

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

### The Holiest Days of Bone and Shadow, Chapter One: Blood is Blood

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

The Holiest Days of Bone and Shadow, a special holiday mini-series. Chapter One: Blood is Blood. Roanoke Virginia, 1922.

Nadine Rigg had never been on her own before. She kept her head down as she hustled with her suitcase through the crowded train station and down a narrow side street that veered off toward the river. She'd put her long, raven hair up under a scarf and a hat and wore a plain brown traveling dress with sensible shoes. She was tired already, her feet sore. Nadine wasn't used to so much walking, much less dragging all her worldly possessions behind her.

She looked again at the letter she'd received in response to the advertisement she'd placed under a false name in the *Leader* about selling an estate lot of jewelry, with a short preview of said lot's contents. She needed the money. She *needed* to escape this dirty city and didn't care if she had to sell her mama's headstone at this point to get out. Looking up, she saw the name of the grimy, little bar-and-grill indicated in the letter and slipped inside.

Looking about at the dimly lit, greasy room, she wondered how she ever got to this

point. She used her handkerchief to wipe off a seat at a table by a window, sat down to watch the street for the woman who had answered her letter. [sigh] She wasn't used to living like this, she'd tell you. Not at all.

Nadine's daddy had been one of the richest men in Virginia. Benjamin Rigg had owned much of the land that had been purchased at a premium by Locke Railroad when they pushed their iron fingers through the New River Valley, expanding the Riggs' hometown of Roanoke so quickly that it earned the name "Magic City." See, one day, it was just a speck on a map by the river, and the next? Poof. Fifty thousand souls all living and dying in the hum and pulse of the railroad. Daddy had sold and leased his land wisely, setting his wife Inez and little Nadine up for a life of ease.

The Rigg home had been one of comfort—of love, and laughter, and kindness. All that changed when her mama grew ill a few days after Nadine's 16th birthday. A strange wasting illness came upon her with a terrifying speed, until Inez Rigg was little more than a trembling pile of bones in a bed. And then just as suddenly, she was gone.

The only member of her mama's family who made it to the funeral was her mother's younger sister, Verna. Verna Sergeant was a plump, gregarious woman with thinning, gray hair and giant, brown eyes. She'd come all the way from Hogskin, Tennessee, and she was in awe of the bustling big city where her big sister had made her home. Now, Nadine had never met much of mama's family. She'd heard stories about life down there, living on the side of a mountain with barely a pot to piss in, with snake-handling

churches and wild superstitions. Well, not from her mama of course. Mama didn't like to talk about her life before she married Daddy and come to Virginia, but the Riggs' housekeeper and the man who looked after Daddy's horses were a little more free with their talk about Mrs. Rigg than they probably should have been. And Nadine overheard plenty.

She could barely reconcile the idea of the genteel and delicate woman who had birthed her hoeing in a garden and cutting the heads off chickens, but Aunt Verna was a glaring reminder of the low station her mama had risen from. The woman dressed like it was 20 years ago and smelled like mothballs, but she was kind to Nadine, speaking gently to her and patting her shoulder occasionally as she helped Nadine sort through Inez Rigg's earthly things. They'd gone through a box of letters and postcards that Daddy sent Mama when they were courting, and he was traveling. And then they were sorting through her mother's extensive collection of necklaces, rings, bracelets, and other sparkly jewels. Benjamin Rigg had been an enthusiastic suitor and had all but drowned his mountain bride in the sort of finery which she'd never seen in person growing up, which never failed to delight her.

Among the pile of sparkles and bangles was a simple ivory-colored ring. It was hand-carved from what looked like bone—plain and adorned with only a few thin curly lines that were probably much grander and clearer before her mother had worried it to death on her middle finger. Mama called it her thinking ring, and when she was worried or distressed about anything, you'd catch her working around and around on her fingers,

staring out the window toward the mountains. Nadine had once asked her mama why she wore such a cheap trinket when she had so many nicer things. Mama laughed and told her it had been her mommy's, and her mama's before her, and that one day it would be hers. Nadine never thought she'd want it, but seeing it now with Mama fresh in the ground, it was like having a piece of her here with them. Aunt Verna told her that her mama wanted Nadine to have all of her jewels but that she would take that old bone ring home with her—she said she was sure Nadine didn't want no old trashy hillfolk trinket junking up her collection. But as many times as Nadine had joked that the ring looked like it was carved from somebody's old toenail, her mama had treasured it, and Nadine found it was unaccountably precious to her now. No, no—the bone ring would stay here with her. Aunt Verna seemed quite flustered by this, and it seemed like she would have pressed the matter if Nadine hadn't pointed out that her mama had promised it to her. It was a family heirloom, passed from mother to daughter. Verna couldn't argue with that, nor would the two pair of ear bobs set with emeralds and rubies that Nadine gave her to soothe any hurt feelings.

Barely two weeks had passed since he'd buried his wife when Benjamin Rigg—Benji to his friends—got sick himself. He had grieved his Inez's passing and fallen under the dark shadow of depression in its wake. It was not uncommon for Benji to put in late hours during the work week, but after Inez's passing, Benji had begun to bury himself in his work, often spending the nights on the plush sofa in his office and not returning home until Friday evening. But when her daddy didn't come home by Saturday night, Nadine herself went looking for him. She found him feverish, passed out over his desk

at the offices of Locke Rail, and he rambled to Nadine about needing to get to the station—that her mama was coming home, and they needed to greet her. Frightened and unsure where else to turn for help, Nadine phoned the Locke family home and asked to speak with Nathaniel Locke III, heir apparent to the entire Locke railroad empire, and perhaps not coincidentally, Nadine’s fiancé.

In the years since the railroad came to Magic City, Benji had kept a hand in running his interest in the rail yards that were now controlled by Locke Rail, of the Barrow & Locke Combine out of Pennsylvania. He’d come to know the Locke and Barrow families intimately since his rise to prosperity, particularly the Lockes. Benji sat on the board for Locke’s Virginia branch, and the families had enjoyed many a Saturday evening cocktail party or Sunday dinner in company. So it had come as no great surprise when the Locke’s eldest son had called on Benji and Inez about six months back to ask their permission to marry their only daughter. Nathaniel himself had just returned from the office and quickly reversed course, returning in his daddy’s sleek black Rolls-Royce. The two helped Benji into the back seat, and Nathaniel drove Nadine and her daddy home. He called for the doctors his own family used, assuring her they were the very best in Virginia. They soothed Benji as best they could and assured Nadine that he’d be just fine, urging Nadine herself to get some rest.

Nadine returned to her rooms that night, but she couldn’t sleep, instead, found herself pacing and staring out the windows into the night. Near-sick with worry, staring out over the mountains, Nadine thought of her mama and her thinking ring. She went to her

jewel box and opened it. [Music box music plays] The little ballerina popped right up and began to turn in slow circles, the haunting melody of the tiny gearbox orchestra inside playing one of the six different tunes it knew. The bone ring was nestled into the velvet folds, almost seeming to glow in the warm light of the gas lamp on Nadine's vanity. She reached out and slipped the ring onto her hand. And the world changed.

The details of the room around her became crisper and brighter, a veil of fog seemed to lift from her mind. She could feel the cool comfort of the stones of the house and the familiar scent of her laundry that her maid had brought in yesterday, brightened up like it was fresh off the line. She felt sharper, stronger, more awake and alive than she'd ever felt before, and—and, strangely, she could tell you there were four people on this floor of the house without leaving a room: two cleaning girls, herself, and the housekeeper, Ms. Dory. Ms. Dory was not pleased with these two cleaning girls—she was on her way to give them a good tongue lashing for sneaking out and smoking behind the wash sheds earlier that day, and—

But how in the world did Nadine know that? She listened and she didn't hear them talking. In fact, she happened to know Ms. Dory had just found the two girls and was beginning her tirade down by the east staircase, which was nowhere near earshot in this cavern of a house. Nadine looked down and saw that she was turning and worrying her mama's ring and stopped. And as soon as she did, that flow of knowing things stopped.

Nadine quickly pulled the ring from her finger and returned it to the jewel box with

shaking hands. She, she was imagining things surely. She was, she, she was upset and overtired, and, and she just needed to get some rest, surely. And so she returned to bed and eventually drifted into a restless sleep.

In the days after Nadine's first dalliance with the ring, Benji Rigg's health had improved. He woke from his feverish state, looking tired and careworn, but much better than he had the night before. Nadine insisted he spend a few days at home, resting, reading his favorite books, and letting Ms. Dory feed him up good. He'd grown so thin since Mama's passing, and he seemed to be getting back to his old self—smiling more and spending time with his dogs, tossing a stick on the back lawn.

Nathaniel had come to call on Nadine and ask after her daddy's health, as a gentleman should. And they decided that once a proper grieving period for Mama had passed, they would resume planning their wedding. Nadine put all thoughts of the old bone ring from her mind. She ached for the return of her normal, comfortable life, and anyway, there was no use dwelling on some silly late-night fancy. She'd been tired and worked up, and, well, she just spooked herself. Plain and simple.

Two weeks passed, and Daddy's health seemed to wax and wane. When Nadine saw him in his study, he greeted her with that handsome grin—not the polite reserved smile he used for business, the real one that was just for her and her mama. He seemed bright and present, but Nadine had overheard the cleaning staff whispering about fits where Mr. Rigg would just stare into space for hours. Then one afternoon, when she returned

home from a meeting of her book club, she slipped in through the kitchen and found Ms. Dory and Okla, the man who looked after her father's horses, talking about how Mr. Rigg had almost gotten out of the house. He'd been yelling about how he was going to be late for picking Mrs. Rigg up from the station, and Okla had to almost wrestle him out of the car and back into the house.

"Just to keep him from hurting himself, Miss Nadine," Okla told her, twisting his hat nervously in his hands.

Nadine had thanked him and assured him he'd done the right thing, and she appreciated him looking out for her daddy. Sick with worry, Nadine found herself pacing her room again that night and returned to her jewel box and her mama's bone ring. As she slid the cool, smooth ring around her finger, she didn't expect much of anything to happen. She just wanted the comfort of feeling close to her mama, that was all. And yet, there it was again—that feeling of clarity, of knowing. As Nadine spun the ring around her finger, she was able to sense everyone on this floor—just herself and her daddy at this time of night. He was sleeping, but not well—oh, she could almost feel his agitation. Nadine told herself, once again, she must be imagining all this. But this time—this time, she slipped out of her room and began walking slowly through the house.

She found her daddy in his room, tossing and turning under the coverlet, sleeping just as poorly as she'd felt through the ring. Closing his door, she stood quietly in the

hallway, worrying at the ring of bone and concentrating. There were two cleaning girls sleeping in the servant's wing and a third up late with her sewing kit, mending the hem of her Sunday dress. Two stable boys were asleep in their bunks, and Ms. Dory and Okla were still awake down in the kitchen, playing cards and drinking something that *probably* wasn't currently legal under prohibition. Nadine slipped quietly through the darkened house, verifying one by one that each of these perceptions were true, and then returned to her room.

She pulled Mama's ring from her finger and sat quietly on the bed, holding it in her palm and thinking. She didn't know how this could be possible, how the ring might work, but she—she was grateful for its blessing. Mama had always been so kind, so thoughtful and conscientious—she'd always known just the right thing to say to soothe everybody's feelings, or when to suggest that Ms. Dory make her or her daddy a cup of lemon and honey tea because, "You're looking a little peaky, honey," often before Nadine had even started feeling too bad. Was the ring how Mama had known all these things? How she'd been able to take good care of them? Maybe so. And now with Mama gone, it was up to Nadine to look after her daddy until he was well again.

And so, she got in the habit of wearing the ring anytime she was at home. It wasn't pretty enough to wear out, of course; but at home, it helped her to know when her daddy needed something, or when one of his fits was coming on. The longer she wore the ring, Nadine found she didn't even need to spin it round her finger anymore. She could, if she really wanted to concentrate on everything going on around the property. But as time

passed, and the bone ring spent more time on her finger, the more knowledge she found it would just bring to her in the wearing.

Nathaniel had been wonderful through this whole ordeal. He had expressed nothing but proper gentlemanly concern for her father—never once mentioning money nor business, he seemed eager to take her as his bride in spite of her family's recent troubles. The wealth of the Locke family dwarfed even her daddy's considerable fortune, and in the moments Nadine didn't spend worrying over her father, she often daydreamed of the splendor of their wedding. Nathaniel was tall and broad-shouldered, a neat and well-kept man with a sharp mustache and sparkling green eyes that ran in the Locke family, and which Nadine secretly hoped their future children would also inherit, along with the many advantages and comforts a Locke family trust fund would bring. and yes, she was heartbroken that Mama wouldn't be there to see her married to such a fine man. Before Mama had taken sick, Nadine had been looking forward to shopping for a wedding dress, selecting china and flowers, and considering bridesmaids with her mama at her side, but at least her daddy would be there to walk her down the aisle. Little had Nadine realized that none of these dreams would come true.

On a Thursday night following a few good days for her daddy—he'd been cheerful and more energetic and seemed to be sleeping better—Nadine accepted an invitation from Nathaniel to have a late supper. Her daddy assured her he would be fine, and she should go on and have a nice evening with her beau, and so Nadine tucked her mama's thinking ring into the jewel box, selected instead a pretty little ruby in a rose setting her daddy

had given her for her birthday, and was ready when Nathaniel pulled his car up the drive at six.

Despite Nadine's specific instructions to everyone, from Ms. Dory to the men who watched over the grounds at night, sometime thereafter, Benji slipped out of the house and the dark of night found the richest man in Roanoke, second only to the Lockes, running in his stocking feet to meet a train that would, in his addled mind, bring his beloved Inez home. What he found instead was a way onto the tracks and a northbound coal train loaded with the black bounty of the southwestern Virginia mountains. Benjamin Rigg never even saw it coming.

Services were scheduled for the following Sunday. Nadine was in shock—numb with loss, and sick with guilt and despair. She watched herself in the mirror as she slid her mama's ring back onto her finger, telling herself she must never take it off again. She was her daddy's only heir, the head of the household now, and it was her duty to take care of everyone in it—not to mention the family she and Nathaniel would have one day. The ring was a great comfort to her, both for the sense of clarity and vitality it brought to her, and the sense of her mama's presence she always felt when she wore it. Nadine straightened her stiff black mourning dress—the same dress she'd purchased for Mama's funeral just a few short months past and made her way downstairs.

As she moved through the house, she could feel what the people around her were feeling, even hear a few stray thoughts here and there. Her father had been well-loved—

even the cleaning girls thought kindly of him. His butler, Mr. Scott, was sad in a way that Nadine didn't understand, but it was clear that over his many years of service to her daddy, the two men had become very close. Best pals, one might think.

Ms. Dory was weeping quietly in the corner of the dining room, but inside, she was terrified for her job, and for her daughter's job—Nadine had never realized one of the maids was Dory's youngest. Nadine's heart swelled with pride to know how others had appreciated her father's kindness, how well-thought-of he was, and she felt he would have been pleased as well. She felt a little guilty eavesdropping on folks's true feelings, but not enough to take the ring off. It was a good thing, she told herself, to know people's hearts and be able to anticipate their needs.

But it was also hard—feeling the weight of friends' and neighbors' grief on top of her own was a heavy burden to bear. And after a long day of receiving visitors, Nadine found herself exhausted. She bid the last guest good night and finally returned to her room to get ready for bed.

She changed into her most comfortable nightgown, relieved to be rid of the uncomfortable black dress she'd worn all day. She washed her face and brushed out her long, dark hair, and was about to settle in for the night, when the ring seemed to thrum on her finger. It was a strange sensation—one Nadine had never felt before. And suddenly she knew that someone was coming up the hallway. So she extended her newfound sensitivity in that direction eagerly, but frowned.

[Growling, snarling, animalistic noises]

Oh. This was different.

She could sense something in the hallway, but the feeling was... strange. Every other voice that had come to her mind had been familiar, or at least identifiable. This—oh, this seething mass of—of darkness, she could think of no better word for it, was full of malice and anger. Whoever, or whatever—because something seemed very, very wrong—this person was, well... They seemed consumed with barely-contained rage.

And they were coming closer to her room.

Thoughts that were not hers swam into her head. “Fools couldn’t keep a simple, old man inside until we got married... Would have been a perfect vessel. Twenty years of good work, wasted! We’ll make the signatures and legalities work, but we still need a vessel—still need a blood heir, still need a bonded heart. Well, we’ll just have to make us a new one. Blood is blood, I suppose,” and the flood of images that came after were carnal and raw, and of a nature that made Nadine blush to her nethers and quake with fear.

Whoever this was, was thinking these things about her, and this was not someone nice. This was not someone who meant her any good, and—and she was a properly engaged

woman after all! And Nadine was young, she was no fool. She knew there were awful men in the world—men who would hurt a woman if they got the chance. But the steady stream of images filling her mind were also tainted with a darkness and a purpose that chilled her to the bone. She had the sense of—whatever was coming toward her room was coming for her, to hurt her, to take her away, maybe.

And a sense of panic rose screaming in her chest. Nadine rushed to her writing desk, looking for something she could use to defend herself, and she found the pretty, silver-plated letter opener, the hilt set with mother of pearl, that Daddy had bought for her as part of a whole stationery set when Nadine's engagement was announced. She clutched the little blade—pretty, but solid and well-made—like it was the only thing standing between her and the devil himself.

And when the presence came to the other side of the door, she didn't wait for it to break it down or even knock—she threw the door open wide and plunged the letter opener again and again into the neck and chest of... one Nathaniel Locke, her very own fiancé. Nathaniel looked at her with shock and incredulity on his handsome face, his hands clasped against the ruin of his throat, as he slowly sank to his knees. But the sense Nadine had—of rage and malice, of wrongness—did not match the pleading, wounded expression on his face. Standing there before him, she could see the tendrils of darkness swirling around him, reaching out for her. As he reached one pleading hand towards her, Nadine stepped back out of reach, and Nathaniel fell face first across her bedroom doorway, as his lifeblood poured out around him, soaking into the plush carpet of the

hallway.

That had been nearly a month ago. Nadine's desperate, half-mad flight from her family home with her mother's jewels and a not insignificant sum of cash that Mama had advised her to squirrel away in a coffee can under the bed—just in case she needed it someday—didn't bear thinking on, really. It had been a dark time for Nadine. Wearing Mama's ring out in the world, away from the safe and loving confines of her home and family, she saw more of the cruelty and pettiness in folks's hearts than she ever imagined, or wanted to—not to mention glimpses of the dark things she had first seen infecting her betrothed. But it led her here, to this grimy table in a filthy, little tavern by the tracks. She'd procured respectable lodgings easily enough—the coffee can saw to that. The rich always have access to hotels or places where everyone pretends not to know who you are, as long as your money is green and the law stays away. And as young as she was, Nadine had heard the gossip about this or that establishment, and they were easy enough to find. She kept her eyes and ears and, thanks to Mama's ring, her mind opened for news of Nathaniel's murder, but there was nothing in the papers. She overheard no gossip with her special way of knowing things. The news of her father's death had echoed throughout the city for weeks, so it followed that the death of an even richer man in an even more scandalous setting would too, but she heard not a murmur. Still, Nadine knew her luck couldn't last.

She needed to get out of Roanoke, so she posted the notice to sell her mother's jewelry in the local newspaper, and a week later, here she was. The buyer wanted to be discreet

– now, Nadine knew it could be a reporter, or the police, or even Nathaniel’s family trying to track her down. She didn’t think so, though. The bone ring told her otherwise—that strangely, at this moment, no one was looking for her. Oddly, what the ring did not announce to her was the presence of her buyer, who had slipped silently into the chair across from her when Nadine was gazing out the window, listening to the world with her new gift.

“Good afternoon, Miss Rigg,” the stranger drawled finely, startling Nadine out of her thoughts. Her voice spoke of Nadine’s own mama’s mountains. She was a tall, older woman with pale, gray hair pulled tight up under her hat and the rigid posture Nadine usually associated with military men. She was finely dressed in a high-collared black dress made of velvet and decorated with intricate embroidery. Everything she wore, in fact—from the dress to her coat to her gloves—was black. Nadine thought she must be a widow. Some of the older generation never left off wearing widow’s weeds if they lost a spouse. But by contrast, her hair, her eyebrows, and even her skin seemed to carry a pale, papery, gray cast. It was a little bit unnerving and unnatural, but Nadine assumed she must be wearing a very heavy powder, that must be it. And she was infused with a strange vitality, in spite of that pallor—somehow giving both the impression of age, of almost ancient wisdom, and youthful strength at the same time. The woman seemed to drink in all the light in the room, commanding Nadine’s full and rapt attention. And still, the bone ring did not seem to sense her, or if it did it, wasn’t telling Nadine.

“Oh, hello,” Nadine stammered. “I’m sorry... Do I know you?”

“You do not, Miss Rigg. My name is... unimportant. But I know you. Those of us who need to know about the property of the dead being moved and shifted on can always find who’s doing the shifting when we needs to.” Nadine felt the world fall away. This woman knew her. Did Nathaniel’s people send her? Was she caught? To her horror, it was almost as if the woman possessed a thinking ring herself. She seemed almost to know Nadine’s thoughts as she continued, “I do not care what you have done or whose blood you have spilled for your goods, Miss Rigg. Such things are beneath my employer’s notice, and after all, in—in my line of work, we are all about second chances.”

“Second chances?” Nadine narrowed her eyes. “And what line of work would that be?” She asked suspiciously.

“why, the saving and redeeming of lost souls, of course! You see, I am in the service of a wonderful organization known as the Fellowship of his Blessed and Undying Love and Grace, and we are so pleased to accept your donation.

“So you’re with... what, a—a church?”

The woman chuckled. “Oh, a church! Good, good mercy, Miss Rigg, no. Much bigger than a church. Our ministry helps provide housing, relocation, and.... education. For those less fortunate among us who have lost everything due to their own vices or,

sometimes, to circumstances completely beyond their control. And as I said, we are so pleased to accept your donation.”

“My what? Ma’am, as my advertisement stated quite clearly, I have an estate lot of jewelry that I need to *sell*. My own jewelry, thank you, handed down from my mama. I’m no thief, if you’re thinking you can get them by leaning on a guilty conscience. And I’m not looking to give to a charity, I’m afraid you’re mistaken—”

“Oh, there’s no mistake, Miss Rigg. You will donate your mother’s entire jewelry collection to be sold at auction to raise money for the building of our new school house. We’ll be happy to keep your donation anonymous if you prefer, but – or, we could name the building after you! Stones taken in the shadow of blood would bring much power to a name such as yours. Or, we could drop a word or two in the right ears, raise a few questions here and there, about why no one seems to have seen a certain affluent young man since he attended the wake of one of Locke Railroad’s board members—his fiancée’s father, as I understand it. Tragic loss, that, and the mother and the father going so quickly—one wonders what might have happened to the boy...”

Nadine sat in stunned silence as the woman reached down and, uninvited, picked up her suitcase, thumbed open the lock, and began rifling through her things. As Nadine watched, the Gray Lady quickly located her jewel box and began sifting through its contents. She frowned.

Her voice was like a whip as she suddenly grasped Nadine's arm in one hard, claw-like hand. "Where is it? We know you have it—what have you done with it, you stupid little—oh," and the tension drained from her voice as suddenly as it had entered it, and she was all mountain honeysuckle again—prim and proper as she cooed, "Here she is." And she took Nadine's hand, and before she could stop her, the woman slipped her mama's thinking ring off her finger.

The world went dimmer, colors grew duller, smells and sounds muted, the murmur of feelings and thought from the people around them was gone in a heartbeat, as if a switch had been thrown. Nadine felt like she'd been reduced by half. "Stop—give that back. That—that's a family heirloom. My mama's mama gave that to her—"

"That may be so. But your mother's mother was a thieving whore."

"Excuse me! You don't have to be nasty—it's just an old bone ring. It's not worth anything to anybody but me, and I'll have it back," Nadine said angrily.

"It's *antler*. Not bone," the Gray Lady sneered, holding the ring up to the light. "And it is not yours. It was not your mother's, nor her mother's, and it does not belong to any of the likes of you. If you'd worn it for another day, the dreams would have started, and that would have gone badly for all involved. My employer is... over-eager sometimes."

Nadine felt smaller, weaker, less alive without the ring, and for a moment, she

considered trying to snatch it back. But the Gray Lady caught her eye again, seeming to almost hear her own thoughts, and Nadine was chilled by her expression. Something in her very bones knew that would be a very bad idea.

“I will return this to its rightful owner,” the Gray Lady continued. “He will be grateful enough for your donation to allow you to live in his debt.... for now. Be thankful for that, Miss Rigg.” She tucked the ring away into a hidden pocket somewhere in her coat—here one second, gone the next, like a magic trick, right here in Magic City. She returned Nadine’s jewel box, now empty, to her suitcase, which she closed with a snap and shoved into Nadine’s arms. “Now run away, little girl. Return to your home, Marry your fiancé. If you’re wise, you’ll do your level best to forget this conversation ever happened.”

“My, my fiancé? But, but I—”

The Gray Lady laughed. “Oh, you dear, sweet child... How precious. It takes more than a—What was it? A letter opener? How positively literary of you!—to end one of the Locke line, my girl. They are old and well-kept. If you no longer wish to be his bride, then I suggest you run. At this point he might not even pursue you. He has your father’s money and land, and he can find another vessel if he truly needs. Blood is blood, after all.”

The look in the woman’s eye as she echoed the strange words, heard just a short time

ago in the mind of—of whatever thing Nathaniel had become, chilled Nadine. She was on her feet and out of that tavern faster than she'd ever imagined possible, the weight of the suitcase be damned.

Nadine felt at first like she might never stop running, but eventually she did. When she stopped to catch her breath, she looked around and found herself just across the street from the train station. Suddenly, the answer clicked into place, and Nadine sagged with relief, leaning against a streetlight for support. She took a few moments to collect herself, smoothing her dress and coat and straightening her hat in the reflection of a drugstore window, and hefted her suitcase, and strode purposefully across the street toward the ticket office. With the remnants of the coffee can, she purchased one ticket bound for a small city known as Paradise on the Virginia-Tennessee border, where, the clerk assured her, she could catch a bus for Elizabethton, which was a hop and a jump from Hogskin. She only had to wait an hour.

And she settled into her seat, finally able to relax just a little. The Gray Lady's words, the words of the monster she thought she would marry, echoed in her thoughts.

"Blood is blood, yes," Nadine thought to herself as she pondered this new and unknown future. "Blood is blood. And mine is my mama's."

[God's Dark Heaven by Those Poor Bastards]

*[humming]*

*Guided by something I cannot describe*

*Foggy dark presence been chokin' my mind*

*The strings hanging down from heaven above*

*Pokin' like pitchforks in a pure white dove*

*Through God's dark heaven*

*Go I, go I*

*Through God's dark heaven go I...*

Thank you for joining us for this, Chapter One of The Holiest Days of Bone and Shadow, our new holiday miniseries. Hope everybody's having a safe Halloween, or Samhain, or All Hallows, or whatever it is you celebrate. And hope you're staying inside, wearing the right kind of mask if you go outside, if you know what I'm saying. Next installment of the Holiest Days will come on December 25th, and we will wrap up the trilogy on February 14th.

Today's story was written by Steve Shell and Cam Collins and performed by Steve Shell. Our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. For more information on this story and others, join us at [oldgodsofappalachia.com](http://oldgodsofappalachia.com).