

## The Island's Heart

When I was seven, I read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* for the first time. It was my first taste of real fantasy outside of watered-down fairy tales, and after I finished it I searched the inside of my closet for a back door for weeks, just in case. I started to carry books around with me everywhere I went. It wasn't that I was a loner or didn't want to socialize. I just couldn't help comparing my afternoon activities to my stories, or feeling that real life didn't quite measure up to fiction.

That year, my father and I belonged to a father-daughter bonding club called Indian Princesses. Most of the year, the club was essentially a Native-American-themed playgroup. We rotated through each other's houses, looping brown cord through flaps of leather to make a purse, or gluing scraps of cotton into dresses for our corn-husk dolls. In July, though, we loaded musty sleeping bags and suitcases full of t-shirts and shorts into the car to spend a week at Camp Letts.

The camping games were all right, but there were times when I would have been happier reading in my cabin than stumbling through another potato-sack race. The highlight of the trip happened midway through the week, when our group went canoeing. I listened impatiently as the instructor explained the intricacies of life jackets, fastening and unfastening what seemed like dozens of red Velcro straps. The jacket smelled like fishy water and trapped the afternoon heat against the back of my neck, but the lake below us was silvery-blue and sparkling. I helped my father carry the canoe down to the shore—at least part of the time, anyway. I'd get distracted and let my grip slack if I thought I saw a bird or felt a mosquito whining around the damp wisps of hair on the back of my neck.

Once we got out on the lake, though, the atmosphere changed. The day was still hot, especially without the protection of the trees, but I had the feeling that once I was out on the water, I was on an adventure. A new sense of purpose rushed up in me, and my eyes fell on an island near the center of the lake. It was small, just big enough to support a cluster of trees that kept me from seeing the opposite shore.

“Can we go there and explore?” I begged my father.

He agreed, and after another ten minutes’ rowing, we scraped onto the sand. I clambered out, soaking my sneakers and socks, and we dragged the canoe further onshore to keep it from drifting off. Where the trees started, we could see a narrow, half-overgrown path winding through the trees toward the center of the island. I led the way, picking through suspicious-looking vines, water bubbling through the holes in the top of my shoes. When I got to the center of the island, I stopped in amazement.

The trees had opened into a small, round clearing. In the middle of this space sat an enormous armchair. It was a wonderfully decrepit thing, tawny and bleached by the sun, its rusted springs showing through threadbare cushions. It faced us head on, duster flaps brushing the sand. There was something very sad about it sitting there, moldering away in the sun, whipped by cold rain and coarse sand, and yet the chair had a certain dignity. It seemed right, somehow, that the chair would be there. I had never seen anything larger on the lake than a canoe, which couldn’t possibly carry something so unwieldy. The chair seemed to have grown out of the island as naturally as any of the trees and had returned to the heart of its home to die, like an ancient lion.

I could hardly breathe. After years of stories, after weeks of pining for the Wardrobe, I knew—I *knew*—that sitting in this chair, maybe even just touching it, would

open the gateway I'd been searching for. I circled it, getting close but keeping my hands behind me, just in case an accidental brush of the fingertips would be all that was needed to spirit me away. My father watched me from the edge of the clearing, torn between amusement and concern, most likely picturing snakes nestled deep in the cushions or tetanus-swollen gashes from rusting springs.

“If I sat there,” I asked, pointing from a safe distance, “I'd go to Narnia, right?”

“It's possible,” he said, nodding thoughtfully. “It might be dangerous, though, and I don't know how you'd get back.”

They were good points. I bit my lip, considering ogres or witches or the strange, slithering things the book had left unnamed. I tried to think how returning to the Wardrobe had worked in the story, but unless lamp-posts appeared at every bridge between the worlds, I'd have no landmark to guide me if I did decide to return. Most importantly, while it must once have been plush and comfortable, the chair didn't look sturdy enough to hold more than one person anymore. In the end, I took my father's hand and we stood facing the chair for some time, silently acknowledging its untested powers, and left the clearing without touching it.

We took the canoe out one more time to the island that week, and again I didn't do anything more than study the armchair from a distance, imprinting it on my memory. Soon after we got home the Indian Princesses group disbanded, and I didn't return to Camp Letts for several years.

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I went back to Camp Letts when I was eleven for a week of traditional sleep-away camp experience. I caught my breath every time I looked out onto the lake. After a few

days of making crafts and balancing awkwardly on horseback, our canoeing day finally arrived. I was with James, one of the counselors, and as soon as we were on the water I explained that I had to make a stop at the island.

“I’ll be real quick, just a few minutes,” I promised. “I just need to see it again.”

James shrugged. “All right. We can catch up with the rest of the group a little later.” He signaled to the other counselor and called out that we were taking a detour.

Once we’d reached the island and pulled the canoe safely ashore, I ran to find the path. It was even narrower than I remembered. The trees were beginning to close in over the last traces, stretching branches into the open space to catch the sunlight, and strands of grass lay over the path as though the island were a balding man trying to give himself a comb-over.

“Shall I wait here for you?” James asked.

“Sure,” I said, and headed toward the heart of the island.

The chair was gone. The clearing opened onto nothing but bare sand, empty and naked in the middle of the trees. The grasses had already begun to encroach on the bare ground; I could circle the border in ten steps. My stomach dropped. The island’s heart was a hole now, nothing but sharp grasses and dirt and empty space. But then something caught my eye, and I looked at the sand again.

The chair was gone; of course the chair was gone. I couldn’t have been the only one in five years to stop on that island and follow the path to the center. But I realized that it hadn’t been gone long: there was a square patch in the center of the clearing where the sand was a shade darker than the rest. I went to it, squatted on my haunches, hesitated for a moment, and then pressed my palm flat against the dark square. I didn’t feel a spark

of static electricity or gain any flashing insight, but I stayed there for a moment, and it was enough.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” James asked when I came back out through the trees.

“No,” I said.

He made a sympathetic grimace, half smile, half wince. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said, and surprised myself by meaning it. There are windows for magic, as natural as seasons. I had discovered one of them before it closed, and now it was mine to carry. I still hadn’t seen anything other than canoes on the lake of Camp Letts. There was no way to know exactly how or why the chair found its place on the island, or how it left. I began to understand that with this window held in some secret corner of my mind, my world would never seal itself off completely.

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I still read more fantasy than anything else, but it’s only very recently that I’ve thought about the person who first put the chair on the island. I was afraid to for a long time, afraid that trying to pin down purposes would crush the magic like an eggshell. I should have known wonder isn’t so fragile. If anything, it extends further than I had thought. I’ve always believed that there were more places like the island, but what I’m coming to realize is that there are other people who seek them, as well. There is a hidden community of us—reading old fantasies, lingering by the doors that supposedly lead nowhere, carrying our secret truths within ourselves.