

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

presents

BUILD MAMA A COFFIN

Episode 8: Mercy's Visitation

Build Mama a Coffin is an all-new story in the same world as Old Gods of Appalachia. We're about to take some turns, family. Y'all ready? Heh, I thought so. Let's go.

[Build Mama a Coffin by Blood on the Harp]

Gonna build Mama a coffin, I'm gonna make it out of pine

There'll be tears from sister to make those hinges shine

Gonna build Mama a coffin, I'm gonna make it out of spruce

They can all act broken when they hear the news

That Mama's dead and gone...

"Beloved, believe not every spirit but try the spirits whether they are of god, because many false prophets are gone out into the world."

— John 4:1

It was the dead of night when Mercy Boggs Carter jerked awake, pulled from sleep by a loud thump that seemed to come from somewhere in the house. Mercy was rightly frightened to hear any sort of unexplained noise in a house where she knew she was alone — her daughter Delia had spent the night with a friend, and her husband was, as usual, traveling. The family didn't keep any pets, as much as Delia would have loved a cat — Mercy's husband had, of course, vetoed that idea, even though Mercy had pointed out that cats were useful. They kept a house free of mice and rats.

A *rat*? The thought gave Mercy a scare. When she was around four or five — just a little thing — a rat had bitten her foot in the night, and Mercy'd been terrified of the little buggers ever since. She huddled deeper under the coverlet, and listened hard.

For a few minutes, everything was quiet — real quiet, not even the sounds of crickets or frogs singing out in the night, which wasn't right. It was summertime — the world outside should have been alive with the comforting sounds of nocturnal creatures going about their evening. But it was still and silent, as if the whole world was holding its breath.

And then she heard it — not a thump this time, but a soft scritch sound, long and drawn out, like fingernails drawn over wood, and Mercy realized the sound was not inside the house but coming from the front porch.

The next thing Mercy knew, she found herself at the bottom of the stairs, standing just inside the fine and sturdy front door of the Carter family home, her hand on the knob. The door was fitted with two thick panes of glass, and Mercy squinted out at the porch through the flimsy

privacy curtains that covered them. It was a clear night, the moon about three quarters full, and the yard was lit with that soft white glow, dew sparkling on the neatly trimmed grass and the leaves of the roses bushes that lined the walkway from porch to mailbox. Mercy couldn't see anything on the porch — the door and the shadows from the overhanging roof blocked her vision — so she unbolted the door and stepped outside.

The porch was cold as ice, and as soon as her feet touched the smooth, painted boards, Mercy saw, and she knew what she had heard. It was a wonder she hadn't woken sooner, because it had to have taken time — all night, surely. The porch was covered in... symbols. Where those... sigils? Yes that was it — she'd heard her mother say the word once or twice. Strange, twisted designs scratched into the wood beneath her feet, into the white painted columns around her. It had all been dark until she stepped outside, but once she touched them, it was as if they'd come to life, lit from within by a cold blue glow.

When Mercy tried to make sense of what she was seeing, the sigils swam before her vision, as if her eyes refused to focus on them. She felt like she'd sometimes felt in school, trying to make sense of the questions in her geometry class — a test she was doomed to fail. Mercy had a fine head for figures, but points and slopes and all that nonsense were beyond her grasp. What were they? What did this mean? Oh, Mama would know, damnit. Mama would know and she would know what to do — and Mercy had never listened to her like she should, and now she would reap what she'd sown by being an arrogant, disrespectful daughter.

Mercy's head ached and her stomach churned — she clapped a hand to her mouth, afraid she might be sick. She felt a cold sweat break out over her skin — her bare skin. Dear god, she was naked as a jaybird. How had she come to be *outside* and naked? What was wrong with her? Her chest felt tight — she could barely breathe — and Mercy realized she had to get off the porch, away from these... *things*... carved into the wood.

Gasping for air, she threw herself toward the steps and the yard that lay beyond, missed the first one, stumbled and fell down the last two. Her knees hit the concrete paved walk with a hard smack. It was a sound she hadn't heard since childhood, but one you never really forget — the sound of busting your knees. Mercy almost laughed, because she could laugh now. She could breathe again, here in the yard, away from those awful markings. She could breathe, and she could think, and...

And she could hear something. Footsteps.

Mercy looked up, down the lawn, and saw a white man coming toward her up the path from the road. Not white like Mercy herself — not white as in *Caucasian*, to be clear — but paint white, chalk white, whiter than any living man should be. Not an albino though — Mercy knew what that was, and his eyes were not pink but dark — they looked black in the night. His skin was smooth, ageless, and he appeared to be completely hairless — a fact that Mercy could observe because, like herself, the man was naked as the day he was born, though he seemed not to notice

or care. Shocked speechless and completely forgetting her manners, Mercy just stared as he continued up the walk at the same sedate, unhurried pace.

The white man stopped when he reached Mercy, and he stood over her a moment, looking over her battered knees and wide, frightened eyes, then turned his gaze to the porch. He squinted at the sigils carved into the wood, then grunted softly and shook his head.

Looking back down at Mercy, he held out a scrap of paper, which she took in numb fingers, acting on pure reflex.

“Granny says bring the girl.”

And then he was gone, and Mercy was struggling to sit upright, shaking and gasping as she jerked awake. She was back in her own bed, not naked but dressed in her nightgown just as she had been when she laid down last night. Sunlight streamed through the windows of her bedroom. She could hear birds twittering outside, not the weird, awful silence of the night before.

No, she thought, *that must have been a dream...* but then she felt something in her hand, and realized she'd been clutching it all along. It was the small scrap of paper, a bit crushed from her grip. Mercy pulled her hands out from under the covers, and with shaking fingers, carefully smoothed it out. On it, written in a fine, dainty hand, were directions to a location in the woods of Esau County — directions that would purportedly lead Mercy from the door of her family home in Boggs Holler to that of one Granny White.

Granny says bring the girl, the man had said. Delia. This woman, whoever she was, knew about Mercy's daughter.

[Come Children Come by the Gravesend Weavers]

There's a narrow path to deliverance, child — come, children, come

There's a path right through where the woods go wild — come, children, come

There's a wolf out hunting in the pale moonlight...

Today's story was written by Cam Collins and performed by Steve Shell. Our outro music is by the Gravesend Weavers.

Come, children, come — Oh come, children, come

Keep on the path 'til the morning light — come, children, come

That narrow path gonna cross one holler — come, children, come

Better mark your way with a silver dollar — come, children, come

That narrow path gonna cross two cricks — come, children, come

Better mark your way with the dust of bricks — come, children, come

*Come, children, come — Oh come, children, come
Keep on the path 'til the morning light — come, children, come*

*That narrow path gonna cross three hills — come, children, come
Better mark your way with porcupine quills — come, children, come
That narrow path gonna cross four roads — come, children, come
Better mark your way with two dried toads — come, children, come*

*Come, children, come — Oh come, children, come
Keep on the path 'til the morning light - come, children, come*

*That narrow path gonna cross five rails — come, children, come
Better mark your way with three iron nails — come, children, come
That narrow path gonna cross six stones — come, children, come
Better mark your way with two wishbones — come, children, come*

*Come, children, come — Oh come, children, come
Keep on the path 'til the morning light — come, children, come*

*That narrow path gonna cross your door — come, children, come
Better run that path 'til you can't no more — come, children, come
If you hear that wolf howling after you — come, children, come
Better lock your door 'til the day come new — come, children, come*

*Come, children, come — Oh come, children, come
Keep on the path 'til the morning light...
Come... children... come...*