

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

presents

BUILD MAMA A COFFIN

Episode 11: The Harvest

Build Mama a Coffin is an all-new story set in the same world as Old Gods of Appalachia, which is a horror anthology podcast. And I know y'all know that, but we're going to a dark place — a real dark place, family, so brace yourselves if you can. Here we go.

[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 — come, children, come

Better keep on the path, better stay on the right — come, children, come...

On a marshy patch of land down by the river southeast of Glamorgan, the bonfires burned bright and hot as the death of summer. The air was aflame with song and breath in the night. The earth thrummed with the pounding feet of the celebration of the end of a hard season — for, family, the True Harvest had come.

The White property, as it was called, was alive. It was called the White property because Granny never had no taste for naming things grander than they were, so while the Dotsons had Glendale Acres and the Blankenships had Sunset Farm, out between Glamorgan and Esserville it was just the White property.

And the property was, in fact, alive with all the folks that lived and worked on that particular piece of land. Granny's land. Granny White. No one ever called her by a first name if she ever had one, but she always seemed to need help on that land. They planted and they grew, but no one could ever really say *what*, that would sustain that land. Some whispered that Granny's family ran a bootlegging operation and that all the buildings in her back forty were filled with stills and bottling lines, and other folks said she grew the finest hemp this side of the Green Belt of Kentucky for both work and recreational purposes, but everybody knew there weren't no truth to that.

Everybody knew that Granny grew some 'baccar, and she did have a mighty big garden, had trucks at every market day. There might be some truth that she had tried her luck digging a couple of doghole mines out there — unlicensed death pits dug into the earth looking for coal that probably didn't come close to meeting state inspection standards — because there were dig sites back there. But why in the world would anybody dig for coal out by the river? Even old B&L knew better and they never showed no interest in Granny's land. Not at all! I mean hell, you'd think they were scared of the place or something.

The folks that moved onto Granny's land and worked and lived there did so as a family: sharing work, food, homes. Some come for a summer job when they was young and just ended up staying. Some families sent their kids to work for old Miss White and never saw them come home. Saw them at market day, maybe, or driving one of her carts or trucks, looking pale and sleepy like some of the color had been drained out of them. Some would joke that the albinism that Granny had was catching. Or maybe it was something in the land out there, some fertilizer she was using or some pesticide. When you seen somebody from out the White property in town, well... it looked like they weren't quite *there* with you.

But out on the property, though, lord you'd think you'd discovered a new paradise! Everybody stepped lively and sang while they worked, and worked 'til the sweat and the blood was wrung out of them and their bones couldn't hardly carry them no further, but they loved it. They loved that land, and they loved that old woman.

And they had their traditions. Every new moon, there'd come what they called a Lesser Harvest, a celebration with hard cider and 'shine, and the folks of the White family would celebrate the end of a job or a barn raising or a planting or a taking-in or... something. And they'd dance and they'd sing and they'd get all worked up, and some of them might retire to the woods or the barns or in couples or pairs or more... for other doings. All while Granny sat on the front porch sipping a drink and chuckling to herself, just taking in the evening. And when the time come, Granny would have one of her boys give a loud whistle, and everybody would stop whatever it was they were doing and come in close to the main porch, where Granny would thank them and say a little something, and then each part of the family would thank Granny and say something nice to her. Sometimes from the heart, and sometimes they'd recite what they'd been taught like you do in church. But there ain't no church in Esau County said they ever saw anybody from the White property in their congregation, I can — I can promise you that much, family.

The planters would go first and then the diggers and then the pickers and the sowers and the woodcutters, and they'd all give thanks to Granny, and Granny would smile and laugh and after the children gave their thanks, Granny would clap and laugh a little more and say, "Let's get on with it!" and the party would resume.

When a new baby was born on the land, the family would have a big, late supper and a dance. Oh, Granny loved to dance! But when someone died, they'd have a big breakfast and buried the departed before the sun rose on their next day in the White family graveyard, way back in the property, way deep where the sun don't never shine. And the whole farm would go dark for two days, 'til everybody come back out of there looking like they'd been asleep the whole time, like they was trying to readjust to the world of sun and the light.

A True Harvest, though, that come at the end of the season, on the longest night and on the shortest night and maybe at other times. The celebration would be bigger, somehow. Sometimes town folk would get invited. And sometimes they'd stay a little while and visit and go home and other times they might be so enamored they'd take a job sometimes. And sometimes they... they

just didn't go home at all. And when the whistle come at the True Harvest and everybody gathered around the porch, it was a might different. Granny's oldest boy Byron would speak and remind everyone of their place, remind them how lucky they were that the White family took pity on them and took them in and gave them purpose, gave them something to do and something to be and on and on and like that. But Granny... at True Harvest Granny wouldn't speak. She'd just sit in that rocking chair and look out at her family through those little rose-colored glasses with her blind old eyes and watch.

First the planters came. And they came out and did a dance for Granny, moving in a slow circle that got faster and faster as they threw handfuls of seeds into the air, seeds that splattered them and the ground with drops of what looked like blood, ruby speckles painting black dots on their faces and on the ground and on more and more of their skin as it came into view, as clothes were rent and two of the oldest pickers would end up in carnal relations right there in the circle, planting the seed that would sustain the White family. And Granny would just sit there and rock and laugh.

And then the diggers would come and say their piece and they would bring great black stones they'd dug from the earth — coal, it looked like. It looked like it at least, but it wasn't. Their hands scraped and bloody, fingernails gone as if they'd done the digging with their bare hands — and some of them had, most of them young boys screaming for Granny to please accept them, to please love them, to know what they had brought her was the best they could do and to please forgive them if it wasn't enough, until the oldest boy would hand the oldest girl a small, dark gemstone they'd pulled from the earth blacker than any coal. And Byron would come and take it, carry it up to Granny who would hold it to her chest and “mm-mmm,” thank them nicely and they would move on.

The pickers came next with bushels of taters and corn and 'maters and onions and other crops that don't seem to grow around here. Flowers with petals the color of wounds, leaves blacker than greenest midnight, that seemed to move on their own, all left in a bouquet of abundance and avarice. More food than one little old lady could ever eat, but only for Granny.

And so it went, with Granny holding her mostly-silent court, her breathing growing heavier and labored, her ivory skin slicked with an oily sweat that hung like grease on cold meat until the children came. The children were especially precious to Granny White, as they were the future of the land, their color not quite as dimmed as the others, but noticeable. One of the middle boys, Marcus Bledsoe, stepped forward and asked to be able to say his piece to praise Granny White. After receiving the nod, he accepted a burlap-wrapped package from one of his peers and bowed his head, then turned his face up to the ghostly moon that was Granny White.

“Granny, oh Granny, we the littlest love you so. And for this love, we plant and sow. Granny White gives us the best of this world. We have warm beds and dry blankets and full bellies and strong bones and we offer them all to her. Oh, accept our offering, please oh Hungry Mother, please take this which we, the least of you, have claimed and taken in your name, please oh Host

of Hoary Night, Black Womb of Starving Orphan Night, Marrow-Clotted Tooth of the Sightless Maw! Please, oh please accept this humble offering, given and taken from one of us, tent and torn from willing vessel! Gregory says he loves you, Granny, and he hopes that he is worthy!”

And with that, Marcus Bledsoe began to unwrap the burlap package he clutched to his chest. Gregory was his younger brother, who’d come with him to stay on the White property after their daddy run off and their mama turned to drink. Marcus was eleven now, which meant Gregory had been nine when the land told Marcus it would be him that gave the gift to Granny White at the next True Harvest. Told him that what beat and pumped the blood through his little brother’s body would be what ensured his place in Granny’s good graces, and he was sure that Reggie understood, and would even be proud of him as he tossed the burlap wrap aside to reveal his little brother’s gore-slicked heart and dropped to one knee, offering it to the white woman on the porch.

Granny White stood up from her rocker, her tiny alabaster body a beacon of cold, greasy light. As she lifted her hands, removed her glasses, and opened up her mouths, and sang the harvest.

GRANNY WHITE: “Mm-hmm...”

[Build Mama a Coffin by Blood on the Harp]

Today’s story was written and performed by Steve Shell. The voice of Granny White was Betsy Puckett. From here on out, *Build Mama a Coffin* will only be a once a week affair, but with longer and meatier episodes. We hope to see you there, family. Oh, who are we kidding? There ain’t no hope involved.

That Mama’s dead and gone...

© 2020 DeepNerd Media. All rights reserved.