

Make a Friend

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Charlie Boyd sat in his cluttered living room, staring up at the small dog. His mother, Mrs. Boyd, was a self-employed taxidermist, and so the sight of a stuffed dead dog on the mantle above the fireplace wasn't as much of a shock to Charlie as it would be to other kids. Other various oddities were strewn about the room, such as unopened mail and some little puppets Charlie played with when he was little. If you didn't know that the Boyds had just moved in, you would assume from the clutter that their residence spanned years. Moves like this were frequent in his life, as his mother's artisanal corpse business somehow didn't bring in much money. Still, this never deterred her from pursuing her dream, and she would always encourage Charlie to pursue his, whatever it might be. Charlie's only dream, of course unknown to his mother, was to have a normal life. Charlie never really had any friends, other than his mother, which made moving to a new town quite easy. Charlie hated making friends, and yet he wanted one more than anything.

"Time to go, honey," chirped his mother, holding out his lunch box. "Don't wanna be late on your first day!" Charlie thanked his mother quietly, stuffed the lunchbox into his bag, and unfortunately couldn't dodge her long, thin arms, ensnaring him into a hug. He didn't like hugs, but he was used to getting them from his

Mom. “Will you promise me that you’ll try to make some friends?” she pleaded, to which Charlie agreed, before stepping through the rickety screen door. The school wasn’t too far of a walk, and even if it was, Charlie wouldn’t mind. He loved the feeling of the crisp autumn air in his nostrils, with the early morning sky coated in a shallow grey smog, like he was in a snowglobe dropped in cement. This day, though gloomy to most, was Charlie’s favorite type of weather. The route to school took Charlie down a path adjacent to a deep, inviting forest. Since he hadn’t any time to explore before school, Charlie gazed into the woods and thought, *next time*.

Charlie then heard the crunch of a leaf under a foot, and whipped his head around to find a boy walking behind him. He had seen this boy before in the house next to his, and he looked to be around Charlie’s age. However, there was something undeniably ghastly about him; his skin was like paper, his eyes were piercing green orbs, floating within sunken craters on his round head. His hair was a dull blonde, almost grey, that was sticking out in unkempt tufts. The boy looked up at Charlie, and gave him a warm smile. Charlie could feel himself blush, and quickly turned back around and kept walking, now at a pace just a bit faster than comfortable. Charlie was confused and thought to himself, *Who is he? Why was he looking at me? Why does he look so creepy? Why did I panic?* Charlie felt uncomfortably frightened by the boy’s looming presence, as well as embarrassed by his first social interaction in the new town. His accelerated gait made him get to class a couple minutes earlier than he expected. Charlie sat down, and waited alone for time to go by.

Charlie’s school day went as expected; he spoke to no one, and nobody spoke to him. Back home, or rather, back in the last town, Charlie had once overheard some other kids talking about him.

They were hypothesizing about him and his home life, saying things like “I heard he collects bugs,” “I heard from my mom that his mom’s a weirdo too,” and “I heard his daddy left ‘em both ‘cause they creeped him out.” These theories were mostly true, but hurt Charlie nonetheless. Now, Charlie enjoys people-watching much more than actually engaging with others. As he walked out of school, he saw a group of boys clustered by the monkey bars, one dangling upside down. He walked over, keeping enough distance to remain unnoticed but close enough to hear.

“There’s no way that’s true, Kyle.” said one of the boys.

“Bro, I’m telling you, it is!” replied the dangling one.

“So wait, it’s a kid who eats wood?”

Charlie’s heart dropped, *are they talking about me?*

“No, dumbass. It’s a monster that eats kids. It lives in the woods.” Charlie hadn’t heard that one before, and felt relieved that they weren’t talking about him. Intrigued, he kept listening.

“Ohh, that makes more sense!”

“Yeah! What it does is, it disguises itself as a bush or a tree, then transforms into a giant monster and eats you!” Kyle shouted this at his friend, causing him to fall.

“Not cool, asshole! Now I’ve got dirt on my jeans!” Charlie was beginning to lose interest, when he noticed something next to him. He turned and saw that it was the pale boy from earlier; Charlie was so invested in the story that he didn’t notice when the boy sat down beside him.

“Hi! I’m Finn. I think I’m your neighbor!” The boy enthused. Charlie was surprised by the liveliness in his voice, he expected more of a ghostly murmur. Charlie introduced himself, and apologized for running away before. Finn responded, “Oh, it’s no big deal. A lot of people don’t talk to me ‘cause I creep ‘em out, heheh. Whatcha doin’ over here?” Charlie told Finn he was

listening to the group's conversation about some urban legend. "Pretty scary, right? I dunno if it's real, but it'd be so cool if it was!" Charlie agreed, and was pleasantly surprised by the boy's friendliness. They spoke some more about their favorite urban myths and legends; they actually had a lot in common. Charlie then remembered that the school day was over, and his mother was probably worrying about him. "Oh, you gotta go? That's alright, I should too, soon. See ya tomorrow!" Finn said with a smile, "Unless the monster gets ya!"

Charlie walked home with an unfamiliar sense of joy, which quickly faded when he saw the worried look on his mother's face. She had been standing behind the screen door since the exact minute school ended, waiting for him. Charlie knew what would come next: the questions.

"Charlie! How was your day? Great! Were your teachers nice? Oh, good, I'm glad. The lunch I gave you how was- it was good? Yay! Did you make any friends?" Charlie said that he did not make any friends. He felt the urge to keep Finn from his mother, afraid that she'd start asking even more questions before having a happiness-induced heart attack. "No? Oh, honey. It's alright, it's only the first day. I promise you'll make a friend soon!"

He could tell she was expecting this. Once he escaped his mother's patronizing interrogation, he asked if he could take a walk. "Oh, well, it's getting dark soon, and I don't want you out there on your own. We could go together! No? Oh well, looks like we're staying in."

Charlie waited a few hours after dinner before sneaking out. He made sure to close the door quietly, careful not to wake his mother. Aside from Finn, the main thing on his mind since leaving school had been the monster. Charlie loved scary stories and cryptids, and used to wander around hoping to encounter or even befriend

Bigfoot or the Mothman. He was a bit too old for that now, but still wanted to explore; he loved the woods, and maybe he'd run into Finn. He went up the same path from earlier, stopping again to gaze into the woods. The sky was a dark grey, but not entirely black. Moonlight lined the edges of the trees, turning the forest into a cascading collage of silhouettes, inviting him in. As he walked off of the path, he began to hear a distant rustling. This sent a chill down his spine. *Should I go home?* He thought, *No, It's probably just a squirrel or something.* Curious, he kept walking, following the sound.

The rustling grew ever louder as Charlie approached, until he could see a strange bush by the base of a large tree, wiggling in the distance. He walked closer, seeing it now as a pile of moss and vines, with something inside, moving. Charlie took another step, and the pile of vines perked up.

"Hello Charlie!" said the bush, in a high-pitched, cartoonish voice. "What brings you out to my neck of the woods?!" Charlie fell silent, staring at the bush; did he really hear that? The bush spoke again, "What's the matter pal? Didn'tcha come lookin' for me? Well congratulations! You found me!" Charlie was confused and scared; he didn't know what he expected to find, but it sure wasn't this. He wanted to cry, to run, to scream, but he was too terrified to even move.

He let out a weak "Hello."

"Allow me to introduce myself! My name's Friendly, the friendly woodland monster! Do you wanna be my friend, Charlie?"

Charlie heard himself reply, "Okay." He didn't decide to say this, rather it formed in the back of his mind and somehow found its way out of his mouth.

"Great! It's so good to be your friend, Charlie." The voice was so bizarre. It sounded strained, like a bad impression, but it wasn't

any impression Charlie had heard before. Though he should've stayed in horror, as anyone else would, Charlie's curiosity got the better of him, and he calmed down a bit. *Maybe it really just wants to be friends?* Charlie thought. He took a step forward, wanting to see the creature more clearly. The creature shrieked, "Stop! Stay back! Don't look at me!" This snapped Charlie out of his curious trance, and he frantically spun around and sprinted home as fast as he could. He heard the creature receding into the dark distance behind him, shrieking "I'm sorry! Come back! I'll let you see me next time!"

Charlie went straight to his room, closed the door quietly, so as to not wake his mother, and collapsed in bed, cold sweat dripping from his forehead. He tried to calm himself down, thinking *That didn't happen. That wasn't real.* He repeated these words until he fell into a restless sleep, dreaming of nothing.

Charlie found himself sitting in his living room the next morning, staring blankly into the empty fireplace. *Was any of that real? It couldn't have been a dream... but it couldn't have been real...* Charlie's crisis was interrupted by his mother handing him his lunch box. She was cheery, but seemed less energetic than usual.

"C'mon honey, you gotta get to school." She said with a tired smile. It seemed like she'd been up for a while, but Charlie's mind was too scattered to worry about her. He gave her a hug and left home, hearing the screen door swing shut behind him. He didn't look around or take his time; he kept his head forward and plodded straight to school. Once he arrived, the day went just as it did the day before, with no interactions or interruptions. Charlie kept looking for Finn, but he couldn't spot him anywhere. Charlie had never looked for someone before, it made him feel vulnerable, exposed.

Charlie ended up walking home alone. Finn didn't seem like the type to just skip school, maybe he was sick? As Charlie walked past the spot of the woods where he entered last night, he was stopped in his tracks by a fleeting thought, *what if the monster got him?* No, that can't be it. After all, the monster didn't eat Charlie; it actually seemed friendly. What was he thinking? Of course that wasn't real, that was a dream, a hallucination, a nightmare. But still, Charlie couldn't shake the strange sense of comfort he got from that pile of vines. Charlie arrived at his front door, greeted by his mother.

"Hi honey! How was your day?" she inquired. Charlie decided to be honest, and told his mother that a boy he met yesterday was absent. "Oh?" she said, her eyes widened, "I thought you said you didn't make any friends?" Charlie decided to lie, and told his mother he must have forgotten to mention Finn. He expected his mother to light up after hearing the news of a friend, but she looked uncharacteristically serious.

"Finn? Finn who? What's he look like? Why didn't you tell me that yesterday?!"

His mother looked angry and anxious, which made Charlie mad. He suffered through her pleas to find a friend for years, and now that he finally had, she's going ballistic. Charlie ran to his room and slammed the door shut. He could hear his mother run to her's and lock the door. Charlie laid down on the floor, crying.

It was dark out now, and Charlie found himself at the edge of the forest. He made sure to sneak out slowly and silently, but once he was outside he fell into a full sprint. Charlie wasn't entirely sure why he returned; part of him was hoping that, if this monster is real, maybe it could magically solve all of his problems. Maybe it really could be his friend. Charlie walked the same path down into the black, glistening forest, his hands brushing against those coarse

pillars once again. He could see it in the distance, that pile of vines, only now they were strewn over the branches of that giant tree. He analyzed the new web of dark lines reaching up from the ground into the branches above, the highest of which were concealed to Charlie by the densely foliated elm. At the base of the leafy entanglement, Charlie could see an outline of a figure, only now it was not a bush, but a boy. Its head turned.

“Hey, Charlie!” That familiar voice rang out, seemingly originating from the tree itself “I’m so glad ya came back! I’m really sorry about yesterday, I was still gettin’ myself together. But here I am now!” The monster’s arm jerked upward, giving Charlie a limp wave.

“H-hi,” Charlie responded, his voice pushing past the knot in his gut, “Um, It’s okay, don’t worry about it. W-what, uh, are you?”

“I told ya yesterday, remember pal? I’m Friendly, the forest monster!” It started to hum an unrecognisable melody and then began to dance. At least, Charlie assumed it was meant to be a dance; it was really just shaking around like a ragdoll. “I’m here to be your friend!” Charlie’s lingering fear was outweighed by his curious delight.

“I, um, I guess we can be friends.” Charlie said, nervously. Even he was surprised at his own calmness in this surreal scenario. Something was keeping him calm; something about the monster was just so familiar. Charlie started walking forward to inspect the monster closer.

“Hey, heh, whatcha doin’ there buddy?” The monster sounded nervous. Charlie stopped walking, but could now see some more detail stand out from the darkness. He could see the monster’s hair; he couldn’t make out the color, but it was short, straight, and messy. The monster’s face was still in shadow, but the illuminated

border of its silhouette showed that its skin was a pale white. Charlie recognized it.

“Finn?” Charlie asked.

“Hm? No, silly, I’m Friendly, remember?”

“Finn, I can tell it’s you. Is this why you missed school? To get your monster costume all set up?” Charlie was flattered that Finn would do all of this for him, and he started walking towards him again.

“HEY! Uh, hey! Don’t get too close, Charlie! I’m, uh, shy! Too shy! Stay back.” Friendly sounded panicked.

“Finn, it’s okay, I’m shy too! You don’t need to do all of this to be my friend, and you don’t have to keep doing that weird voice.” Charlie understood all too well how difficult it can be to make a friend; he kept walking.

“STOP!” Friendly shouted, “Just stay away, don’t look at me! Please, I can keep being your friend as long as you don’t look at me!” Charlie stopped walking, bewildered and irritated.

“Why’d you do all of this then?! Why invite me back here and set up some elaborate monster costume if you were just gonna yell at me again?! Why can’t I look at you?!”

Friendly fell silent, and began wiggling around. Charlie, now more angry than confused, took one more step forward.

“STOP!” shouted the monster, before falling to the ground with a thud. Charlie could hear a rustling in the branches, growing more distant, as if a flock of birds were going from tree to tree, as the vines fell from above and buried the monster. Charlie stood for a second, too overwhelmed to move, before running over to the mass of vines. He dug away at the foliage, revealing the figure underneath.

Charlie uncovered his hands first. “Finn? Finn, what’s wrong?” Charlie could see now that it was in fact Finn, but he was limp,

extremely cold, and even paler than normal. He wiped the vines away from Finn's face, expecting to see those emerald eyes, and instead finding two bloody gouges in his skull. Charlie now noticed the crude stitches scattered all over his body, from which small tufts of cotton poked out, crusted over with dried blood. Finn was gone, and he had been for some time. The vines, which Charlie could now see were reinforced with fishing line, were tied tightly around his wrists, ankles, torso, and neck; they would've cut off his circulation, if he had any blood left in him. Charlie tried to scream, but no sound came out. He stood up shakily, like an old dog, and slowly mustered the strength to walk. With every step, he threw himself forward, the image of Finn's empty sockets lingering in his view. There weren't any conscious thoughts going through his head; he just wanted to go home. He opened the screen door, and without a thought walked past his bedroom door and went to his mother's, seeking comfort. He wanted to go back to when he was little, back before he developed this disdain for his mother's affection. He pushed open the door and flipped the switch. The fluorescent bulbs buzzed and flickered, before flooding the room with blinding white light. Once his eyes adjusted, Charlie could see that his mother wasn't there, and her room was littered with leaves, various tools, densely stuffed garbage bags dotted with flies, and bloody clumps of cotton. He heard the screen door swing shut, and finally realized the lengths his mother would go to help him make a friend.

