

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA
Season 1 Episode 1: The Path to the World of Men

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

[The Land Unknown by Landon Blood]

I walk these hills, leave these dark valleys,

Where I can't stay in the land unknown

In these hills that I walk so often,

I can feel the winds now on your ghost...

Chapter 1: Barlo, Kentucky 1917

It used to be a schoolhouse. In its day, it was a place of windows and sunlight rife with the small, winged things of spring singing through them like tiny comets. These days the front steps sag like a bespoiled altar, bowed and warped by seasons, because we have those here. Fall, rich with rot and the sodden burn of flame-kissed leaves, twilights of misting rain and fair nights that leave everything soft. Winters that will reach into your joints and teach us what gettin' old is all about. Spring and eventually Summer – months of stinging flies and nights of opened-windowed dreaming. The only condition of the air being blanket-like. All of these conspired to dissolve the only schoolhouse in Barlo,

Kentucky like a cherry sucker you'd get at the bank: a long and slow process where the temptation to bite is almost too much to bear.

The air here is heavy.

If you breathed it too long, your lungs would fill with a fetid, floral sweetness and you'd probably be sick. There are no school books. There's a bible moldering in the bottom desk drawer of the wreck of a thing at the front of the room, but that's it. The chalkboards still haunt the walls, the ghosts of any lessons taught long since consigned to wisdom of the owls who nest here. The floor creaks hungry and unsteady and the number of snakes that have called that underdark home are legion, so step careful.

The ceiling is not. The room opens to the rafters and to the holes in the tar of the roof. This place is a rotting tooth in the mouth of the holler, but it is the only molar remaining. The town of Barlo has been gone for over 100 years, and 'town' is a generous word for what Barlo was: a collection of a post office, a dry goods store, a church, a school, a bank, and two or three other businesses that were concerned more with paper and signatures than actual work. Outside what was half-jokingly called the Square were the modest tract houses and older dwellings that the local folk built themselves. Up the road and around the mountain were the mines. The mines were the only reason anyone was here. Central Appalachia as a whole was a closed hand to most of the country. We had our God and our land and that was just fine with us. White, black, native or

melungeon, as long as you minded and kept to your own, Sunday would come and the creek would stay where it was.

When the northerners started coming, talking about mineral rights and offering up what seemed like literal buckets of money, that closed hand opened right up. Mines went in, deep, dark, and seeking. Coal was what they wanted, and coal is what they took. It was coal that started taking us as well. Everybody knows that you don't climb into the dark earth without her swallowing a few of us whole. Her dark kiss planting seeds of decay in our lungs and blood – you do not take from the mother without her taking back. It was fair trade though – she fed our kids, built newer, nicer houses, and paid more per hour than we could ever hope to dream and all she asked in return in is that we die slowly and without complaint.

A lot of us are pretty sure the mines are what started it. See, the places we dug were places that hadn't ever been opened. The things that were there had never seen the sunlight and were never meant to. That's for later though – the Low Things and the Deep Things – there's time for them, just not right now. Right now we have to talk about the school. That's where it started.

There were fifteen little babies, as Annie Messer would call them, in her first through eighth grade class at the Barlo schoolhouse in the summer of 1917. They were just a few

days out of summer and into the school year when the worst mining disaster ever to happen in the state of Kentucky heralded the doom of Barlo.

[Deep rumbling of the earth and blasts of fire.]

The #7 mine up on Greasy Creek, which had been on strike for the past month, had vomited gas and fire and 62 souls were lost. Some grumbled it had at least been a blessing that most of the men who had died in the explosion and the eventual collapse had been scabs, nonunion workers who had come down from Cincinnati and other places not here and crossed the picket lines to do so. The fact that 51 of these scabs were black men who had come here looking for work made the loss all the lesser to the inhabitants of Barlo. It's hard to believe that you could segregate a place so small, but there you are.

There's no way to describe what was left of the men pulled from the mine, but we will try. Flesh was charred, bones splintered like busted kindling. The faces of the men who died furthest from the blast were melted into slag. Teeth were blackened, eyes reduced to a viscous running of gelatinous tears. If the Bible had the #7 disaster in it, Hell would have been a lot more convincing. When the undertaker ran out of coffins, the bodies of the black miners were dumped two and three at a time into rough-hewn crates and lowered into unmarked graves well outside of town.

If digging too deep into the mines was the first mistake, this was the second.

Somewhere in the underneath, a barrier cracked. Memories awakened. Bones and flesh defiled, burnt and offered. An invitation. An invocation. Worship. A darkness stirred and the path to the world of men stood open.

The schoolhouse had rocked and swayed with the force of the explosion and the rattling of the earth. Children had raced outside to see the plume of smoke erupt over the ridgeline, cries of fear and worry tearing from all assembled. When the men of your family work underground, you pray for the earth to stay cool and steady – for the dark to remain tranquil and clean. This was the worst case scenario that every wife and child feared. Mothers came running to the schoolhouse, children were collected and families went to the mines – praying beyond prayer that their husbands and daddies would emerge soot-faced and shaken but alive.

Every miner who was walking the picket line that day lived and in fact, very few were even hurt. Two of the striking miners, Ed and Pinky Avery, tried to go back in an ill fated rescue attempt and were never seen again. They were hailed as heroes – fools, but still heroes. The residents of the town counted themselves relatively lucky that day despite the body count.

The mine was cleaned up. The dead, such as they were, were grieved and life went on.

Ten year old Sarah Avery, daughter of the late Pinky, hadn't been back to school since the disaster. This was hardly unexpected, Miss Annie thought. The little girl had lost her daddy and she might not be ready to come back to school, or her mama might need her at home to help with chores now that Pinky was gone.

Pinky Avery, by all accounts, was not a bad man. A quiet man perhaps, but when you had the sort of crushing stammer Pinky had lived with his whole life, quiet was understandable. The Avery family lived back over in Goshun Creek on the far side of Barlo, so far over in fact, that it could barely be called Barlo. Goshun Creek, or just the Creek as most people called it, was backwoods and isolated. The Averys and the Holbrooks were the only two families who stayed up that way and the Holbrooks were just about gone, Isaac and Norma being the last two up there and they barely even came to church any more. The Avery family was Pinky and his wife Carol Anne, their daughter Sarah, and Pinky's uncle Ed. They had a cabin up on the hill overlooking the creek. They kept to themselves mostly and didn't care for church. If Pastor Garvin wanted to make the trip all the way over to the Creek to witness to the Averys, he never seemed to get around to it. But with Ed and Pinky gone though, someone needed to look in on the Avery girls. It took a little convincing but after a day's hard ride in the pastor's cart, Darwin and Annie arrived at the house in Goshun Creek.

Carol Anne greeted them at the edge of the yard where she swung, bloated and purple at the end of a roughly tied noose. Flies buzzed about her face and bulging eyes, and

contents of her bowels stained her housedress and ran down her leg to mark the earth beneath her. The yard looked as though horses had ran through it in the middle of a thunderstorm – the earth churned and ripped. What grass was left was coated in a greasy black residue that Annie could only think of as wet soot. The house had been ransacked. It looked as if animals had torn open the front door and destroyed and befouled the house, the windows and the walls smeared with excrement and what looked like fungus.

[Miss Annie calling for Sarah in the woods.]

Annie began to call for Sarah, praying that the child was in one piece and that whoever or whatever had done this had not found her.

Sarah Avery had never been scared of much. She hadn't been scared when her Papaw died and she saw his body all bloated and fat in a box. She hadn't been scared when there were tracks in the yard that didn't belong to a dog and were too big to be anything but a bear. She wasn't scared now when she ran through the woods behind her house, the sound of whatever had come in through the front doors and the windows, and the chimney echoed behind her. She felt like a rabbit being hunted by her daddy's old blue ticks – but the sounds she heard behind her sounded nothing like dogs. Still, she wasn't scared. She was angry, she was confused, and she was hungry. None of those were the

same as scared. Sarah ran and ran and ran some more until her heart was a panicked mouse inside her chest and her breath came cold and burning.

The noises had stopped. This did not mean she was safe. The Things that came in the House were not something you could see she didn't think. It was like the light didn't know what to do with them. So instead of wrapping around them and showing her whether they were dogs, or dog shaped or animal shaped or whatever – they seemed to be not quite shadows – but bent light. Like the light you'd see bounced off a mirror-glass, except the size of a small horse and apparently hellbent on catching her.

[Baying of creatures in the distance.]

She had woken up that morning to find her momma in the tree out front. She knew her momma missed her daddy something awful and figured she'd just went to find a way to be with him, and Sarah sort of understood that. She also wanted to yell at her momma, too, because who was going to feed her now and take care of her, but what could she do? She wasn't going to be scared, that was one thing. Sarah moved as quiet as she could back to the main road in hopes she could just find a grown person to help her. She could hear someone calling for her and if she could just get to them, she might be all right. She started up the road, and that's when she saw her daddy. Her daddy was walking up the road, covered in soot and ash and partly on fire. This last part didn't seem to phase Pinky Avery as he lurched and limped toward his only daughter.

“Hey sugarpup,” he slurred, his mouth partially burnt, partially melted into what was left of his teeth. “D-D... Don’t look so s-s-scared, it’s just your old daddy.” The Thing That Was Not Daddy laughed at this, black smoke wheezing out of the various holes burned in his body. “You just come on with me now and I’ll get you home to your momma,” it said, forgetting to stammer this time.

“Momma’s dead,” said Sarah.

“Well ain’t that a shame,” said the Thing That Wasn’t Daddy.

“I can still get you to her though, she’ll be right glad to see you.”

With that, the Thing lunged for her and Sarah screamed.

[I Cannot Escape The Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

There is a curse upon my every waking breath,

And I cannot escape the darkness...

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Our intro music is written and performed by Landon Blood. Our outro theme is by Those Poor Bastards. The voice

of Miss Annie was Allison Mullins. Today's story was written and narrated by Steve Shell. Follow us on Facebook and Instagram as Old Gods of Appalachia and on Twitter @OldGodsPod. If you would care to become a patron of our particular type of dark arts, consider joining our Patreon at www.Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia for a few meagre dollars a month, the forces of darkness and shadow could find their way to your mailbox, on the internet, and in this world.

For more information about the show, including cast & creator bios, source material, and exclusive original bonus content, go to www.OldGodsOfAppalachia.com

Join us next time for Barlo, Kentucky Part II: The Schoolhouse here, on Old Gods of Appalachia.

And I cannot escape the darkness...