

Old Mary

By Bill Wolfe

As I promised, it's time for me to tell you why I asked the four of you out here. I know that forests and campfires aren't everyone's cup of tea, but hey! You're all here, aren't you? Besides, the cabin is warm and well-stocked—as you've all experienced—and the helicopter will be back tomorrow to pick us all up.

What? No Joanne, I didn't twist your arm. I just promised that if you and Greg came up here for this overnight visit, I would instruct my lawyers to stop fighting your lawyers, and you two could have everything you both have spent so much time lying and conniving to achieve. The divorce settlement will be worth well over twenty million, after legal fees, of course.

I thought that would shut you up. And besides, I've got some good news you'll all be interested in, I promise you.

Oh really, Frank? You and Carl came up here from the goodness of your hearts, I suppose? I'm sure it didn't have anything to do with the email I sent to you, highlighting your financial shenanigans. When your insider trading scheme comes out—and they always do, you know—the Company will go down the tubes. You both know it, of course, but you'll also both be in Rio, by then. Yeah, I knew about that, too.

If you hadn't shown tonight, my lawyers would have forwarded everything to the S.E.C., tomorrow morning. They won't, now. You have my word I will do nothing to report your scheme.

The good news? In a minute. But first, I have a story to tell. It's kind of a scary campfire story. You cold, Joanna? I notice you're not sitting very close to Greg. Trouble in paradise, kids?

Interesting.

So Greg, why don't you put a few logs on the fire to warm her up. Sip a little more Cristóbal, Jo. You always said it lit a fire in you.

Better now? Good.

This is the story of Bloody Mary. . .whoa! . . .that was a big one! Some of those logs must be green pine, don't you think? That thing went off like dynamite!

Well this lady—the one named for Frank's favorite breakfast beverage—was already living in these parts when the first white settlers showed-up. They say she was part Cherokee, part. . .something else.

In any case, she was just called Old Mary, in those days. Some called her a witch, some called her herbwise, but she could always be counted upon to offer a poultice to stave-off infection or a potion to cure the croup.

She knew about what plants were safe to eat or which to avoid and the story goes that Old Mary was always willing to dispense her wisdom and her medicines to all in need. Nobody knew how old she was. She was there to ease a mother's pain when a child was born, and there when that same child was on its deathbed, children and grandchildren gathered around.

People needed her, so though they were never comfortable around her, they generally left her in peace, up in her little cabin in these mountains.

And then the red plague came. It was brought in by a small group of settlers, fresh off the boats from Europe. Whatever it was, people died, bleeding from the eyes, ears and mouth.

Hemorrhagic Fever? Maybe so, Carl. But Old Mary's cures were, indeed, worthless. Perhaps it's because her medicine was so tied to these mountains and this land, and this disease wasn't. Perhaps it was something she just couldn't fight. In any case, because she wasn't helping them, this time, a lot of the old suspicion and fear came boiling up. They blamed her for the outbreak.

It didn't take long for these good, God-fearing people to forget all she had done for them for so long, and decide to do something about her. The words: "Suffer not a witch to live" were misused by the locals, I'm told.

People started calling her Bloody Mary. . .Wow! That one was even bigger. Better scoot back, people. Don't want one of those coals shooting out on you. You could lose an eye!

Where was I? Oh yes. They shouted her new name as they surrounded her little cabin up in the hollow and called her out.

Long story short, she refused to come out, instead, she called-out to the settlers, reminding each of them—by name—of the many times she had helped them, but it did no good.

They started chanting her new title as they set fire to her cabin, burning her alive, inside. When they were sure she must be dead, she came stumbling out, "burning as if she'd been soaked in coal oil" as the story is told. With her dying words she cursed them.

"If my name is spoken three times into a fire, then all who've gazed into it shall be consumed as I have."

And with that, she collapsed on the ground, and died. They say there was nothing left of her body to give a "decent, Christian burial." Not even ashes.

Yes, that's the end, Frank. Just three more things to say, and I'm done.

First, I'm dying of cancer. I have less than a month to live.

Oh, don't even try, Joanna! I saw the look in your eyes when I said it.

Second, did you all hear about the couple, husband and wife that were about to go on trial for that terrible child abuse story involving their young daughters? The ones who were mysteriously bailed-out of jail and disappeared up in these mountains a few weeks back? Nationwide manhunt, right.

Well, I'm who bailed them out. I paid them ten thousand dollars to come up to this cabin, light a fire and say a name three times. Oh yeah, they had to video it, too.

I always cover my bases, and you know it.

And finally. . .

BLOODY MARY!

The End