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# The Forest House

Gloria Salcido

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It still looked haunted, even fifteen years later. Charlie stood just looking at the dilapidated old house, feeling the memories wash over him. He still remembered the day they had stumbled across it, the abandoned old summer cabin. The shutters that had been hanging haphazardly then had now fallen off completely, and greenery had fully overtaken the house. Was the old table still standing in the dining room? The cobwebs had probably come back, without them there to dust them away.

Shaking himself from his thoughts, Charlie forced himself to walk closer. After all, he hadn't trekked all this way just to look at it from afar. He stepped up onto the porch, hearing the creaks of rotting wood beneath his feet and hesitated. Charlie had been much younger and lighter the last time he was here, and the house was crumbling more than it had been then. Though he wanted to look inside, he didn't want the floor to give out under him and then get stuck with no one around for miles to help.

He heard light rustling behind him as he thought of this, but didn't pay much attention. Deer had occasionally been sighted during Charlie's childhood visits to the house, so he assumed one was passing behind him and didn't want to scare it off. Then suddenly, Charlie heard a sharp intake of breath. He turned around and saw a girl staring at him from the same place he had been standing moments before. Recognition dawned over her face at the same time Charlie placed hers.

"Hannah?"

"Oh my God," she breathed. "Charlie?"

He nodded as she began walking towards him, her steps quickening until she stood in front of him. Their eyes both darted back and forth over each other's faces, marking the similarities and differences from the last time they had seen each other. Finally, a slow smile spread across Charlie's face and he felt himself reaching forward.

"Hannah," he said, pulling her into a hug. Their arms slid around each other, and Charlie felt the familiar warmth of her spread over him as they squeezed each other tightly. "I can't believe this! Oh my God, I've missed you so much," he exclaimed, finally pulling away to look at her again.

"What are you doing here?" Hannah asked, beaming at him. "I missed you too. I – I didn't think you'd ever come back though," she said, her smile fading. She looked at him with concern, an expression Charlie knew well.

"It's okay," he said, almost automatically. "I mean, I'm okay. Everything is..." he trailed off, not sure where to begin. He cleared his throat and started again. "I was at the Peterson's old place."

Hannah's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Really? What for?"

"I live there now," Charlie said with a shy smile. "I just bought it."

Hannah didn't immediately reply, apparently stunned. But then she was grinning, squeezing his hands as she exclaimed, "That's amazing! Charlie, I'm so happy for you. I can't believe this; you're really back. And I get to see you everyday again!" She let out a disbelieving laugh.

"So, I take it you never left then?" Charlie asked.

"No, never," Hannah replied, shaking her head. "We're still at the same place. I'm getting my degree online, so I didn't have to move away. I just love it here. I've never wanted to be anywhere else," she said with a shrug.

Charlie looked down at her and could see the happiness emanating from her eyes. Though their experiences in this town had been very different, he was glad that for her, she had found home. Maybe now that things were different, Charlie could too.

"Well, I'm glad Hannah. If you had gone away somewhere, I wouldn't be seeing you now," Charlie said.

"I know," Hannah murmured. "I'm glad, too."

They looked at each other for another moment before Charlie finally noticed the tote bag Hannah had dropped at the bottom of

the porch steps.

"So, what's that?" he said, motioning to the bag. "Is that why you're here?"

"Oh!" Hannah quickly grabbed the bag, shouldering it once again. "Actually, yeah. I come out and have picnics here sometimes; occasionally, I work on assignments. It's peaceful, and I have some good memories here, you know?" she replied, smiling up at him.

Charlie smiled back knowingly. "I definitely do know. That's why I came out here," he explained. "I wanted to see if our old 'ship' is still standing.

Hannah laughed, and it filled Charlie with warmth again. He had missed her laugh. He had missed her.

"Actually, it is," Hannah said. "Do you want to go in and see? I can guide you through. The floor is pretty messed up now, so we can't just go in the normal way. And we definitely can't 'go to sea'," she continued, grinning now. "But you can look if you want."

Charlie grinned back at her, then waved towards the house. "Lead the way, Captain."

"Okay, come on," she said, walking down the porch steps and motioning for him to follow. They shuffled through the weeds around to the back door, then entered. Charlie mimicked Hannah's steps exactly as she murmured for him to watch the floor in certain places. He could see holes where the wood had rotted away, and the whole house had a damp, earthy smell. He didn't remember that smell being here before, but there also hadn't been so much foliage growing inside then either. Finally, they made it to the dining room.

"There it is, Mate," said Hannah. "The 'Galaxy Glider,' in all her glory."

Charlie smiled as he looked at their old "ship" fondly. The makeshift sail they had made together had flopped over onto the table, the duct tape apparently worn out. The popcorn tin lid that had served as their helm, steering them along, lay now rusted on the floor beneath the table. The paper towel roll they'd used as a telescope had unraveled and lay molding and wrinkled on the single chair that had been their loading dock. As Charlie surveyed it all, his mind flashed back to their adventures and he felt a pang. It wasn't often that he missed his childhood, but this? He had missed this place, these times, like nothing else.

"Are you ready?" Hannah whispered. Charlie snapped back to

the present and looked over at her. He could tell from her expression that she had seen it, the way he'd gotten lost in the memories. He nodded and began walking back carefully through the house, doing his best to remember the way they'd stepped.

Finally outside again, Charlie heaved a sigh. He felt a hand squeeze his arm, and turned to face Hannah. She smiled up at him.

"So, care to join me for a picnic?"

They settled in front of the house, in a spot where the weeds had been flattened and worn down. Clearly, this was Hannah's regular spot. Hannah had laid out an old flowered sheet on the ground before they sat, then she began unpacking the remaining contents of her bag. Her picnic consisted of a PB&J sandwich, a cheese and cracker snack plate, a Ziploc baggie of green grapes, a water bottle, and a can of ginger ale. She promptly split the sandwich before handing one of the halves to Charlie, then set the grapes and snack plate between them.

"Which do you want, water or soda?" Hannah asked, holding them each towards Charlie. He accepted the water and promptly took a swig, as she cracked open her ginger ale. They began eating, remaining quiet for a few moments as they chewed.

Charlie swallowed another bite of sandwich before breaking the silence. "So, an online degree. What are you studying?"

Hannah took a sip of her soda. "Environmental science. I want to work in nature conservation. I don't know if you saw it yet, but the marina? A huge chunk of it got cleared for a new development project. It was just awful, so much natural life has been affected by it. And if they come for this place next," she said, motioning around them, "I want to be able to do something to fight it."

"That's amazing, Hannah," Charlie replied, feeling pride swell inside him. "And that totally sucks about the marina. I haven't seen it."

"Yeah, some of us tried really hard to petition against it. But it didn't work out." Hannah looked down for a moment, disappointment etched across her face. Then she looked back up at Charlie quizzically. "And what about you? No school?"

Charlie shrugged. "I got my AA in general ed, so I can go back later for my BA if I want to. But I just didn't have a clear direction," he explained. "I didn't know what I wanted to do. So it's on hold til then."

"Nothing wrong with that," Hannah said, popping a grape into her mouth. "I think you're doing the smart thing. College ain't cheap, right? Better not to waste the time and money wandering aimlessly."

They settled into a comfortable silence again, before Hannah broke it next.

"Speaking of money," she emphasized dramatically. Charlie quirked an eyebrow at her as he chewed on a cracker. "How were you able to buy the Peterson's place?"

Ah, that. Charlie swallowed and took a drink of water, thinking about how to proceed.

"My dad died last year," he finally responded.

Hannah froze. He met her eyes as they searched his, trying to gather what he felt and probably also the right thing to say.

Charlie shrugged. "He never changed. It's okay if you aren't sorry."

Her eyes remained locked on his. "I'm not."

He wasn't surprised by her blunt words. They had been young, but he knew his stories of make-believe hadn't fooled Hannah to what really happened at his house. Charlie had always claimed the "ghost" haunting his basement had given him the bruises, and maybe for a time she had believed him. But then she'd seen his father's fury that fateful day and pieced the truth together. After that, Hannah's eyes hadn't filled with fear at the stories he made up for their make-believe pirate adventures. They only looked that way when she knew he was going home.

Charlie reached for another cracker, but simply turned it over in his hands as he continued.

"Well, anyway, he left me a lot of money. He left some for my mom too, enough to live on, but most of it he gave to me. The one good thing he did, I guess," Charlie said with a shrug. "So I decided to move back here."

Hannah sat back a little. "Wow. Well that's --," She shook her head, searching for words.

Finally, she reached forward and covered his hand with hers. "I'm glad you're back Charlie. And I'm glad things seem to be going well for you now." She peered up at him. "How's your mom?"

A sigh escaped Charlie's mouth, and he ran a hand through his hair. "She's better. So much better now. She was happy I got the

money; I was always the one she was most concerned about. I'm trying to convince her to move out here with me. I think it would be good for her."

Hannah squeezed his hand. "I think so too."

They resumed their eating, and Charlie switched the conversation over to lighter topics. It all felt so comfortable being with Hannah again, talking and laughing and joking. Though they had been apart for so long, it was as if those years were all erased. They were kids again, best friends. He wanted it to stay that way.

An idea popped into Charlie's head. "Hey, do you wanna come see my house?"

Hannah grinned excitedly. "Seriously? Of course I do!"

They quickly packed up their trash and Hannah's things, and then set off out of the woods. Soon they reached the edge of the forest, where the ground began transitioning from dirt to sand, and then they had reached the beach. They walked along the edge of the transition as they headed to the houses perched at a distance.

Soon they came to Charlie's new home. It was a large white beachfront house with blue trim. The yard was small but well-kept. As they walked up to the front porch, Hannah pointed to the sign reading "Peterson" next to the front door, and raised a brow at Charlie.

He chuckled. "I haven't gotten around to taking it down yet, but it's not staying. I'm not planning on changing the house a whole lot, but that for sure is going."

Charlie opened the door then, beckoning Hannah in. "After you, Captain."

Hannah smirked as she stepped inside, and Charlie followed after her. "You really were always a great First Mate," she said teasingly.

"Yes, I was," Charlie replied. "Okay, so... Here it is." He extended his arms, motioning to the house from where they stood in the foyer. He allowed Hannah to look around a moment, then began ushering her forward. He led her through each room, pointing out details he loved, explaining the changes he wanted to make, and describing the layout of his mental vision for the home. Eventually, they had toured the entirety of the place. They ended up in the kitchen, standing on either side of the island.

"Wow, this place is great. And the way you described everything... Maybe you should go into home design or something Char-

lie. You seem to really have a knack for it," Hannah said, with an encouraging smile.

Charlie raised his eyebrows in surprise. The thought had never occurred to him before. He really had just wanted to make this house a home. Maybe there was something to what Hannah had said though. He smiled back at her. "I'll think about it."

Just then, he caught sight of the setting sun outside. He looked at his phone and confirmed that it was now evening.

"Whoa, sorry Hannah, I didn't mean to take up your whole day. It's already gonna be dinner time."

Hannah shook her head at him. "Don't apologize. If I didn't want to spend the day with you, I wouldn't have. I've had a great time."

They looked at each other then, and something unspoken passed between them. An understanding, a mutual feeling of not wanting their time together to end quite yet. Charlie took a leap.

"Well... Do you want to get dinner together?"

Hannah's smile was radiant. "I'd love that."

"Great," Charlie said, feeling nervous now for the first time. He plunged forward, feeling his heartbeat quicken. "We can go out, or we can order in. This is my first night here in the house, so I don't have any groceries or cooking tools, or else I'd offer to cook."

"How about pizza?" Hannah suggested. "I can call and order it if you want?"

"Sure," Charlie agreed. "And order any sides, drinks, or desserts you want too."

"And I'll ask for extra plates and napkins," she said with a giggle, as she began dialing. "Make sure you are well-supplied for survival here."

Charlie laughed. "Great, thanks! I'll be right back." He walked off to the garage and grabbed the boxes marked "BEDDING" and "PILLOWS," taking them into the family room. He pulled out a blanket and several pillows, arranging everything into another picnic. Lastly, he turned on the fireplace, grateful that the Petersons had upgraded to a gas one a few years back. No having to deal with firewood.

"Hannah, come into the family room," Charlie called. He heard her footsteps approaching, and soon, there she was. She stopped short when she surveyed the setup.



"Picnic number two?" Charlie asked with a grin.

Hannah walked forward grinning back, and settled on a pillow. Charlie plopped down next to her.

"More like picnic 2.0," Hannah joked. "This is a nice upgrade from the woods! Very cozy."

"Thanks," Charlie replied. "Sorry the TV isn't set up yet, but we can watch a movie on my laptop if you want?"

"That works for me," Hannah nodded. "Did you have a movie in mind?"

"Your choice," Charlie said, waking his laptop from sleep mode. He tapped in his password and opened a browser before turning to face Hannah. "What do you feel like watching?"

She slid her eyes up to the ceiling, considering. Then her face lit up, and Hannah turned back to him. "Treasure Planet."

They're eyes locked then, and Charlie felt himself flashing back to the forest house fifteen years ago. He recalled their first game of pirates together, and how they'd named their ship after Charlie had said he'd wanted to sail the Milky Way and be like Jim Hawkins. Hannah had agreed and requested that she be Captain Amelia, then promptly dubbed her "Jim" as first mate. They'd boarded the Galaxy Glider and set off for Saturn. It was one of Charlie's favorite memories.

Charlie and Hannah both reached for each other's hands and squeezed. Charlie looked at Hannah and felt himself leaning forward. Soon, he was kissing her, and it felt like everything he had ever been missing. Hannah's hand reached up to cup his face gently as she kissed him back.

Finally, they pulled away, resting their foreheads together. Charlie raised Hannah's fingers to his lips, pressing her knuckles with a kiss.

"Charlie?" she whispered.

He pulled back to face her fully. "Yes?"

"Promise me you'll stay."

Charlie smiled. "I promise." And he meant it.

With that, she smiled and scooted closer, leaning her head on his shoulder as Charlie finally loaded the movie. A few minutes later, their food arrived, and they spent the rest of the movie eating and laughing together. As the film came to a close, Hannah snuggled closer and Charlie kissed the top of her hair. She let out a contented

sigh, and Charlie felt – at last – home.

#### About the Author:

Gloria is an HCOM major / Business Minor, endeavoring to become a social media manager. While attending CSUMB, she was introduced to writing as a creative outlet. She now occasionally writes both poetry and short stories, drawing inspiration from personal experiences as well as from her favorite music.