

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

presents

BLACK MOUTHED DOG

Episode Five: Waylon's Retreat

A word about the story you're about to hear. Black Mouthed Dog is a prequel to Build Mama a Coffin, but is meant to be experienced after you have listened to Build Mama a Coffin. Steve and I take great pride in our non-linear storytelling. The way our stories move back and forth in time to reveal family secrets, hidden motivations, and other dark mysteries is very intentional. We highly recommend listening to our stories in the order that they are released. You can always go back later and listen in chronological order. And now, family, we give you Black Mouthed Dog.

Black Mouthed Dog is an all new story set in the same world as Old Gods of Appalachia, which is a horror anthology podcast and may contain material not suitable for all audiences, so listener discretion is advised.

[Black Mouthed Dog by Landon Blood]

*In the black I see
Another witch running
It's a black dog
That she's felt coming*

*Here comes another
Child, cry for your mother
Old gods how they hunger
Witch run now
For deep Green and cover*

Waylon Boggs was soaked to the bone before he ever made it to the treeline. The rain that had come to the holler seemed determined to wash them all out before the elders could make it back from whatever their mysterious business over the mountain was. Waylon was far too young for the sodden cold to reach into his joints the way it one day would, but the downpour brought a

chill with it that had nothing to do with the temperature of his flesh or blood. You see, when you bear a true gift you come to understand the funny little quirks that it brings with it. Times, places, changes in the weather or moon can change the way a gift might reveal itself.

Lewis Boggs, for example, saw the dead the best through the fumes of his favorite pipe. Any communion with the spirits began with the Boggs patriarch packing his favorite briar with a special blend of tobacco and other herbs and smoking up the room good and proper. Oanetta Boggs and her Mama before her did their best work with healing by the light of a full moon, or when the wind come from the east. For Waylon, it was the train. The rain always brought the dead to him in stunning clarity and definition. He'd mistaken spirits for full blown living folks many times when he'd passed them on a rainy night. And tonight was no different. As he moved towards the woods, he saw the dead were out in force.

Over by the big locust tree near the edge of Uncle Batch's house, he'd passed the young couple he'd often seen strolling arm in arm through the holler since he'd first begun to see the dead. His mama told him the pair had settled downriver in Yellow Oak forty years or so back. The man had died in a fall and his wife in childbirth not long after. According to Mama, they walked up and down the river appreciating each other in a way they never had when they walked the earth. Usually you'd see 'em down around the big house in Yellow Oak where their descendants lived to this day.

Waylon nodded to the couple as he passed.

WAYLON: Evening Miz Vanover, Mister Vanover.

The man tipped his hat and his wife smiled at Waylon as they faded from his sight into the rain.

He could see Great Uncle Franklin sniffing around Batch's house like a clumsy burglar, tripping and hotfooting around each ward he ran into, trying to find a way in to bother the sleeping man inside. Waylon was tempted to shoo the old ghost away, but hell, even the living couldn't wake Batch Boggs when he was that deep asleep, so he figured the dead wouldn't have much luck either. All about the edge of the holler he could see the shades of young men in uniform, listless dead hovering about as if unsure of why they were there. Some Waylon recognized, and others

were complete strangers, but Waylon avoided all of their eyes, pulling the brim of his hat down, and kept moving to the western edge of the property. He could feel their hunger, their weight, their need. He did not have it in him to sit and talk with any of them tonight. The littl'uns were still out there, and he had a responsibility to them and to the whole holler, but first... first he had to get his head on right. There was only one place and one person that could help with that.

There were places where Waylon could escape the dead. His daddy had warded out little patches in the woods and even inside a privy or two that would give respite from the entreaties of the deceased, but those were not what Waylon needed on this particular night. So he bypassed the outhouse at the edge of the property line and the circle of old stones at the mouth of the holler, and made his way west across the narrow wooden footbridge to the other side of the river. Waylon knew this path well. As he climbed up the side of the steep incline where the laurels started growing thick, he knew where to step, and where to avoid to make his way safely to the abandoned Frazier homestead.

The wide, cleared dirt drive that had once led up to the Frazier place was overgrown and rife with copperheads. Coming up the back side like this was an adventure when Waylon had first started exploring over this way when he was younger. Now it came to him like some long remembered dance. Some of the other boys would go dig through the old cabins and houses that had been left behind, looking for 'baccar or pistols or anything else of value to mountain boys. Kizzie and Ira Mullins' 15-year-old brother Robert had once found a rifle in the old Hampton place and had gone around showing it off to everybody. It had been all the talk until Waylon's daddy heard about it and took it for safekeeping.

That hadn't helped Waylon's popularity at all, but it was for the best. Shoot, he wouldn't have trusted Robert Mullins with a busted bow and arrow, much less a rifle. Lewis offered to teach the boy how to shoot, seeing how his own Daddy was off fightin' in the war, but Robert was as stubborn as most Mullinses and refused.

Waylon had never looked for things like that. He wasn't immune to the urge to treasure hunt though, and the Frazier place had taunted him for a year before he set out to explore it on his own. After Silas Frazier disappeared and his sons were conscripted into the army, his wife had moved back up north somewhere. Most of what she'd left behind would be of no value to most of

the local boys, but to Waylon, it was a veritable treasure trove. Books. Letters. Boxes of papers and documents of all sorts. Waylon could come up here and get lost going through the stories and poems and missives he'd found in a big old steamer trunk.

Waylon's mama and daddy had been insistent he have his letters, and reading had come naturally to Waylon's hungry mind. He'd read all the correspondence between Mr. Frazier and the coal companies. He didn't understand all the financials involved of course, but he could see that Mr. Frazier owed a lot of people a lot of money. He found love letters written to Miz Frazier, though he wasn't quite sure they were from Mr. Frazier, as the last page of each one always seemed to be missing. He hadn't sensed any spirits up this way and he didn't expect to. Not everybody sticks around once they cross over, much less in someplace they didn't live for very long. But then he met Lucas.

One morning last spring, Waylon had finished his chores early and had snuck up to the Frazier property to have a poke around and to further examine the horde of books and letters that he'd squirreled away. The other boys wouldn't follow him this far out, especially since they assumed the Frazier place was haunted as all get-out. But Waylon knew better. Just 'cause a house was abandoned didn't mean anybody died there, or would linger even if they had, but he didn't disabuse them of this notion. He was happy to have the place to himself.

Of all the books and letters left behind, it was the slim volumes of poetry that held Waylon's attention most. They were like a puzzle sometimes — the unfamiliar words came halting to his tongue, but when he figured one out, it was like a door unlocked, and he found whole new rooms in his head to explore. One of his favorites was a poem by an Englishman named Alfred Lord Tennyson, a long and ruminating thing mourning the loss of someone deeply loved and missed. Waylon didn't like to think about death all the time, but this poem had just grabbed him and wouldn't let him go. There were lines that had been marked up and underlined in the book, so whoever read it before him must've had the same journey. Waylon had discovered that when he read some of the verses out loud he understood them better, and shoot, there wasn't nobody up here to make fun of him or nothing. He was making his way through "The Way of the Soul" for what must have been the umpteenth time when he first met Lucas Frazier.

WAYLON: *For by the hearth the children sit*

*Cold in that atmosphere of Death,
And scarce endure to draw the breath,
Or like to noiseless phantoms flit*

Waylon was pondering on how noiseless Tennyson thought actual ghosts were when he felt a presence slowly begin to manifest behind him, his gift opening in response to it as another voice — plain as day to his ears — spoke the next few lines to complete the canto.

LUCAS: *So much the vital spirits sink
To see the vacant chair, and think,
'How good! how kind! and he is gone.'*

Waylon turned to find the ghost of a young man about his age standing there, dressed in the uniform of a union soldier. He was handsome, with a bright round face and a dimpled chin, and he seemed a bit surprised or embarrassed to have heard himself speak. Waylon clambered self-consciously to his feet, feeling as if he'd been caught lounging in someone else's private chambers and going through their things... which, of course, he had.

WAYLON: Oh, hey. Hey there. Um. I'm sorry, is this yours?

He asked, holding up the book of poems and letting it close around his index finger, unwilling to lose his place in such a long and winding poem.

LUCAS: What? Oh. No, that was my mama's. I'm surprised she left it behind. She used to get boxes and boxes of 'em from her sister up in Maryland, all the latest poetry from over in England, France, Ireland. She must've read that section of Tennyson a thousand times after Solomon died — out loud, just like you did.

WAYLON: Solomon?

LUCAS: My eldest brother. Man of the house after Daddy didn't come back. He signed up with the Union on his own. We got a couple of letters before me and Jonah got ourselves conscripted. He died up in Antietam, close to where Mama's people was from. Me and Jonah ended up at

Fredericksburg. Big mess up there, they were dug in deep and they kept throwing more and more boys at 'em. Jonah died trying to cross the river. I was out in the open by the railroad when the artillery got real bad and that was that.

WAYLON: So you know then? That you're dead, I mean.

LUCAS: Yeah! I worked that one out a while ago. I woke up here, sorta. I couldn't move nor speak, but I could see Mama. I saw when they came to tell her that Sol was dead. She was so sad. She just kept reading that book of poems over and over. Mama always read to us, made sure we were "well-rounded and civilized" she'd say. I don't know that reading that one over and over again did her any good, but the woman loved her words and she loved her some Tennyson.

Waylon could see Lucas' fondness for his mother and siblings writ clear in the slight, sad smile that lit his face.

LUCAS: Went dark for a while after that, and next thing I knew, Mama's sisters were here and they were packing up the house to head back up north. Mama hated it here. She knew Daddy'd messed up bad back in Pennsylvania. She wanted to believe that he was gonna get the family money back and open up some new mines down here, but I think she knew. It was only a matter of time before he just... didn't come back. And he didn't. With me and my brothers dead and gone, weren't nothing keeping her here. I tried to follow them, but every time I got to the front steps I'd just... go dark again.

The young man seemed distracted by his memories, lost in thought for a moment, before remembering his manners.

LUCAS: Oh! I'm Lucas, by the by. Lucas Frazier. I'd ask what you're doing in my mama's room, or how we're even having this conversation, seeing as how I've not heard my own voice in two years almost — oh, and because I'm dead — but I'll settle for your name.

Waylon smiled. Lucas was funny, and he wasn't rattled by the fact that he was dead. He also wasn't begging Waylon for help or demanding he bring him back or carry on a message to his beloved, which made for a nice change.

WAYLON: Nice to meet you, Mr. Frazier. I'm Waylon Boggs.

LUCAS: Boggs? Ah, your family's down on the other side of the river.

WAYLON: Yes, me and my Mama and Daddy and my Uncle Batch.

He settled himself back into his chair, and began to tell Lucas about his own family. The two young men carried on getting to know one another, discussing their families, their favorite books and poetry, long past sunset. By the time Waylon had to head home for supper, they'd become fast friends, and since then, Lucas had become very important to Waylon. At least once a week he'd make the hike up to the Frazier place to share the news from around the holler, or the goings-on of his life. The Teasley girls were fine and they were all close, but Lucas was smart and educated in a way that made him unique in Waylon's world. And he listened to Waylon in a way that nobody else seemed to. Not that Waylon didn't get love and attention from his family — he did — but this was different though. Lucas was fascinated by Waylon's stories about his family and their journey over from the old country, and how Waylon had been born and grown up here, learning about his gift and his family's bond with the dead. Waylon had never been up to Pennsylvania or Maryland and was held rapt by Lucas' stories about the differences between life here and up in that part of the world.

Lucas had never married, nor ever had the chance to, and had asked Waylon if he had a sweetheart or if either of the girls he talked about all the time might be sweet on him. The idea of Verna seeing him as anything other than a sibling or an inept cousin was laughable to Waylon, and he told Lucas so. He saw the way Glory Ann had started looking at him in the past year or so, and Waylon thought she was mighty nice too, but... well, he just wasn't sure he was ready for all that. As much as he enjoyed working and spending time with the girls, he'd share a sunset with Lucas Frazier any day, and he was starting to think that Lucas felt the same.

So it was that in this present time of missing children and great black dogs, Waylon came to the place where he felt he could find his center. Stepping onto the front porch of the house, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, pushing out the words from the familiar poem like a

prayer.

WAYLON: *Dark house, by which once more I stand
Here in the long unlovely street,
Doors, where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, waiting for a hand—*

The feeling of his gift responding to the presence of a familiar shade washed over him as Lucas' voice answered from the door.

LUCAS: *A hand that can be clasp'd no more
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,
And like a guilty thing I creep
At earliest morning to the door.*

Lucas Frazier's form flickered into view and solidified before Waylon's eyes, a warm smile on his face. And maybe it was because of the rain, or just the need he had for peace, but Waylon thought he looked more... more present, more in-this-world than he'd ever seen him — tall, and handsome with dark hair and a slightly boyish face.

LUCAS: Well hey there. You're out late, mister.

His smile slipped when he detected the tension and worry that radiated from Waylon.

LUCAS: Waylon, what's going on? What's wrong?

Waylon Boggs reached inside and tried to find the words he needed to explain about the missing children, and his Uncle Batch — how he couldn't do nothing right and how he wished his daddy would just come home — but they all just slipped away from him, and instead what came out was a choking sob. Collapsing under the weight of the last few days and all that had transpired, Waylon sat down on the front steps and just cried for awhile. Lucas hovered nearby for a moment, then settled down on the step next to him. And when Waylon found his voice at last,

everything came out like a rush of rain kissed river water, overflowing its banks and swallowing the world.

He talked about Uncle Batch and his lost mind, about little Maggie Bentley et up by some wild dog. He cried for his own shame at not being who he thought he should be as Lewis Boggs' only son. He dropped his head into his hands and let all of this pour out of him in hard, wrenching sobs and before he could really understand what was happening, someone had put their arms around his shoulders and pulled him close. Waylon leaned into the embrace, returning it and hugging back hard without thinking, grateful that someone wanted simply to comfort him, and not lean on him or patronize him or expect anything from him. As he relaxed and opened his eyes, he found himself in the arms of a handsome boy in a Union army uniform.

WAYLON: Oh.

LUCAS: This is new.

WAYLON: It must be the rain, sometimes when...

LUCAS: I don't care why, I'm just glad I can help.

Waylon smiled and reached up to touch the other boy's hair, which is something he never realized he wanted to do. It was soft. Comfort in the arms of someone you love is a powerful thing, Family, and it was a light that Waylon Boggs was more than happy to warm himself by despite the bone wrenching cold of the rain. The wind blew the water sideways and thunder rolled from the chest of the night sky like the mocking laughter of a cruel god. Lightning flashed and lit up the yard, revealing the Thing that had made its way into it.

It was all Kyle had said and worse. A huge black dog, thick of muzzle and even thicker of body, stood in the rain at the top of the hill in the one place that Waylon had thought was safe. Its very presence defied the world around it. It stood stock still, thick legs planted in the earth, yet somehow it seemed to... *withe*, just slightly, as if it were made of smoke. Its coat was blacker than the night, reflecting light and absorbing it at the same time in a way that would have made it difficult to look at for long. It seemed to shimmer, allowing it to be seen despite the darkness

that swallowed it after the lightning had passed. Its hackles raised as it growled softly, drooling lips snarling, baring an impossible number of teeth that overlapped each other like an overgrown forest of bones. Its eyes, which smoldered like coals from the heart of the devil's furnace, were fixed on the two smiling boys in their stolen moment. Boys who had no idea how dark the night was about to get.

[Black Mouthed Dog by Landon Blood]

And thus concludes episode five of *Black Mouthed Dog*. Today's story was written by Steve Shell, and featured in order of appearance: Brandon Bentley as Waylon Boggs and Matthew Krieg as Lucas Frazier. Narration was by Steve Shell. Our theme song is by Landon Blood. *Black Mouthed Dog* is a production of DeepNerd Media exclusively for our supporters on Patreon.

© 2021 DeepNerd Media. All rights reserved.