

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA
Season 1 Episode 6: The Witch Queen Chapter II: Doubt

Old Gods of Appalachia is a horror anthology podcast and thus may contain material not suitable for all audiences, so listener discretion is advised.

Winter in Appalachia is one of the most beautiful ways that a man could ever die. The silence of a snow-covered mountaintop is breathtaking in more than a few ways. See, the mountains of the Cumberland will present you like an altar to a slate and death colored sky. The wind knows your name but only speaks it when you have no more need of it. The cold of that December is a slow seduction of crystalizing respirations that fills the body with a white, burning numbness. This frozen purgatory, this middle Hell, this cellar where a body is set so that spring thaw can return it to the earth...

Well, this is where Timothy Vanover of the logging camp-turned-incipient town of Yellow Oak found himself on the day after Christmas in 1821. Brother Tim, still spry and keen of eye at the ripe old age of 27, had been hunting, trying to clear his head from a disorienting few days. He had not counted on the snow picking back up, much less a second full-on storm. When all was said and done, it had blown through and painted the world a blinding shade of heaven that erased all track and would have spun the compass of the most seasoned traveller.

Tim Vanover was not the world's most seasoned traveller. In fact, he hated travelling. Hated wandering in these woods foraging and hunting for food when the supply wagons were delayed by snow. He'd only come here on the behest of his father-in-law-to-be, now his father-in-law in fact to scout a potential logging territory. He'd done the initial outlay and returned to New York and as a reward been allowed to marry Albert Dunaway's daughter Clara and then he returned here without her to get things up and running along with her know-it-all brother Anson Dunaway.

Yellow Oak was a solid encampment of veteran woodsmen and foresters, and what started out as a tent-driven town now had real buildings and was feeling more and more like a place of trade and commerce every day. Wives were being sent for, children brought in, houses were being established. And it was to that tune that with absolutely no correspondence and zero warning, Clara Vanover had arrived in Yellow Oak.

Now, it's said that absence makes the heart grow fonder, but to Tim's perception it seemed like his absence had just made Clara grow – more than likely it was his brief visit home for the honeymoon. Because when Clara Vanover made her way off the wagon, her body was swollen and glowing – full up with their child. But Tim had never wanted to be a father if he was honest. His own old man had been a thieving drunk who left Tim and his momma to fend for themselves, so he didn't feel like he had a lot to go on on ways of example. But here it was. And after two solid days of waiting on his flower of a wife hand and foot and worrying about everything from her not making

through the labor to the baby not even being his, to how badly he would in fact fail as a father – he decided he had to get out of the house, get out of the town, at least for a day... or he might run for real.

Now, Tim had never hunted a day in his life, but a' hunting he would go. See, Tim was good with measuring and he was good with figures and he was usually pretty good at being careful. You'd think the measuring part might help him figure out that he was only half a mile away from camp when he got lost and it was just obscured by the next rise in the snowfall – but it didn't. And you might think that since Tim Vanover was usually one of the most cautious and logistically prepared people ever to ride south, that he might have dressed warmer preparing for every logistical emergency that might arise, that he would have dressed warmer, brought better supplies – but he didn't. He'd rushed out of town so quick he'd woefully underpacked and didn't think it would get that cold. But it did. You also might have thought that he would remember that there were two trails back home. Two trails that he himself had surveyed when the site was established: one that led back to town from the deeper woods. It rounded right into a tight curve but then the road widened back out to a safe spot, and then there was the one that went to the left. It looked similar but it petered out into a dropoff that was a surefire way to break your neck.

I'll give you two guesses which one our distracted brother Timothy chose. Hell, the first one won't even count.

So there he lay, baby on the way, back likely broken. The white arms of a mountain winter opening to take him home. He'd closed his eyes and prepared to sleep his last when he heard footsteps approaching through the snow and a woman's voice.

[The winds of a blizzard. Footsteps crunching through deep snow.]

“Halloo? Oi there – you! A-Are you dead? You don't look dead. Not yet anyway. Does he smell dead, Bartholomew?”

Tim's senses were overwhelmed by the heat and musk of a massive animal, something larger than just about anything he'd ever been around. He breathed deep and almost gagged, his eyes closed tight. What was that, a horse? A bull? The heat and nearness was tremendous as he felt a huge snout nuzzle him and give a loud *grunt* and Tim opened his eyes wider than he ever thought he could to see a bear the size of his worst nightmare moving away from him and not just the largest bear to ever live, but a bear in the company of a woman. A young woman no – she couldn't be more than twenty, maybe? She had her hair bundled up under a woolen hood. Her face was only visible because she'd unwrapped a scarf to be able to speak... to... a bear. Tim knew he was dying now. Or had died, or had lost his senses on his way to dying, but he watched as this woman... girl? It was hard to tell her age, but he watched her as she removed that

hood and shook out a mane of russet hair that framed her pale face and made her gray eyes shine.

“Oh, you’re not dead at all!” she exclaimed and she leaned down and cupped his chin hard, looking into his eyes – her face and hair and sweet scent overpowering his senses as much as the bear had – wait where, where did the bear go, there had been a bear hadn’t there but – but – right now she was all he could process. Her eyes were like flint. Seeking, questioning. Seemed a mind beyond his understanding lay behind them. Her features were not delicate or ‘finely made’ as his pig of a father-in-law would say – but there was a fierce nobility to this young woman. A survivor’s grace.

“I think we can move him,” he heard her say. “Oh, but first...”

Then Timothy felt a glass jar being tipped to his lips and he swallowed – and everything was warm and his vision grew soft around the edges. He watched as she wrestled her hair back under her hood and rewrapped the scarf around her mouth. She’s more than beautiful, his drowsing mind offered – she’s downright regal. You know, like a queen.

[The Land Unknown by Landon Blood]

I walk these hills, leave these dark valleys,

Where I can’t stay in the land unknown

In these hills that I walk so often,

I can feel the winds now on your ghost...

She'd gotten the man back to the little town that had sprung up down by the bend in what they were callin' the Clinch River – she'd had Bartholomew go home first so not to scare the other folks, but she'd hobbled up by herself with the broken man on a sled and given him back to his people. Her heart swooned when she saw his wife go to pieces when she saw him. Oh, that girl was eight months in if anything, and she looked fit to pop right there.

She asked the boss at the gate if they had a doctor to look to the woman and the man – place like this might, they'd gone from tents to sheds to real buildings in just a few years. They said they had a doctor who come in every 3 months and a Granny to tend to the man or deliver the baby if it came to that before then. She'd met their Granny before. She'd found her out gathering in the far corner of her valley and they knew each other that way on sight. She looked like an older woman who had much of the knowledge but only some of the gift. She was not a threat, but she was not a friend either.

They traded pleasantries, if not names, greeted each other as 'sister,' and the woman had apologized if she had crossed any of her lines – she had not – but she thanked her all the same. The woman would not meet her eyes though.

In an earlier day when she was younger she might have took that as a warning sign, but now, in her 65th year of walking these hills our good daughter Dooley knew it wasn't the other woman's fault, it was on her.

She could smell it on her, she bet.

She had accepted the deal offered by the dark and the Stag. She had been allowed to grow to her 19th year, and in fact had not aged one day past it. Hell, she was old enough to be a granny herself by now, and her hair remained as lush and full in its red-brown glory, her face untouched by time or weather. Her body stayed young and spry and fertile. She'd cut her hands and wrists and arms a thousand times over by accident and on purpose – and bore not a single scar. Fire refused to burn her, cold was merely a discomfort. The magic of what this land was and what lay beneath this land healed her, kept her young and strong.

But it kept her for itself.

Now, she knew that Yellow Oak had a Granny – she had no idea why she'd even asked. It was not like she didn't have plenty of her own chores to do: a garden to tend, animals to raise and feed and butcher when it was time. She wanted for nothing. If she had a

desire or a need like food, clothing, tools, Hell even like beer or liquor, it would just appear wrapped in brown paper on her porch the next day.

Well that was another thing, she had a porch. She had a proper house now. The pathetic little shed she'd been abandoned in as a girl had not been torn down but had been built onto, in some places built around. See, early one morning in her 20th year, not long after she'd stopped aging and she'd realized it, six men emerged from the forest who did not speak. Men with blank eyes and black jaws who had clearly walked miles without food or water. They gave her a letter written in a sprawling black script that was not signed – and in the future they never would be – but this letter explained these men were hers, and they were to make her comfortable, and she should use them however she wished.

She swore she heard the Beast's blush-rousing laugh when she read that last bit. She had no idea why she blushed. She had no use for men that way. She had no use for women that way, either. Solitude suited her in that way it seemed – that didn't keep her from being lonely, though. The Six Men, as she came to call them, were poor company. They did not speak, but they would listen and do whatever she asked.

She learned, though, that she had to be very careful when she told them what to do. Once, she told them to fetch wood to build her a new privy and off into the woods they went. Two hours later they came back with wood that had already been painted and nailed – clearly torn from an existing house. The men's hands were bloody – their faces

spattered with it. She told them to stand still and not move. She proceeded to make the hour long walk to where a new homestead had appeared about a year earlier in the next big holler over. She found the young family there dead. Even the children. Beaten and strangled. Pieces of the front porch and door had been torn away. Torn away and carried to her valley.

[Animalistic snarls.]

She swore and ran back to her land to find the Six Men standing there exactly where she'd told them to stay, blinking stupidly into the sun. Her blood boiled. She wanted to tear them limb from limb and burn them alive, but she knew this wasn't their fault. Hell, she doubted there were men left in those bodies.

This was Its doing. And It would answer for it, maybe not today, but soon enough.

That day, she tasked the Six Men with cutting trees and sawing wood to build that new privy, this time and to stay in her sight while they did it. When they were done they just dropped their tools, bowed to her like courtly gentlemen and ambled back into the woods and disappeared.

Over the years they had built her a whole new house around her little shack. She knew it very important that it remain standing: rotten wood, old iron nails and all. It became the

center of her most sacred space. More room for drying herbs and tables for other work if she could move her bed and belongings elsewhere.

There had been a time when she believed she had made the right choice. There were unnatural things happening in this place and there were unjust and unclean men doing them. The letters led her to these men that she dealt with them to protect the land. That, she promised. A little dogbane in the water supply of the surveyors who would've dug up a hillside for the minerals. Buried the worst of them and sent the rest puking home to warn others. And the creeping fungus that ate the tents and the clothes of the men who came to lay out lines for a church camp? They went home with holes in their feet if they still had feet at all.

Those things were easy, even enjoyable at times. But the other things. Rituals. Readings. Things she did not understand or sometimes even remember all. At times where her body was more conduit than creator. By the time she'd reached her 30th year she'd come to dread them. She became less confident in her choice. She had begun to truly doubt.

And then there was Last Harbor.

Last Harbor – so named because the seafaring men who settled there thought they were in fact settling there for good – had been a settlement to the far south and east of her land. The letter the Six Men had brought her said that she was to go there and live for

half a year. To leave most of her belongings in the valley and take only what she needed. She would watch and observe. Should they need her to act to protect the land, she would know. She was to present herself as a young midwife and herb gatherer. She had lost her husband in the flood last spring and had no place to go. They would agree to let her stay. They would not question nor harm her. Certainly no man would be allowed to touch her. She was to wait and to watch. They would tell her what was next.

She was overjoyed – to live amongst people again? Well that might feed her soul, she thought. Maybe even to find the company of another of her kind to talk with, to practice with. Could this be her reward for all the ugly things she'd been made to do for these years that had passed like rainwater? She packed one of her mothers' trunks and stepped outside to find a cart waiting. A cart drawn by a coal black draft horse and being driven by the youngest of the Six Men. She locked up her house and set her wards and set out for Last Harbor not knowing neither she, nor these woods would ever be the same once she returned.

[I Cannot Escape The Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

There is a curse upon my every waking breath,

And I cannot escape the darkness...

Happy holidays, family. I hope you've had a grand and peaceful time of celebration over the past few days. Hope your bellies are full and your hearth is blazing and everyone is safe and warm inside. Not that it's that cold out here in North Carolina, I can tell you that much right now. Did you expect to be back with young daughter Dooley so soon? Hmm. I didn't think you did, I thought it'd be a delightful Christmas present to hide her under your tree. And don't worry, there's more to come. You definitely need to know all about Last Harbor. Things are gonna change in the new year, family. They most certainly are. And I appreciate y'all staying with me thus far. And I know you're gonna see us the rest of the way home, ain't you? S'what I thought.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Our intro music is written and performed by Landon Blood. Our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell. We hope by now in this shadow of the solstice you have completed your social media ritual, finding us on Facebook and Instagram as Old Gods of Appalachia and come tweet into the void with us @OldGodsPod on Twitter.

We want to thank everyone who has joined us in the Fellowship Hall Facebook group, you can find us there and come congregate. Also this week we launched a Discord server! That's a new thing to me but, uh, we're out there. You can actually find that in the Fellowship Hall Facebook group. We'll make the information readily available on Twitter and other places as well. We also launched our merch store, the Threadless

Shop, the Mercantile. OldGodsOfAppalachia.Threadless.com. Buy brand-new t-shirts and other forms of other merchandise on there at fairly reasonable prices and we hope you would consider going forth in our raiment. Represent our family wearing our colors and our sigils. Every dollar that comes in helps us make this show bigger and better and extends our reach.

And speaking of extending our reach, consider supporting us on Patreon. For a few dollars a month, we can solve the complex puzzles and unlock the mad new locks that separate us from existing in this reality permanently. And also we got some baller prizes coming out. www.Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia

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