her eyes and lips, wondering if I had just imagined the whole thing. My brother walked by me in the fields and nudged me, teasing me about my imaginary angel. I always blushed and clenched my fists, but in the end I couldn't help it.

She was never there again when we entered the first village. Some weekends I would think I saw her hiding behind a basket or a wall. I thought I saw her face peek out from under the failing light along the dust worn streets, but it was never her. My father and uncle noticed the change in me every time we arrived at the village and my brother swayed between pity and frustration depending on his mood.

I told my mom about the girl one night after a long day in the fields and she just lay beside me holding my hand and closing her eyes. After a moment of serene silence, she simply said, "She sounds perfect. I hope one day I'll meet her."

When I was 12 years old, I finally got up the nerve to ask one of the villagers about her, if there was a girl around my age with green amethyst eyes and glowing blonde hair, but they ignored me. By that time, my brother was as tall as my father and as strong as my uncle. He was a brother, a father and a friend to me. He always worked and never seemed to tire of the family business. My father was beginning to lose some of his vigor. I even saw him miss a light drop from time to time.

I overheard my uncle talking to my brother one day out in the field about how my father couldn't see more than three feet in front of him now. Because of the foggy dark, blindness was common on the planet.

The more my father's eyes dimmed, the more my brother stepped into his role. I never understood how easy it seemed for him to step into that responsibility. He still held me as we traveled along the road, the cart being driven by my uncle now instead of my father. He still intertwined his legs with mine and tried to make me laugh. But underneath all of it was a seriousness I struggled to find for anything but her.

Shortly after I turned 18, we were on our way back from the villages. I carried with me the same disappointment, as undeterred and current as the first time I didn't see her. I heard a distant wolf howl, jarring me from my self pity and then heard my father cry out in the midst of the silent trek home and say over and over, "It's all black. It's gone now. The light is gone."

My uncle and brother led him to the back of the cart, my brother now occupying his spot while I held my dad and tried to describe all the things I was seeing, hoping he could at least see the light in his memory.

As the wagon pulled into our house, my father told us to run inside, a dread covering his face. We ran, and found my mother laying on the kitchen floor, peaceful and dead.

There was no way to prove it and I still don't know which happened first, but I believe my mother's heart stopped at the same moment my father lost his sight. I think it was actually my mother crying out through him when he let out the shriek on the side of the road. Their vigor and life were tied together like intertwined legs. The universe seemed to invite my mother into it when my father no longer had the eyes to behold her.

Either way, things changed. Time was the constant tying all of the planetary sojourners together. Time and change.

I volunteered to remain home to care for my father. When I told my brother, he looked directly at me and said, "But what about her?" My heart sunk, but I told him it made the most sense. He was always a better light catcher than me and that one day we could try and find a live-in caregiver for father so I could join them.

I didn't realize how much I enjoyed catching the light until I was home with my father, surrounded by darkness and dust save for the few hanging baskets with leftover light drops from the previous week's harvest. My father had not only lost his sight, but his joy as well and most days were spent in silence.

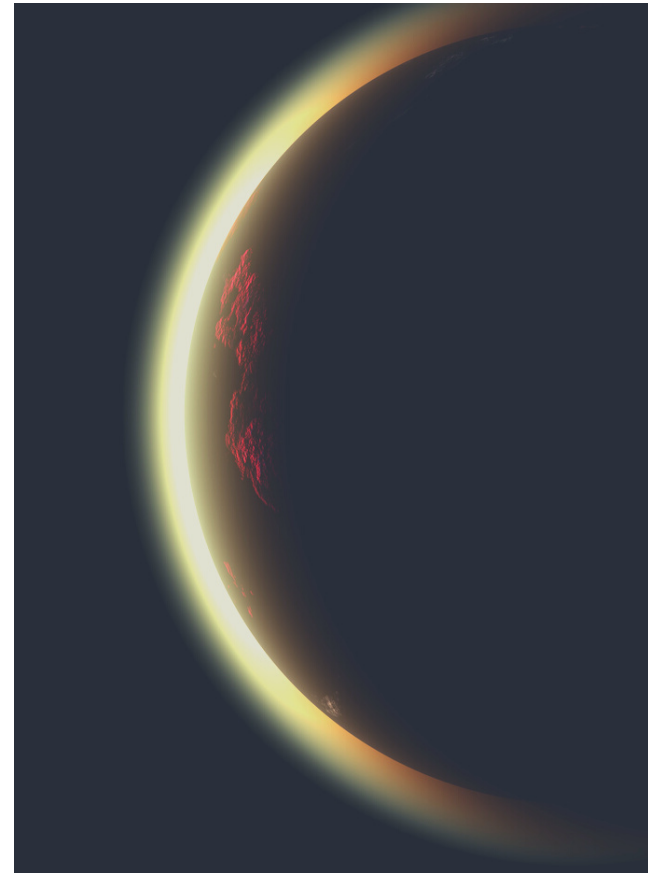
I picked up most of the responsibilities originally carried out by my mother. I now experienced the loneliness of my mother, her family gone every day, left in isolation lightyears away from her home. The echo-like hollow in my stomach grew bigger as I thought back to my mother trying to keep me home with her for just a little bit longer. I understood why she lay in bed with me at night and just held me. I tried to talk to my father about things, but he seemed out of words. I even told my father about the girl I saw so many years before and, for the briefest moment, I noticed a smile across his face.

But most days were spent in silent work with a lightless father, the echo chamber memory of my mother, the dust and red and darkness, and a fleeting hope that the green eyed girl of my childhood was real and as possessed by me as I was by her.

This morning began like every other morning. I woke before the unseen dawn to help my brother and uncle load up the week's harvest into the back of the aging cart. The light drops from the star dust field shown brilliantly through the fog and dust. In satchels my mother made years before, I brought them food I prepared the night before and put my arm on my brother's shoulder as he took the reins of the cart. Our blind horse stood staring at the nothing in front of him, waiting for the gentle commands my brother gave as it navigated the cart down the rocky road.

When my hand touched my brother's shoulder, he looked directly at me. His eyes had the same joy and weight my father had so many years ago. The lines on his forehead and cheeks gave his face an appearance of being much older than his age. My brother placed his hand, burnt and scarred from catching the light on my shoulder and smiled. "I'll see you later, brother."

The blind horse pulled the cart slowly forward, the light bouncing and shaking as it traversed the desolate wilderness of planetary isolation. The dust rose and fell behind the cart as it got lost in the fog of darkness. I watched until I couldn't see the light of the cart or hear the muted wheels. I felt a profound longing as I turned back toward the house, the dim light bundle hanging beside the front door of our metallic dome we made a home. The sting of loss swirled around me like darkness, the restless wanting of an unfulfilled dream. I checked on my father, who was still asleep in the room beside the kitchen and went about my daily tasks.



Between cooking and checking the garden and inventorying the shed where we kept the light catching supplies, I found myself staring into the void. I wondered if all of the planet was red and dusty and dark. My mother read me books from earth when I was a child and there was still a part of me that hoped to see a waterfall or a beach or a glacier. I hoped that all those things were on this planet as well, just hiding in the darkness and that one day we would happen upon them while chasing the falling light.

I was gathering hay for our horse when I saw a small cloud of dust and a faint light moving down the road toward our house. It was too small and fast to be the cart and much too early for them to return. My father, now awake, must have sensed it as well and fumbled his way toward the doorway, leaning with worry. "Wait here, Father. I'll see what's happening."

At the edge of the road, I saw my brother, running, running with a small bundle of light in his hand, the sheath around the light drops slightly torn and spilling light drops behind him as he ran. I sprinted to meet him.

"What is it? Is everything okay? What is it?" My brother was out of breath, having run miles through the dark fog. My arm was on his shoulder as he hunched over, trying to catch his breath.

"What is it? Please, brother. What happened?"

"It's, it's, I saw, I saw..." My brother, began to cough in an attempt to breathe more oxygen than the planet had to give.

"What? What did you see?"

My brother, finally calm, looked directly into my eyes, his eyes glistening with a wonder I hadn't seen in him since we were children.

"I saw, her. I saw her. You have to go. You have to go now."



I left my brother after hugging him. My father was still leaning against the door frame of our home as I took off toward the village. I ran down the rutted and worn road, drops of light marking my way. I ran through the dusty wilderness. I ran through the dark. I ran beside the bouncing majesty of the star dust fields, light falling like manna.

I ran past the ancient rocks with their hidden history. I ran through the memories of childhood and the forgotten songs of earth. I ran through the laughter and the tears of a life I knew I was leaving behind. I ran through the emptiness of loss and longing and darkness.

Behind me, I heard the first wolf snarl. In my haste, I forgot to grab a light bundle and my sweat and heaving breath must have drawn the wolves out from the distant void. A second wolf. A third one. All keeping pace behind me as I ran. There was a gap, but not a big one and I knew it wouldn't take long for them to close it. So I ran.

The city was just over the next ridge. I knew I had to make it. She was there. The first wolf lunged at my leg, missing me by an inch as the second waited patiently. I could see the city glowing in the distance and needed to just get there. Another wolf ran ahead of me as the third wolf took his turn, this time grazing my foot, causing me to trip and fall forward.

I was almost there when I realized I was surrounded. I turned in a circle to look into the eyes of my captors, cursing them and fearing them and hating them. They were silent and tense, their teeth longer than I had initially imagined they would be, and their coat a soft, glistening white. I began to cry and close my eyes. If I couldn't see her again in life, I could at least imagine her in death.

I waited with my eyes closed for over a minute, watching as her face came into view, a memory now with its own life. Around me, the air felt darkly silent, the heavy breath of the wolves, gone. I cracked open one eye and then the other. Not only were the wolves gone, but light surrounded me, brighter than any light fallen on the stardust fields. It was a light that taught colors to show and I turned back towards the village.

Her shape and form seemed mythic as her dress blew in the intergalactic winds. Before I could see her face I saw her eyes. I saw her hair, still falling over her face. I saw her brilliant lips and the dimple as she smiled at me. I ran but didn't lose my breath as I got closer and closer to her.

Our lips met before we could speak. We clung to each other with the familiarity of years, and the urgency of longing lovers absent from each other for too long. As our lips met, the light exploded from us, overcoming the dark world around us. The planetary fog lifted and the world revealed forests and oceans and waterfalls and glaciers and memories of a world I'd never seen, and would never need to see for as long as I lived.

Just as easily as our lips came together, they came apart and my eyes beheld her eyes beholding mine. The light emanating from her made me feel both small and unstoppable. She smiled slightly again as I stared at her in wonder while she took my hand into her hers and began to walk.

We walked past my uncle and the cart and the blind horse, light emanating like fireworks. We walked past the dusty streets and the metallic domes. Past the hanging baskets and ebbing light drops, past the tired villagers in their red and blue and black and gray clothes.

We walked past the world and into the dark, hand in hand, with no need for the star dust light or the ancient songs.

A hand holding a jar filled with a starry, galaxy-like pattern against a dark blue, starry background. The jar is the central focus, with the hand visible at the bottom. The background is a deep blue with a dense field of stars and a prominent, bright, orange and white streak of light, possibly representing a galaxy or nebula, that runs diagonally across the upper half of the image.

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