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OUR
LADY
OF THE
FOREST

A NOVEL

DAVID
GUTERSON

AUTHOR OF SNOW FALLING ON CEDARS

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year's best novels." —THE PLAIN DEALER

DAVID GUTERSON

of the
Forest

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Our Lady
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I

Annunciation

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The girl's errand in the forest that day was to gather chanterelle mushrooms in a bucket to sell in town at dusk. According to her own account and the accounts of others in the North Fork Campground who would later be questioned by the diocesan committee, by Father Collins of Saint Joseph's of North Fork, by the bishop's representative, and by reporters covering the purported apparitions—including tabloid journalists who treated the story like a visitation by Martians or the birth of a two-headed infant—the girl left her camp before eight o'clock and walked alone into the woods. She wore a sweatshirt with its hood drawn tight. She didn't speak to others of her intentions. Setting out with no direction in mind, she crossed a maple bottom and a copse of alders, traversed a creek on a rotten log, then climbed a ridge into deep rain forest and began searching for mushrooms in earnest.

As she went the girl ate potato chips and knelt beside rivulets to drink. She swallowed the antihistamine that kept her allergies at bay. Other than looking for mushrooms, she listened for the lonely music of birds and—she confessed this later to Father Collins—stopped twice to masturbate. It was a still day with no rain or fog and no wind

stirring branches in the trees, the kind of stillness that stops time, or seems to, for a hiker. The girl paused often to consider it and to acknowledge her aloneness. She prayed the rosary on her knees—it was Wednesday, November tenth, so she said the Glorious Mysteries—before following an elk trail into country she hadn't visited or perhaps didn't recall, a flat grown up with Douglas firs, choked by blowdowns and vine maple draped with witches'-hair. Here she lay in a bed of moss and was seized by a dream that she lay in moss while a shape, a form—a bird of prey, a luminous man—bore down on her from above.

Rising, she found chanterelles buried in the interstices of liverworts and in the shadows of windfalls. She cut them low, brushed them clean and set them carefully in her bucket. For a long time she picked steadily, moving farther into the woods, pleased because it was a rainless day on which she was finding enough mushrooms to justify being there. They drew her on like a spell.

At noon she read from her pocket catechism, then prayed—Give us this day our daily bread—before crossing herself and eating more potato chips and a package of two chocolate donuts. Resting, she heard the note of a thrush, but muted, faint, and distant. Sunlight now filtered through the trees on an angle through the highest branches and she sought out a broad, strong shaft of it, stippled with boiling dust and litterfall, and lay on her back in its luminous warmth, her face turned toward heaven. Again she slept and again she dreamed, this time of a furtive woman in the trees, lit in darkness as though by a spotlight, who exhorted her to rise from the ground and continue her search for chanterelles.

The girl got up and traveled on. She was lost now in an incidental way and the two strange dreams disturbed her. Feeling a vague desire again, she put her hand between her legs, aimlessly, still walking. A cold or flu had hold of her, she thought. Her allergies and asthma seemed heightened too. Her period had started.

The newspapers reported that her name was Ann Holmes, after her maternal grandmother, who died from sepsis and pneumonia a week

before Ann was born. Ann and her mother, fifteen at Ann's birth, had lived with Ann's grandfather, a long-haul trucker, a man with complicated gambling debts, in a series of rental homes. The newspapers, though, did not uncover that her mother's boyfriend, a methamphetamine addict, had raped Ann opportunistically beginning when she was fourteen. Afterward he would lie beside her with an expression of antic, contorted suffering etching his hairless long face. Sometimes he cried or apologized, but more often he threatened to kill her.

When Ann was fifteen she took a driver's education class, which she missed only once, on a Friday afternoon, in order to have an abortion. Eight months later she expelled her second fetus into the toilet at a minimart on the heels of a bout with nausea. On her sixteenth birthday she bought a two-door car, dented or crumpled in more than one panel, for three hundred and fifty dollars earned foraging for truffles and chanterelles. The next morning, she drove away.

Ann was diminutive, sparrow-boned, and when she covered her head with her sweatshirt hood it was easy to mistake her for a boy of twelve, fair-skinned and dreamy. She often wheezed asthmatically, sneezed feebly, blew her nose, and coughed against her fist or palm. On most mornings her jeans were wet with the rain or dew transferred from the fronds of ferns and her hands looked pink and raw. She smelled of wood smoke, leaves, and rank clothes and had lived for a month in the North Fork Campground in a canvas tent by the river. Others living there told reporters that she'd rigged up a plastic tarp with twine and often sat under it against a log, reading by firelight. Most described her as silent and subdued, though not unpleasant or inspiring unease, not threatening in her estrangement. Those who saw her in the woods that fall—other mushroom gatherers, mostly, but also several elk and deer hunters and once a Stinson Company timber cruiser—were struck by her inconsequence and by the wariness of her eyes in shadow underneath the drawn hood.

A mushroom picker named Carolyn Greer who lived in a van in the North Fork Campground claimed that on an evening in mid-October she had eaten dinner with Ann Holmes, sharing soup, bread and canned peaches and speaking with her of present matters but never of themselves, their histories. Ann had not had much to say. Mostly she

stirred her soup pot, listened, and stared at the flames of the fire. She did indicate a concern for her car, whose transmission no longer allowed her to shift gears or to travel anywhere. The car's battery had petered out, and its windshield and windows appeared permanently clouded with an opaque, viscous vapor. It sat beside her canvas tent, gathering fallen cedar needles, both seats loaded with plastic bags, paper sacks, and cardboard boxes stuffed with her belongings.

Carolyn didn't tell the bishop's representative that while the soup was simmering they got high together. Primarily, it was nobody's business. Furthermore, it implicated her too. Carolyn indulged in pot regularly. It surprised her that Ann, after a few tokes, did not become effusive and talkative, like most stoned people around a campfire. Instead she became even more reserved, more hermetic and taciturn. Her face disappeared inside the hood of her sweatshirt. She spoke when spoken to, terse but polite, and poked incessantly at the wood coals. Her only subject was her dead car.

Stranded, Ann had resorted to the county bus, which stopped at a convenience store a half mile from the campground and dropped her in front of the MarketTime in North Fork for eighty-five cents, one way. She paid, the county driver reported, with exact change, sometimes using pennies, and replied in kind when he greeted her. Once he commented on the mushrooms in her bucket, on their number, size, and golden hue, and she gave him some loosely wrapped in newspaper she found at the back of the bus. On the highway, she slept with her head against the window. Frequently she read from a paperback book he eventually discerned was a catechism. When she got off in town she said thank you or good-bye, her hood still drawn around her face.

A half dozen times she accepted a ride from a mushroom and brush picker named Steven Mossberger, who wore a dense beard, Coke-bottle glasses, and a wool cap pulled low on his temples. Seeing her carrying her bucket of chanterelles and walking the road one afternoon, Mossberger rolled down the window of his pick-up, explained that he lived in the campground as she did, that he picked mushrooms just like her, then asked if she wanted a lift. Ann refused him without affront. No, thanks, she said. I'm okay.

The next time he saw her, in late October, he pulled over at dusk in a modest rain and she accepted without hesitating. When he leaned across to push ajar the door, she got in smelling of wet clothes and mushrooms, set the bucket of chanterelles on her lap, and said, It's a little wet out.

Where are you from? Mossberger asked.

Down in Oregon. Not far from the coast.

What's your name?

She gave him her first. He told her his full name. He put his hand out to shake hers and she slipped her hand into his.

He wanted to believe, afterward, that this moment was freighted with spiritual meaning, that in taking her hand he felt the hand of God, and he described it that way to the diocesan committee and to the bishop's representative—a hand that was more than other hands, he said, connecting him with something deeper than his own life—but in fact, he understood privately, what he felt was probably little more than the small thrill a man gets from shaking hands with a woman.

In North Fork, Ann sold her mushrooms to Bob Frame, a mechanic who worked on logging equipment and ran his mushroom business on the side. Garrulous and jocular most of the time, he spoke with an instinctive brevity and disdain to the first journalist who entreated him. The girl's mushrooms, Frame said, were always meticulously field cleaned, and her bucket contained few culls. Only once, on an evening of bitter rain, did she drink the coffee he kept about as a gratuity for his pickers. For a few minutes she sat by the electric heater, sipping from a Styrofoam cup, watching as he layered mushrooms in newspaper and weighed the day's take on a scale. It seemed to him, working close to her, that she hadn't bathed or laundered her clothing in a long time, maybe weeks. He did recall that she kept her pay in a leather pouch worn around her neck, not in the pocket of her jeans. Her shoes, he noted, were well-worn, the sole of one of them separating from the upper so that her damp wool sock showed through. Even in his shed she wore her sweatshirt hood and kept her hands in her sweatshirt pockets.

Frame didn't tell the journalist that she could give no social security number when he requested one for his records. He'd paid her cash and noted nothing in his books of recompense made to an Ann Holmes, and because of that small worrisome omission he was angry with himself for having said anything about Ann Holmes at all. He spoke to no more journalists afterward and proclaimed in town that the media circus perpetually surrounding the visionary was a spectacle he couldn't participate in and still live with himself. In truth it was the specter of an IRS audit that made him afraid to speak of her, though he did tell his wife, swearing her to secrecy, that once when the girl freed her pouch from her sweatshirt she also inadvertently brought forth a necklace bearing a crucifix, which Bob said glowed a brilliant gold.

From Frame's shed Ann carried her bucket to MarketTime and bought a few things each evening. One checker recalled her proclivity for sugar wafers, small cartons of chocolate milk, deli burritos, and Starbursts. No one else remembered very much, except that she always wore her hood and counted her returned change. She asked for the key to the storeroom toilet more often than other customers and used the dish soap in the utility sink to wash her hands afterward. Occasionally she stuffed pennies in the cans for the Injured Loggers' Fund.

In early November, while foraging for chanterelles, two girls from North Fork came across Ann Holmes in the woods east of town. They were middle-school girls, seventh graders, who had employed the ruse of mushrooming all fall to smoke pot in the woods after school. Besides their mushroom buckets and pocketknives, they brought along a bag of marijuana, a small pipe, and matches. Deeply concerned about getting caught, careful girls who giggled for long stretches after smoking even a little pot, they were mindful of the need for chewing gum, eyedrops, and doses of cheap perfume. They were also ravenous, paranoid, and startled by noises in the forest. The singing of a bird could worry them. A plane overhead, a truck on a distant road, froze them in their tracks, wide-eyed.

They'd been stoned that afternoon for a half hour and were finding mushrooms here and there, giggling together in their usual man-

ner, when they saw Ann Holmes perched on a log, watching them with her hands in her pockets and her sweatshirt hood drawn around her cheeks so that her face lay in shadow. At first they thought she was a boy of their own age, an unfamiliar boy not from their town, and even when they came close enough to see that her bucket was brimming with chanterelles, neither was certain that she wasn't a boy, though they inspected her face closely. Both were conscious of being stoned and wondered if it was observable somehow, if their behavior gave them away. They exerted themselves to act normal. Whoa, said one. You scored.

I should have brought along another bucket.

Amazing.

Ass kicking.

Have you ever noticed that bucket rhymes with fuck it?

Crystal.

Excuse me.

God, Crystal.

I'm sure. It rhymes.

God, Crystal. I'm sure.

They giggled now in a truncated manner, trying to stop themselves. They both put hands over their mouths in an effort to hold in laughter. Ann loosened her sweatshirt drawstring, pushed the hood away from her face, and ran her fingers through her hair. Her hair was short, the color of old straw, matted to her head, unkempt. The others could see now that Ann was a girl, which was not as good as a strange boy in the woods to talk about at school. Are you like from where? one asked.

I'm from the campground.

You were like born there?

They laughed again, covering their mouths. One of them nearly fell over.

You guys are baked, Ann said.

We're not baked we're totally hammered.

I'm like fried. Totally.

I'm like ripped.

Me, too.

They sat cross-legged on the forest floor. The one named Crystal pulled out a deck of cards. The other produced the bag of marijuana. Let's get baked, she suggested. Maybe a little, Ann replied.

They smoked dope, played Crazy Eights, ate a rope of red licorice, some Dots, and a box of Red Hots. Ann asked if they believed in Jesus. Uh oh, said one. Are you a Jesus freak?

I just wonder if you believe in Jesus.

I believe Jesus eats Reese's Pieces.

Jesus is the reason for the season.

They covered their mouths another time. Jesus saves but Moses invests, that's why the Jews are all rolling in money.

They own Hollywood.

Totally.

I have to go home.

What time is it?

It's time to go.

We need some more 'shrooms.

We need magic 'shrooms.

I'd rather do 'shrooms than get baked, wouldn't you?

I quit doing 'shrooms, said Ann.

She gave them each enough chanterelles to help them dupe their parents. God bless, she said. God loves you.

Okay. Whatever.

He does.

At school the next day they told certain people about the Jesus freak in the forest. They said she was probably a lesbian. God, what a weirdo, totally. Dikes for Jesus or something.

God bless. Jesus saves. Freak out.

Three weeks later they saw her picture in the paper, on the front page beside a long article. It's that freak from the woods, said Crystal.

It's totally her.

I can't believe it.

She got too stoned and hallucinated or something.

That little pothead lesbian bitch. I bet she makes money on this.

They told people not to believe in her. That bitch didn't see the Virgin Mary. She was on an acid trip.

Maybe she hallucinated a Madonna video.

Yeah, Like a Virgin.

No, Like a Surgeon.

Weird Al Yankovic I think sucks.

So what are you doing after school today?

I'm totally, completely tired for some reason.

This freaks me out.

Me, too.

I'm totally freaked.

That bitch. What a lez.

She didn't see anything.

The first apparition—on November tenth at three in the afternoon, in the wake of Ann's two disturbing dreams, which she characterized afterward not as dreams but as pregnant celestial visitations—occurred while Ann cleaned a mushroom. She had taken a bandanna from her jeans pocket, folded it into a sanitary pad, and nestled it into her panties. Then, climbing over a steep hill, she'd entered a thicket of salal and Oregon grape not conducive to mushroom picking. This she passed through in fifteen minutes before coming to a sea of moss. The forest here had a dank smell. There were chanterelles, but few in number. She picked them with no particular urgency; the cold she felt coming made her feel listless, and her bucket was nearly full.

She was brushing dirt from the gills of a mushroom when she noticed a strange light in the forest. Later she described it as a ball of light hovering silently between two trees, also as a bright floating orb about the size of a basketball. It was lit from inside, not from without, not like a mirror, jewel, or prism but more like a halogen lightbulb. It didn't waver or wax and wane like a candle and appeared, like a helium balloon, free of gravity, aloft and attached to nothing. A nimbus surrounded it like fog or gauze. She thought that perhaps it revolved in place like a small planet or a moon.

When Ann felt confident it was not a mirage, a trick of the forest, or a problem with her vision, she picked up her bucket and ran. A number of mushrooms hopped out and spilled, and she lost a few dozen when she tripped on a nurse log, but she didn't stop until her lungs forced her to; then she sprawled behind a tree, pulled free her rosary, made the sign of the cross, and recited, silently, the Apostles' Creed. The light, she thought, hadn't followed her, thankfully, so she said an Our Father and three Hail Marys, and when it appeared that she was safe where she lay, hidden between two clefting roots, she went on through the remainder of the rosary, whispering all of it at high speed.

It was, she felt certain, not a fantasy or dream but more like something from a science-fiction movie, a UFO or a government experiment she wasn't supposed to know about. She didn't want to present herself out in the open and stayed behind the concealment of ferns where she could watch for it in pursuit of her and, if need be, flee again. But the woods, as always, were indifferently still; there was no sign of a traveling light. Ann clutched her rosary between her cold fingers. Perhaps, it occurred to her, troublingly, the light had something to do with Saran.

When she saw it again, off to her left, it seemed to her that it was spinning violently, or vibrating and shimmering. It was closer this time, and lower too, and feeling now that she couldn't outrun it she held up her rosary like a shield. Leave me alone, get out of here! she said. Just get out of here!

Instead, as she told her inquisitors later, it glided toward her in a frightening arc, dropping first and then advancing. It loomed larger and more distinct until it was clearly a human figure—she could make out a spectral, wavering face and a pair of incandescent hands—levitating just off the forest floor thirty yards away. It was now too brilliant, too luminous, to behold, so still staving it off with the rosary, she used her free hand to cover her eyes and peeked, squinting, between her fingers. Don't hurt me! she said, feeling at its mercy. Please, please, go away!

She dropped to her knees, squeezed shut her eyes, and told God she would never sin again in return for divine intervention. She told herself,

too, that she meant it. She meant to keep this bargain. When she looked once more, a few seconds later, the light was already retreating through the trees, borne away like a soap bubble, silent, swift, and ascending through branches but touching none, no needles or leaves, avoiding obstacles as if it could see them, guiding itself in departure.

Ann, relieved, found her way out of the woods in slightly more than an hour. At her campsite she sat in her car for a long time, blowing her nose and shivering. That evening she couldn't eat anything or concentrate on reading her Bible and feeling uneasy about the coming night, went with a flashlight to Carolyn Greer, who lay in her sleeping bag inside her van, reading by the glow from a candle lantern and eating baby carrots. It's raining, said Carolyn. Come on in. You don't really look too . . . healthy.

I think I have a cold, answered Ann.

The shades were drawn and a small cone of incense burned in a cast-iron pan. Rain battered the van's roof like gravel falling from the sky. Ann's face, in the candle's glow, was grave and animated. Carolyn lay and listened to Ann's story. When it was finished she sighed, sat up, stretched, slipped a marker into her book, and pulled a rubber band around the bag of carrots. It sounds like the sun, said Carolyn.

I was in the woods. There wasn't any sun.

You must have been dreaming.

I wasn't asleep.

You don't think you were.

Well take right now. It was like right now. Right now I know I'm completely awake. I don't have to pinch myself or anything like that. No way I'm really sleeping.

How do you know?

I'm completely awake.

Were you high, Ann?

That isn't it.

A ball of light. Floating around.

With a person in it, like I said. A ball of light. Exactly.

It sounds to me like it has to be the sun. Didn't you ever look at the sun too long? Today—today it was sunny.

But I was in the woods. In shade.

That or else you were having a dream. I've had dreams I thought were real. What else could it be?

It could be something like a UFO.

I don't think so. UFOs? That just doesn't work for me. I'm totally rational about things.

Well it wasn't normal.

A UFO?

It's crazy, I agree with you.

How can a little ball of light floating around out in the woods with a person's face inside of it be an unidentified flying object?

I don't know. It's crazy.

A UFO is a spaceship. If you believe in UFOs, they're spaceships.

I don't believe in them.

So it wasn't one.

It was something though.

It was just the sun.

You keep coming back to that.

What else is there?

I don't know. An experiment? The government doing something?

Do you mean like maybe the CIA? Is that what you think is going on here?

I don't know. The military?

The military doing something with a little ball of light that has a person stuck inside it.

Ann gave no answer to this. Carolyn tossed her the bag of carrots. Have some, she said. Go ahead.

Ann sat with the carrots in her lap. I'm a Christian, she said. Sort of. I guess. And the devil hates all Christians.

So now you're saying what you saw was the devil?

Satan hates religious people.

Then it's good that I'm not religious, isn't it.

No it's not. You should be something.

But science explains things so much better. The earth getting made in six days? Women coming from the ribs of men? Who can believe that nonsense?

That's not the right way to read the Bible. You have to interpret it.