

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA
Season 1 Episode 2: The Schoolhouse

Old Gods of Appalachia is a horror anthology podcast and therefore may contain material not suitable for all audiences, also this is part two of a two-part story, so if you haven't heard part one yet, go on back there and listen to that first. We'll wait for you here. All that being said, 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...

Barlo, Kentucky 1917, Chapter 2

Sarah jumped back as the stumbling, burning form of the Thing That Was Not Daddy fell to its knees in an effort to grab her. The Thing was slow and obviously dying – the fire that seemed to come from within it was clearly consuming it.

“B-Babygirl,” the Thing That Was Not Daddy rasped – for a moment sounding almost like Daddy, “You gotta help me babygirl – they won't let me – you gotta come with me,

they won't let me come 'til you... 'til you come with me..." the Thing's back went rigid, as if some unseen hand picked it up by the scruff and slammed it to the unforgiving grit of the road. Bits of the Thing splattered the ground and Sarah's feet. The Thing gurgled as the same hand seemed to grind it into the gravel, pulping it to blackened viscous gore, skin breaking and the cooked tissue underneath liquifying.

Sarah ran again. This time off the main road and down into the mess of wild flowers and brambles that lined the hillside. Every road in Appalachia has a hillside like this. A place where any attempt at human development just stops. There are no roadside flowers, there is no cut grass or cultivated greenery, just rough, unkempt weeds tangled with sticky vines and briars.

About two thirds of the way down the side of the road, as my mamaw would call it, Sarah fell. She fell hard and and spun rest of the way with the sudden, teeth jarring rattle that you don't really understand until you do. Sarah stood, caught in that moment of hurt, shock, and pain where everything is too much to process and you can't even cry, you just stand there, mouth wide, sucking air and waiting for the bad hurt to really kick in.

Before she could start crying in earnest though, Sarah looked around to see where she was. She was waist deep in tall grass and cattails. Stagnant water and mud squished between her toes as well as coating most of her lower half now. The road was way back

up the hill, and that Thing was still up there, dying or not. And this... this was not a place a little girl should ever play. The Weeds were dangerous. You couldn't see where you were stepping and snakes and stingers and spiders and just everything. She was in the Weeds.

There was nothing to be done about it though, so she started making her way through the undergrowth and overgrowth – pushing fat stemmed plants with spiky little hairs that grabbed and tried to tear her skin. She managed to slowly move through brambles with thorns long enough to put out an eye, but brittle enough to break on touch without doing much harm. Slowly she made her way through the suffocating greenery until it seemed she could go no further.

And here, Sarah Avery began to cry in earnest. Real, hot tears of fear and shame and loss and just not-knowing-what-to-do burned down her face as she looked about for another way. And then she smelled it. The rot sick smoke smell of burning skin and hair.

[Unnatural, rasping breathing.]

She turned to see her Uncle Eddie rise from behind a stand of cattails. His work uniform was smoldering and barely a thing. The raw meat of his scorched chest cavity wheezed with the wet suck of his smoking breath. Where his right eye should be there was pulsing, dead orange light – the low smolder of a cooling ember.

“Sarah,” he breathed, the hiccup of his ruined chest punctuating the word, “Your Daddy’s hurt real bad little lady... you need to come with me so I can...” then Uncle Eddie’s face froze and he shook his head, like he was trying to clear it, “Sarah... run girl.. they done seen you, they got your scent, they got your Daddy and Mommy and they want me... me to get you—”

[Animalistic growls and snarls.]

Blood surged up Uncle Eddie’s throat and out of his burned mouth trying to silence him, he spat and went on, his uniform burning hotter now, the flames growing bigger and brighter, smoke billowing.

“I said RUN GIRL!”

Sarah would later wonder if she had seen her great uncle leave his body at that point, because the eyes of the golem of skinned flesh and fire that turned on her at that point held none of the sparkle the man her daddy called Big Boy, or the man who brought her sweets from the company store even after Mama said they was a waste of money – naw, this wasn’t Uncle Eddie, this was something using her kin’s burnt and bloodied bones to try to kill her.

The Thing's mouth stretched wide as he reached for her, all black teeth and scorched gum, skin charring as the flames and darkness intensified inside its blasted vessel and Sarah literally had nowhere else to go, no more go to give – she just looked at death as it came towards her. Just before those blackened, almost skeletal hands could reach her something enormous came through the Weeds, chuffing and growling, heavy paws splashing in the swampy water until the largest bear Sarah had ever seen tackled her great uncle to the ground and proceeded to tear him into as many pieces as possible.

[Bear roars, a man's agonized shouts.]

The Thing screamed, tried to push its smoking hands into the bear's face and eyes but it was no use. Soon enough there was nothing of Uncle Eddie's body left. The bear sat up, its muzzle smeared with the same wet black ash that covered the front room at Sarah's old house. It looked her dead in the eye, gave a loud *grunt*, and then vanished. And by that I mean the bear's features melted back into the green around it, looking at first as if it were made of the Weeds – like a bear statue made out of cattails and bush – and then the lines of the bear were just gone. Sarah, exhausted, hungry, and at last truly scared, whimpered softly and fainted dead away.

When Sarah woke, she was in the schoolhouse. I told you, that's where all this started. Miss Annie and Pastor Garvin apparently had found her down by the creek all banged up and dirty and brought her back to the school and cleaned her up. Pastor Garvin went

to fetch the doctor, who was a good two hour ride away, but Miss Annie stayed. Sarah's head was in her lap and Miss Annie hummed softly as she stroked her hair.

[Miss Annie gently humming Amazing Grace.]

Sarah wanted to tell Miss Annie all about the Things and the Bear but her brain and mouth just felt too tired. She didn't understand how they had found her. She was way out in the Weeds and there was no way they could have seen her, even from up on the road. She tried not to think about that now because she was in the school with Miss Annie and this was a safe place. As she laid there, her eyes roamed the room taking in all the familiar sights: the blackboards, the erasers, the rows of wooden desks and chairs. Comfort, and safety.

She tried not to think about Momma and Daddy or Uncle Eddie or the Things That Were Not Daddy Nor Uncle Eddie. Miss Annie had stopped stroking her hair and humming now. And from outside there were screams. Voices raised in alarm and distress. The sound of breaking glass, the sound of splintering wood and the smell... the smell of methane and sulfur, rot and men cooked alive in the throat of a mountain. Miss Annie's hands were trembling now as she pulled Sarah up and close to her.

"It'll all be over soon honey... just close your eyes," Miss Annie whispered as she held Sarah tight – but something was wrong with her voice. It sounded raspy and... melted somehow? Sarah could turn her head slightly and saw a throng of those Things, burned

men missing limbs and faces, ill-fitting scab uniforms burned into their bodies, as the 51 non-union miners burned alive in old #7 took their vengeance on the town of Barlo.

Most of the buildings in the Town Square were burning. Miss Annie was crying now – or was it *laughing* – as the schoolhouse floor began to crack and split, the glass of the windows shattering as the Things threw their smoldering selves into the sides of the school. Sarah pushed Miss Annie away, saw that the woman had become a burned Thing herself, the skin from her forehead down her cheeks was torn. The eyes that should have stood between those wounds missing, the sockets cauterized.

As Miss Annie whipped about, a blind Thing searching for its prey, reaching for Sarah Avery with scent rather than sight. The town was burning. Sarah wished that the Bear would come back, carry her away – but what good would one Bear be against a whole town of these Things? Miss Annie reached for her again as she backed away. Portions of the roof were caving in now as the Things outside continued their assault, determined to bring the whole building down.

And through one of these holes, the pure, unadulterated sunlight of late summer afternoon washed over Sarah's skin. She looked up. She saw the thick canopy of trees that arched high over the school and the town. She saw green. She saw the woods that was here before Barlo and the mine and any one came here.

“Please...” she said to the light and the sky and the green. “Take it back, you can have it back – they’re not doing right by it, anyway, please...”

The light faltered. Heavy clouds moved across the sun. A breeze became a wind and blew cold. The Things hesitated in their doings as Barlo continued to burn around them. And then, with little preamble, it began to rain – a hard, pounding rain that only late Kentucky summer can bring. The kind of rain with drops so big that getting hit by one makes you feel like you’ve been dipped in a pond. The Things screamed. Miss Annie wailed and dove towards Sarah but ended up under one of the new holes in the roof and fell hissing and screaming under the weight of a thunderstorm.

[The hiss of rain, the roll of Appalachian thunder.]

Outside the school, the storm howled and drowned the sea of burning corpses with the skin-shivering coldness of a dying August day. The bodies animated by fire and hate stiffened and cooled. The Things screamed again in unison.

[Inhuman roars.]

Sarah felt like the whole world bent in on itself. The sunset seemed to grow dimmer as if something was sucking the last of the light out of the day before it was time. And through the holes in the roof and through the haze of the rain, Sarah swore she saw the

shadows of great black birds trying to push off from the sodden earth, leaving the cooling corpses of Barlo's men behind, intent on piercing the veil of the storm and flying away home.

But the rain would not relent. Great dark wings were cast sideways to and fro as the wind and the water battered the birds back to earth. Sarah saw one strike the front steps of the school and bounce into the nearby mud where, awestruck, she watched its form dissolve like ink, melting back into the wet and muck of the ground before being swallowed by the dark earth that had given it form. More and more of these dark shapes fell to earth. As the bodies of the sons of Barlo slowly crumbled like cinder and ash, just as the Moon fully rose, and for the last time night came properly to Barlo.

When the sun rose on the place that used to be Barlo, Kentucky, only one building still remained. And in that schoolhouse slept a girl who had truly not slept in days. She would wake soon. She had to find her way back to that place in the Weeds, give thanks, and make good on her word.

[I Cannot Escape The Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

There is a curse upon my every waking breath,

And I cannot escape the darkness.

We hope you've enjoyed this, your second journey into Barlo, Kentucky in 1917. I hope you don't think this story ends with young Sarah Avery continuing to look for answers. Oh no, family, we're far from done here. There are too many questions we have to answer. Surely you didn't think 51 dead miners just got up on their own, did you? Surely not.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Our intro music is by Landon Blood. Our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell. The voice of Miss Annie was Allison Mullins. Complete your social media ritual and find us on Facebook and Instagram as Old Gods of Appalachia and on Twitter @OldGodsPod.

We'd like to take a second to acknowledge the tremendous outpouring and surprising groundswell of support that Old Gods of Appalachia has gotten in our first couple of weeks in existence over on Patreon. We never expected this many people to come on board this soon and we really hope we can live up to your expectations and be worthy of the offerings of blood and gold and flesh and sinew. If you'd like to be a part of that bloodfest, then help the shadow in your heart be cultivated into an appropriately sized succubi or incubi, consider supporting us over on Patreon. For a few dollars a month you can reap the benefits of all the powers of shadow and fire that we command. You, too, can get a really cool t-shirt. To explore the various tiers of power we command, join us at [Patron.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia](https://patron.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia) and consider joining us. Come home, family.

For more information about this show, including cast & creator bios, source information, and the occasional bit of bonus material, join us at www.OldGodsOfAppalachia.com

And I cannot escape the darkness...