

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

The Holiest Days of Bone and Shadow, Chapter Two: The Gift of the Lesser Magi

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 three-part mini-series. Chapter Two: The Gift of the Lesser Magi. Esau County, Virginia 1928.

Christmas Day had dawned bright and cold in Esau County, with temperatures hovering just below 20 degrees in the town of Glamorgan and dipping well into the teens in the surrounding hollers. Like most of her neighbors, Delia Hubbard was up with the sun, brewing up a pot of coffee and fixing a simple breakfast of eggs and toast to share with her cousin, Indiana.

Indy was already up by then, of course. He brought in fresh eggs from the chicken coop first thing and was now out in the barn, tending to the other livestock. Feeding the horses, turning the hogs out into the pen, filling up the trough, letting the old milk cow out into the back field. For a young man accustomed to wealth and comfort, Indiana had adapted admirably to farm life when he and Deely inherited their mamaw Glory Ann's property in Boggs Holler. At heart, Indiana was a simple man. He found satisfaction in a hard day's labor and holding the fruits of that labor in his hands—being an ear of fresh corn in the summertime or a newly-hatched baby chick. The challenges his father Vernard had enjoyed, or said he did—leaning over a desk, analyzing stocks and bonds,

attempting to forecast trends, and considering investments—were simply not for him. Deely, too, had had a lot to learn when she came to Boggs Holler. Although she was blessed with abundant natural gifts, passed down the family line, she had quickly learned that the majority of the healer's art had more to do with knowledge and skill than any inborn abilities or gifts. Thankfully, Mamaw Boggs had known her letters, and she had in fact taken copious notes in a number of well-organized journals—almost as if she had known the day would come when her granddaughter needed them—and perhaps she had.

The first winter in Esau County had been hard for Deely. Glory Ann's death in late summer had interrupted her preparations for the coming winter, and young Deely hadn't had the knowledge of herb lore at the time to properly inventory her mamaw's stores and know what would be needed, or indeed, that she had any need to do so at all. She had run out of many of the supplies she later found she needed and, combined with a certain skepticism she'd faced from some of the older members of the community, Deely had struggled to keep the folk of Esau County alive and well through that long, cold winter.

Eventually, however, the spring thaw came, and with it, the return of many of the herbs and roots that Deely had been missing. And then June brought the birth of the very first baby Deely had the honor of ushering into the world as the County's new midwife. A robust, healthy little boy born to a young couple who credited Deely with their good fortune, as they had been the recipients of the first fertility charm she made back in

October. They named the boy Delbert in her honor, this being the closest name to Delia they could come up with for a boy. And his health and cheerful, biddable nature had boosted Deely's reputation significantly. Armed with a better idea of what she might need, Deely had spent the spring and summer foraging and cultivating herbs and roots, brewing up the elixirs and salves, tonics, and tinctures that she would use over the course of the next year to treat various ailments.

It's a good thing she had—winter had come on bitter and damp and brought with it a multitude of troubles, from a nasty round influenza to especially troublesome arthritis for many of the older folks. December had been a busy month, and Christmas Day had proved especially so, if for more pleasurable reasons. Delia and Indiana had exchanged their gifts after breakfast before climbing into Deely's Nash—the automobile which had once belonged to her late mama—to make their careful way down the icy country roads to enjoy the holiday festivities. They attended the Christmas service at Esserville First Baptist, where their parents had attended services in their youth, and where, or so Deely was told, that her mama and daddy had met at a church picnic, one long ago summer afternoon. Afterwards, they drove over to visit Deely's Bledsoe cousins on her daddy's side for Christmas dinner. Around sunset, they all went into town to attend Glamorgan's Christmas tree lighting. The town tree was donated by the Barrow and Locke Mining Combine—a tall, thick fir of grand proportions, under which waited a present for each child in Glamorgan. Now, privately, Deely thought that money would have been better spent providing a Christmas bonus to their fathers, who toiled away underground, and maybe the only reason B&L gave out those presents was to get their

hooks into the next generation of miners, but most folks seemed grateful, so she held her peace.

After presents were distributed, they joined up with a group of carolers visiting folks around town, the tradition of breaking up Christmas that would become a daily routine of either visiting or receiving guests, through Old Christmas on January 6th. Deely and Indiana's last stop was at the home of one Miss Helen Cantrell and her family, whom Indiana would join for supper that night. Indy had been courting Helen for around six months now, and Deely imagined he might ask her daddy for her hand any day. Although he hadn't specifically mentioned marriage, Indiana had been talking about clearing some trees to build himself a little house somewhere else on the Boggs property, and believe me, there was plenty of land to go around.

After they exchanged pleasantries, and Deely and Indiana had each been served the obligatory cup of spiced cider and a big, old slice of apple stack cake, Deely begged off dinner. She was still full to bursting from their lunch at the Bledsoes', she said, and so she headed home. Indiana would find a ride home with a friend, or she could collect him in the morning if Helen's daddy allowed him to sleep on the sofa.

It had been a long day, and it was with no small amount of pleasure that Deely kicked off her boots, hung up her coat, and put the kettle on. She would make some of Mamaw Boggs's lemon balm tea, and then settle in next to the wood stove with the new mystery novel Indiana had given her for Christmas: Patricia Wentworth's *Gray Mask*. She settled

into the comfy, cushioned rocker next to the stove, propped her feet up on the ottoman, and covered her legs with an old, well-loved quilt.

Deely had just finished the first chapter when the knock came at her front door: three sharp raps in quick succession. She sighed and pulled the quilt from her legs as she sat up. She had really been hoping for a quiet night, but it was that time of the year. Old Miss Henson's rheumatism had been acting up something fierce lately, and of course the Thackers out on Turkey Branch had a colicky baby, so Deely took a moment to straighten her dress and smooth her hair before she marched to the front door and pulled it open. Tonight's visit was not at all what she'd expected. Rather than some fretful parent or concerned spouse on her doorstep, she found instead someone she had neither expected nor wanted to lay eyes on again: her mother's late husband, one Kenneth Carter of Pineville Kentucky.

He wore a heavy, black overcoat over a gray, pinstripe suit with a red and green plaid bow tie and gleaming oxfords, polished to a reflective shine. In deference to the season, he had pinned a twig of holly to his lapel, and he held his fine, gray, wool fedora in one hand.

Deely frowned. "Good evening, sir," she said tightly. "To what do I owe this... visit?"

"Merry Christmas, Deely," her stepfather said with an uncharacteristically wide smile. He reached into the pocket of his overcoat and withdrew a small, brightly wrapped

package. “Uh, I brought you a gift, a—a peace offering of sorts.”

Deely’s last encounter with Kenneth Carter had been in her Uncle John’s office back in Pineville, shortly following her mother’s death. Uncle John was her daddy’s brother, as well as the attorney in charge of executing her mama’s will, which, of course, had left *everything* to Deely. Her stepfather had objected, strenuously, to the terms of that document, arguing that Deely, and the money her daddy had left her and her mama, should remain under his guardianship. It had been an ugly encounter, with many harsh words spoken, and Deely had hoped to never, ever see the man again. Yet here he was.

“Mr. Carter, I am not going back to Pineville with you. If you bore my mama any love at all, you should respect her wishes.”

“No, no,” he assured her, holding his hands up, palms out, in a gesture of surrender. “I didn’t come here to talk about that. I hope we can put the past behind us and at least try to be... friends? For your mama’s sake?” He gestured to the box in his hand. “I brought you just a little something. I promise, I’m not trying to buy your affection, just—just a small token I thought you might like, by way of apology.”

Deely sighed and held out her hand. The box was solid wood, not cardboard—she could feel that before she even tore off the wrapping—and it was about the size of her hand, wrist to fingertips. When she unwrapped it, she saw that it was made of pale birch, carved with flowers, leaves, and vines, and polished to a glossy shine. It had a hinged lid,

and when she opened it, she found it was lined in red velvet. Nestled into the velvet was a jeweled comb. It was made of... ivory, or bone? Or something polished and ivory-colored, rather than white, and carved in a similar fashion to the box, with vines and flowers. The centers of the flowers were set with round, amber cabochons, which gleamed in the light cast by the lantern just inside the doorway.

It was very beautiful, and something about it pulled at Deely in a way she didn't understand at first. She almost reached inside to pick it up... But then she saw it. Saw the shadows that seemed to gather around it like a negative glow, pulsing with power and something else, with—with intent. With awareness. The darkness that swirled around its pretty, white tines seemed almost to have teeth. And yet even seeing this, Deely still felt its call, still wanted it. A strange hunger to possess it, to know its secrets, uncoiling in her belly—her fingers practically itched to take it.

Deely closed the box with a snap. “No, thank you,” She said stiffly and thrust the package back into Kenneth Carter's hand. “I have no need for such... gifts.” She stepped back and reached to close the door. “Good day, Mr. Carter.”

“Now, Deely, be reasonable! Is there any way to talk to your step daddy? Your mama might have passed, but I still take my responsibility to look after you seriously. You're a smart girl, Deely. Too smart to throw away the opportunities I can offer you. You can have a nice home, find a wealthy husband to take care of you—just like your mama would have wanted for you. Look at this place,” he sneered, gazing around him at the

home left to her by her mama's mama. "You can't possibly be happy here. Come home!"

"This is my home," Deely snapped, having reached the end of her patience. "Go home, sir. Don't make me tell you again."

And with that, she shut the door in his face, latched it, and went back to her book.

Kenneth Carter was not used to being refused. He was a man of significant means and well-used to having doors opened and wheels greased whenever and however he wished. If he encountered an obstacle, he merely had to throw some money at it, and it would politely go away. So he was livid to be so abruptly and soundly denied by Mercy's ungrateful brat. It was all the fault of his contact at B&L—Amon Finley. That good-for-nothing idler Amon had assured him that she would not be able to resist the lure of such a powerful artifact. That it would deliver her, and thus, the property B&L had sought for so long—had, in fact, urged him to marry that foolish woman to obtain in the first place—right into his hands.

But, no. It had done no such thing.

The child had taken one look at the carved antler comb and practically thrown it back at him and slammed the door in his face. How dare that little bitch! Carter clapped his hat back onto his bald pate and stomped back down the rutted gravel drive to his sleek black Duesenberg SJ, a recent acquisition that he had been foolish to bring to this

benighted backwood. He'd had to drive at a snail's pace to bring the car safely up the ill-maintained country road that led to his late wife's family property—curse that woman. He would have to navigate worse ones to return to the appointed rendezvous point where he would find Amon.

The plan had been to hand the girl off to B&L's agent and wash his hands of the whole tedious affair, but that smug bastard couldn't have been more wrong about the appeal the comb would hold for the girl. And now Carter would have to report that he'd failed, as if it were his fault. And one did not like to disappoint the directors of Barrow and Locke. To do so could be... deleterious to one's prospects, not to mention one's health.

So, fuming, Kenneth Carter steered his way down the long, precarious drive toward the County roads the Boggs property faced, whose condition was only a minor improvement. He navigated his way around hairpin turns and over steep hills that gave no hint of oncoming traffic, which was heavier for the hour than likely usual—no doubt holiday revelers returning home at the end of an evening, he told himself. That's all it was—just holiday traffic, as another vehicle pulled up on his rear, growing increasingly close.

And yet, he expected the car behind him to turn off, to take one of the narrow trails that deviated from the main road and up into some holler or branch or whatever these people called them, but the dark vehicle did not. It only grew closer, its headlights growing ever brighter behind him as it closed the distance. Its engine growled and someone

revved the gas. Carter glanced over his shoulder in irritation. Did the damn fools mean to rear-end him?

And that's when he saw the second car pulling around the first into the oncoming, and gunning its engine, clearly intending to pull alongside the Duesenberg. A finger of cold dread wormed its way into Carter's belly, and abandoning his concern for saving damage to his car in favor of saving his own hide, he stepped on the gas.

The dark cars behind kept pace with him, the engine of the one following behind growling as its driver accelerated, zipping back up onto his tail, while the other came roaring up on his left, heedless of the danger of oncoming traffic. It began edging closer to him, crowding him over toward the right shoulder. His wheels kicked up a cloud of dirt and gravel as they edged over, and Carter realized they intended to drive him off the road, over the embankment.

"The hell you say?" Carter swore furiously and poured on the gas. The drivers of the vehicles that followed Carter—they looked to be something of Ford make, likely Model A's given the dark color and boxy shape—were clearly determined, and seemed to be skilled drivers given their maneuvering, but Carter had speed on his side. The J Model was the most powerful automobile Duesenberg had ever made, and the supercharged SJ that Carter purchased was, in fact, one of the most powerful luxury cars in the world, producing an astonishing 320 horsepower. The Duesenberg's engine roared, and the pursuing vehicles quickly fell behind. Rounding a curve, Carter swept past an oncoming

car, heard the screech of brakes, as presumably the car in the left lane maneuvered to avoid it. The sound of screaming metal and a colossal crunch reached his ears and Carter dared a glance over his shoulder. He could see the glow of lights around the corner he'd just turned, but nothing else. It seemed he'd managed to evade his pursuers at last.

Carter sighed with relief as he returned his eyes to the road ahead, but he didn't slow down—best not to chance it. Overconfidence had proved the downfall of many a fool, and Kenneth Carter did not consider himself a fool. It was several more miles before he reached the turn down the narrow track that led up to the abandoned farmhouse where Carter had met with Amon earlier in the day, and where he had arranged to return when his business in Boggs Holler was done. He nearly missed the slight deviation in the undergrowth that marked the private road, half hidden as it was, particularly coming from this direction. Just catching it, Carter slammed on his brakes, managed a sharp turn onto the correct path, and now, finally, he felt comfortable slowing down and proceeded up the rutted track with caution, protecting his investment.

Finally, he crested the top of a narrow ridge and saw the decrepit structure looming up ahead of him. The house was small, comprised of a lone room. It was more of a shack in Carter's estimation dirty and falling to ruin. But the windows glowed faintly—Amon must have lit a fire in the hearth within.

Carter had seen no sign of a lantern left behind by the previous occupants. The devilish

man was here at least, he thought sourly as he pulled the Duesenberg to a stop in the scrubby front yard. Patting his pockets to ensure the box with the antler comb had not slipped out during his treacherous drive back to the meeting place—it hadn't—Carter picked his way carefully through the darkened yard up to the entryway of the abandoned house. He rapped sharply to announce his arrival, and then pushed open the door—having to put his shoulder into it, for it was a bit warped—and stepped inside.

Kenneth Carter did not find Amon Finley, the agent of Barrow & Locke who had led him on this fool's errand, waiting for him as anticipated. Instead, the single room was occupied by three women—two of them perched delicately, backs ramrod straight, on the edge of dilapidated chairs, positioned either side of the fireplace where flames crackled merrily, casting a warm light into the dark corners of the room. The third stood by the hearth, her hands folded lightly in front of her—the picture of patience.

The women were dressed nearly identically in black silk dresses, cut in the latest drop-waist style, and embroidered with fine silver thread, and black woolen coats with fine fur collars—ermine from the look. They had removed their matching fur hats, which were lined up on the mantle, revealing hair pinned up in nearly identical styles that mimicked the bobbed shape that more daring women had cropped their hair into. All three were of an indeterminate age—not old, despite the silvery gray shade of their hair, but too refined for youth—and shared the same gray eyes and pale, papery, gray skin.

[Animalistic growls and snarling]

The one who stood was the first to speak.

[The three Gray Ladies have characteristic voices: the first is bright, cheerful, and proper. The second voice is rough, frantic, and grating. The third voice is bored, low, and husky.]

[First Gray Lady, brightly:] “Good evening, Mr.—”

[Second Gray Lady, roughly:] “Carter. We’ve been—” said the second.

[Third Gray Lady, huskily:] “Waiting for you,” finished the third. The effect made Kenneth Carter’s skin crawl. Still, he was not a man to be intimidated by a gaggle of women, that incident with his late wife and the fireplace poker notwithstanding.

“Where’s Amon? Did that do-nothing leave our business to a bunch of women?” He sneered.

As one, the women smiled. Their eyes gleamed.

[First Gray Lady, brightly:] “I’m afraid you’ll find Mr. Finley—”

[Second Gray Lady, roughly:] “Indisposed, in a fashion rather—”

[Third Gray Lady, huskily:] “Permanent, we’re afraid. But we’ve—”

[First Gray Lady, brightly:] “Come to collect that which—”

[Second Gray Lady, roughly:] “Does not belong to you.”

Carter’s hand twisted reflexively toward his coat pocket, but he didn’t flinch. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” he sniffed. “I have an appointment with Amon to discuss the disposition of my stepdaughter, who, given my late wife’s passing, I assure you, is legally mine to dispense with.”

[First Gray Lady, brightly:] “Liar,” hissed the first woman who stood by the fireplace. “Even if that one were with you, she’s—”

[Second Gray Lady, roughly:] “None of yours,” the second finished, her contempt matching her sister’s—because they had to be sisters, surely, Carter thought, increasingly unnerved by their patterns of speech.

[Third Gray Lady, huskily:] “In any case,” the third chimed, examining her long, pointed fingernails, her tone one of intense boredom, “we care not for—”

[Second Gray Lady, roughly:] “That one. We have come for the artifact. As we

understand it, it's—”

[First Gray Lady, brightly:] “A hair comb now,” the first stated matter-of-factly, her grin widening just a touch right at the corner of her mouth. Carter caught his first glimpse of teeth—sharp, and far too many.

[Third Gray Lady, huskily:] “How charming,” chimed the third, the delight evident on her pretty, ageless face, her smile even sharper than her sister’s.

[First Gray Lady, brightly:] “You will give us the comb now,” the first said flatly, and all smiles vanished in an instant.

[Third Gray Lady, huskily:] “If you refuse us, there will be—”

[Second Gray Lady, roughly:] “Consequences. If you cooperate, we might just—”

[First Gray Lady, brightly:] “Spare your life.” The first smiled again. “It’s entirely up to you, of course. To be—”

[Third Gray Lady, huskily:] “Quite candid, we dearly love—”

[Second Gray Lady, roughly:] “Consequences.”

The smile that spread from the first Gray Lady to the second and then to the third chilled Carter to the bone. He had the unsettling thought that even their teeth looked vaguely gray—gray and sharp. But these were just women, he told himself, however off-putting their bizarre manner of speaking. “Tell Amon I’ll not be pawed off on secretaries. I’ll see that the comb is returned to Barrow and Locke myself.”

[Second Gray Lady, roughly:] “Thieves!” the second of the women snapped, rising to her feet, and the third joined her. Until this moment, Carter hadn’t registered how tall the women were. They towered over Carter at just five foot nine, in boots and if God loved him, and he took an unconscious step backward.

[Third Gray Lady, huskily:] “You dare suggest we let you hand the artifact over to those—”

[Second Gray Lady, roughly:] “Pathetic monkeys, those—”

[Third Gray Lady, huskily:] “Children playing dress up in Mommy and Daddy’s—”

[First Gray Lady, brightly:] “Skins?” The first of the women smiled. “Well, Mr. Carter, it seems you’ve chosen the hard way.”

[Second Gray Lady, roughly:] “We love—”

[Third Gray Lady, huskily:] “The hard way.”

The three women hissed in unison, mouths gaping impossibly wide to reveal gleaming rows of needle-sharp teeth, much like lampreys. Their limbs began to lengthen and undulate, their skin deepening into the gray of something that did not see the sun, slicked with a sheen of something else viscous and poisonous.

The last vestiges of his arrogance deserted him, and Carter screamed. He turned and lurched toward the door, but the farmhouse was small, and the Gray Ladies were quick and possessed of a terrible strength. Their hands had melded into the snake-like tubes of what had been their arms as they wrapped them around Kenneth’s wrists and trunk and hips and throat. Their faces now seemed only to hold an enormous ocean of teeth that yawned ever impossibly wider. They were on him in a heartbeat, dragging him to the floor, tearing at his clothes. He saw one of them grin in triumph as she pulled the carved box that held the antler comb out into the light.

And then he felt those terrible terrible mouths closing upon his flesh.

Kenneth Carter’s screams cut off abruptly, and silence fell across the woods of Esau County. For a while, there was nothing but the sounds of lip-smacking and the contented sighs of a meal thoroughly enjoyed by all at the table.

Eventually, the fire burned low in the hearth, and the front door opened, and three

women stepped out into the quiet, snow-blanketed night. They piled in the sleek, powerful car that had lately been owned by one Kenneth Carter of Pineville Kentucky, and the one in the driver's seat started the engine. It would not do to leave such an easily-recognizable vehicle abandoned in such a place, after all. And what fun they could have in disposing of it. As they steered the car down the driveway, the heavy cloud cover overhead broke, and the heavy, wet snow began to fall.

[Second Gray Lady, roughly:] "Oh, lovely," said one of the three.

[First Gray Lady, brightly:] "Look at—"

[Third Gray Lady, huskily:] "The snow. We do so love—"

[Second Gray Lady, roughly:] "A white Christmas."

[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...

Happy Holidays, family. Whichever holiday you may celebrate in this season, we hope you're doing it safely, and at home, and you're not out there traveling. I'm just going to say it: stay at home, wear a mask if you got to go out, but don't travel, please, for the betterment of us all. Let's all be able to gather again in person in the coming year.

Thank you all for joining us for Chapter Two of the Holiest Days of Bone and Shadow, our new holiday-themed miniseries. It's nice to be able to give you all a gift as we take a little break between Act One and Act Two of Season Two here on Old Gods of Appalachia. Our outro music, as always, is by Those Poor Bastards, and today's story was written by Cam Collins and produced and performed by Steve Shell. For more information on this story and others, head on over to [Old Gods of Appalachia dot com](http://OldGodsofAppalachia.com). see you soon, family. Happy Holidays.