

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Black Mouthed Dog Episode 0: Prologue

The girl was not meant to be in the woods alone at night. She wasn't supposed to be in the woods at all. Maggie Bentley's Granny Joan had told her time and again what happened to littl'uns who wandered off into them woods behind the house — you could get eat up by a bear, or a catamount, or just get lost and starve to death, or... or all kinds of things. But she'd been playing down in the Bottom with the Mullins twins and she'd lost all track of the time. Next thing she knew, Kizzie and Ira's ma was hollering and the sun was going down and if Maggie was late for supper, Granny was liable to whoop her backside.

The path through the woods might have been dangerous, according to her Granny, but it was also the fastest. The cleared patch on top of the ridge where Maggie's Daddy had built their stout log cabin when she was little more'n a twinkle in her Mama's eye was somewhat isolated, and the path down the road and 'round the mountain would take a good couple miles longer to walk. Mama used to take in sewing for some of the other ladies around the Gap — those with too many kids and not enough time to see to their own mending — and Maggie would walk down with her to pick up or deliver whatever Mama had been working on. Mama had always taken the path that snaked down through the woods.

That had been Before, of course. Before Maggie's Daddy got conscripted and died his first winter in the army and Mama took sick and Granny Joan packed up her two cats and came to Esau County to look after them. Since Daddy died, Mama didn't get out of bed most days. She took her medicine, but it didn't seem to help much. When Maggie asked about it, Granny laughed and said laudanum weren't no cure for a broken heart and she'd best not catch Maggie taking that snake oil — but she never said that within Mama's hearing. She would only ask gently each morning if Mama would like some breakfast with her coffee, and whether she was feeling up to helping with the canning today?

Granny Joan loved canning, and she was right good at it too. If it hadn't been for Granny, Maggie and her Mama might have starved that first winter. She'd come to Esau County in a little cart pulled by an old mule and loaded up with the fruits of her labors — canned taters and turnips and corn and carrots and all manner of jams and jellies — and found their cupboard all

but bare and their hearth all but cold. So Granny Joan had ordered them both to bed, which she heaped with quilts, while she carried split logs in from the wood pile and stoked up their fire. Mama had gone to sleep, but Maggie had sat up in bed, playing with Granny's two cats, Shadow and Mittens, while her grandmother whipped up a veritable feast out of the shining glass jars she'd brought in her little cart as if by magic.

Of course the magic of the jars had lost a little bit of its lustre since Maggie had spent the past year or more helping her Granny put up more beans and taters and so on for next winter, but she still loved Granny's cooking — particularly warm bread and butter with Granny's blackberry preserves, which she was likely to be denied if she was late for supper. The sun was going down, and she'd have to hustle if she wanted to make it home before full dark. The fastest route was through the woods, so that's the way Maggie went. She'd been with Mama plenty of times. She knew the way.

At least she'd thought she did. But full dark comes on faster in the woods than it does up on the ridges and the balds, or even on the narrow dirt roads of Glamorgan. As Maggie started up the trail that zigzagged its way through the trees and up around the side of the mountain, the sun-dappled shadows of leaves reflected on the ground melted into deep pools of darkness. The familiar branches arching overhead seemed to distort, growing long and twisted. In the growing gloom, Maggie could no longer tell oak from sycamore from alder. Was this the tree that marked the right fork in the path? Or was it that one just ahead?

She heard a soft shuffling sound behind her, something sneaking through the underbrush, and Maggie's heart leapt up in her throat. Was it the bears Granny had warned her about? Or a stalking catamount? She froze, tense and wary, but heard nothing more.

Stop acting like a baby, she told herself. It hadn't been very loud. It was just a possum or a raccoon — maybe a fox slinking out of its den. At worst it might be a skunk — *shooo-weee!* she'd be in trouble for sure if she got sprayed — but that was all. It was dusk now, time for all the evening critters to start stirring. It was not a bear, nor a catamount — it couldn't even be a deer. Hadn't sounded big enough.

Squaring her shoulders and shaking off her fear, Maggie started forward again, careful to keep to the trail through the woods as best she could in the gathering twilight. Finally, she saw what was undoubtedly a familiar landmark — a cluster of large rocks jutting out of the mountainside at the top of the rise just ahead. Beyond that, she knew that the path forked left and snaked back up around the mountain toward home. Maggie grinned to herself. She wasn't lost. She knew the way. She could tell her Mama and maybe—

Something snapped behind her with a resounding crack — not a twig, but something larger, a fallen branch maybe — and Maggie heard that shuffling through the dead leaves and brambles, only much louder now. Again she stopped. She listened. Again that careful, deliberate pacing through the brush. Coming closer, until she could hear the rough sound of something breathing... and then a low growl.

Maggie broke and ran, plowing up the hill toward the tall stones ahead that she knew marked the way home. She was young and she was quick, and if she could just make it around that bend, she'd be out of sight of... whatever it was behind her. Her heart pounded in her ears, and she thought she could hear it panting behind her... but that might have been her own ragged breath as she scrambled up the mountain faster than she'd ever run in her life. The path home through the woods was the shortest route home, but now it seemed so much longer than she remembered.

Finally, she reached the rocks, her hands slapping the cold stone as she swung around them. With sudden inspiration, she wriggled into the narrow space behind them, hoping their bulk and the side of the mountain would hide her from whatever critter might be pursuing her. Crouching down as small as she could make herself, she struggled to quiet her gasping breaths and listened for the sounds again, straining to hear over the pounding of her own heart in her ears.

Silence.

Nothing but the gentle chirp of crickets and the wind sighing through the trees.

The hunting call of a hoot owl echoed through the night, and Maggie started, but it didn't come again. It was just an ole owl. Nothing to be scared of.

She took a moment to catch her breath, and then slowly crept from her hiding place behind the rocks. There was no more shuffling, no breathing but her own. Whatever she'd heard must not have been chasing her after all. She'd just scared herself, remembering Granny's stories about bears and whatnot, and now it was coming on full dark and she had to get home. Granny was gonna tan her hide for sure.

Maggie turned to head up the ridge, following the shadow-draped trail mostly by memory now. The moon wasn't up yet, but at least now she could see what little light remained up ahead, a pale orange glow beyond the edge of the tree line.

And then suddenly that glow was gone, as something loomed out of the shadows ahead of her — not a bear, not a catamount. Maggie could make out the pointed ears and shaggy tail of what looked like an enormous black dog. It turned glowing eyes on her, and began to growl.

No one else was on the trail to hear her scream.

Black Mouthed Dog is a new original story set 30 years before the events of Build Mama a Coffin, available exclusively on Patreon (patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia). Coming much sooner than you think, y'all.