

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

*presents*

### BUILD MAMA A COFFIN

#### Episode 5: Mama's Mercy

*Build Mama a Coffin is a brand-new story set in the world of Old Gods of Appalachia, which is a horror anthology podcast. And y'all know what that means, don't you family? 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...*

*“Behold: everyone that use of Proverbs shall use Proverb against thee, saying, ‘As the mother, her daughter.’”*

—Ezekiel, 16:44

Mercy Boggs Carter was a woman who liked nice things, and she made no apologies for it. Mama always accused her of putting on airs, getting above her raising, but Mercy saw nothing wrong with wanting to live in comfort and security — life was a hell of a lot easier when you didn't have to worry about where your next meal was coming from, or when you'd get it.

Mercy and her two brothers had grown up poor — and poorer than they should have been, because the land their family owned in Esau County, Virginia was valuable. The Barrow & Locke mining company had offered good money for that land many times, and many times been denied. The Boggs family was a proud one, and Mercy's daddy Waylon was a particularly stubborn example. After Daddy had run off — or Mama had run him off, as Mercy had always believed — B&L had approached Glory Ann with an even more generous offer than before. After all, a woman left alone with three kids to raise could surely find comfort in a nest egg of that size. Mercy had hoped Glory Ann might see some reason — they could move out of Boggs Holler and into town, set up a respectable house close to the school and the church, and that new Piggly Wiggly grocery store.

Glory Ann, however, was even more stubborn than her husband. When the last representative of Barrow & Locke — a weird little man with an unsettling number of twitchy nervous tics — had come calling, Mama met him at the door with Daddy's shotgun, and made it very clear that he should get off her land and not come back again. He had not, and the family continued to live in Boggs Holler until, one by one, the three Boggs children had escaped to bigger and better things.

Mercy's means of egress had turned out to be half blessing, half curse. One Sunday afternoon the summer she turned eighteen, she had met a Kentucky boy with fine prospects at a church picnic — one Craig Hubbard, cousin of her brother Vernard's friend Orville Bledsoe. Craig was the son of a newspaper man. His daddy was the founder and editor of the *Bell County News-Register*, and he could turn a mighty fine phrase himself. His letters always made Mercy blush, though they were perfectly respectable and respectful — never a stray word that she would have hidden from the eyes of her Mama or the Lord himself. Even Mama said Craig was a “fine young man, for a professional gossip.” As kind as he was handsome, and set to take over his daddy's paper one day, he currently earned \$20 a week as a reporter for his family publication.

When Craig had come to ask Mama for Mercy's hand, she hadn't objected... much. “I think your question is best directed at my daughter,” she told Craig grouchy. “Although since you were thoughtful enough to ask my opinion, I am not opposed to you joining the family, Mr. Hubbard. If she'll have you.”

And of course Mercy would have him — Mercy would, in fact, have had nothing else, and if her Mama had objected, she was prepared to pack up and steal away in the night. And in truth, this idea had appealed more than a little bit to teenage Mercy — a romantic flight like something out of the dime novels she picked up once a week at the general store in town. Why, she might have been just a wee bit disappointed things didn't work out that way at the time. But in the end, all Mama said was she always knew that Mercy was never going to take up her work as the local healer anyway. She helped Mercy pack up her belongings and gave her \$50 and a right pretty blue-painted brooch to wear for her “something blue” in the wedding, and sent her only daughter off to Kentucky with the groom-to-be.

The years she spent with Craig had been the happiest of Mercy's life. Craig's father turned out to be as good a man as his son, and Mercy was accepted into the family with open arms. Within a year, that fine elder gentleman suffered a stroke and passed from this world, which left Craig to shoulder the running of the *Bell County News-Register*. Mercy helped ease his burden by acting as his secretary until the shadow of Craig's grief was lifted by the birth of their daughter, Delia. A bright, precocious child with fair hair and piercing blue eyes, she was the apple of her Daddy's eye — and Mercy's too, although in her case, that apple might have held a small blemish, just a worrisome little brown spot, not much. But Mercy was the daughter of a holler witch, and though she possessed no talent herself, she knew the gift when she saw it.

From the time she was old enough to hold her head up and focus those sharp blue eyes on the world, Mercy's baby girl... saw things. Her little eyes would often focus not on her toys, but on some middle space in the air above her, and sometimes she would reach her little hands out toward... something. Something not entirely there, something Mercy could not see. But other times, she would shrink away, begin to cry, and those were the moments that made Mercy's heart freeze. And she would sweep her little girl into her arms and run into another room, or outside into the warm, leaf-dappled sunshine of the front yard. When she was old enough to talk, little Delia would sometimes describe for her mother what she saw: a pretty woman with

red hair in a long, old-fashioned blue dress; a man who looked like her daddy but with white hair and wrinkles; a squatting, shadowy thing with no face that crouched in the corner.

The child also simply... knew things, things she couldn't possibly know. One afternoon when Delia was just three, Mercy had invited Opal Hibbits, Pineville's finest seamstress, over to the house to talk about a new dress she wanted made special for a Christmas Party. As the two women sat in the kitchen drinking coffee and looking over a book of McCall's patterns, little Delia had toddled into the room, pointed at Opal's stomach, and said, "You gotta baby in there."

The two women had chuckled at the time, but three weeks later Opal had pulled Mercy aside after church to tell her Delia had been right. "That girl's got the sight, Mercy," she told her. "You'd best keep a close eye on her."

In the summer of 1917, Craig was called up in the first draft enacted under the new Selective Service Act. On the day he was set to ship out, Mercy packed Delia into the back of the Nash and drove her husband to the train station. As they stood on the platform, crying, hugging him good-bye — neither wife nor daughter wanting to let go — Craig said gently, "Now girls, I'll be home before you know it. Maybe I'll bring you home of them fancy chocolates from Europe." And six year old Delia began to wail. Now their daughter was not one given to tantrums — much like her Mama, Mercy would not have tolerated such carrying-on — so her parents were somewhat taken aback by this display.

"Delia, baby," Craig crooned after a moment. "Honey, it's all right. Daddy'll be home soon, I promise."

Little Delia, sniffing, collected herself enough to shout back at him: "No! No you won't! You'll be down in the mud and they'll never find you and you'll never come home!"

A feeling of deep cold swept over Mercy, and she knew then — knew it in the pit of her stomach and deep down in her bones — that she would never see Craig again. She clutched his arm and looked up into his face. "You can't go," she said. "I know you don't like talking about it, but you *know how she is*, Craig."

But Craig, a pragmatic man who liked to think of himself as a modern man, someone above all that superstitious nonsense, just shook his head. "Honey, I wouldn't go if it was up to me, but I don't have a choice here. It's the law. When Uncle Sam calls, you gotta go."

Mercy knew that tone of voice: his mind was made up, and there would be no changing it. About a hundred crazy schemes went through her mind in an instant — she could hit him over the head, drag him home — tell the military so sorry, but my husband is injured and couldn't possibly serve. Or hell, they had a little money, they could run away somewhere — Mexico? Canada? It didn't matter much as long as she kept him with her, they'd be happy anywhere. She could... she could... she couldn't do anything, really, and Mercy felt a sudden, deep pain in her

chest as she accepted this. They tell you heart break is just a metaphor, but family, I'm here to tell you it is a real and visceral thing, a thing that can kill.

It didn't kill Mercy. Not then. She wiped her eyes and reached for Craig, cupping his face in her hands. She looked into his bright blue eyes — her daughter's eyes, almost, just a little bit darker — and tried to burn his face into her memory, the face most dear to her in the world, that she had so looked forward to growing old with, to watching the way love and sorrow and joy and laughter would carve their unique stamp into his features. "Craig, honey, I love you more than anything in this world. Don't you ever forget it," she said. And she kissed him good-bye and watched the love of her life step onto a train and ride out of it forever.

There were a few letters, at first — Mercy wrote to Craig every week but knew better than to expect he could do the same — but as the fighting intensified for the U.S. troops, those slowed, then stopped. It was almost a year to the day that he'd shipped out when Mercy received word that her husband was missing and was presumed dead. Her little girl had, of course, been right: they never did find her father's body. Eventually, Craig was officially declared dead, and there was a funeral in which he was buried with all honors that did absolutely nothing to comfort Mercy or her child or the Hubbard family.

Craig's family had money, but most of it was tied up either in the newspaper or held in trust. Mercy and Delia each received a modest sum from Craig's estate — Delia's held in trust until she was of legal age. It was enough that keep them comfortable, at any rate. Mercy, however, having grown up poor, would do whatever she could to secure a safe, stable, comfortable life for herself and Delia. So when she could stomach the thought of another man, she married Kenneth Carter, a local banker, who set her up in his family's fine old house on Pineville's main street, situated at the primary intersection of town. Built in the Colonial Revival style out of red brick with bright white trim and columns, a gabled roof and three-bay covered porch, it was just the sort of house Mercy had always envisioned living in as a girl. And if the taste of realizing that dream was somewhat bitter because of the cost of achieving it... well, that was life. And Mama didn't raise a fool.

For all her cultivated charm and carefully honed manners, Mercy Boggs Carter was a good deal more her mama's daughter than she ever cared to admit, and the older she got, the more she began to understand her mama and the choices she'd made.

By and large, Kenneth Carter was a decent enough husband — he traveled a lot, so he mostly stayed out of her hair — and a generous if indifferent stepfather. On occasion, however, the man had been known to have a drink or four, and he could be ill-tempered when he was in his cups. He had shown this side of himself to little Delia only once. And Mercy was fairly certain it wasn't a mistake he'd make again, not after she'd snatched a bottle of fine whiskey into the fireplace and hit him with a poker. Just on the arm that time, but make no mistake if he used that kind of language with her daughter again, she'd knock his head clean off.

The incident put Mercy in mind of her mama, and of certain family stories she'd never quite believed regarding Daddy's departure from their lives. And it weighed heavy on her heart. Mercy had ever been a rebellious child, angry at the mother who she saw as driving her beloved Daddy away. And after she moved to Pineville, Mercy hadn't once gone home for a visit, not even when Delia was born, although she wrote the occasional letter. If she was honest with herself, Mercy knew she'd never done right by her — none of them had — and now it was too late. Too late for her to mend those fences, too late for Delia to know her grandmother — which she absolutely should have, given her particular talents.

They should do whatever they could to make amends, at least. Something to honor their mama, as they should have while she lived.

Mercy's eldest brother Vernard was apparently thinking along the same lines, although the letter she received from him detailing his high-falutin' plans to build a fancy cemetery in Glamorgan, complete with — of all things! — a *tomb* for their mother, whom he'd taken to referring to as "The Queen of Boggs Holler." Mercy laughed right out loud at that. *Mama would die!* she thought, shaking her head.

No, they needed to do something for Mama, but in the proper way, a way that would recognize and honor the life she'd lived, the service she'd provided to Esau County as a healer and granny witch, not gloss over it, make her out to be some saint. It was these thoughts she took to bed with her on the night that Mercy Boggs Carter, a woman of no particular mystical gifts, received her very first spiritual visitation.

[Build Mama a Coffin by Blood on the Harp]

*Gonna build Mama a coffin, hmm-mmm*  
*Gonna build Mama a coffin, hmm-mmm*  
*Gonna build Mama a coffin, hmm-mmm*  
*Gonna build Mama a coffin, hmm-mmm*  
*Mmm-mmm...*

Today's story was written by Cam Collins and performed by Steve Shell. Join us this Friday for the next installment of our story, wherein Mercy Boggs-Carter responds to her brothers, Vernard and Dale, and we learn what motivates her to honor her mama.

See y'all then, family.

*Gonna build Mama a coffin, I'm gonna make it out of pine*  
*There'll be tears from sister to make those hinges shine...*