

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Stacking the Odds

Old Gods of Appalachia is a horror anthology podcast, and therefore may contain material not suitable for all audiences, so listener discretion is advised.

Bower County, WV: December 21st, 1939. Bower County lay under a light blanket of snow that sparkled in the sunlight as Nina Jennings steered her car carefully up the road that wound around Oak Mountain to her mama's house. Snow flurries had come the previous afternoon, growing a little heavier after dusk, but by morning the skies had cleared and the sun shone down, melting the snow from the roads and making her visit possible. There were still a few icy patches in areas where the trees cast more shade than the weak winter sun could penetrate, so she took her time, but most of the trip had been easy, even pleasant, as she drove through a sparkling winter wonderland.

The trunk of Nina's Packard held presents wrapped in simple brown paper and tied with ribbons of red and green yarn, a huge tin filled with sausage balls, and two long strands of cranberries and popcorn she'd strung together over the course of the last few evenings. Tonight her family would gather to celebrate the winter solstice and trim the Christmas tree, as they had every year since she could remember. They would not exchange gifts until Christmas Eve, but as Nina had finished wrapping all her gifts, she figured it was best to go ahead and bring them over to put under the tree. Her cat, Mr. Biscuit, had an unfortunate habit of chewing the paper off of packages, as well as a fondness for yarn.

Nina pulled her car to a stop in front of the tidy white farmhouse. Its bright blue shutters and matching rocking chairs gleamed in the sunlight with the fresh coat of paint her cousin Tobias had applied that summer. She began unpacking the car, loading up her arms with as much as she could safely carry. The front door was unlocked, so she let herself inside, calling out a greeting as she crossed the threshold.

NINA: Mama! I'm here!

Marigold Underwood, matriarch of the Underwood family and Fire of the Mountain, known to just about everybody around these parts as Granny Underwood, hollered to her from the back of the house.

MARIGOLD: I'm in the kitchen, darling! What have I told you about slamming my door?

NINA: Sorry, Mama! Got my arms full. I couldn't catch it.

Marigold emerged from the kitchen to help her daughter, wiping her hands on a dish towel. She'd tied her hair up in a kerchief and her apron was liberally dusted with flour. As Nina carried in an armload of gifts, she caught the door behind her and closed it gently.

NINA: I see Tobias has already brought the tree. I didn't see his truck outside.

MARIGOLD: He went out and cut one down for me yesterday. Had to work this morning. He should be here directly.

The furniture in Marigold Underwood's parlor had been rearranged to accommodate a tall, lush balsam fir that was placed in a bucket of water in front of the bay window. The bucket had been cleverly concealed behind a draping of pretty red and green plaid flannel upon which Nina would eventually arrange the gifts she'd brought for the family. For now, she placed them in the hall closet so they wouldn't be underfoot during the tree trimming that evening.

MARIGOLD: Where's that son-in-law of mine? I thought you said Calvin was coming with you.

NINA: He's over at the school. He decided the children could use one last rehearsal before the show on Saturday.

Calvin Jennings was the teacher at the Booker School, a single-room wooden structure in Kayboro which provided education for black children in Bower County aged five to twelve. He had taken the position after he finished his training, when Nina's brother-in-law Victor was promoted to superintendent of the county school district. As the sole instructor at Booker, Calvin was responsible for everything from developing each day's multiple lesson plans to

preparing school lunches to providing janitorial services — and this year, for directing the school's first annual Christmas pageant — the first, he hoped, of many more to come.

MARIGOLD: He surely does love those children.

NINA: He does. He's a great teacher. He would have made a good father if we'd ever had any of our own.

MARIGOLD: There's still time, if the lord wills it. But it may be God just has other plans for you, baby.

Nina Jennings found she was not particularly disappointed that the home she and Calvin shared had not been blessed with children. When they had first married, they tried for a baby, but months and eventually years passed, and Nina never found herself with child. Her heart had ached as she watched their friends and peers welcome new life into the world, and she saw the longing in her husband's eyes. Calvin's mother had died when he was little more than an infant, and his daddy never remarried. While his father had several siblings and thus, there were always plenty of cousins around to play with at family gatherings, Calvin had grown up a little lonely. His daddy was a kind man, a loving father, but their home was a quiet place, haunted by his grief, and Calvin dreamed of having a family of his own to fill his house with laughter and games and music and light. It had hurt, feeling that she couldn't make that dream come true for him.

As the years passed, however, and she watched as her peers grew tired, worn down by the sheer work of raising children, the constant pressure of making ends meet, and the fear for their futures that kept them awake nights, Nina began to think perhaps it had been a blessing in disguise — for her, if not for Calvin. The life of a mother looked utterly exhausting to her, and she wasn't at all certain she was cut out for it. She found she was quite happy with the life they enjoyed together — their evenings spent curled up by the fire, playing cards or board games, listening to radio programs, or reading books; volunteering with the church; helping her own mother with the work she did for their community. And thus, she had taken her mama's advice to heart: if they were meant to have a child, then a child would come when the time was right, and if not, then it simply wasn't meant to be.

NINA: Calvin will be along later this evening. You're coming to watch the Christmas pageant, aren't you, Mama?

MARIGOLD: Why, I wouldn't miss it! It's not every day a woman gets to see her son-in-law's directorial debut.

NINA: Don't you dare tell him that! That man is already planning how he can make the show bigger and better next year. He don't need you giving him a big head.

MARIGOLD: I will tell him whatever I want.

The two women continued bantering back and forth in the comfortable way of mothers and daughters while Nina finished unloading the Packard. Though the majority of the Underwood clan would not arrive until around six that evening, Nina and Tobias had promised to come early to help with preparations. Their annual solstice celebration was a potluck, and everyone would bring a dish or two, but there was still plenty to do. Tobias would bring holly boughs and mistletoe and other decorative items from nature that needed hanging. Chairs would need to be brought into the parlor from other rooms or fetched up from the basement to ensure everybody had a place to sit. The good china had to be set out and the silverware polished. And of course, there was the baking. Marigold had spent the past few days making cakes, pies, and a seemingly endless array of cookies. There were the holiday staples — pecan and mincemeat pies, fruit cake and bourbon balls — and then of course, there was her famous apple stack cake.

Granny Underwood's stack cake was a thing of legend, consisting of twelve impossibly thin, golden layers of molasses-flavored cake, each slathered with a healthy coating of spiced apple butter and sealed with yet another layer of the same. The cake had been wrapped and allowed to set for the past couple of days to soften and allow the glorious flavors to properly combine. Tradition held that the cake had to be tasted by at least twelve different people on the same day it was cut to ensure good luck for the following year. For most folks, that part was little more than superstition, but a stack cake baked by Marigold Underwood was another matter altogether. It was one of the many subtle layers of protection she had been weaving around her family since she was just a new bride, and it worked. It also tasted like pure heaven, so it had

never been too much trouble to find twelve people willing to eat it. The difficulty was in making it last through the twelfth.

As Nina pulled a spare apron from a hook on the back of the kitchen door and tied it around her waist, the sound of tires crunching on gravel reached their ears.

MARIGOLD: That'll be Tobias.

Nina and Marigold headed back into the parlor just as Tobias Underwood walked through the door, dressed in a fluffy red and white Santa suit, complete with stocking cap.

TOBIAS: Ho ho ho! Merry Christmas!

The two women laughed delightedly.

NINA: Where on earth did you find that?

TOBIAS: One of the fellas at work asked if I wanted it. Said he outgrew it. It's nice, right?

MARIGOLD: Yes, nephew, you make a right handsome Santa Claus. But I hope you brought a change of clothes, because we got work to do.

TOBIAS: Oh yeah. I got my street clothes on underneath it. I just thought you ladies might like a preview.

Tobias stripped off the Santa suit — which was getting a little warm already — and the three of them got to work. Nina and Tobias swept and mopped the floors, hung decorations, and saw to the other matters of setting up for the party while Granny Underwood finished the last of her cooking. By the time family and friends began to arrive, there were candles lit in each window, the doorways were strung with mistletoe, the mantle had been draped in boughs of holly and fir, and the sideboard was stocked with an amazing assortment of sweets. In the dining room, the long table had been set up buffet-style, while the chairs had been moved to the parlor. Nina's sausage balls sat at one end of the table and were soon joined by a wide array of other finger

foods, including her older sister's deviled eggs and Tobias' pigs in a blanket, a perennial favorite of the grandchildren. Marigold's apple stack cake held pride of place, situated on a silver cake tray that had been an anniversary gift from her late husband Lee some years ago.

NINA: Mama, your cake looks beautiful! I don't think I've ever seen you make one so pretty!

TOBIAS: She ain't lying, Auntie. That is one fine looking cake. You sure I can't just scooch on in here and—

The speed with which Marigold Underwood smacked her nephew's hand away was like the kiss of a hummingbird's wing, too fast to be perceived by the eyes of man.

MARIGOLD: Nu-uh, boy. Get your hands back! You know better. I'll let you know when it's time.

The distribution of Granny Underwood's apple stack cake was serious business. The twelve slices had to be consumed on the same night, and the baker of the cake could not be the one to eat the first or final slice. It was preferable that some slices be consumed by blood relations, and others by guests, although the precise distribution was of little matter. This year, Nina and Calvin would have the first two slices. Tobias would take the third.

The fourth and fifth were promised to two of Marigold's closer neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Sensabaugh, who had come to see her regarding their daughter's prospects for marriage in the coming year. This was accomplished by a midnight visit to the pigpen to see whether an old pig or a young pig would "speak" first. If an old pig gave the first grunt, the young woman in question would marry an older man, while a younger pig squealing heralded matrimony with a younger suitor. Sure enough, a handsome young pig spoke right upon their approach, howling either for slop or for fear that his time had come. The Sensabaughs were thrilled, and Marigold had invited them to her annual solstice potluck and tree trimming for a slice of apple stack cake to add a little extra luck to the girl's prospects.

What she had not mentioned to the Sensabaughs was that when the porcine prophet had cried out to greet them, she hadn't heard a squeal of the usual sort. Instead, that little future barbecue

had looked her right in her eye and spoke her name. “Marigold.” Just like that: “Marigold.” Granny Underwood had quickly turned away and hurried the Sensabaughs along. In the general run of things, hearing an animal speak could mean any number of things. Animals speaking near the solstice, however, was a particularly bad omen. It wasn’t as bad as if you sat under a pine tree on Christmas day — which was a surefire way to make sure you didn’t live to see the next one — but it wasn’t good.

Marigold was worried. The signs had been unclear in every attempt at divination she’d made in the week leading up to the turning of the season, and this didn’t help matters. It had been a long and difficult year for Bower County and the family. Early in the year, the union had gone on strike at the Kayboro mine, a situation that had dragged on for months and resulted in bloodshed on both sides before an agreement was reached and work resumed. There had been an outbreak of measles which several of her grandchildren had caught. Tobias had broken his arm back in the spring and been laid up out of work for weeks — although to be fair, he had painted the house late that summer, by way of helping regain his strength, and it was looking mighty fine. Her daughter Tilley had endured a rough pregnancy and ended up confined to bed for its final two months, requiring everyone in the family to pitch in and look after her other two little ones while her husband was at work.

As 1939 drew to a close, however, things had begun to look up. All she needed now was some little sausage factory bringing bad luck to their door. While the cake wasn’t the only working she would perform to ensure her family’s peace in the coming year, she was determined to do everything in her power to ensure it was a success.

Slice number six would go to Mr. Jenkins, who lived a few miles down the road on the way to town. Delmar Jenkins — bitter ass old miser that he was — became an absolute sweetheart from Thanksgiving through Boxing Day. Marigold figured it was because he was half lit most of that time, but every Christmas Day for as long as she and Doc had lived on Oak mountain, that crabby old sumbitch had turned up with a dozen eggs and a box of chocolates for their house. He had continued this tradition after Doc passed, and even began dropping off eggs every now and again and otherwise checking in on her, so he too had earned his spot at the family solstice party.

Marigold herself would take the seventh slice, seven being both generally an auspicious number and Doc's birthday. She heard the sound of footsteps on the porch and Nina called out:

NINA: Mama, Tamara and Perry are here with Jeremiah and Gregory!

TOBIAS: Ope! Looks like the Sensabaughs and the Harpers from church are coming up the drive too.

Marigold remained focused on her stack cake, running through the last five intended recipients in her head.

TOBIAS: Auntie? You all right?

MARIGOLD: What? Oh. I'm all right. Just wanna make sure everybody's got plenty to eat.

TOBIAS: With all due respect, Auntie, don't play with me.

MARIGOLD: Tobias!

TOBIAS: I'm sorry, ma'am, but... I know that tone. That's the way you used to talk to me before... you know, before I knew.

MARIGOLD: Knew what, nephew?

TOBIAS: You know... about this hoo-doo shit.

MARIGOLD: Tobias! Language!

TOBIAS: Uh-uh, Auntie! Now that was not even fair, and you know it!

MARIGOLD: I'm sorry, boy. Sometimes it's just too easy, and I can't resist. I'm fine, Tobias.

TOBIAS: I seen the way you been looking at that cake all night. What's going on Auntie? Wait, the cake ain't like... haunted or nothing, is it? Don't tell me we can't eat the cake because there's a h'aint in it.

MARIGOLD: There ain't no hain't in the cake, baby. We gonna eat it. We gonna eat all of it. We got to. You know that.

Before Tobias could ask anything else, Marigold Underwood went to hug her grandbabies and make sure everyone had full plates and were on their way to having full bellies. Tobias noticed that she kept eyeing the stack cake and glancing around the room nervously. He saw her visibly relax a little when her bible study and crocheting companion, Martha-Ann, showed up with her best friend and roommate Miss Barbara (slices number ten and eleven, respectively).

Tobias made his way across the rapidly filling parlor and pulled Nina away from an undoubtedly thrilling conversation with her husband and brother-in-law about grading standards in the county school system, for which she seemed grateful.

TOBIAS: Have you noticed that Auntie is acting a little... I don't know... strange this evening?

NINA: I mean she's got a house full of family. She's done run herself ragged getting all the food ready. She might be a little tired.

TOBIAS: You think she might be a little... fixated on the stack cake this year? Like no matter who she's talking to or what else goes on, she keeps checking on it. Look, there she goes again.

Granny Underwood sat on the sofa next to her grandson, Gregory, who was talking animatedly about all the things he hoped Santa might bring him this year. She kept nodding distractedly, her eyes flicking to the window, then back to the cake, before returning to Gregory and his story. That just wasn't like her at all. If there was one thing you'd normally have to pry Marigold away from, it was her grandchildren.

TOBIAS: See? She keeps looking out the window like she's expecting someone... or something. I don't know what the cake has to do with it, but we might have trouble and she wouldn't tell me nothing.

NINA: I don't know, Tobias. I mean, did you ask her directly if anything was wrong?

TOBIAS: I did, and she tried to distract me. She kept making jokes and brushing me off. Nina, she was talking to me like I don't know nothing about... you know.

NINA: Hoodoo shit?

TOBIAS: Yes!

NINA: Well, we can stand out here whispering about it, or we can ask her like grown folks. I just saw her go in the kitchen. Come on.

The cousins stepped over to the kitchen door and peered inside. Marigold Underwood paced the linoleum with the nervous energy most often seen in the hospital waiting room. She wrung her hands and muttered to herself. When she started toward the door back into the parlor — no doubt to check on the cake again — they quickly stepped inside. Tobias shut the door behind them.

NINA: Mama, are you ok? Tobias is worried about you.

TOBIAS: Why you gotta put it on me?

NINA: You hush. Go change into your Santa outfit. Give me and Mama some privacy.

NINA: You're worrying me, Mama. Please tell me what's going on.

MARIGOLD: Nina, honey, we can talk about it later. I just need to see if—

NINA: Tobias is right. You keep watching the windows. You're hovering over the apple stack cake like it's a pot about to boil over. Mama, what's wrong? Is something coming? Do we need to be ready?

Cheers erupted from the next room, and a mighty "Ho ho ho!!" reached their ears as Tobias made his entrance as Santa.

MARIGOLD: Honey, I just want to be sure that cake gets eaten before midnight. We need every little bit of good fortune we can get this coming year, if it's anything like the last one. Tobias getting hurt, people getting sick. And there's darker things stirring out there in the world. I can feel it. You got three black folks in one house with gifts like ours? You have to know trouble will come calling. On top of all that, a pig spoke to me today.

NINA: A pig. Spoke to you?

MARIGOLD: Mmmhmm. Looked me dead in the eye and said my name.

NINA: Well that's not good.

MARIGOLD: No it's not. Little bastard's lucky he's not ham biscuits by now.

NINA: But Mama, everybody always eats your cake. Usually there's hardly any crumbs left. You give it to people who love and appreciate you. Sharing that delicious thing that you worked so hard on lets them know that they're loved and appreciated too. How could we not get that blessing?

MARIGOLD: I... I might have messed up. You know Tilley and Perry couldn't make it this year.

NINA: I know, but Perry's people deserve to see them babies too.

MARIGOLD: You think I don't know that? But it leaves us one piece short without your brother-in-law here to eat it. So I asked somebody else, and they ain't showed up, and I'm

starting to worry they may not make it. They probably don't understand how important sharing in this is to our family.

NINA: Not understand? Mama, who did you ask?

MARIGOLD: I was down at the bank handling some business and that nice Mr. Rowe who works at the front counter wished me a Merry Christmas. I wished him one back — you know he's a handsome young man — and he said, "You have a good holiday, Miz Underwood, and save me a piece of that stack cake now!" I said I would, and in fact he could come join us for our tree trimming and have a piece when it's nice and fresh.

NINA: Wait. *Kenny* Rowe? That white boy that used to work at the gas station til his daddy got him a job at the bank? You promised *him* a piece of cake?

MARIGOLD: He'd just been so helpful, and he *is* a handsome boy and... I was just caught up in the holiday spirit is all.

NINA: Mama, why would he come all the way out here just to get a piece of cake? The Rowes are *town* folk. They don't come up on the mountain.

MARIGOLD: I am very much aware of that, baby. I just thought it might help us to spread the luck around, introduce some new energy.

NINA: Well even if Mr. Bigshot Bank Job Rowe doesn't come see us, it's not like you don't have other protections in place, Mama. Bad stuff's come before. Hell, Mama, we've gone chasin' after it if we're honest.

MARIGOLD: Nina! Language!

The kitchen door swung open and Tobias, who had overheard the last bit of their conversation, came into the kitchen, still merry in his red and white suit.

TOBIAS: Nina's right, Auntie. We've been through a lot this past year, sure, but we faced worse before. And no matter what comes, we'll face it together. You taught us that.

MARIGOLD: All right, all right... I hear you. Let's cut this cake and get on with it.

TOBIAS: Oh, almost forgot. I was coming in here to tell you there's some white boy on the porch, saying something about the bank?

Marigold Underwood tore past her nephew and daughter and blew into the parlor like a hurricane. A timid blond man in his mid twenties stood in the doorway, holding a pair of white gloves, looking very uncomfortable to be the palest face in the room and sudden focus of everyone's attention.

MARIGOLD: Mr. Rowe!

KENNY: Uh... hi, Miz Underwood. You, uh, left your gloves on the counter at the bank yesterday? My daddy suggested I bring them up to you. Customer service and all that. We appreciate y'all for being loyal customers all these years. Daddy says even when folks were scared to keep their money in banks after the stock market crash, you kept your accounts open with us, helped keep food on the table when times were bad.

MARIGOLD: Why, thank you Mr. Rowe. That's very thoughtful. You give my best to your daddy. Why don't you stay and have a piece of that cake I promised you?

KENNY: Well, uh, I should really get going—

MARIGOLD: Sit down, Kenny. You're eating this cake.

And with that, Marigold Underwood cut and served her famous apple stack cake. It was sweet and spicy, golden and delicious as always. The solstice had come, and the Underwood house met it with good food, good friends and good fortune.

["50 Second Instrumental" by Landon Blood]

Today's story was written by Cam Collins and Steve Shell. Our intro and outro music is by Brother Landon Blood. The voice of Nina Jennings was Shasparay Irvin. The voice of Tobias Underwood was DJ Rogers, and the voice of Marigold Underwood, Fire of the Mountain, was Stephanie Hickling Beckman. Happy holidays from all of us here at DeepNerd Media, and we'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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