

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 2 Episode 12: The Other Queen

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

And in these woods there are two queens. Now you have learned some of the elder and her journey into the wilds where she found blood and darkness, fire and shade, the songs of mothers and the secrets of bears. You bore witness when she pressed her ear to the chest of the mountain and heard the whispers that came from the inner dark and made the mistake of answering them. You watched her walk the paths of darkest night and discover the corruption within her own soul. You watched her face down her betrayer and, well, you were left wondering, weren't you? Her story is far from finished, Family. You'll hear it soon enough. Just not right now.

The time has come to tell you of the younger queen. For her story is of bone and shadow, pine and forest floor; of time lost and purpose found with a beginning hidden inside an ending. You see, it's thought the younger died in childbirth when she was about twelve. She and her babe were buried on the far side of the hill on the other side of the road; far from where any decent folk might go. No one would ever say who the babe's daddy was, cause it would cost too much. But his blood did things to the girl and the child best not discussed in the light of day. Nor in the black of night, come to that.

Beneath the soil the girl continued to age and grow as unnatural as a voiceless bird. Near her twentieth birthday she crawled from her makeshift grave, the husk of the babe still latched to her breast, skin pale and flaking, eyes alight with a malice and a hunger for vengeance. See, there is not enough death in this world to let her heart truly know peace. The earth that

surrounds what was once her grave is devoid of life and every plant or tree that sprung from it is dead. That place is watched by both grannies and haints with equal fear and trepidation. Her half of the wood is dried and singing poplar; the wind always a soft song of burial. The things that walk these woods are worse than dead. Sometimes rotten things made of flesh but, other creatures born of the sinews of trees, formed of tangled roots and mottled bark, forgotten bones long buried in the palace of the green raised up and dressed in new raiments of vine and briar, leaves and shadow, carefully crafted into the wondrous and horrible new forms to do the bidding of their dark mother; their matriarch; their monarch. We call her the Dead Queen.

[The Land Unknown: Hollow Heart version by Landon Blood]

A cold wind calls

And so I follow

No time to rest these weary bones;

I hear her song

And my heart goes hollow

Best not to walk these woods alone

Best stick to the roads

Stay out of the shadow;

Best get on home

Best to leave them ghosts alone

She has walked these hills like the shadow of a circling buzzard for generations. If good Daughter Dooley is wild overgrowth in the sticky sin of summer, her younger counterpart is the hulk of black mountain laid bare by winter. A naked skull fringed by an army of the life

bereft. And as there are legends of the elder sister in the plateau, the stories of the witchy woman in the woods, the ghost mother, the vengeful bride that looks in your winder for her baby abound across all of Appalachia. Amongst the eastern band of the Cherokee she might be mistaken for one of the Raven Mockers, twisted witches that lay in the way of darkness prepared to steal away the livers and lives of the sick and the dying. Why over in Pikeville, Kentucky they might tell you she's Miss Octavia Hatcher who was buried alive and haunts the land her body sleeps in, hands all bloody from raking at the inside of her casket. In the Cumberland Gap they'd warn you of the pale and hungry mother who wanders the hills like an old blind wolf and would eat you right up with all her mouths if you went too far into the wrong woods. These yarns were spun to teach you to stay safe and mind common sense and most importantly your mama. The stories that get lost, though, the ones hardly nobody ever lived to tell, were often just blunt and simple warnings: There is darkness here. Fear it. Trust those who can see through it and you might live to see the dawn. Or then again, maybe not.

Craw, Tennessee is not a place you will find on any map. It was never a town, a village, or any form of recognised locality for which you could find a charter filed away in a courthouse somewhere. But Craw was a home. For Big Jim Gibson and his family it was a second chance. See the Gibsons were not strangers to putting down roots and having to dig em back up again, cause when your family ain't nobody, and you and your kin had done some time in the penitentiary, finding work amongst the God fearing people of Isaac, West Virginia was just more trouble than it's worth. Every prospect that Jim, his daddy Robert, and his little brother Ricky Lee ever had just dried up and blew away. Hell, Jim missed the first four years of his little boy's life while he was locked up. He wasn't going back inside. And when you live someplace where an honest living ain't an option sometimes you just have to move on.

It was Ricky Lee who set out for east Tennessee first. Found himself a job laying track with Lock Railroad, started sending money back home. Once Big Jim saw there was money to be made working for the L side of the B and L combine, and the checkered past weren't an issue

why, he joined his younger brother. Within a year they'd made enough to buy a middling little patch of scrubland in the middle of nowhere between the Tennessee and North Carolina line. A new homestead sat at the top of a modest hill. There were blackberry bushes on one side and a pond down and around t'other. And some nights the thick sweetness of the air and the songs of the frogs down by the pond made it seem like a little patch of heaven. Now the soil wasn't as rich as it could be, and the trees left standing were ugly old things jutting up out of the earth like the clutching fingers of a corpse. It wasn't much; when they were done with it it would be theirs. And thus the Gibson family had given it a name. Big Jim had painted that name as half a joke on an old plank of wood posted up at the bottom of the hill: Welcome to Craw! Cause you see this is where they finally stuck. This may not have been the brothers' first mistake, but it would be their last. There's power in a name, Family. Believe it and know.

Little Caleb Gibson hadn't had many friends. He'd not gone to school in town back in Isaac and his health had kept him from being as robust and outdoorsmen as Big Jim would have liked but he was a good boy, and his daddy and his uncle and his papaw and his mommy loved him. They told him stories of how proud the Gibson boys had stood for the union during the war; how brave his great-papaw had been even when they had to take his leg. Gibson men were tough, and Gibson men were brave.

"That was doc-u-ment-a-ble," his daddy would tell him when he tucked him in, tickling his boys ribs with each part of the word. And they told him stories that would keep him safe, too. Stories of the woolyboogers that would carry him off if he went to bed without saying his prayers. Long ago stories about a giant looking for his big toe, and of the witch woman who might come in the night and try to carry off little boys who were out of bed after the lights done put out. It's a delicate balance to teach a boy to be both brave enough and scared enough to live in the world at ten years old. It's a balance that can sometimes go...all kinds of wrong.

The first time Caleb saw the woman in the woods he had in fact been out of bed after lights out, just like his mommy had told him not to. He'd had a dream that they'd had chickens and cows on their land. That this new homestead had blossomed into the farm his daddy always talked about having and he was convinced he heard them clucking and mooing and carrying on outside. So he snuck down the stairs of the tall pine wood house and peered out the front door. Now there were no chickens nor cows of course, and the lot was silent and still. And Caleb got a little bit scared of how quiet it were if he was honest. See there's something about living out away from town in the deep part of the night, that part that can't rightly call itself morning but is deep in the blue-black of a time that is best spent sleeping so you don't see what passes by your winder in the gloom. And he was about to turn and slip back into the house when he saw her. She was standing right on the edge of the property line, right by that one big tree that his papaw had said was a hawthorn tree, and thus bad luck to cut down. She wasn't that tall of a woman and she was pale, ghostly so. Her hair hung in tatters about her face, sticks and leaves matted all in it. He could see that from the porch. She was staring at his papaw's house like she was trying to burn a hole in it with her mind. Papaw wasn't even in that house yet. Papaw was sleeping in the downstairs room on a cot; cause daddy and Uncle Ricky were still putting the roof on that house. Caleb watched the strange woman for a minute. He yawned real big and when he opened his eyes she was gone. Caleb crept back up to the loft that he slept in and did not sleep again that night.

First thing the next morning Caleb went straight to his mama and asked her about the witchy woman from the old stories. Would she really come and lead you into the woods and give you to the devil if she caught you up after bedtime? He told her about his dream and coming downstairs and seeing a scary woman at the edge of the property. His mama gave him a look for being out of bed and that look probably would have turned into a smack if she hadn't seen how scared her baby was.

“Now, honey,” Brunetta Gibson began, “the witchy woman only comes when you been *real* bad. I don’t think you been *real* bad, have you? I bet you was just dreamin’ one big dream. You probably never come down them steps last night. Now you just be a good boy and mind your daddy and I don’t think you need to worry about no witchy woman comin’ to take you.”

Caleb smiled and felt a little better, and went out to start his day. Oh, and that day was a good day. He played in the yard and let the warm September afternoon wash into a cool fall evening. That time of the year when you can feel summer stretch her bones and start to get out of the way for changing leaves and cool mornings. He helped his daddy stack firewood and they hung the door on Papaw’s new house. Daddy said Paw and Ricky would be able to move in later in the week. They were *doing* it. They were making themselves a real home, at last.

A week after Papaw and Ricky moved into their shared house Caleb saw the woman again. He’d been stirred from his sleeping by a ruckus in the side yard. Caleb had laid in the dark for a while and listened and he could hear what sounded like dogs barking and growling and getting into things so again he crept down the stairs. This time he stepped out on the porch to look for them dogs. But before saw hide nor hair of the canine variety he looked to the hawthorn tree and there she was, whisper pale and corpse skinny, like a scarecrow working the hoot owl. She was looking from Papaw’s house back to their house. Back and forth like she was trying to decide which door to knock on first. Her eyes like undug wells, bottomless pits under the crabgrass scraggle of her matted hair, and then she turned her head back toward the porch and Caleb’s heart nearly stopped. He ducked low, hustling back through the front door and tiptoed his way to the kitchen so he could see the yard from there. He wanted to wake his daddy, get him to scare this strange woman and her dogs away, started to call out but then he remembered - Gibson men are tough. Gibson men are brave. He made it to the kitchen window and looked out. There were in fact two dogs sniffing around and playing with each other in his yard. Now Caleb didn’t like dogs. Sorry, y’all. He’d been scared

of dogs since he got spooked by a stray he found in the woods behind their old house when he was littler. And dogs made him nervous in the daylight and on a good day but these dogs? These dogs were...wrong. Caleb couldn't tell you how but something in their movement and in the wet, growling sound of their barks, it was just...wrong. These dogs seemed to ripple as they moved, their bodies scrawny and more than half starved, loping across in jerky twitches and starts and stops and they nipped and bit at each other and Caleb swore he saw one of them tear a mouthful off t'other but just watching the two animals play or, whatever it was they were doing, made Caleb feel sick to his stomach. And he looked up from the dogs to find the pale woman staring straight at him through the kitchen winder. She had not moved, but Caleb could feel the weight of her regard like an icy wet blanket against him. He thought he could almost smell her damp, rotten breath. She raised a hand in a gesture that was almost, but not quite, like a greeting, and the two dogs collapsed. One second they were wrestling in the yard, the next they dissolved into nothing, like they'd been made of moonlight and mud and they just melted silently back into the earth.

The next morning after breakfast, a hurried and argumentative affair in which he was not permitted to leave the table til his bread and preserves were all gone, Caleb went out to the spot where he'd seen the dogs and found proof he had not been dreaming. Right where the dogs had vanished was a slick of rotten leaves and what looked like old roots pulped up and ground into the dirt. The smell of rot and rancid meat hung about the spot as if something had died there days ago and only just this morning had been hauled away. He found himself a stick in the yard and did what all little boys will do when confronted with a mess and poked at the slimy pile of rot, finding an animal's jaw bone, some old rotten, busted teeth, and a single dead eye. Caleb got sick right there and then ran in the house to get his mama, and when she followed him back outside to check that spot on the ground she found nothing but Caleb's sick on the grass. Between the bad dreams and painting the side yard with his breakfast Brunetta was beginning to worry her son might be coming down with something,

so she scooped her little man up and carried him up to his bed where he'd spend the rest of that last day.

Later that night, while Brunetta Gibson dozed in the rocking chair at his bedside, Caleb woke and sat bolt upright in bed. He was aware of himself but at the same time he was sure this was a dream. It had to be. He wasn't doing this. He wasn't telling his body to sit up or try to get out of bed. Well, he tried to wake his mama, see if she was dreaming too. All the same he swung his legs over the edge and put his britches on and then his shirt, tied up his shoes on the first try so this had to be a dream cause Caleb Gibson was still learning the trick of tying them shoes. And then with every bit of care he'd taken before he crept down the stairs and went out into the yard. There were no dogs this time, just that eerie silence that made everything so much worse. But she was there. Like a chunk of the moon in the shape of a dead woman standing vigil by the hawthorn tree. Well, his dream double backflipped itself into nightmare territory as he found himself walking right up to her, try as he might to stop his feet, to turn around and run back to the house where he belonged. Close up she was a horror. Her clothes were old and rotted like she'd been buried in them. The bones of her near skeletal face pushed against her skin like dull knives through cheesecloth. She was all angles and wrong bent joints rank with the stench of fever and sweat-soaked bandages. She breathed heavily but did not speak. She held out one hand. Caleb, to his growing horror, watched as his body betrayed him further, his left hand reaching out to take her right one, and followed her into the dark woods.

[I Cannot Escape the Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

There is a curse upon my every waking breath

And I cannot escape the darkness

Well, hey there, Family. Welcome to your first full episode in our first steps into season two of Old Gods of Appalachia: In the Pines. Welcome to Craw, Tennessee, where you have been

introduced to the Other Queen. Now I know y'all want to know what happens to little Caleb as he wanders into the woods with the old witchy woman. A lot of stories just end that way. Hmm. Y'all know how we do things around here, and y'all know that's not what's happening here so we'll, we'll go further into the woods next time around. And, Family, I would be remiss in my duties if I did not ask you to make sure that you complete your social media ritual. In fact, why don't you head over to oldgodsofappalachia.com where you can follow us on Facebook, Instagram, tweet into the void with us on Twitter @OldGodsPod. Join the Discord server which has blown up and is now, like, over a thousand plus pe-, I don't know, a zillion people are on our Discord. It's kind of quiet sometimes but I feel like it's just blown up in the past little bit. Uh, and as always, if you wish to cast your lot in with us, if you wish your name to be written on the roll, Family, join us on Patreon, patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia, we have opened up a bunch of upper tiers that have benefits that range from having a character named after somebody in your family or something you come up with, to getting to play test our new role playing game that will be coming in the new year, to other varied and sundry things both material and immaterial, patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia. Oh, and by the way if you pledge \$10 or more a month you get access to seventeen episodes of Build Mama a Coffin, along with other fantastic digital exclusives. It's really a good bang for your buck scenario, in terms of content. Family, we love you and we treasure you and we just want to remind you that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of Deep Nerd Media. Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell. Our intro music is by Landon Blood and our outro music once again is by Those Poor Bastards. See you soon, Family. Real soon.

And I cannot escape the darkness

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