

FOREST OF CHILDREN

Written by

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Based on the short story  
"Forest of Children"  
By Shirley Pesto

EXT. SMALL TOWN SQUARE OF A SLEEPY TOWN - DAY

Bored NEIGHBORHOOD KIDS ranging from ages 7 to 16 are scattered. Sporadic adults mill about and run errands.

Sounds of CLICKING marbles, BOUNCING balls, and SHUFFLING feet fill the town square. Some kids relax on their backs. Hats or forearms shield their eyes from the sun.

The sun is strong. The earth dries from the previous day's rain. The weather is humid.

Taped on a storefront window is a faded MISSING poster with the picture of a child wearing a red shirt.

CHARLIE (male, 16 years old) sits on a bench with his arm around his girlfriend, SUE (female, 16 years old).

Sue fiddles with the buttons on Charlie's blue flannel shirt. They giggle and whisper to each other as they sip on glass bottles of fizzy soda.

GWEN (female, 12 years old, Charlie's younger sister) sits on the ground nearby. She scrapes a bottle cap along the zipper of her yellow backpack and sips from her own glass bottle of fizzy soda.

NATHAN (male, 11 years old, cousin of Charlie and Gwen) does sloppy cartwheels.

NATHAN

Charlie! Charlie! Look at me!

CHARLIE

Looking good, Nate!

NATHAN

And look at this! Sue! Look at this!

Nathan attempts a handstand but fails.

SUE

Great try!

NATHAN

I swear I can do it better. Watch!

Nathan tries a handstand and fails again.

GWEN

Ugh, leave them alone, NATHAN.

NATHAN  
YOU leave them alone, GWEN!

CHARLIE  
It's okay. Everybody just chill  
out.

Nathan sticks his tongue out at Gwen. Gwen rolls her eyes.

Charlie and Sue get up from the bench.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)  
(to Gwen)  
We'll be back in a little bit. Will  
you be okay?

Gwen nods.

NATHAN  
Nuh-uh! Don't go!

CHARLIE  
We'll be back soon, Nate. No  
worries.

NATHAN  
No! I'm bored. You better not  
leave. Or... I'll tell Auntie you  
snuck off with Sue!

Gwen shakes her head at Nathan.

Sue giggles at Nathan's boldness.

Charlie and Sue plop back down on the bench.

Nathan continues his attempts at handstands.

Charlie doodles on the back of a store receipt with a ballpoint pen. He shakes and taps the tip of the pen. It is out of ink. He tosses the pen into the trash and it makes a PING.

CHARLIE  
All right. Here are the rules of  
the game...

Neighborhood Kids and Nathan perk up. They push and step over Gwen to gather around Charlie.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)  
Now, there are only so many of you  
that'll be able to play.

Sue lets out a little laugh and playfully pats Charlie's chest.

SUE  
Don't be so cruel.

CHARLIE  
Well, rules are rules. The maximum  
number of players for this game  
is...

Charlie points at each of the seven kids as he counts silently.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)  
Seven!

Neighborhood Kids and Nathan collectively sigh in relief. Gwen rolls her eyes at Nathan then looks up at Charlie with admiration.

All give Charlie their undivided attention.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)  
Okay everybody! The game is... a  
scavenger hunt!

The energy switches quickly to excitement. Some kids run around with their arms out at their sides mimicking airplanes.

NATHAN  
Where?

SUE  
The woods!

CHARLIE  
Five minute warning before we head  
out!

Gwen looks at her watch and jogs to her nearby home.

CUT TO:

EXT. MODEST HOME - DAY

Gwen kicks off her shoes and opens the screendoor. It CREAKS loudly.

INT. MODEST HOME - DAY

MOM (O.S.)  
Who's that?

GWEN  
It's me! I'm getting some paper.  
We're doing a scavenger hunt.

MOM (O.S.)  
Where?

GWEN  
Just the woods.

MOM (female, 40s) pokes her head around the hallway and looks at Gwen.

MOM  
And Charlie's going with you?

GWEN  
Yeah. Him, Sue, and them.

MOM  
How about your cousin?

Gwen makes a face.

GWEN  
Yeah. Him, too.

MOM  
Hmm. I hope this game isn't just  
some way to slink off with Sue. I  
told him he needs to watch you.

GWEN  
He knows, Mom.

MOM  
With Terry missing, you just can't  
be too careful.

GWEN  
I know.

MOM  
(hesitantly)  
Well... I guess it's okay.

Gwen brightens up.

Mom smiles.

MOM (CONT'D)

Be back at dinner. Your dad's bringing home something special for dessert.

Gwen stuffs a pencil and yellow legal notepad into her yellow backpack.

MOM (CONT'D)

At dinnertime. Okay, Gwendolyn?

GWEN

Yup! We'll be back at dinner.

Gwen rushes over to Mom to give her a quick kiss on the cheek.

MOM

Bye, baby.

Gwen races out the door. She jams her feet into her shoes and jogs back to the town square.

CUT TO:

EXT. SMALL TOWN SQUARE OF A SLEEPY TOWN - DAY

Gwen approaches.

The group is already leaving. There is a trail of kicked-up dust in their wake.

Neighborhood Kids and Nathan are a ball of chaos all on different rhythms: skipping together, playing mini-tag, racing against each other.

Charlie and Sue are at the back of the pack, walking slowly with their hands in each other's back pockets.

Gwen cinches up the straps of her yellow backpack and jogs to catch up with them.

FADE TO:

EXT. EDGE OF THE WOODS - DAY

Neighborhood Kids and Nathan stand in an informal circle in a field of tall, yellow grass. They are restless and play wrestle.

NEIGHBORHOOD KIDS  
(all talking over each  
other)

Yeah! Let's go!  
We're bored!  
Shut up!  
I can't hear!  
You shut up!  
I have to go to the bathroom...

Gwen quietly waits off to the side from everybody else.

Sue has her arms wrapped around Charlie's middle. His unbuttoned blue flannel shirt drapes over them both as it flows in the very slight wind. His tank top is stained from sweat.

Charlie cups his hands around his mouth.

CHARLIE  
Okay everybody! Pair up!

Neighborhood Kids and Nathan pair up and transition back into a circle. Gwen stands without a partner.

Charlie looks at Gwen and inhales to say something.

Gwen shakes her head at Charlie and smiles.

GWEN  
It's okay. You know I like doing  
stuff alone.

Charlie smiles and nods.

CHARLIE  
Okay, here's the list of stuff to  
collect. Take turns memorizing it.

Charlie takes out the store receipt from his back pocket.

GWEN  
I brought some more paper, we can  
all just copy it.

CHARLIE  
Great idea! Okay, everybody hurry  
up and copy the list and then we'll  
go over the rules.

Gwen beams with pride and offers her resources.

Neighborhood Kids and Nathan feverishly grab at the paper and pencil. They copy the list and hand the notepad and pencil back to Gwen.

Gwen looks disappointed. The notepad is all wet from a puddle and the pencil is broken.

Charlie breaks from Sue and walks over to Gwen.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)

I'm sorry about your stuff. You can just use my list.

Gwen smiles and looks triumphant as she holds the original list.

GWEN

Thanks.

Charlie smiles and merges back with Sue. He claps to get full attention.

CHARLIE

Okay, here are the rules! Each item on the list is worth one point. There will be one bonus point awarded to the team that comes back here with the prettiest item. Sue will be the judge of that.

Charlie rubs Sue's shoulder. Sue nods.

SUE

So take your time collecting these things.

Sue smiles at Charlie.

CHARLIE

Yes. Take. Your. Time. We meet back here in one hour. Not a minute earlier. Got it?

Most of the Neighborhood Kids nod.

NEIGHBORHOOD KID 1 (male, 7 years old, Nathan's game partner) speaks up.

NEIGHBORHOOD KID 1

I don't have a watch.

Nathan shows his watch face to Neighborhood Kid 1.



NATHAN  
Don't worry. I do.

NEIGHBORHOOD KID 1  
How do we know when it's an hour?

NATHAN  
When this hand gets to the five  
again.

NEIGHBORHOOD KID 1  
Your hand?

NATHAN  
No, dummy. I'll just tell you when.

Nathan rolls his eyes and then nods at Charlie and Sue.

CHARLIE  
Ready? Go!

The kids disperse towards the woods.

Gwen packs the damp notepad and broken pencil back into her yellow backpack. She takes a swig of water from her canteen and zips it up.

Sue playfully jumps on Charlie's back and kisses his ear. They fall into the tall grass together.

Gwen grimaces.

GWEN  
(quietly)  
Good luck with all the rodents and  
ticks, brother.

Gwen puts on her backpack tightly and jogs into the woods.

FADE TO:

EXT. THICK OF THE WOODS - DAY

Gwen sits on a big rock and takes out the list. She runs her finger over the indented bumps and swirls from Charlie's hard-pressed writing into the store receipt. She smiles and reviews it.

-green leaf

-brown leaf

-purple flower petal

-smooth river stone

-bark

-feather

-seed

-witch-hazel

Gwen looks around. The woods are quiet and serene.

Gwen sets off to search for the items.

CUT TO:

EXT. CLEARING IN THE WOODS - DAY (LATER)

Gwen puts a leaf in her backpack and zips it up. She looks down at the list and then her watch.

GWEN

(to herself)

Welp, forty-five more minutes to  
kill.

Gwen is pleased. She puts her thumbs in her backpack straps and strolls to the center of the clearing. She faces upward with her eyes closed.

The sun highlights Gwen's face. She smiles. She faces forward and opens her eyes. She looks intrigued.

A single, curious looking tree stands alone. The tree is small, slightly shorter than Gwen. It has red, bean-shaped berries and dark green, circular-shaped leaves.

Gwen inspects the ground nearby and picks up a fallen leaf. She tears off an unmarred section of paper from her notepad and uses her pocketknife to expose a flat piece of graphite from the broken pencil.

Gwen takes a rubbing of the leaf and tilts her head to look at it.

GWEN (CONT'D)

Hunh. It kind of looks like a  
fingerprint.

The tree leaves RUSTLE. A red berry falls from the tree and rolls to Gwen's feet.

Gwen reaches to pick up the berry. It VIBRATES. A few more berries fall to the ground. She pinches one of the berries between her first finger and thumb. It shines a brilliant red. The luminance reflects in her eyes.

Gwen is transfixed. She puts the berry in her mouth and swallows it.

CUT TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

EXT. EDGE OF THE WOODS - EARLY SUNSET

Charlie looks toward the woods and down at his watch. All are playing with their scavenger hunt items and showing them off to Sue. They are getting increasingly restless.

CHARLIE

Well... I guess we can get started.

SUE

Shouldn't we wait for Gwen?

CHARLIE

I think she might just want some time to herself.

Nathan interrupts.

NATHAN

Well?

CHARLIE

Well? Well! You all did a great job and found every item. So the tie breaker point for the prettiest item goes to...

Sue reaches into the pile and takes out a random seed.

SUE

This one! This is the prettiest item. Just look at it!

NATHAN

So that means we win!

A mixture of jeers and cheers ensue.

NEIGHBORHOOD KID 1

So, what's our prize?

CHARLIE

These beautiful crowns!

Sue reveals two crowns of hastily threaded wildflowers and places them on the winners' heads.

NATHAN

That's stupid! We thought the prize was candy!

NEIGHBORHOOD KID 1

Yeah! We want candy!

CHARLIE

Well, too bad! We don't have any candy. Now it's time to get out of here and go home!

Charlie and Sue playfully roar and put their hands up like claws. The kids feign terror and scream as they run back toward town. A trail of flowers from their crowns and kicked-up dust follows them.

Charlie and Sue shake their heads and laugh.

Charlie looks toward the trees and furrows his eyebrows.

SUE

You think she's okay?

CHARLIE

Yeah, she's probably fine. When we were younger, sometimes we'd track each other for fun. Maybe that's what's going on. I'll go check.

SUE

Okay. I have to get going. It's my turn to make dinner. Say bye to Gwen for me.

Sue kisses Charlie on the cheek and walks down the road back to town.

Charlie watches her walk until she disappears beyond the horizon. He looks at his watch and walks toward the entrance of the woods.

FADE TO:

EXT. CLEARING IN THE WOODS - DUSK

Charlie walks through the clearing and steps on a torn piece of paper. He picks it up and sees the pencil rubbing of a leaf on it.

He looks around for Gwen.

In the clearing are two small trees with dark green, circular-shaped leaves. One with red berries and one with yellow berries.

Both of the trees VIBRATE slightly and leaves RUSTLE.

Some berries shake loose and fall to the ground.

A yellow berry bounces and lands near Charlie's shoe.

Charlie bends down and picks it up. He puts it onto the center of his palm and brings it close to his face. A brilliant light shines from it and reflects off of his eyes.

Charlie is transfixed. He pops the berry into his mouth and swallows.

CUT TO:

EXT. EDGE OF THE WOODS - NIGHT

The field at the edge of the woods is lit mostly by the moon.

Crickets CHIRP and wind RUSTLES through the tall grass.

The woods are dark except for three distant and dim sources of light. One red, one yellow, and one blue.

There is a low HUMMING vibration and the red, yellow, and blue light sources pulse.

The vibration HUM ceases and the light sources simultaneously go dark.

CUT TO BLACK.