

# WitchWorks

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# THE MEADOW

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**T**he meadow was a little place tucked between thick brambles and old, gnarled, oaks. It was a quiet place; the birds had gone silent, though they could be seen peeking through knotholes in the oaks surrounding the place. Crickets dared not chirp, and rabbits and squirrels skirted the outside of it nonchalantly, as if they were walking around some invisible structure and not an expanse of green grass and wildflowers. The meadow was beautiful. The openness and candidness of the sun became a surprising contrast to the dark, dank forest with its elder branches, and gray folds of bark as imposing as a wizened old man. Snake-like roots slithered in and out of a fog that always seemed to cling about the ankles.

I stumbled upon it by accident.

My grandmother used to tell me, “James, you

be careful about which birds you follow; you might never come back.” She was a superstitious old woman, always spitting whenever an owl hooted at dusk. I never understood her fear of them; I’d always found them fascinating. Naturally, I made bird-watching my hobby. “You respect them, those birds.” She wagged a veiny sausage finger at me as she said in earnest, “they know a lot more than you and I both.”

It was about that time again; I could feel it creeping up on me. Hopelessness then anger followed by restlessness. Armed with a camera, compass, map, binoculars, notebook and pen, I stepped onto the trail. I’d seen the daintiest little sparrow assaulting a caterpillar on a low branch there, but something had scared it off. A great black shadow and a caw. *Corvus corax*. I crept closer, slowly trading my binoculars for my camera. What a beautiful specimen! The raven landed on a branch a few paces away, preening itself. It was a large bird — the largest I’d seen — and its feathers were the emblems of perfection! It was so black it seemed to shine with a bluish tint. Purple? I slid my finger over to the shutter button, gearing up to capture this bird forever in film, when its head cocked. It let out a momentous cry, and in a ripple of black, it took off. “Damn.” I dropped the camera to dangle around my neck, hauled up my pack, and took off after it. Every time I’d catch it, poised to take that one perfect shot, it would fly off again. Once, I believe, I *did* take the shot. But when I looked at the image, it wasn’t there— just a smear of black.

I'd been chasing that bird through my camera lens for what seemed like hours; I became complacent. I had always believed nature to be the best remedy for a restless mind; the best therapy for a troubled soul. It also wasn't too far of a stretch to say that the forest was like a giant mouth. It swallows you whole, chews you up, and spits you out the other end with less of you remaining than what went in. It was just that for me; I was in the belly of the beast now. I'd endured the scrapes and bruises of its teeth —once I set one boot over the threshold of the wild, it took hold of me and played with me like a child plays with its food, until I'd lost my way. An owl hooted in the distance; a *Megascops asio*— the Eastern Screech Owl. I peered through my binoculars, scanning the trees around me. Curious things, binoculars are. Mirrors and lenses — they only let you see what you *want* to see. Picking and choosing, they block out all the extra-ness of life.

I scanned the trees, crooks of branches, and knotholes. I knew it was there, watching me — some funny looking mammal spinning around, looking at life through tubes. Was I going mad? Had I really seen that stupid bird or had I imagined it? My boots must have tangled or caught on a root, because, suddenly, I felt myself falling, crashing through branches, leaves and rocks. Hurtled down to reality, feeling it hitting me square in the face.



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I was cold. Colder than I'd ever been.

Looking up at the receding day I felt my head begin to whirl. I heard wings flapping, talons scraping, shadows passing here and there — just out of sight. And it grew darker and darker. The fog built up around my ankles, caressing them in such a way, it was almost feline.

Night birds screeched along with the rustle in the forest bed as some unseen creature rooted about in the leaves. I had learned enough in Boy Scouts to know that fire kept away the wild of the night. I'd goofed off enough in Boy Scouts to not know how to start one. I hadn't been expecting an extended stay either, so matches were out of the question.

I found the meadow the next morning.

On the outer rim of this miraculous circle of green, I watched, as hesitant as a doe. There were objects in the grass that beckoned me out further. I peeked over my binoculars, rubbing the sweat out of my eyes, before returning them to my face. I couldn't tell you *why* I was reluctant to venture out into the sun and pleasant greenery, just that I was. There was a presence, perhaps the same presence that made the rabbits, squirrels, badgers, and deer walk around its perimeter.

The meadow was quiet; out here, neither bird nor cricket chirped. The raven kept silent vigil as it sat upon what looked like trunks of felled trees as they leaned awkwardly towards the ground.

I crept closer and the trunks seemed odd.

Wood cylinders became ancient granite headstones rounded at the top. The moss and wear faded the names that had once been engraved on them. The black bird that watched me did not shift; it stayed frozen to its post like a gargoyle, its eyes following my slow steps. There were dozens of them! Each row faced the same direction: North.

During my time in the woods, I didn't come across anything human. No notches carved in to the bark of trees, no boot prints, no remains of campfire — nothing. Not even a trail. Where did these headstones come from? I believed this place was a long forgotten cemetery, yet it wasn't on the *map*. Oh that *map*! That *useless* piece of paper! No greenery marked where this meadow would be. There was no indication at all of any open expanse like this, only mountains, trails and woods. There were no churches, no remnants of buildings, nothing of tourist attractions or historical sites. This place, by all accounts, should not exist.

I grabbed a handful of grass and wildflowers and threw it as far away from me as I could. They floated to the ground before me, as lazy as anything. A slight breeze blew, ruffling my hair and stirring the grass. The raven clicked its beak, and suddenly, everything was laughing at me all at once. The trees rustling, the grass swaying, the raven with its watchful eyes — the air itself! It was all a joke. All I had wanted was peace, and here I was in this beautiful meadow so terrified. All I had wanted was a worryless trip doing what brought me pleasure only to end up in some place that had no business

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being here. How many times had I walked that trail looking at birds? I had never gotten lost. Ever! That raven, that *bird*, watching me — judging me. It knew what a pathetic little man I was and dared me to prove it wrong. I ripped off my backpack and threw it on the ground. I kicked it a few times. I emptied its contents all over the grass — a raincoat, a camera, my wallet, some power bars, a notepad, water, the map —

That *damned map!*

I tore it to shreds — ripping it into pieces, and then ripping its pieces into pieces.

I pulled out my cell phone, and finding that it *still* did not have a signal, I threw it with a cry of pure rage. The raven didn't do so much as ruffle its feathers.

“What are *you* looking at? You think this is funny?” I crawled around, throwing whatever my hands landed on at the raven that sat perched four headstones away. “Looking for handouts, is that it!”

The water bottle missed. I scrambled to remove the camera from my neck, and hurtled it. The raven shuffled a few paces to the right and out of the way. I must have looked like a tumultuous toddler, but I felt like a rabid dog. There was so much anger and hate in me — much more than I expected. I'd tried to hide; I had a stress ball. I was reluctant to accept aromatherapy from my grandmother, but I did. Nothing worked but Bird watching. My hobby became my Zen.

“You damn *bird!*” I lunged at it. It was all that



bird's fault. It took me for a fool; it knew what it was doing. Having me and me carry on like a mad man was funny to it. I wanted to kill it. The raven rose to full height, extending its black wings and cawed.

I cowered to the ground.

I try to be bold, I really do. Yet I always end up like this — well not *exactly* like this. There aren't many tombstones to cower beside in my day-to-day life. I get angry. Everyone gets angry; anger is a very human thing. What makes us angry, a defective map? A beady-eyed bird? A few choice words to slap you in the face as well as any hand could?

"You're such an idiot, Jim!" she'd say. "Why don't you grow a pair and do *something!*" she'd say. "You spend so much time with your *birds*, go live with them!" she'd say.

"I've met someone. I'm leaving," she said.

Anger. So many questions flashed through my mind at that moment and I started to puff out my chest. *She can't leave me!* She was already leaving me. *What if I make it worse?* You can't make it any *better*. *What if she claws my eyes out?* Better lose them to her than to birds. My chest deflated. She almost looked...disappointed. She left and took the kids with her.

I'm angry. I throw things. I clean them up. I go to work. I come home and eat my dinner by the window, and watch the birds.

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Hours pass. I could tell by the way the shadows of the tombstones leaned away from me. I lay, curled in the grass like a child. How many times had I looked up at the sky with my binoculars? Not really *looking* at the sky, but the birds in them. *Anatidae* are my favorites. Geese, swans, ducks — they come in pairs. There are always stories to them; stories I make up.

I pretend one of those geese is Michelle, and the other is myself. Goose Michelle would nag and complain about the long flight, honking and clapping her beak together. Goose Jim would nod mutely and Goose Michelle would get frustrated. She ruffles her feathers and distances herself from him. But at the end of the day, the goose that was myself would hunker down next to her and keep her warm as she sleeps with her head tucked beneath her wing. Goose Jim puffs out his chest to protect her from danger. He gives her all the choice treats and Goose Michelle is no longer mad. Geese mate for life, you see, They are *always* in pairs. Then, there were times where I'd only see one. I'd think "Don't worry, 'Chelle, I'm coming!" as the lone goose flapped after it's skein. Or, as a lone goose glides idly along, "She'll come back." I have hope for it. I don't want to think that that goose will forever be alone.

I watched the skies this time, hopeful for a distraction. There were no geese; no Goose Jims

and Goose Michelles. No warblers or wrens or hawks. Just sky, clear and blue. I wondered if anyone would come look for me. If, at any moment, a chopper would come from over the trees, drawn to this blank, green area, and rescue me. I listened real hard.

I heard nothing, not even the sound of the forest.

I lifted my head, just a little, to see if the raven still watched me. It was. It still sat, perched on the nearest tombstone, watching me. It was unnerving. I rolled over.

“You know,” I mused to the eyes on my back, “if you’re lost, you should stay in one spot. That’s how people find you. If you keep moving, how in the hell will you get rescued?”

No response, obviously. Not even a cricket.

“I used to tell my children that when they were young. ‘Don’t come and find us, we’ll find *you*.’ Never thought I’d be taking my own advice.”

I imagined the sound of the chopper, so dim at first as it combed the treetops for any sign of me. Then I imagined it coming closer and closer... but as the sun slipped behind the trees, and the meadow grew dim with the receding light, I began to wonder. Was anybody looking for me? Maybe I hadn’t been gone long enough to be missed. Or, maybe I just wasn’t important enough to be missed.

I’d sat through soccer games, piano recitals, and tennis matches. I’d pretended to be interested in the stories my wife’s coworkers shared over cocktails at office parties. I’d typed away at my desk

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feigning interest in the lives of my own coworkers. I'd hoped to hear the words "how was your day, Jim?" or "what do you want to do today, Dad?" Importance takes the form of black and white keys, balls and rackets. The "he said, she said" of the guy in the cubical beside mine, and looking fancy in an eight year old suit Michelle dry cleans every year for her office parties. Of course no one would look for me.

I still hoped, though.

I looked over my shoulder, at the raven; it preened itself silently.