

We Were Wonder Scouts

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Yes, I was there: a Wonder Scout, one of nine, at our first campout led by Charles Hoy Fort himself in the summer of 1928. Back then, we didn't have handbooks and uniforms like you do now, no recorders or cameras. All we had was our need to see more than everybody else, to uncover the realness behind things. During that trip to the Adirondacks, we saw something real, all right, something terrible and even wondrous. It's probably saved me from a life of...whatever it is that most people lead.

I was thirteen then, the son of Norwegian immigrants living in Queens, and I needed saving. I've come to respect my father and my mother in the years since, just like you will, but back then they seemed so needlessly grim and unimaginative...just like yours do. Father had earned his way to America with fifteen years of wet freezing misery on the sea, and he never let anyone forget it, least of all me.

"Your mother waited for me, Harald, you know that?" he'd say. "I worked those ships for fifteen years, but she knew I'd come back. She knew I'd come for her. But I had to earn it first, and you have to earn it, too."

"Earning it" meant going to school at I.S. 25 every day, paying attention, doing my homework, and coming home to my father's newspaper stand in the afternoons to sell *The New Yorker* and Pall Malls to men taking trains home from Manhattan. I wasn't allowed to read the sciencefiction magazines because then we couldn't sell them. Or so he said.

My parents, Father especially, had little interest in the imagination. "Why would you read things that someone else made up?" he always wanted to know. We had no books of fiction in the house or a radio, and I didn't have many toys.

What I had was Thuria, and it was better. In the shadowy crawlspace beneath my house where only I could fit, I built a kingdom out of discarded sardine tins, thread

spools, and cereal boxes. A wide boulevard wound between four hills to a colander capitol dome. There, King Wemnon and his twenty wise councilors benevolently discussed and executed their national affairs. Sometimes they called the men to arms to repel giant invading animals, usually the neighbor's cats. Often, they built elaborate fortifications along the frontier to defend against the evil Count Pappen and his massing armies. At least once, they sent lone heroes across the dusty wasteland to rescue poor Princess Annabella from the Tower of Eternal Woe.

A strange sensation of stretched time would overtake me when I visited Thuria, started by a sort of whispering trance, and I could perform whole epochs of its development in just a few stolen moments before dinner. Have you ever felt that way? It's a feeling of total absorption, the kind that seems to hum and fizz against the edges of your brain.

But all great civilizations have their end, and Thuria was destined to be no different. One evening after work, my father saw my shoes poking out from underneath the house and he pulled.

"We didn't come all the way to America just for you to imagine somewhere else," he said after he looked inside. He got the broom and, with the same caprice as the sea washing over Atlantis, he swept Thuria into history.

"The only life you need is yours," he told me, with the tone of someone doing me a favor.

Now, I've lived a long time since, and I can tell you that it wasn't a favor. I've never felt the absence of a person as much as I've felt the absence of Thuria. I fell sick for almost a week after its destruction, shivering beneath a blanket in my room despite my mother's care. When I returned to school, to the bullies who chased me through the hallways and yelled "hurh-hurh-hurh" to make fun of my accent, I hunched at my desk all day staring at math problems and maps of dull places. When I returned from school, my feet fell hard onto the sidewalk like I wore shoes of iron. My dinners were bland, my baths were cold, and everything seemed as yellowed as an old picture.

I might have grown into a different man that way, the kind who skulks and flinches his whole life, who talks at parties about what roads he drove to get there, but then I found Mr. Fort's poster at the library on Fifth Avenue and everything changed.

As far as my father knew, I spent my afternoons studying English, and that wasn't entirely wrong: all the books about castles and ghosts and heroes I read in the

library were certainly written in English, and I studied them closely. I'm surprised that I even noticed Fort's sign at all, and I sometimes doubt it was only luck.

"BOYS! DO NOT BE CATTLE!" it seemed to shout. The handwriting shrank smaller and smaller the further I read. "What do you see from the corner of your eye? There are secrets all around us, and the vibrations of the universe are not perceivable by common senses. Do you want to see the ropes and wheels behind the facade? Then come to the next meeting of the WONDER SCOUTS!"

I'd heard of the Boy Scouts and even met a few. Maybe they're different these days, but in my school at least, they were either swaggering bullies who wanted to join the Army as soon as they could or sickly goody-goodies who organized every project like they were building the Pyramids. I'd always wanted to go camping, but it didn't seem worth it if idiots like that would be there, too.

But Wonder Scouting...well, that had the sound of something different. I did a lot of wondering. What was going on in Loch Ness? Were ghosts really the spirits of the dead? Was there ever really a minotaur? How did Stonehenge get there? Were there really mummy curses? Could someone still find Excalibur? If anybody was a born Wonder Scout, it was me.

Well, me and Mr. Fort. When I met him at the first meeting, he wasn't anything like any adult I'd ever met. Though mustachioed and barrel-chested like a taller Teddy Roosevelt, he was more a scholarly sort than a man taken with physical adventure. He wrote books about the strange things nobody noticed, spending hours reading and collating articles in newspapers from all over the world. He kept boxes and boxes of notes about snakes dropping out of the sky, airships shining lights on European cities, giants walking the ocean floor, comets exploding, the seas running red. He talked all the time like a boy in a clubhouse about what really made the world work.

"Reality leaks," he told us at the first meeting. "The consciousness that imagines us into existence doesn't always remember all the details. It gets distracted. It lets things slip. It can't keep up the illusion in all places and all times, and it's our job to find those places and times, to peel back the edges."

There were eight other boys at that meeting (we didn't have girls in the Wonder Scouts until the Sixties), and I remember them all to this day. There were Hiram and Caleb from the Bronx, twins who lived just a few doors down from Mr. Fort's house; they spoke at last year's Jamboree. There was Clarence, the boy whose father ran a bank downtown and gave him a ten dollar bill every week; he wore a suit to the park.

Dudley built ghost detectors from cans and wire, nothing like the fancy EMF ones you have today. Stevie smelled like trash, and we never asked why. Petey came all covered in bruises and was the quietest boy I'd ever met, except when you asked him about alligators; he and I are still friends, long after our wives have passed on. Patrick's father worked the docks and wanted his son to learn the trade. Tony's parents came from Italy, and they didn't understand the importance of fishermen and spaceships like all of you do.

With Mr. Fort's advice and urging, we looked together for those peeling edges of reality. We weren't very organized about it--there were no formal badges for ghost hunting or cryptozoology yet, even if we'd had uniforms on which to sew them--so we just kind of kept our eyes open while we went to school or did our chores. We peered into sewer grates for tiny people. We listened at tavern doorways for the whisper of alien languages. We broke into haunted houses and rapped on all the walls, climbed over junk piles searching for misplaced Roman artifacts, spit into Mason jars to measure the proportions of our humors, and hypnotized each other with pocket watches to plumb our evolutionary memories. Just like the things you've been doing all week here at Camp Manticore.

We lived, as best we could with parents and schoolteachers nagging us to do dull things like chores and homework, by the tenets of the Wonder Scout oath. Will you say it with me?

On my honor, I will do my best
 To confound the expectations of society,
 To observe the super-consciousness in all its workings,
 To seek independence in body, in intellect, and in spirit.

We followed the Wonder Scout Law, too, which we recited at every meeting.

A Wonder Scout is curious, adventurous, strong, observant, resourceful, brave, skeptical, thoughtful, and aware.

We only had nine back then, but you've added "careful" these days. That's fine; lawyers need work too. Mr. Fort wasn't exactly what you'd call careful, and neither were we. You didn't have to be in 1928, or so we thought until that camping trip to the Adirondacks that made me a Wonder Scout forever.

See, Mr. Fort had discovered in his research that several people had disappeared near Moreau Lake over the years from 1925 to 1928, and he figured we'd be the perfect team to investigate. We'd had some practice now with research and investigations, and there wasn't a boy among us who wouldn't notice a man's socks didn't match if we saw him across Times Square.

To one of our biweekly meetings in the library basement, Mr. Fort brought a map of the terrain for our briefing.

"That's it, boys," he told us. "See where those lines converge? Those are vertices of superluminal power, the harp strings of the Earth, pluckable only by the sensitive and the damned. When they come together like that...well, it's no wonder that people seem to disappear to common eyes."

"Are we going to disappear?" asked Petey. He's always been a little cautious, even today.

Mr. Fort wouldn't let him worry. "At worst, we'll be absorbed into the super-consciousness, learning and seeing all knowledge at once in a single stupendous flash. More likely, we'll find a tunnel to an underground civilization of pygmies or a portal through time."

"Or a sinkhole," Petey suggested.

Mr. Fort narrowed his eyes at that, I remember. "Well, if you want to buy what *They* tell you, sure. A 'sinkhole.'"

Luckily, Mr. Fort didn't bring all that up when he asked our parents for permission. It took some convincing for my father to let me go, and I'll admit I was vague on the exact name of the organization; we were boys and we were scouts, and that was all he needed to know. As far as Father thought, I was learning to tie knots and chop trees, growing big and strong and American. I didn't mention that Mr. Fort was as likely to fly to the moon as tie a knot. More likely, even.

We traveled four hours to the mountains in a borrowed school bus, and Mr. Fort spent most of it lecturing from the front seat, listing the missing people from memory. Mine's not as good after all this time, but I'll try my best. The dates are probably wrong, but they're close.

"August 12, 1925: Pauline Walters, lost while gathering blueberries. November 3, 1926: Emily Lindbergh, no relation to the aviator, lost while playing tag with her brother. April 16, 1927: Penny O'Hare, a girl witnesses saw walk over the top of a hill and then never return, vanished in thin air; the authorities searched for her with

bloodhounds. June 27, 1927: Susan Franco, escaping in the night from her drunken father, never found. March 9, 1928: Mary Williams, one of her saddle shoes left behind near the roots of an oak tree."

Something struck me. "They're all girls," I said.

"Excellent observation, Harald," said Mr. Fort. He wasn't watching the road that well. Like I said, we weren't careful yet. "Do you think feminine sensitivity makes them more amenable to seeing through time and space? Or are hearty human women simply appealing to the ancient races?" He waved his hand. "Dryads and so forth?"

I didn't have an answer for that, so I shrugged.

"We'll just have to find out for ourselves, then," he said. "There's no substitute for direct research."

"What if they're dead?" asked Petey. Of course he'd think of that--he became a doctor fifteen years later.

Mr. Fort shook his head. "Where are the bodies? Where are the footprints? Where is the panicked confession of a killer? No, these girls just walked into another world."

"I don't want to walk into another world," said Petey, but only I heard him.

"Sure you do," I whispered to him. "We'll all be with you. Me, anyway." That seemed to make him feel better. Lost isn't quite lost when you're with someone else.

We arrived at Moreau Lake late on Friday afternoon, descending through a notch in the mountains to approach its narrow rocky shores. The place was beautiful then and for all I know, it's beautiful now. I haven't been back. I'm guessing they've civilized it, built up ice cream shops and hotels, made it safe and not at all mysterious. When we went, there were a handful of small cabins built around the lake, a few private houses, some rugged trails, and miles of wilderness. That's it. We had to carry our own tents, our own canned food, our own jugs of water.

You wouldn't think it to look at him in those thick glasses and tweed suit from the back of the handbook, but Mr. Fort was a decent outdoorsman. We pitched our tents on high ground, faced them toward the rising sun, tied our food bags into the trees to keep them from bears, and built our fire circle out of rocks so it wouldn't spread. By sundown, we'd cooked ourselves a hearty if messy meal of beans and franks out of an iron skillet, and we sat together on logs to eat it.

Most of us had never been camping, certainly not out in the woods like that, and there is something grand and adventuresome about eating under the darkening skies,

isn't there? Food just seems to mean more. That moment, sitting there with Mr. Fort and the other boys listening to the surging songs of the crickets, was probably the first real magic of my life outside the city of Thuria. And it was with real people. My people. Just like you.

Soon after dark, Mr. Fort added fresh logs to the fire and handed out nine forked sticks, one to each of us.

"Tomorrow morning, lads, we'll be looking for the true magnetic terrain of the area, following the likely paths taken by the missing girls toward the gate or portal. I've found that dowsing rods are excellent ley line detectors, and we'll each carve our own tonight."

He showed us how to strip the twigs of bark--"for greater sensitivity," he said--and whittle the handles for perfect symmetry with our hands.

"It's a delicate instrument, a dowsing rod. Not something you clutch with your fists like a shovel. You hold it gently, letting it do all the work. Maybe the earth makes it move and maybe you do, but either way, nothing happens if you think too hard on it."

Each of us set to quietly preparing our dowsing rods while Mr. Fort leaned back on his hands and propped his feet close to the fire.

"Oh," moaned Caleb. "I broke mine."

"No, you didn't," said Mr. Fort. "Yours is just meant to be short."

After a lifetime in the city, my first night in the woods was more than a little eerie. In our neighborhood in Flushing, you could hear people talking at all hours, dogs barking, things rattling among the trash cans. Here, I heard only the great engine of the forest, rumbling at idle, waiting for us to fall asleep before roaring forward.

"Do you know any ghost stories, Mr. Fort?" asked Tony. He liked to tell us the ones his grandmother told from the old country, all about gypsies and potions and vengeful friars.

Mr. Fort turned and looked at him. "Ghost stories, my boy? They're just the gossip of the dead. What kind of damned fool wastes his heightened awareness of all time and space to come back and tell you that he loves you? Or where the family treasure is buried? Or who killed him? They all say the same things, those ghosts, none of it interesting. None of it sublime." He snorted. "The whole world is a ghost, echoing and fading from the perfect original. *We* are the ghosts."

That wasn't what I'd expected him to say at all. I never imagined that Mr. Fort was all that picky about the weird experiences he collected in all those shoebox clippings.

"Well," I said, "what's the scariest story you know?"

Mr. Fort squinted in my direction. "Oh, a good old-fashioned campfire yarn is what you want, is it? I'm not sure I've got one of those, but the scariest tale I've ever heard goes like this."

Everybody leaned closer to the fire, even Mr. Fort.

He cleared his throat. "Not long ago in one of civilization's greater cities, two young friends walked together at night in an old quarter of leaning brick buildings long abandoned. They conversed about their usual subjects, the unusual and the lost, and they hardly noticed as the brownstones beside them grew more and more dissolute and decayed, so absorbed were they in talk of faraway places. It wasn't until they turned a corner and saw the crumbled fieldstone house that they paused."

A pine cone in the fire popped and sparks splashed into the air.

"It had been there far longer than the others, maybe even to Colonial days. They stood looking at it, fascinated. One of them stood watching, fascinated by its architecture, curious about its history. The other? After just a few moments, he recoiled in horror and ran shrieking down an alley."

All us boys traded glances.

"The man gave chase to his friend, shouting for him to stop, to wait. But the friend ran for blocks and blocks before finally stumbling to a halt. He put his hands on his knees and gulped the air.

"'What happened?' asked the other man. 'What did you see?'

"'She was waving to me,' cried the friend. 'From the windows! A woman in grey, smiling. She beckoned from behind the glass. She wanted me to come inside, and I...I had a terrifying idea that she'd never let me out again.'"

I'm not sure about the others, but I shuddered. The gust of breeze from out of the woods didn't help.

"The other man shook his head. 'But my friend,' said he. 'There is no glass. There are no floors from which to wave. The building is a ruin.'"

By then, everyone had stopped whittling their dowsing rods.

“‘But I saw it complete,’ said the friend, ‘As it was in the old days. I saw a fire within. She wanted me to stay with her, I’m sure of it. The left side of her face was beautiful.’”

Mr. Fort prodded a log in the fire with his boot.

“The other man wanted to go back to try to see it again,” he finally said, “but his friend was clearly shaken so they walked home together in silence.”

Nobody said anything for a long moment. Then Tony asked, “Wait. That’s it?”

Mr. Fort didn’t look up from the fire. “For the rest of his life, that other man would wonder about that night. Most of all,” he said, even more quietly and almost to himself, “he’d wonder why nobody ever beckoned to *him*.” He shook his head. “*That* is a horror story, lads.”

All the other boys groaned and swatted their hands at him, but Mr. Fort’s story gave me a strange chill. For all our searching and listening and reading, I had yet to see something extraordinary myself. I wondered if I ever would, but I didn’t have to wonder long.

The next morning, after our breakfast of runny eggs and cold sausage, we prepared for our first excursion. We filled our canteens, unfolded Mr. Fort’s maps, and marched into the woods with our dowsing rods.

We fanned out amid the brush, Mr. Fort at our center yelling directions. “Come around the tree! No, this way! Stop!” he’d shout. “To the left!” I couldn’t tell if he had some intended direction for us or if he was just improvising. I was too busy tumbling headlong over rotten logs and getting entangled in the vines to notice. Clarence broke his dowsing rod in a fall. Caleb kept stopping to drink.

The day wore on, hot and muggy, and gnats buzzed around my eyes. By lunchtime, I was sweaty and tired of the whole exercise. I didn’t know much about seeing magic, but I knew you didn’t see it with a bunch of guys yelling in the woods. You didn’t see it when you had to go to the bathroom or had mosquito bites all over your arms, either. Am I right?

So when we gathered in a circle of elms to eat our cheese sandwiches, I took the opportunity to drift away from the group and eat mine alone.

“Where are you going?” asked Petey.

“I’ve got to pee,” I said, not quite telling the whole truth. What could I say to him? He’d kept me up half the night in our tent, talking about his vicious old man, and

I'd talked to him as best I could. Now I was full of everyone, including him, at least for awhile.

"Oh," he said. "I'll just be here." He sat on a boulder a few feet off from the other boys.

If I'd been a better person, I might have stayed. I just couldn't, though. I turned and climbed over ridge out of sight, and then I walked deep enough into the brush toward the protective drone of insects.

I did my business behind an oak, and I stopped to sit upon a log to eat my sandwich before going back. It gave a little beneath my weight, obviously hollow. I'm not sure why, but I stooped at one end to look inside.

The log was half-filled with a silt of rotten leaves and loam, and holes in the bark let in beams of yellowed sunshine. Among those beams, along a wide promenade of rich black soil, I saw the perfect place for a new city of Thuria, protected from my father, ready to rise again from destruction. Maybe I could never come back to see it, but at least I could always know that it was out here, growing on its own, living on no matter what happened to me.

It would take no time at all, I figured, to set up some pine cone buildings and a leafy pavilion. So I reached inside and traced streets with my finger. I built a capitol out of bark. I tipped water from my canteen in the center of town, a fountain celebrating the fallen kings of ages past.

And then I heard the crunching leaves of human footsteps behind me.

Turning quickly expecting to see Petey or Mr. Fort, I saw instead a man in brown dungarees and a white shirt watching me from the edge of the hemlocks. He seemed to be silently flexing his mouth, his eyes wide. His hair had strands of grass in it, as though whippoorwills had nested there. He was tall and skinny, his legs most of all, and he swayed on his feet.

"You find 'em?" he said, finally.

"Find who?" I asked.

"The little people."

I squinted into the log, and it seemed to stretch for miles. At the blurry edges of my vision, I could imagine the daily errands of a tiny civilization, but I knew that they were only imaginings. When I turned back, the man stood closer though I hadn't heard him approach.

"I don't see anybody," I said.

The man nodded. "You want to?"

When I stood up, it seemed to take longer than usual and my head felt as airy as that log at the end. I swayed in the clearing like one of the saplings, barely strong enough to resist the breeze. I had a feeling something wasn't right, but I couldn't quite decide what it was.

"I think I might have to go back," I said, though my words felt as fuzzy as cotton.

The man held out his hand but I didn't take it. He grunted and stumbled into the trees, weaving from trunk to trunk, ducking beneath the lower branches. I followed a few yards behind, listening for any sign of Mr. Fort and the other Scouts. I heard none.

We came to an igloo of branches thickly woven together. The man pulled aside a sheet of old green canvas and pointed inside.

"Go in if you want," he said.

The woods had gotten quiet, if that's the word for it. No, they'd gotten *slow*, as though the birds still opened their beaks to sing and the leaves still blew in the wind but they did it at a speed you couldn't quite perceive.

I bent down to look inside. There, lying upon a bed of moss, was a girl in a white dress, not much older than me. She was asleep, one arm cast above her head and the other crossing her chest. Her feet were bare, and her fingers long and pale with strange purple-blue nails. Her blonde hair had been sprinkled with flowers.

"She's my princess," he said, close to my ear. His breath was cold. "Annabella. I rescued her."

I blinked and turned to him. "Annabella? From Thuria?"

He raised his finger to his lips and reached for me with his other hand, wide and fleshy, the fingernails packed deeply with grime.

Time surged forward like a nickelodeon. I screamed and spun out of his reach. His mouth narrowed to speak and he lunged for me, but I was too fast. Jumping, crashing, shrieking through the bushes, I swam my way back to the others, not sure if he was following or not.

I all but fell out of the forest, covered in scratches. "I know where they go!" I cried, scrambling on all fours. "I know where they go!" Everyone came over to help me stand but I was swinging my arms in all directions.

Mr. Fort looked over my shoulder, back toward the way I'd come. Then he sprinted into the forest himself, and the rest of us followed. You wouldn't expect a middle-aged man to leave a group of thirteen-year-olds behind, but I think now that

Mr. Fort wanted it more than we did, whatever he was chasing, whatever I'd seen. He could have scuttled atop those brambles if he had to.

When he trotted to a stop in the middle of a clearing, we caught up to him. He was staring at the ground, eyes wide, and we followed his gaze to the object of his horror.

It was an old green canvas tarp, bigger than the one that had formed the door of the hut. It was streaked with patches of brown blood, and the toe of a saddle shoe poked out from beneath.

There was no log. There was no Thuria. There was no igloo. There was no man.

We stood there, all ten of us, staring at the tarp a long time. Mr. Fort could probably have stayed there forever. We had to push our hands against him to get him to leave.

The guys helped Mr. Fort and me back to camp, and neither of us was particularly useful for packing up the tents and knapsacks. Petey and Caleb had to slide Mr. Fort into the driver's seat of the bus. After he sat for a few minutes blinking through the windshield, he leaned forward slowly to start the engine. It took us six hours to get home after we called the New York State Police, and I looked so sick when my father saw me that he sent me straight to bed.

That was the first night of many since that I've wondered just what I saw in those woods or how I saw it. The police found the other bodies, of course, though no one ever figured out who killed those girls or why they'd all been buried in white gowns. In all the questions I answered for detectives, I tried my best to describe the man who somehow entered or exited my Thuria, but I could never quite fit it all into words. I've found that the harder you work to explain something, the further it slips away. Maybe that's why Mr. Fort's books are all but unreadable.

After that, our meetings were never quite the same. Mr. Fort hadn't expected something so...expected out in those woods, and I think he was too spooked to take us on any other camping trips. Not that that stopped us, of course: most of us found other ways to get out again under the stars. Of course I did, sometimes alone, sometimes with Petey, sometimes with a few of the other guys--always to see just another glimpse of Thuria.

Of course I wanted to see it again. Wouldn't you? I've been a Wonder Scout for my whole long life, even when it's cost me, and I always will be. There's no changing that for people like us, a little blessed and a little damned.

I know some of you are waiting and hoping like I did for your moment of magic. I can't promise you'll have one, though looking at you here around the fire, I can see in your eyes that you've got a sporting chance. But you should know that there are no roads into Thuria, only out, and not all the people who take them are good.

It will come, Scouts. You can't be ready, but you can be brave.