

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

### Season 3, Episode 34: On Oak Mountain

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

Oak Mountain sits like a jewel amongst the glory of West Virginia's mountains, lush and green and untouched by the destructive hand of industry. For three generations now, the Underwood family has made it their home, and they tend it well, protecting this land from the avarice of loggers and big coal alike. When the logging company had knocked on Marigold and Doc Underwood's door, with an eye to stripping the mountain of its eponymous oaks, the couple had politely declined. And when the slick lawyers from Barrow & Locke came sniffing around, looking to expand the Kingston mining operations into the coal deposits beneath their feet, making their promises — and later, threats — the Underwoods had stood firm. In return, the mountain has helped keep them safe through all manner of troubles.

Today, trouble has found its way to the family's very door. In the deepening shadows of an autumn dusk, a long black Cadillac winds its way up the twisting mountain to the tidy, well-maintained wood frame house that Marigold Underwood and her late husband Doc built decades ago, in the early years of their marriage. Its white wood cladding and blue front door and shutters are clean, painted within the past couple of years, and the picket fence that stands around the yard straight. A red mailbox rests at the gate, set onto a sturdy iron post. The porch is lined with well-tended beds seeded with flowers and fragrant herbs. A child's rope-and-board swing hangs from a stout oak in the front yard. Soft, welcoming light glows from behind sheer curtains hung in the windows on the first floor. It is a place that speaks of comfort. Of safety. Of home. And of *power*.

It's a subtle power, though. The Underwoods are not showy or flashy folk. And thus, it goes unremarked by Polly Barrow and her Hollow Men as Mr. Churchman pulls their car to a stop just by the mailbox, down the hill from the house proper. It's a sizable house, Polly muses, on a good piece of land. A foreman, maybe? There was nothing about it in her notes, but perhaps they've uncovered a traitor in management. The thought makes her smile.

The three are silent as Mr. Crain steps from the car. He reaches back inside to heft a woven basket laden with what at first glance might be a load of blankets, wraps himself in shadows, and proceeds silently up the drive to deposit their unexpected gift on the Underwoods' front porch. Just as he's done before, he returns to the car and closes the door quietly. There's no good place to hide the car on Oak Mountain Road, a narrow, twisty mountain track that winds itself up around the mountain and back down the other side. But the house is isolated — the Underwoods, as it turns out, own the whole damn mountain and have permitted no other settlement here. No one will hear any disturbance in the night and come running to investigate. And thus far, all has gone precisely to plan. They've grown confident in their methods. So Polly, Crain and Churchman drive back down the mountain and into Kingston for the night.

From behind the curtains in her foyer, Miz Marigold Underwood watches the black car drive off down the road. When its taillights have faded and she can no longer hear the crunch of gravel under its tires, she opens her door and steps out to see what the three strangers in the Caddy have left behind. Her daughter, Nina, hovers protectively inside the door, eyes sweeping the darkness for any further signs of mischief.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Well, now. I've had poisoned pies, boxes of roaches, and all manner of nastiness left on my doorstep, but this is a first.

NINA: What is it, Mama?

As Miz Marigold kneels down and carefully lifts the swaddled bundle up from the basket, Nina Jennings hears the unmistakable sound of a baby's curious babbling. Surprised, she peers over her mama's shoulder.

NINA: Oh sweet Jesus! Is that—?

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Mmhmm. Somebody's dumped a little white boy on our doorstep.

[ "The Land Unknown (The Pound of Flesh Verses)" by Landon Blood ]

*These old hills call*

*For the blood of my body*

*A pound of flesh for a ton of coal  
So down I go  
Into a dark hell waiting  
Where lungs turn black and hearts grow cold*

*And I'll take to the hills and run from the devil  
Into the dying sun  
Something wicked my way comes  
And tread soft, my friend, into these shadows  
Where the old ones roam  
For in these hills we die alone*

NINA: Mama, get inside! Before somebody sees!

Miz Marigold carried the baby into the house, and Nina grabbed the woven basket from the porch and hurried inside, casting one long, measuring look around before quickly bolting the door behind her. The fancy black car was gone, and she saw no one else around. She felt no gaze upon her. Still, her senses were tingling. Aside from the fact that this was obviously a trap of some sort — the latest in a long line of attempts to run the Underwoods out of Bower County, or worse — something was not right here. Not right at all. She could feel it, a subtle tickle of dread just under her skin.

Her mother had taken the child into the back of the house, where they could get a good look at him under the bright kitchen lamps. He was a sturdy, healthy-looking baby, just past the one year mark if Nina was any judge, with fair hair and green eyes and... something weird on his skin. Miz Marigold had peeled off the boy's shirt and was peering thoughtfully at the spikey, swirling designs that stretched across his back and down his arms.

NINA: What is that, Mama? Is it... paint?

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Mmhm. Of a sort. I don't like the look of it. It's gonna take us some elbow grease to get that muck off, but... I reckon we can manage.

The two women looked up at the sound of an engine chugging up the driveway. Nina peered out the side window anxiously, but relaxed as she saw a familiar green truck rounding the corner of the house in the glow of the back porch light.

NINA: It's just Tobias.

Tobias Underwood was Miz Marigold's nephew, one of Doc's brother's sons. He'd lost his parents in a house fire when he was twelve, and had come to live with his Auntie Marigold and Uncle Lee. He'd gone to work in the mines in Kingston when he was grown — though not, at his auntie's insistence, until after he'd finished school — although lately, like so many others, he'd accepted a job at Barrow & Locke's operation over in McDowell County. Once a thriving community, the Kingston mine had recently begun to decline. Years of excavation had destabilized the local mine shafts, leading to a few unfortunate collapses in the past few years. There was more coal to be had, but it would take time to reconstruct and reinforce those tunnels, sending folks looking for work elsewhere.

Tobias had rented a room in a boarding house near the mine in McDowell County, but his address of record was still the house on Oak Mountain, and lately he'd taken to driving up to after work. Sometimes he'd just stay for supper. Other nights, he'd bunk down on the sofa in the front room. Word had gotten around about a series of unexplained deaths around Bower County, and while Auntie Marigold always assured him she'd be fine, just fine... well, it didn't hurt to be cautious.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: He's come to join us for supper. Nina baby, can you check on that chicken in the oven while I look after this little man here?

Miz Marigold settled the infant on her hip, and went over to the ice box to see how much milk they had on hand, and what else might do to feed a child his age. Nina grabbed a potholder from a peg near the stove and peered into the oven, filling the kitchen with the heady aroma of a family favorite. Chicken and rice bubbled away in a creamy sauce under a golden layer of cheese. Cornbread and biscuits baked on the lower rack. It was rich fare these days. Times had grown mighty lean the past couple years, but Nina and her husband raised chickens, and a local dairy

farmer had brought Marigold a good block of cheese after she helped with his wife's latest — and most difficult — baby.

NINA: I'd give it another five minutes or so, Mama.

Heavy boots clomped across the back porch, and a key turned in the latch as Tobias Underwood let himself in through the kitchen door. He was a solidly built man in his thirties, just over six feet tall, with smooth, light brown skin, warm eyes a few shades darker, and a trim beard, which was unusual for a miner. Most of the men who spent their days digging up coal for B&L kept their faces clean shaven, on account of the dust. But Tobias was mighty proud of that beard, so he didn't mind the extra few minutes it took to clean. He had an open smile, an infectious laugh, and a kind heart. Of all her cousins, Tobias might be Nina's favorite, at least of the menfolk in the family.

TOBIAS: Mmm mmm! Something smells good in here! Evening, Nina. Auntie...

The cheerful greeting stilled on Tobias' lips as he caught sight of his Auntie Marigold, sitting at the kitchen table with a little white child bouncing on her knee.

TOBIAS: What the—

Miz Marigold shot him a look.

TOBIAS: ...*heck* is going on here? Who's baby is that? And what is he doing here? You taking up babysitting, Auntie?

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: No, I am not. And we don't know who he is or where he came from. Somebody left him on my porch like they'd dump a stray kitten.

Tobias eyed the two women — Auntie Marigold sitting calmly at the kitchen table, playing peek-a-boo with a napkin to entertain their unexpected visitor; his cousin Nina pulling plates and cups down from the cabinets and setting them on the countertop as if the only thing she had to worry about was an extra place setting at the supper table tonight.

TOBIAS: And y'all don't find that a bit suspicious?

Nina favored him with a look that suggested he'd just asked if they knew water was wet.

NINA: Well of course it's suspicious, Tobias, but what do you expect us to do? Just leave him out there in the cold?

Tobias lifted his hands in surrender.

TOBIAS: Fair enough. What's he got all over him?

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: From what I can tell, it's paint. A very particular kind of paint.

TOBIAS: Can you get it off him?

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: I can, but I think we'll leave it where it is just now. I'll take a closer look after supper. We'll have to be careful if we want to remove it safely.

Tobias knelt down and peered at the strange symbols painted on the boy's skin. The child gazed back at him curiously out of clear green eyes. He frowned up at Miz Marigold.

TOBIAS: This some hoodoo shit, ain't it?

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Tobias Underwood!

TOBIAS: Sorry! Sorry, Auntie. Hoodoo *stuff*.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: And in front of this child! I ought to wash your mouth out with soap. But to answer your question — and you know I don't like it when you call it that — yes. It looks like somebody's worked a curse on this boy.

TOBIAS: Can you help him?

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: I think so. But I'll need some time to look at it. You can do more harm than good if you're not careful.

TOBIAS: And then what? What are we supposed to do with him? You know whoever left him here only done it to cause trouble.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: I do know, thank you, Tobias.

If this were a simple case of child abandonment, you might think they'd go to the police. But the sheriff of Bower County was no friend of Black folks in general — it had long been rumored that he was part of a certain fraternal organization fond of running around in bed sheets looking like fools — nor the Underwoods in particular. If they reported their find, they'd just be accused of kidnapping the boy and arrested. Or worse. “Those Underwoods up on Oak Mountain are stealing white babies” was the kind of rumor that could get folks killed. This situation alone was dangerous enough, but the unusual symbols painted on the boy told Miz Marigold that this was more than just the latest in a long history of attempts to run them off their land.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: I have some ideas. But right now it's time for supper. Run down to the cellar and fetch me one of those old high chairs out of storage before you get cleaned up, would you?

Tobias knew that tone of voice. Auntie Marigold had a plan, that much was clear, but she wasn't going to discuss it until she was good and ready. He would just have to trust her, which wasn't hard in spite of his worry. In his experience, Marigold Underwood was rarely wrong, and usually operating about five steps ahead of everyone around her. So he went downstairs and rooted around the storage room — a space filled with trunks of children's clothes, old cribs, toys, and all manner of things that would get passed to the younger generations of the Underwoods as the need arose, and returned to the basement when they were outgrown. The room was neat and well organized, and it didn't take him long to locate a sturdy high chair that had no doubt served countless dinners to Nina and her siblings when they were babies. He dusted it off with a cleaning rag hung on a peg near the door, and took it up to the kitchen before heading back to the bathroom to get cleaned up.

By the time he returned, the table had been set, and Nina was dishing fragrant scoops of supper onto Auntie Marigold's rose-patterned dinner plates. The little blond boy had been settled into the high chair with a bowl of cereal. Nina set a frosty pitcher of sweet tea out on a folded towel, and she and Tobias took their places at the table. Miz Marigold said grace, and for the moment, everyone let the matter of their current predicament drop. They talked about Tobias' day at the mines, and the most interesting articles in the local newspapers, which Nina brought by for her mother every morning. Then the conversation turned to the beating heart of small town life — gossip. Who'd been on the prayer board at church, and who'd been absent from services on Sunday. Whose children were getting married and who was having babies.

When everyone had eaten their fill — and Nina had given up fussing at her mama that she should eat more — Tobias volunteered to do the washing up, and Miz Marigold was free to turn her attention to the problem at hand. She asked Nina to heat water to fill the tub, and then went into the narrow room off the pantry that she used as her workroom, peering at shelves full of dried herbs and fresh ones hung on pegs, and put a few things she thought she might need in a small basket. She pulled down a few jars of dried herbs, and added a couple spoonfuls of each to a clean cheesecloth teabag, which she tied tight at the top. She went back through the pantry, pulling a few items from those shelves, and added a good knife from the block in the kitchen. She looped the basket over one narrow wrist, gently pulled the baby up out of the high chair, and headed for the bathroom.

NINA: Mama, you need help with anything else?

Nina called as she passed through the living room.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: No, baby, I'm fine. You put your feet up. I can take care of this young man.

In truth, Miz Marigold didn't want Nina or Tobias anywhere near when she started taking this hex off the boy. She hadn't wanted to alarm them, but she had a hunch that the runes inscribed on the child's body were, at least in part, some sort of spell of containment. They had been meant to suppress... something. She couldn't tell what. But paint was an odd choice for this sort

of working. Although she'd intimated to Tobias and Nina it would be difficult to remove and thus require extra care, in point of fact she thought she could wipe the stuff off with a wash rag and some warm water. Why would someone choose a method so ephemeral, if there was something about the boy that required that sort of preventative measure? She suspected she was not going to like the answer.

Miz Marigold set the boy down on a fresh towel on the bathroom floor by the big clawfoot tub. Then she began adding the various items she'd tucked into her basket. It was mostly simple stuff: white vinegar, salt, fresh peppermint leaves, a bit of baking soda. Next came seven cloves of garlic, which she mashed a bit with the knife handle before dropping them into the tub. Finally she added the teabag she'd filled with herbs from her workroom. She said a simple prayer while she stirred the mixture together gently with her hand, and let the herbs steep for a few minutes while the water cooled to a temperature she judged suitable for the little one. She asked the Lord to guide her hands, to help her cleanse and purify this innocent child.

And then she picked up the baby, and gently settled him into the tub, watching his reaction. Miz Marigold wasn't overly prone to superstition, but a tiny little part of her had worried the boy might start screaming at the touch of the blessed water. But no. In fact, he seemed delighted at the fizzing concoction wrought by the combination of vinegar and baking soda. He smiled and burbled away like any other baby. Seven times, she scooped up handfuls of water in her cupped hands, and gently poured them over the boy's head, reciting the scriptures all the while. He giggled and splashed. Then she grabbed a bar of soap and gently began scrubbing the paint from his skin.

It took some time to get all the paint off, and the little one began to tire of this new game. As Marigold worked to remove the last of the stain from between his toes, she noticed the boy's attention seemed to be caught by... something. He stared into a corner of the room at... well, nothing really. All Marigold could see over there was the little peg she hung her robe on when she took her own baths. But the child seemed to see something. As she watched, he turned his head curiously, and reached out a hand. The temperature of the room dropped. The hairs on the back of Marigold's neck rose. She heard a low, whining sound, which began to grow louder.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Uh-uh! No sir!

She said sternly, as she grabbed the boy's hand, stilled his tiny, flexing fingers. The little one stared up at her with wide eyes for a long, frozen moment. And then he giggled, and the strange noise was gone, and the warmth rushed back into the room, and Marigold let out a shaking breath she didn't realize she'd been holding.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Well all right, then. That's fine. I guess we know what to do now, don't we?

She said to the cheerful, good-natured, very happy and very dangerous little boy. A few hours later, after she and Nina and Tobias had taken turns entertaining the child until he was well and truly worn out, Miz Marigold settled him into one of her grandbabies' old cribs, and tucked a blanket around his sleeping form, and then she and Nina got to work. It took hours, and by the end of it both of them were exhausted. Miz Marigold's head ached. But the binding would hold. It would be far more stable than the painted working someone had placed upon him — probably the folks in the car they'd seen on the road when he appeared on their doorstep. But all spells erode over time. A working needs to be fed to be sustained. They wouldn't be able to do it — the child couldn't stay here, that would be too dangerous for everyone involved — but Marigold knew someone who might be able to take the boy in.

So in spite of the late hour, she picked up the phone, and dialed some old friends. There was a woman over in Kentucky who occasionally took in foundlings with... special challenges. She had a kind heart, and moreover she owed Marigold Underwood a favor or two. She said she'd be happy to take the child, but she didn't drive so Marigold would have to see to the travel arrangements. And that was fine. She made another call, to some folks down in Tennessee she'd worked with a time or two. They were only too happy to help.

By lunchtime the next day, the mysterious, nameless child was gone, packed off in the arms of people Miz Marigold knew would see him safely on to a new life, and all trace of his presence had been removed — the old crib and high chair returned to storage, the bathtub scrubbed, the tools and materials of their working cleansed and tucked away. It had been a long night and a busy morning, and Marigold and her daughter had just settled into the rocking chairs on the

front porch with a couple glasses of lemonade and some pimento cheese sandwiches, when a long black Cadillac turned slowly up the drive.

The two women sat up straight as the driver pulled to a stop by the porch, and the windows rolled down. They could see there were three white people in the car — two men up front, and a woman in back. Marigold called out to them.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Afternoon. Can I help y'all? You lost?

The woman leaned toward the back window and smiled out at them. She was pretty — beautiful, even — but her eyes were cold and her teeth looked sharp. There was something unsettling about her, a darkness that Marigold could sense lurking beneath the polished surface.

POLLY: Yes, maybe you could. We're looking for the Underwood house. We were told their house is on the left side of this road after you turn down this road, but there's nothing there. These mountain roads! So many twists and turns and old hunting trails. And you know men. They hate to ask for directions. Could you kindly point the way?

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Hm. Underwood... Underwood. Was that that family that lived halfway up the mountain? Might be. But it's been years, and those folks moved on ages ago. I heard they were headed up Chicago way? Anyway, they've been gone a long time. There's no Underwoods 'round these parts anymore, miss.

POLLY: Are you certain? We have it on very good authority that the man we're looking for — Tobias Underwood, to be specific — lives on Oak Mountain Road.

Miz Marigold shook her head and smiled.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: I'm sorry. It seems like somebody's given you bad information, ma'am. I know everybody on this mountain, and there's no one by that name. Are you sure it wasn't Mountain Oak Road? That one's about eight miles back in the other direction.

The woman in the car ground her teeth, but she kept the smile plastered on her face.

POLLY: Well. That's unfortunate for us then, isn't it? In that case, if you could point the way, it would be a tremendous help. We seem to have gotten a bit turned around.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Oh, surely. You just turn left out the drive there, and go 'bout a half a mile. Then you'll come to another road that turns off to your left by an old barn. Take that turn and drive another mile or so, and you'll come to a T intersection. Just turn right there, and it'll take you back to the highway directly.

POLLY: Thank you. Mr. Crain? Shall we?

Miz Marigold gave them a little wave, and the two women watched as the fancy car wound its way down the road and out of sight.

NINA: Do you know who those... people were, Mama? They gave me the shivers.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Those were not people, baby. I don't know them, but I know who they are. Did you notice that Pennsylvania license plate? I bet you a dollar they're from B&L. I think we know who's been causing all this mischief 'round these parts lately.

Marigold Underwood settled back in her rocking chair, and sipped her lemonade, and nibbled at her sandwich. She was pretty sure she knew why that baby had been left on their doorstep, and she had a feeling other folks around Bower County had met the little fellow in recent weeks. Folks who'd been trying to organize the workers at the mines owned by Barrow & Locke. Just like her nephew. She didn't know the people in the Cadillac, but she knew they were trouble. They would have to be dealt with.

[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. Thank you for coming back with us to Oak Mountain in southern West Virginia here on Old Gods of Appalachia. Spending a little time with the Underwoods up in their homestead, and we gotta little bit more road to go in this particular story arc, and hope you're enjoying the fine work that Cam Collins is laying down for you this first story arc. That's why we let her do the evil things she gets to do. 'Cause she's so dang good at it.

Family, we want to thank everybody who has joined us in supporting the Old Gods of Appalachia tabletop roleplaying game over on Kickstarter with our friends at Monte Cook Games. The response has been tremendous. We met our fundraising goal of \$50,000 in eleven minutes. Currently we are over 1.3 million dollars, with a little bit of time left to go. It closes out on May 6, 2022, so if you wish to get in on that and acquire all the cryptic arcane tomes and other good bonus items you need to create your own Old Gods of Appalachia stories, head on over. The link is in the show notes. Super super exciting stuff coming on these last stretch goals. Trust me, you do not want to miss it.

Also, hello and shoutout to all the new patrons on Patreon who have joined us because of the roleplaying game, who are finding us and discovering the way home. You too can throw your tithe in the collection plate and gain access to exclusive stories like *Build Mama a Coffin*, *Black Mouthed Dog*, "Door Under the Floor," and a whole lot more, over at [patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia](https://patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia).

Family, we invite you to complete your social media ritual by heading to [oldgodsofappalachia.com](https://oldgodsofappalachia.com) and following us on your social media platforms of choice., which we think should be all of them, but ya know, hey. The Discord server is there as well. Should you choose to join the congregation over there, family, the level of love and support and attention the show — and thus, Cam and myself — have received over the past couple of months with help from our friends over at Monte Cook Games has been absolutely... just stunning. And we welcome all our new family members, no matter who you are or where you come from. Welcome. We're happy to have you.

And also to remind you that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media a distributed by Rusty Quill. Our intro music is by Brother Landon Blood. Our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. Today's story was written by Cam Collins with special assistance and

consultation by D.J. Rogers. The voice of Granny Underwood was Stephanie Hickling Beckman. The voice of Nina Jennings was Shasparay Irvin. And the voice of Tobias Underwood was D.J. Rogers. Talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.