

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

The Door Under the Floor

Part One

[The Door Under the Floor Theme by Matt Evans]

The Door Under the Floor by Cam Collins. Part One.

Mavidale, Virginia

1992

There was a door under Merrilee Cook's mamaw's house that none of the cousins — or, so far as Merrilee knew, even any of their parents — were ever allowed to open. It was painted a blue that had once been bright, now cracked and peeling and covered in dust, but stout as an oak all the same. And anytime Mamaw sent one of the children down under the floor to bring up a jar of canned beans, or pickled beets, or strawberry jam for biscuits, she always warned them:

MAMAW COOK: You stay away from that blue door down there, hear me?

It was never “downstairs,” because there were no stairs — it was always under the floor. You'd go outside and around the side of the house, then walk under the porch to the little door that would take you into the cellar. The blue door was toward the back of the house, past the furnace and the tidy shelves under the kitchen floor, packed full with jars of Mamaw's canning projects, each carefully labeled in blue ink and her neat script — chow chow, pickled beets, an array of fruit jams and preserves, apple butter, and so on.

Growing up, Merrilee never saw that door open, never saw Mamaw nor anyone else turn the knob, much less pass through it, and she was endlessly fascinated by it. Where did it go? What was in there? Mamaw never would answer her questions — beyond a curt

MAMAW COOK: Never you mind, sissy”

— and no one else in the Cook family seemed to know. Or to have ever given the matter much thought, truth to tell.

Merrilee's mama told her that it was private, and she'd better not catch Merrilee snooping through Mamaw's things or she'd bust her butt. Her daddy just shrugged and said it was "Just Mama's storage room, I guess, Merrilee. She's probably got, like, rat poison in there, stuff like that — *dangerous* stuff. You kids stay away from that door under the floor, now." Uncle Bobby laughed and said it was "where Mama keeps her gin money," which earned him a swat from Aunt Jackie, though she laughed too when she did it.

Once when she was around ten, Mamaw asked Merrilee to go down under the floor and fetch a jar of sauerkraut, and Merrilee had gotten brave enough to sneak over to that blue door and give the knob a try. She glanced over her shoulder — just in case Mamaw had followed her down there, or maybe her little nosy cousin Terry Lee — and wiped her damp hands on her jeans, then stretched her right hand out and tentatively grasped the knob. It felt ice cold against her fingers, even through a thin layer of dust, and it did not turn. Not even the slight back-and-forth jiggle that Merrilee usually associated with locked doors. No. The knob held firm.

So Merrilee had given up, plucked a jar of sauerkraut from the shelves as her Mamaw had asked her to, and gone outside and around the house, back up to the kitchen. When she held out the jar in her grimy hands, smeared with dust from the blue door, Mamaw had give her a long, hard look. She didn't ask if Merrilee had tried to open the door. She didn't say anything about it at all. But she never sent Merrilee down under the floor again, not once.

Over time — and no doubt with lack of exposure to this great mystery of her childhood — Merrilee's interest waned, and eventually she forgot all about the door. She hadn't thought about it in at least twenty years when the call from back home came one rainy Sunday morning at the tail end of her 39th year. Mamaw had passed peacefully in her sleep at home, in the bed she'd shared with Papaw Cook, who'd died of a stroke when Merrilee was fifteen, in the house they'd bought the first year they were married, when she was only eighteen. The funeral would be held over the coming Thanksgiving weekend, and of course there was the will to discuss — why didn't Merrilee just plan on coming in for the holiday? Everybody'd love to see her.

Merrilee had to think about that. She had now spent more years living Away than she had in the tiny town of Mavisdale in the foothills of Appalachia where she'd been born and raised. She'd graduated from Robert E. Lee High School early and with honors, secured herself a good scholarship with a university up north, stepped onto a Greyhound bus with a suitcase and \$200 she'd saved up waiting tables at Uncle Bobby's diner — and never looked back. She hadn't returned in at least ten years, not since her mama and daddy passed... and yet...

Home. Come home.

The words held a power she could neither understand nor deny. As far and as long as she'd run from them, down in her bones, those mountains would always be home. You hear people talk about things that “pull on your heart strings” and most of the time, we think that's just a pretty metaphor. And then something — a word, a picture, a song, or a scent — pulls at you just the right way, and you know: the ties that bind the heart are a very real thing, Family.

And so Merrilee called out of work for a few days, gave her friend Drew a spare key so they could come by and feed her old ginger tomcat Barnabus, packed a black dress and sensible shoes (because nobody wants to be stumbling around a graveside service in heels if it rains), and headed home to see her family. The weather was not ideal for flying: her flight out of the city was delayed, and the second leg was nauseating — battered about by turbulence in a tiny little puddle jumper of an airplane from Atlanta into the small regional airport near her family home. She was exhausted by the time she touched down, and not looking forward to dealing with the car rental agents or the remaining drive home into the mountains.

But of course, she didn't have to. As soon as she stepped through the security gates into the front lobby of the airport, a vaguely familiar voice — in the honeyed accent she'd grown up with — called out:

DAVE: Merrilee! Over here!

— and she turned to find her cousin David waiting for her by the baggage claim carousel.

Merrilee felt a weight lift off her shoulders, and she smiled as she called back —

MERRILEE: Dave!

— and reached out to hug the man. He was a couple years older than her, with sandy blond hair turning slowly silver, and the sort of soft and comfy waistline that Drew would one day call a “dad bod.” Merrilee hadn’t talked to Dave since... god, since his wedding probably? She felt a little ashamed for that. They’d been close when they were kids, but like so many things, she’d let that connection slip away.

MERRILEE: How are Denise and the kids?

DAVE: Well, the boys are doing great. As for their mother, I s’pose she’s fine, although that’s not rightly my business these days. We’ve been divorced awhile now.

Merrilee felt her cheeks heat up. She was sure her mama had told her that, and she should have remembered, but here she was, putting her foot in it right off the bat.

MERRILEE: Aw, jeez... I should’ve remembered that, I’m sorry. Are you doing ok?

DAVE: Oh, I’m pretty good. Things were rough for awhile there, but then I started finally talking to someone — you know, like a counselor — and she’s helped a lot. She says “not every relationship is meant to last forever, but that doesn’t negate their value.” I had to chew on that one awhile, but when you think about it, it makes a lot of sense.

MERRILEE: She sounds like a smart lady.

DAVE: She is. She’s helped me a lot. And I guess it doesn’t hurt that I’ve started dating. Never thought I’d be using *that* word again! But she’s a real nice girl. Her name’s Janet, works at the library. The boys really like her too. But what about you? How’s big city life treating you?

MERRILEE: Oh, it’s all right. You know how it is. Work, work — and oh look! — more work. But I’m doing all right.

Independent and self-sufficient, Merrilee had never married, never dated anyone she felt like taking that step with. It wasn't that she didn't want another person in her life, but... she didn't *need* anyone. Growing up an only child, she'd learned to entertain herself at a young age, and she'd never minded doing the things on her own that some folks did — traveling, going to movies, eating in restaurants. Hell, her cat gave her plenty of affection... if not of a certain kind that, admittedly, she'd been missing lately. But Merrilee's former partners — both men and women — tended to read this self-sufficiency as indifference, and her independence as coldness. It had not been a recipe for success in her relationships, although her friends assured her that she just hadn't met the right person yet. At this point, she wasn't entirely convinced there was a “right person,” and she'd decided she was mostly ok with that.

Like her cousin, Merrilee had learned to appreciate the support of a good therapist.

The drive from the airport up into the mountains took the better part of an hour, during which the cousins had time to catch up. Like Merrilee, David had moved away from Mavisdale after high school, though he hadn't left the mountains behind. He'd attended Marshall University in West Virginia — where he'd met his ex-wife Denise — on a football scholarship, and after graduation the two had settled down to start a family in Charleston. It wasn't too far from home — not quite four hours — but too far to drive back and forth.

DAVE: They've got you and me staying at Mamaw's house. It feels a little weird, I know, but... at least we're not sleeping on Mama's couch or sharing bunks with Cheryl's kids.

MERRILEE: God forbid!

Their cousin Cheryl had not stopped at two children like Dave and his wife — at last count, her brood was up to — what? six? — and both her unruly offspring and string of brief and ill-considered marriages were the subject of frequent family gossip. Cheryl was a kind, good-hearted woman and an excellent mother, but unfortunately not always the best judge of character.

It was around suppertime and full dark by the time Dave pulled his extended cab pickup into Mamaw's driveway. Stepping down to the driveway was like descending through time for

Merrilee, as the sights and scents and sounds of her childhood surrounded her. The air was crisp and cold and sweet with woodsmoke and decaying apples fallen from the old crabapple in the front yard. Dead leaves and gravel crunched underfoot, and a hoot owl called out from the woods behind the house. Someone was here already — every window was lit with the warm glow of incandescent bulbs, and Merrilee could smell the aroma of something delicious cooking on the stove — definitely chicken of some kind — as soon as she'd opened the car door.

MERRILEE: Shew, lord, that smells good!

Merrilee exclaimed, the accent and expressions of her youth creeping back into her speech on reflex, as her stomach growled and her mouth watered.

David grinned.

DAVE: Mama made chicken 'n dumplings. Mamaw's recipe. She remembered they're your favorite.

They always had been, possibly because Merrilee's mama didn't like chicken 'n dumplings herself, so she never made them. Chicken 'n dumplings were a special treat Merrilee only ever got to enjoy at Mamaw Cook's house.

Dave hefted Merrilee's suitcase, and she followed him up the stairs to the porch and into the warm, bright kitchen, where Aunt Jackie stood over the kitchen counter, readying dumplings that she would stir into the thick, creamy soup of chicken and herbs that simmered away on the stove. When she saw Merrilee, she wiped her hands on a dish towel, and came to give her a tight hug.

AUNT JACKIE: Girl, it's been a long time — way too long!

Merrilee hugged her back. It had been too long. Here, in Mamaw's cheery kitchen, surrounded by the love of family she got on with, it was easy to forget all the reasons she'd left home. She'd left for an education, for better job opportunities, to find a place in a larger, more diverse community away from the small-mindedness that could plague a small town. Those reasons had

been perfectly valid — they still were — and yet... at the end of the day, this was still home. Down where it counted — in her heart, her blood, her very bones — this would always be her home.

Aunt Jackie bustled around the kitchen, clearing her latest craft project off the table and wiping it down so Merrilee could sit down, directing Dave to take Merrilee's suitcase upstairs to Mamaw's room, where she'd already put fresh sheets on the bed and turned down the comforter. Dave himself was already settled into Uncle Bobby's old room down the hall.

AUNT JACKIE: Now you just set right down and tell me all about what's been going on with you. Your job, that cute kitty cat you got — what's his name? Barney?

MERRILEE: Barnabus.

AUNT JACKIE: BARN-abus! Like the vampire in that old TV show? That's so cute. Annnnd... what else? You got anybody... *special*... in your life?

Jackie Cook was both a bit of a busybody and a hopeless romantic, and fancied herself something of a matchmaker. If Merrilee stayed more than a day or two, she'd probably be trying to set her up on blind dates. So she stretched the truth. Just a bit. In the interest of saving her sanity.

MERRILEE: Um... well... my... friend... Drew is taking care of Barnabus for the weekend. I gave them the key and all.

AUNT JACKIE: OH! Well now!

Aunt Jackie said, smiling widely and misinterpreting the situation exactly as Merrilee had hoped she might.

AUNT JACKIE: Do tell, girl!

MERRILEE: Oh... well um... I don't want to jinx it. *You know*.

AUNT JACKIE: Oh, I do!

She said with a grin, swatting Merrilee playfully with the dish towel.

AUNT JACKIE: Now, dinner's coming right along, should be ready anytime. Actually, Merrilee — do you mind to go down under the floor for me and bring up a can of Mamaw's green beans? I've gotta keep an eye on these dumplings.

MERRILEE: Sure.

Merrilee said, hopping to her feet, greatly relieved at the change of subject. She passed her cousin, lurking just outside the kitchen, on her way outside. She could tell from Dave's smirk he'd heard the whole exchange. He wiggled his eyebrows at her, and Merrilee stuck her tongue out at him as she swept out the front door.

She walked down the front stairs and around the side of the house, then under the porch to the door that led under the house. The paint had faded over the years, and the hinges squeaked a little, but it was still sturdy and well maintained. Inside, she walked around behind the furnace — a much newer unit, she noted, humming along much more quietly than the old rusty furnace Papaw had kept running on love and prayers — and back to Mamaw's neat canning shelves, along the side wall under the kitchen.

And there, just past the shelves, along the back wall of the house — there it was. The blue door. Merrilee hadn't thought about the door in years, but it was just as she remembered it — the bright blue still cracked and peeling, but apparently no more faded than it had been before, the knob and hinges dark with patina, but not rusted. On impulse, she walked over and tried the knob — wouldn't budge, just as it hadn't when a young Merrilee had tried the door all those years ago.

And yet... as an adult, there was something... not right about the door. Something she didn't think she'd noticed as a kid. Merrilee stood gazing at it for a moment, and then the problem

suddenly clicked into place in her mind: there shouldn't *be* a door there. It was set into the back wall of the house, behind which there was... nothing.

But that couldn't be right. Why would her grandmother have made such a big deal about the door if there was nothing behind it? If it was — what? Just decorative? Merrilee couldn't imagine her Mamaw and Papaw — or anyone of that generation — hanging a door in the wall merely for artistic effect, particularly in the basement, of all places.

Merrilee leaned over and placed her hand on the door. It felt cold to the touch, colder than the ambient temperature of the room. When she rested her hand on the knob, it felt almost icy. She leaned forward, resting her ear against it. She couldn't hear anything really, but her proximity to the door allowed her to feel something else — a faint, almost non-existent breath of cold air swirling around her ankles, coming through the bottom of the door.

MERRILEE: What the fuck?

Merrilee stepped back, looking the door up and down again. There *was* something beyond that door. A root cellar or an old fallout shelter, or... or something.

AUNT JACKIE: Merrilee! You get lost?

Aunt Jackie hollered from the kitchen above, startling Merrilee out of her contemplation of the mysterious door.

MERRILEE: Coming!

Merrilee yelled up to her. Then she turned, quickly found a can of green beans on the pantry shelf behind her, and headed back up into the house.

Thanksgiving morning dawned clear and bright, and Aunt Jackie — who had gone home after dinner the evening before — was already back and bustling around the kitchen well before

Merrilee woke up, eventually lured from sleep by the welcome aroma of coffee brewing downstairs. She wandered down in a pair of pajama pants and a tank top and poured herself a cup in one of Mamaw's double size mugs. When she asked if she could help with anything, Aunt Jackie was only too happy to put her to work peeling a bag of potatoes. When Dave came downstairs, yawning and scruffy, she handed him a second peeler and a bag of carrots.

The Cook family started pulling into the driveway in vehicles of various vintage and state of repair around two that afternoon. There were familiar faces etched with character by the passage of time and the various twists and turns of life — Uncle Bobby had apparently taken up mountain biking sometime in the last decade or so, and the pastime had carved off some of the extra weight that tended to come with a life spent slinging burgers and making pies down at the diner, much to the relief of his wife, who had worried about his heart. Cousin Darrell walked with a limp these days, a souvenir from his time overseas when he was in the service. There were many new faces as well — Cousin Cheryl introduced Merrilee to her new husband, Jerry, and her brood of six rambunctious children, ranging in ages from three to fifteen. Aunt Ivy's new beau, Michael, another nurse recently hired at the hospital where she worked as an RN. Dave's boys were not present, although this should have been his year to have them for Thanksgiving, because his former wife felt that, at 11 and 13, they were too young to attend a funeral. Aunt Jackie had a lot to say about that, and although he was more circumspect, it was clear that Uncle Bobby was no more happy about the decision. Merrilee could sense that there was more to this situation than Dave had acknowledged, but she thought it best not to pry.

Despite the sad circumstances that had brought Merrilee home, dinner was a noisy, cheerful affair, full of the familiar chatter of family gossip, the laughter of children, and a generous helping of good-natured teasing. After the main meal, with the kids sent outside to play and most of the adults settled into the living room to watch football, Merrilee sat around the kitchen table with Dave, Aunt Jackie and Uncle Bobby, with a cup of coffee and a slice of pumpkin pie, to talk about Mamaw's will.

Aunt Jackie got up and fetched a small footstool, which Mamaw had always used to reach dishes on the higher kitchen shelves, and used it to retrieve a small box from the cabinet above the fridge. Painted a bright blue that had faded over time and set with brass fittings, the box was about nine inches across and four deep, and whatever it held must have been lightweight,

because the only sound it made when Jackie set it on the table was a soft rattle as something inside shifted against the side of the box. Jackie resumed her seat across the table from Merrilee, and pushed the box towards her.

AUNT JACKIE: This is one part of what Mamaw left you in the will, Merrilee. The other...

— and here she exchanged a significant look with Uncle Bobby —

AUNT JACKIE: The other's the house.

Merrilee felt as if the world had shifted on its axis. Whatever she'd imagined when Jackie said they needed to talk about the will — a few pieces of jewelry? maybe some family photos? — it had not been this. The house? Mamaw had left her — and her alone — *the house*? It didn't make any sense. Merrilee hadn't even been to visit in years, a choice which, under the current circumstances, she wasn't too proud of, if she was honest.

MERRILEE: Why would she do that?

Uncle Bobby shrugged.

UNCLE BOBBY: We don't rightly know, Merrilee. Mama never really wanted to discuss the will with any of us before she passed. If we asked her about it, she'd tell us it was her business and to mind our own. But... I dunno... maybe she thought you were the one who most needed it?

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

UNCLE BOBBY: She, uh... she knew you didn't own a home of your own up there in Boston. And, you know, she had real particular opinions about home ownership.

AUNT JACKIE: Specifically, she didn't want the house to pass out of the family. There's a copy of the will for you there in the box — you can read over the whole thing, probably a good idea to have a lawyer look at it too. It explains it all, but the long and short of it is, if you don't want the house, you'll need to figure out someone in the family to sell it to, work something out like that.

We asked our lawyer about it, whether or not it was all legal, and it looks like she's got it pretty well tied up.

MERRILEE: Huh. That's weird.

Merrilee said thoughtfully, reaching for the box. Lifting the lid, she saw there was indeed a copy of the will lying on top of an old brass key, and a folded sheet of ruled paper on which her name was written in blue ballpoint in her grandmother's neat, graceful hand.

UNCLE BOBBY: We know it's a lot to take in,

Bobby said, giving her hand a gentle pat.

It was certainly that, and Merrilee was itching to read the letter that her mamaw had left, but the idea of reading over things right there at the table — with her aunt and uncle and cousin looking on — felt like too much pressure, so for now she just nodded and closed the lid.

MERRILEE: It is. Thank you for letting me know. I.. definitely need some time to think about things.

Jackie smiled and squeezed her other hand.

AUNT JACKIE: You take all the time you need, honey. And just let us know if you need anything, ok?

And with that, everyone let the matter drop for the moment. The family spent the rest of the day and most of the evening catching up, watching football on tv, sneaking an extra piece of pie here and there, and generally enjoying one another's company. It was a good holiday, as things go. No one argued — leastways not over anything more serious than which school's football team would win the national championship — and the kids were reasonably well-behaved, and everyone seemed in generally good spirits. But it was a lot of people in a relatively small space, and Merrilee was somewhat relieved when everyone — except of course for Dave, who was staying at Mamaw's with her — packed up and headed home.

When the lights of his mama's minivan finally disappeared down the driveway, Dave produced a bottle of red wine he'd tucked away in a cabinet behind the cereal boxes, along with a couple of jelly jars, because of course Mamaw didn't have wine glasses.

MERRILEE: My hero!

Merrilee declared with a grin, as she and her cousin clinked glasses.

Dave lit a fire in the old wood stove, and the two of them settled into Mamaw and Papaw's comfy old recliners in companionable silence. It was only now that Merrilee let her thoughts return to their conversation earlier that day, and decided to take out the box and read over the letter from Mamaw Cook.

MAMAW COOK: *Dear Merrilee,*

If you're reading this letter, then I suppose it means that I'm gone, or near enough as makes no difference. I am sure you have a lot of questions, and I wish I could be there to answer them for you, but I'll do my best here. I'm sure your biggest question is: why did I leave you the house?

This house must stay in the family, Merrilee. I have spent my life, since I was just a new bride, keeping a secret and bearing a responsibility that I hoped to relieve myself and my family of before I died. If you're reading this, it means that I've failed, and I must pass this burden — and yes, I do mean burden — on to the next generation.

When you were a child, you were always the most curious about that door down under the floor, which is why I kept you away from it until you were older. But I have watched you grow into a strong woman, one who can handle herself, and of all my grandchildren, I believe you are the one most capable of taking up this responsibility I'm asking of you. The key you'll find in the box along with this letter fits that door, and you must never use it. What's behind that door, Merrilee, must never be let out. Keep it locked up tight. If you hear anything from the other side, don't let yourself be tempted, no matter what — or who — it sounds like. No one and no thing you love could ever be found behind that door.

I know that what I ask is a lot, but as of this writing, I also know that in spite of the miles and years that separate you from home, from the family, you've never really put down roots. I pray you'll consider what I'm asking, and come home. If not, speak with your cousins. David has a good head on his shoulders. He might do. Not Cheryl, whatever you do! That girl has a good heart, but she don't have the sense God gave a duck.

*With all my love,
Mamaw*

Merrilee sat, staring, at the strange correspondence in her hand for a good minute.

DAVE: What is it?

And so she cleared her throat and read it back to him. Dave whistled.

DAVE: Sounds like maybe Mamaw was slipping more at the end there than anybody thought.

MERRILEE: Uhhhh... yeah. I mean... wow, right? Jeez.

It hurt her heart to think dementia or something like that had been creeping up on their Mamaw toward the end of her life. She'd always been a real firecracker of a woman, whip-smart and feisty, her presence filling a room despite her tiny, five-foot stature.

Dave sighed, and the cousins sat in morose silence for a moment. Then, of course, Dave being Dave, he suddenly grinned.

DAVE: So. You wanna open up that door? Finally see what's on the other side?

In spite of herself, Merrilee felt herself returning that grin. As kids, she and Dave had been the most adventurous of the Cook cousins, always daring each other to new and more extravagant mischief. She reached into the box and lifted out the old brass key, holding it up to the light for inspection. It was worn, but looked to be in reasonable working condition.

MERRILEE: Why not?

And so they refilled their jars with a little more wine, grabbed a flashlight, and headed outside and down around the house to the door that led into the basement. Dave walked ahead of Merrilee, shining the flashlight until he found the pull chain in the middle of the room that turned on the bare bulb overhead. It was just 60 watts, and didn't quite chase all the shadows from the corners, but it would do. The two walked to the back wall of the house, and there it was, set into the earth it seemed, as ever: the blue door, with its peeling paint and layer of grime, looking as though it hadn't been touched in years.

MERRILEE: Shine the light for me, would you?

Merrilee asked, and Dave pointed the flashlight toward the door knob.

Merrilee fit the key into the lock, and twisted it to the right. For all Mamaw's letter had built it up, as well as her past experience trying to turn the knob, she thought the lock might have stuck, or not turned at all. But the key turned smoothly, and the lock disengaged with a soft click. She glanced up at Dave, took a deep breath, and turned the knob.

DAVE: Oh shit!

Dave exclaimed.

MERRILEE: Hold the light steady,

Merrilee said, reaching out with her left hand to stabilize it herself.

The flashlight illuminated a long shaft that sloped down into the earth below the Cook house. At the end of the light's reach, they could see there was a bend in the tunnel. Just as they could just as clearly see that beyond it, somewhere down in the darkness, there was light.

[The Door Under the Floor Theme by Matt Evans]

Today's story was written by Cam Collin; narrated and produced by Steve Shell; and featured Betsy Puckett as Mamaw Cook, Brandon Sartain as Dave, Aliya Johnson as Merrilee, Allison Mullins as Aunt Jackie, and Steve Shell as Uncle Bobby. Our intro and outro music is by Matt Evans.

Join us Saturday, December 19th at 8pm Eastern on Discord for part two of "The Door Under the Floor."

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