

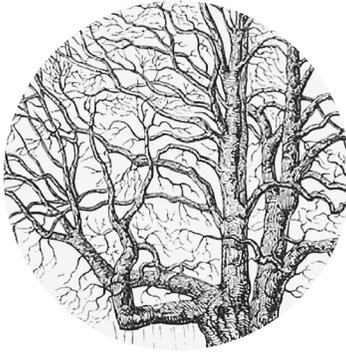
GREENWOOD

MICHAEL CHRISTIE



SCRIBE
Melbourne • London

2038



THE GREENWOOD
ARBOREAL CATHEDRAL



THEY COME FOR the trees.

To smell their needles. To caress their bark. To be regenerated in the humbling loom of their shadows. To stand mutely in their leafy churches and pray to their thousand-year-old souls.

From the world's dust-choked cities they venture to this exclusive arboreal resort—a remote forested island off the Pacific Rim of British Columbia—to be transformed, renewed, and reconnected. To be reminded that the Earth's once-thundering green heart has not flatlined, that the soul of all living things has not come to dust and that it isn't too late and that all is not lost. They come here to the Greenwood Arboreal Cathedral to ingest this outrageous lie, and it's Jake Greenwood's job as Forest Guide to spoon-feed it to them.

GOD'S MIDDLE FINGER



AS FIRST LIGHT trickles through the branches, Jake greets this morning's group of Pilgrims at the trailhead. Today, she'll lead them out among the sky-high spires of Douglas fir and Western red cedar, between granite outcrops plush with electric green moss, to the old-growth trees, where epiphany awaits. Given the forecasted rain, the dozen Pilgrims are all swaddled in complimentary Leafskin, the shimmery yet breathable new fabric that's replaced Gore-Tex, nano-engineered to mimic the way leaves bead and repel water. Though the Cathedral has issued Jake her own Leafskin jacket, she seldom wears it for fear of damaging company property; she's already deep enough in debt without having to worry about a costly replacement. Yet trudging through the drizzling rain that begins just after they set out on the trail, Jake wishes she'd made an exception today.

Despite the litre of ink-black coffee she gulped before work this morning, Jake's hung-over brain is taffy-like, and it throbs in painful synchronization with every step she takes. Though she's woefully unprepared for public speaking, once they reach the first glades of old-growth she begins her usual introduction.

"Welcome to the beating heart of the Greenwood Arboreal Cathedral," she says in a loud, theatrical voice. "You're standing on fifty-seven square kilometres of one of the last remaining old-growth forests on Earth." Immediately, the Pilgrims brandish their phones and commence to feverishly thumb their screens. Jake never knows whether they're fact-checking her statements, posting breathless exclamations of wonder, or doing something entirely unrelated to the tour.

“These trees act like huge air filters,” she carries on. “Their needles suck up dust, hydrocarbons, and other toxic particles, and breathe out pure oxygen, rich with phytoncides, the chemicals that have been found to drop our blood pressure and slow our heart rates. Just one of these mature firs can generate the daily oxygen required by four adult humans.” On cue, the Pilgrims begin to video themselves taking deep breaths through their noses.

While Jake is free to mention the Earth’s rampant dust storms in the abstract, it’s Cathedral policy never to speak of their cause: the Great Withering—the wave of fungal blights and insect infestations that rolled over the world’s forests ten years ago, decimating hectare after hectare. The Pilgrims have come to relax and forget about the Withering, and it’s her job (and jobs, she’s aware, are currently in short supply) to ensure they do.

Following her introduction, she coaxes the Pilgrims a few miles west, into a grove of proper old-growth giants, whose trunks bulge wider than mid-sized cars. These are trees of such immensity and grandeur they seem unreal, like film props or monuments. In the presence of such giants, the Pilgrims assume hushed, reverent tones. Official Holtcorp policy is to refer to the forest as the *Cathedral* and its guests as *Pilgrims*; Knut, Greenwood Island’s most senior Forest Guide and Jake’s closest friend, claims that this is because the forest was the first (and now, perhaps, the last) church. Back when air travel didn’t command a year’s salary, Jake once visited Rome on a learning exchange and saw only curving limbs and ropy trunks in its columns and porticoes. The leafy dome of the mosque; the upward-soaring spires of the abbey; the ribbed vault of the cathedral—which faith’s sacred structures weren’t designed with trees as inspiration?

Now some of the Pilgrims actually begin to embrace the bark for long durations without irony or embarrassment. In their information packages, the Pilgrims are instructed not to approach the trees too closely, as their weight compacts the soil around the trunks and causes

the roots to soak up less water. But Jake holds her tongue and watches the Pilgrims commune, photograph, and huff the chlorophyll-scrubbed air with a reverence that is part performance, part genuine appreciation, though it's difficult for her to estimate in which proportions. Soon they barrage her with impossibly technical questions: "So how much would a thing like this *weigh*?" asks a short man with a Midwestern accent. "This reminds me of being a girl," a fifty-something investment banker declares, caressing a moss-wrapped cedar.

While most of the Pilgrims seem to be tuning in to the Green magnificence, a few appear lost, underwhelmed. Jake watches the short Midwestern man place his palm against a Douglas fir's bark, gaze up into the canopy, and attempt to feel awed. But she can sense his disappointment. Soon he and the others retreat back into their phones for the relief of distraction. This is to be expected. Even though they've paid the Cathedral's hefty fees and endured the indignities of post-Withering travel, there are always a few who can't escape the burden of how relaxed they're *supposed* to be at this moment, and how dearly it's costing them to fail.

The Pilgrims are easily mocked, but Jake also pities them. Hasn't she remained here on Greenwood Island for the same purpose? To glean something rare and sustaining from its trees, to breathe their clean air and feel less hopeless among them? On the Mainland, the Pilgrims live in opulent, climate-controlled towers that protect them from rib retch—the new strain of tuberculosis endemic to the world's dust-choked slums, named after the cough that snaps ribs like kindling, especially in children—yet they still arrive at the Cathedral seeking something ineffable that's missing from their lives. They've read that article about the health benefits of *shinrin-yoku*, the Japanese term for "forest bathing." They've listened to that podcast about how just a few hours spent among trees triples your creativity. So they're here to be healed, however temporarily, and if Jake weren't mired in student debt and hadn't embarked on such a pitifully unmarketable career as botany, she'd gladly be one of them.

When Jake notices a patrol of Rangers creeping through some cedars in the distance, she carefully herds the Pilgrims to the picnic area for their prepared lunches, dubbed “Upscale Logging Camp” by the resort’s Michelin-starred chef. Today, it’s artisanal hot dogs with chanterelle ketchup and organic s’mores. While watching them photograph their food, Jake’s eye snags on a particular Pilgrim sitting apart from the group, wearing large sunglasses and an unfashionable cap pulled low. He’s wealthy, some Holtcorp executive or actor no doubt, though Jake would be the last person to know. Because she can’t afford a screen in her staff cabin—her student loan interest payments don’t leave her enough for internet access—she seldom recognizes the resort’s famous visitors. Still, the true celebrities can be identified by that glittery aura they exude, the sense that they’ve forged a deeper connection to the world than regular people like her.

After lunch Jake escorts the Pilgrims to the tour’s grand finale, the largest stand on Greenwood Island, where she hits them with a poetic bit she wrote and memorized years back: “Many of the Cathedral’s trees are over twelve hundred years old. That’s older than our families, older than most of our names. Older than the current forms of our governments, even older than some of our myths and ideologies.

“Like this one,” she says, patting the foot-thick bark of the island’s tallest Douglas fir, a breathtaking tree that she and Knut have secretly named “God’s Middle Finger.” “This two-hundred-and-thirty-foot titan was already a hundred and fifty feet tall when Shakespeare sat down and dipped his quill to begin writing *Hamlet*.” She pauses to watch a stoic solemnity grip the group. She’s laying it on thick, but her hangover has cleared and she’s finally found her rhetorical groove. And when she gets going, she wants nothing less than to wow the Pilgrims with the wonders of all creation. “Each year of its life, this tree has expanded its bark and built a new ring of cambium to encase the ring of growth that came the year before it. That’s twelve hundred layers of heartwood, enough to thrust the tree’s needled crown into the clouds.”

As she's wrapping up, a hand shoots skyward from the back of the group, upon its wrist a thick, dangly Rolex. "A question?" Jake says.

"How much do you think one of these is *worth*?" the celebrity says while kneading his square chin between his finger and thumb. "One tree. Ballpark."

Normally, she'd shimmy out of answering a question of such crudely capitalistic inanity. But coming from that face, from behind those regimentally straight teeth that resemble actual pearls, it nearly sounds witty.

"Oh, I really couldn't say, sir," she says in a serious tone. "These trees are fully protected by Holtcorp's strict preservation—"

"Just toss out a number," he persists.

As a Forest Guide, Jake is routinely advised against making prolonged eye contact with Pilgrims, to avoid interfering with their epiphanies—but she now boldly peers into the greenish depths of the man's expensive sunglasses. "It depends," she says.

"On what?"

"On who's buying. Now are there any other questions?"

"You want a photo?" the celebrity asks her just before they start back. He says it like he's offering an object of great value. She nods and he stands abreast with her directly in front of God's Middle Finger, aiming his phone with a hooked wrist, kinking his neck into the frame. He doesn't know that appearing in photos and selfies are indignities that Forest Guides are contractually obligated to suffer—they're certainly Jake's least favourite part of the job. To think of all the photos she's haunted in her nine years here, a sedately smiling extra, briefly appearing in the brilliant, globe-trotting lives of others.

"What's your name?" the celebrity says, thumbing the screen afterwards. "I'll tag it."

Only because she's required to, she tells him.

His eyebrows crest from beneath the rim of his sunglasses. "Any relation?" he says, doing a little finger twirl, meaning: *to all this?*

Jake shakes her head. “My family are gone,” she says. “And even when they were alive, they weren’t the island-owning type.”

“Sorry,” he says, wincing.

“It’s fine,” she says, forcing a smile. “But we ought to be getting back.”

Just as the group rejoins the path, Jake notices that some patches of needles high up on the east-facing side of the old-growth firs have browned. Odd, especially at this time of year. She calls a premature water break and picks her way back through the waxy salal underbrush while scanning the canopy. The Pilgrims wait at the trail, tapping the toes of their Leafskin hiking boots, eager for the private luxuries of their solar-powered Villas, which are in fact secretly grid-connected, because the primeval canopy allows only enough actual sunlight to power a two-slice toaster or to charge their phones, not both.

Upon closer examination, Jake discovers two firs, both directly adjacent to God’s Middle Finger, whose needles have rusted to a stricken, cinnamon tinge. And down near the soil, she notes that a few sections of their thick, cement-grey bark have gone soggy. A tree’s bark performs the same function our skin does: it keeps intruders out and nutrients in—so any weakening of the bark does not bode well for the tree’s long-term survival. With her heart banging behind her ribs, Jake scrutinizes the soggy tissue as though she’s peering out a car window at a roadside accident—with curiosity and horror, compassion and revulsion—but the bark seems to be intact, and there’s no sign of hostile insects or fungal intrusion. Somewhat satisfied, she takes one last look before hurrying back to the impatient Pilgrims.

To afford her some time to think during the hike back to the Villas, Jake omits her usual speech about the important riparian area that hydrates the forest. *It was only two*, she reassures herself. There were no bugs or funguses, and the surrounding soil looked damp and well aerated, so perhaps the two trees are an anomaly. If they are in fact diseased, it’s something she’s never observed on the island before.

As a dendrologist—a botanist specializing in trees—Jake knows that many tree species suffered catastrophic die-offs long before the Great Withering struck: the American chestnut in the 1900s, the Dutch elm in the 1960s, and the European ash in the 2000s. Insects, fungi, cankers, blights, and rusts: the enemies of trees are many, and include supervillains such as the emerald ash borer, the Asian long-horned beetle, the dreaded fungus *Chalara*. But no single organism is responsible for the Withering, and most scientists (including Jake) attribute it to the climate zones changing faster than the trees could adapt, which weakened their ability to defend themselves against invaders. Though formal research has surely been done, somewhere, scientists are no longer freely sharing their findings since the rise of environmental nationalism and the end of the free internet. Jake's personal hypothesis is that Greenwood Island's local microclimate somehow manages to regulate itself, which allows it to remain hospitable to its trees.

But could it be that whatever has protected the Cathedral for so long has now shifted, leaving its trees newly vulnerable to pathogens and intruders? But why would the Great Withering strike now, after all this time? It's more likely something abiotic and noncontagious, Jake tells herself. A nitrogen shortage or a sunscald. Or a good old-fashioned drought-induced flagging. Or perhaps the two firs have simply grown old and, after living in tandem for a millennium, feeding one another through their mycelial networks and conversing through their scent compounds, their plan is to meet their end together, like a couple married for fifty years who die just days apart.

What I really need is a drink, Jake realizes later, while walking to the staff dining yurt after concluding her final tour of the day. But a drink might tempt her to tell Knut about her discovery. Knut's botanical knowledge is vast, but she can't be certain whether he'd help her diagnose the two ailing trees—recording rainfall and gathering soil and tissue samples to examine under a microscope—or whether he might do something drastic. Though he's brilliant, there's

always been a precariousness to Knut's sanity, a by-product of a green romanticism that Jake fears can't possibly survive the real world's serial letdowns.

And if the Rangers are now patrolling the old-growth in plain sight of the Pilgrims, then management is clearly already on edge. If they found out about the browning they might do something stupid, like spray the entire island with untested fungicides, or cut their losses and relocate the resort to another of the last scraps of heritage forest that remain—most of them also in Canada, with sprinklings in Russia, Brazil, and Tasmania, the majority on small islands.

For now, Jake decides, the pair of sick firs will remain her secret. The Rangers are private soldiers with no scientific expertise, so they won't notice the browned needles. And since the other Forest Guides have prescribed routes and only Jake's loops around to the east of God's Middle Finger, there's little chance they will see them either. Jake knows that Knut often sneaks into the old-growth during his spare time, so he might spot the damage—but his eyes are going, and it isn't likely he could make out needles that high up. Besides, the soggy bark is impossible to see if you aren't expressly looking for it.

So she has time. She only hopes it's not already too late.

