

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA
presents
BUILD MAMA A COFFIN
Episode 3: Mama's Boys Part II – Dale

Build Mama a Coffin is a brand new story set in the same world as Old Gods of Appalachia, which is a horror anthology podcast. But y'all knew that. You paid for it. So why don't we just get you what you deserve?

[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...

“Then said all the trees unto the brambles, ‘Come thou, reign over us,’ and the brambles said unto the trees, ‘If in truth you anoint me king over you, come put your trust in my shadow. And if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.”

—Judges, 9:14-15

It must be noted for the record that Glory Ann and Waylon had nothing but the best of intentions when they named their second child. Names are important and powerful things whether they are the names we are given or the names we choose for ourselves. After their firstborn Vernard Michael had seemed to have been shaped into the sullen and solemn lump that he would eventually become by his name — named after a great uncle who never really amounted to much but it was nice to remember him — Waylon Boggs decided he would give his second son a name that would carry him into the future. A name that spoke of industry, that spoke of wealth, that spoke... of bologna, because Walleydale was the name of a fancy meat company over in the middle part of the state, and Waylon had wanted to give his son a high-falutin' name to help him have a leg up in life. How could you not respect a man named Walleydale, when just his name made you envision a fine pork sandwich?

We shouldn't kid. I'd fight my daddy if he named me Walleydale, I swear to god.

So Walleydale Hobart Boggs — or, as he would be known for most of his life from the moment he was first able to request it, Dale Boggs — was a cut-and-dried, simple, to-the-point, just-the-facts, if-I-can't-build-it-with-my-hands-I-don't-understand-it, type of fella. As an adult he was a logger and a carpenter by trade. He deals with the physical and the literal, the heart of the earth growing up in oak and spruce and pine to be cut and shaped to his uses. Dale Boggs understands trees. He can see what can be shaped from them: floorboards and paneling, headboards and rocking chairs, just waiting to be called forth with hammer and chisel and

wedge and plane. Hell, it was said he could whittle a song out of a tree branch if you gave him long enough, and I don't doubt it a bit.

But as in all things in life, there is a balance and there is a trade. Where Dale excelled with the concrete, the abstract escaped him: things like love, compassion, empathy, to a certain degree even pride. He met and married his wife Sissy because he was supposed to, and then he produced the obligatory child, Daniel. In the production of that child he saw his wife pass unto the other side. Sissy had never been a strong and hale woman, barely a shadow that haunted the patch of land that Dale bought for her. Sweet and quiet girl, but I don't think she was meant for this world. The baby she brought into it might not have been, either, but he managed to stay. We'll talk about Danny later. Right now we have to talk about his daddy.

Dale was ever a man for a bargain. He worked his way up as a carpenter and as an apprentice until he had his own woodworking shop, and from there, a wealthy client passed away and left him the deed to a nice piece of timberland. From there he built a healthy logging business, built himself and Daniel the house he and Sissy had always wanted. A county over in Stone Fort, which wasn't much of a town, but it wasn't Esau County, wasn't Glamorgan, wasn't Boggs holler, so that made it just fine.

Now in terms of not being able to pass up a bargain, we have to talk about the tree. Not just any tree, the Tree.

Before Dale Boggs ever entered this story, the Tree had known its share of blood. Any man who were to look at this tree who understood how a forest grows would tell you that it was... sick, that some form of pervasive rot had taken its insides, left its bark warm and slimy to the touch. They might even look skyward and see that one broken bough and think maybe the perpetrator entered right there — some foreign fungus or parasite, maybe some form of weevils. You'll never find an expert brave enough to cut from that tree, much less climb it. It had hovered in the background of Esau County for centuries, always finding a way to bathe in the blood of the things around it.

By the time hateful men and their violence had found their way into this part of the woods of Virginia, the Tree had been active for a while, its stout branches the perfect arms to hold the cat's cradle of nooses, as slave and native, and hell, even a few Melungeons met their neck-snapping end over its branches at the hands of hooded men and the light of torches, flicker-flame candles guttering like the life of those they stole from. The Tree breathed. The Tree saw. The Tree heard what was spoken of it and to it. The Tree received offerings. The broken bow that arched overhead dangling like Damocles' blade, threatening to crush whoever might walk beneath it? Well, that broke a long time ago — a rope and a body tumbling to the ground, the impact finishing what gravity could not at the end of a strong strand of hemp. And when that bough did brake, it was more than a cradle that fell. The Tree bled its shadow into this world, for there are cracks and crevices in the veil between this and those who sleep

beneath us. And sometimes things leak through and they find places to live. The Tree is such a place, and the Tree sat on a piece of property owned by a man named Curtis Taylor.

Curtis Taylor worked as a carpentry apprentice in his younger days with one Walleydale Boggs. Curtis Taylor was also a member of the Ku Klux Klan. A hateful and bitter man, Curtis had broken every law god and man had ever intended. He had murdered, he had terrorized, he had shed the blood of his brothers, and he was unrepentant. The patch of land where the Tree stood also contained a certain clubhouse of that same fraternal hooded order, and most recently, the law had been looking for him.

The deed to that piece of land had been in the Taylor family for generations, and the new sheriff — a gangly easterner with the unusual name of Jayfred Dotson — had been looking for the Klan boys for a while. And while Sheriff Dotson wasn't exactly a champion of civil rights, he couldn't have killing on his watch, especially not the killing of a child. A little girl from over in Ramsey, walking home from her granny's, took a shortcut through a patch of woods and, well... everybody was basically just waiting to find the body. So Sheriff Dotson had to do what he had to do.

The heat of his investigation motivated one Curtis Taylor to reach out to a particularly bargain-minded friend he had served as an apprentice with. He never considered Dale Boggs one of his close friends, but he was a white man that worked for a living, so surely he'd help him out. And Dale was indeed amenable to such a purchase, especially at such a scandalously low price. Curtis Taylor figured he'd wait a week, two weeks, maybe a month — let the heat die down — and then he'd kick Dale about \$120, big money, and buy that land right back, clean and simple. And in the meantime he was sure Dale wouldn't mind leaving the clubhouse as it is out there? Surely he wouldn't.

Now Curtis Taylor had no idea how wrong he was. Because the day after the deal was struck, Dale Boggs went and walked his new land. He found the shabbily-built clubhouse and its card tables and chairs. He found the spools of rope and the axe handles. He found the gun. And he found enough graves to properly give closure to half the black mothers in Esau County.

Now Dale was no great progressive thinker himself, but he had been raised by a good woman. He had been raised by a mama that taught him that what you put into the world come back on you three times. And besides, Curtis Taylor was just an asshole anyway. So when Curtis enquired a week later about repurchasing the land with a little kickback for Dale rolled in, Dale had no idea what he was talking about. He told him demolition was set to occur on all structures found on that land — which included two fishing shacks, an outhouse, and some shoddy old barn under a big oak tree. Well, he didn't know who'd built them, but they were on his land so by nightfall, they'd all be gone. And if Curtis Taylor and his boys knew what was good for him — and if he didn't want Jayfred Dotson to know where each and every mound of dirt around that clubhouse was — him and his boys would stay the hell off his land.

Early the next morning, Dale arrived to begin demolition on the old shack, and it was then that his eyes first lit upon the Tree. It was a thing of horrific beauty. There almost seemed to be a light just for it shining down like Jesus's baptism. But it wasn't a light from heaven — no, it was a light from somewhere greater. And that light illuminated every line and crack in the bark, a light that illuminated the details of the sea serpent of roots that emerged from the earth plunging back into it, back on itself like a labyrinth of arboreal glory.

Dale Boggs had never seen a tree like this one. Where other trees showed him the shovel handles and the brooms and the kitchen tables and back doors that hid inside them, this one showed him darkness. It showed him a sky without stars, without a cage surrounding this world so that he could float the infinite inky black and be one with all there was. He himself could become a great tree, his toes the tangle of roots and earth-bound stone, his limbs reaching into that infinite void, fingers curling into branches, sprouting thick black leaves to hide light, to cast shade. Call him Duskbringer. Call him Nightfall. Let him stand and be one with those who have always spoken to him when the tongues of men fell silent.

And then it was just a tree. And it was sick — and it was such a shame it was sick, because he could make something really pretty out of it if it wasn't. He wasn't quite sure what it was showing him, but part of him thought it was the box he might be buried in and somehow that was terrifying and okay at the same time.

When word came that Mama had passed on, Dale knew it would be his hand that must craft her box. The dreams had shown him so. In the worst of them, he had seen himself taking wood from the Tree without cutting it down. He wasn't sure how that was possible exactly, but the wood in his hands, covered in fat and blood, definitely came from the Tree, and he could see the outline of details and filigree and ornamentation, clean and classic. He knew this wasn't his coffin, but Mama's. He'd gotten the full letter from his big brother Vernard, a giant man with a giant ego and a heart half as big who come into a little money out in the 'baccar fields of North Carolina and now had delusions of grandeur of building a brand new cemetery to bury Mama in. That wouldn't do. And so Dale put pen to paper and told his elder brother so.

DALE: *Dear Vernard,*

I do not understand why you have to talk like a Bible salesman, much less write letters like one. Regardless, it's best we not mince words here. Mama is gone and you are correct that we must do right by her memory. If you'd stayed in these hills for more than five minutes once you was grown, you'd know you can't trust anyone from Dorchester, especially a Fields. I think it better that we bury Mama at the home place. Daniel and I have the perfect idea for Mama's coffin and are drafting it as we speak. Well, I am. Daniel's out looking for wood, and if he don't get snakebit and die out there like a fool, we'll have a right nice piece of pine or spruce to carve up. But trust my boy and I will make the finest box Mama could ever lay her head in. Don't go spending any of your big 'baccar money until we talk. Love to Dora and Indy.

*Your brother,
Dale.*

And because he knew his big brother would try to make an end run with their little sister and try to buy her onto his side, Dale had decided to nip that in the bud.

DALE: *Mercy,*

Vernard has undoubtedly written to you about wanting to build a family cemetery with some grifter from out Dorchester or Needmore or somewheres like that. Don't do it. Don't give him a dime and don't you dare tell him it's a good idea. He's gonna get took for every 'baccar-picking dollar he's got ,and I ain't here to hear him crying about it. I say we build Mama a good, strong box, and bury her behind the house. It's simple and it's cheap, and it don't involve no fancy land or acting like Mama was some sort of royalty when we all know what she was. Hell, the rest of the holler knows what she was. We ain't a family for putting on airs, little sister. Please stick with me on this.

*Your brother,
Dale.*

And with that done, Dale Boggs turned his attention to the matters at hand, namely the design and construction of the coffin for his mama. But also to figure out where that idiot boy of his was. He just... Daniel wasn't right. He wasn't right in a lot of ways. He wasn't right in a lot of ways that Dale didn't even know about. We'll talk about that soon, family. Just not right now.

[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 and narrated by Steve Shell. The voice of Dale Boggs was Travis Hollyfield. We'll meet y'all back here on Tuesday, March 10th for the next chapter of Build Mama a Coffin.

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

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