

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA
Season 1 Episode 3: The Covenant

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

[Industrial sounds of a mine.]

[Distorted narrator voice on the radio:] The Earth, she feeds us. Generations of fire damp bituminous and volatile, black breath burning or burial we belong to her all the same. Respirator and headlamp, overalls and steel toes, dress rehearsal for a last Sunday shift. We do not speak ill of her that sustains and consumes us, wrap ourselves in her womb, smothered in promised security. We all know that the only light in the deep dark is a paycheck. So hush. Count your blessings, boy. Roof over your head, food on the table, diesel and grease, work boots on the porch, crippled back, crumbling joints, and silence. Company and even union, tuck you in, shut you up, and leave you to rot. And God damn it, you'd better be grateful.

[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 wind now on your ghost...

Barlo, Kentucky 1917, Chapter 3: The Covenant

When old #7 collapsed in the summer of 1917, the men who had been on the picket line protesting unfair pay and an unsafe workplace sprung into action to do what they could. Several men, including Eddie and Pinky Avery – of whom we’ve spoken before – ran into the mine to help douse the initial blaze that broke out on level 3 when the shouts of “Fire!” reached their ears. None of them held any love for the scabs who’d come to work the mine during the strike – mostly black men and city boys from up Cincinnati way – but you don’t just let men die like that – or, to be fair, you don’t let your only means of supporting your family burn up; the strike wouldn’t last forever, everybody knew that.

And at first, it seemed like they’d avoided the worst of it. They smothered the fire and carried a few of the scabs outside, mostly just woozy from the smoke, although one boy had burned his leg real bad and might lose it. Once the foreman determined the fire was out and the fire bells had called the all-clear, he hollered at the men who’d run outside to escape the flames to get back to work. They picked up their helmets and their lamps and headed back down into the dark. Just another day on the job; fire was always the danger, and they all knew the risks. It was just a job. Just to be safe, a few men volunteered to go deeper into the black maze of tunnels, looking for any others who might have succumbed to the smoke.

Wasn't even an hour before the secondary explosion ripped through #7, spewing black smoke from its gullet and knocking the men on the picket line to their knees. When the men of Barlo regained their feet, this time they all pitched in, running toward the mine to save what could be saved... which wasn't much. Of the 62 men inside entrance 1 that day, they managed to pull nine men out of that black hole and into the light: three non-union workers from out of town, and six union boys who showed up for work that day.

They carried the screaming and the dead back to town on makeshift stretchers hastily improvised from larger sign boards and the shirts from their own backs. The church was the only sensible place to take them, as the town's only meeting hall – no pissant little town like Barlo had a hospital back then, or even would today, come to that. The church had light and it was clean – Ms Ruby Garvin, the pastor's wife, kept a tidy house, and that extended to the Lord's house as well – and the families of the few local men who chose to enter the mine that day would find their way to the Tabernacle of the Elder Covenant anyway, in search of news or prayers.

Pastor Cletus Garvin had ministered to the needs of Barlo for the past seven years. An uncertain shepherd, he had preached the gospel, officiated the weddings and said the last words over the men and boys the mine claimed, often burying a mostly empty box with a pair of workboots and a headlamp in place of a body lost far below. Cletus had listened to the town's secrets and seen the darkness that gathered in the hearts of even

its most seemingly upright citizens. Life on the seam was hard, and it could make hearts hard. He knew only too well the dangers a body and soul faced deep underground, as he'd been a miner himself for many years before the mountain let him go. Well, it let him go as much as it ever does. But no one ever really gets away do they?

Back in the winter of 1909, right around Christmas, Cletus had taken sick, the wheezing cough that had begun to plague him in recent years grown into a phlegmy, choking thing that stole his breath and stained his handkerchiefs with black slime. By springtime, he'd dropped 50 pounds, at least 20 of which he could not really afford to lose, and was coming home so weak and short of breath that Ruby had insisted he see the company doctor.

Against his better judgement, Cletus went to see the man: a fussy little Yankee, in a pristine white coat, bow tie, and shiny, hard-soled shoes that looked like they'd never touched the muddy tracks that passed for streets around Barlo. The doctor had listened to his heart and lungs, made notes on a yellow legal pad as Cletus told him how he'd been feeling, and listened and nodded. Then he stepped out of the room "just for a moment," and returned fifteen minutes later with the mine's foreman, Kyle Watts. Together, they told Cletus that he had the black lung, and he wouldn't be able to do the only work he'd ever known anymore. The company would have to let him go.

"The boss says you and Ruby can stay in the house, though," Kyle told him, not

unkindly. “And you’ll have your pension.”

The pension – a meager sum compared to working man’s full pay – was almost laughable, and Cletus had no idea how he and Ruby would make ends meet. See, the Garvins had been blessed with seven children – four boys and three girls – and only the eldest two were grown. Both of them, Cletus Jr. and Lily Ruth, were married and out of the house now, they had families of their own to provide for. The house was something, though. At least they wouldn’t be out in the cold. Not yet, anyway.

Kyle agreed to let Cletus finish out the week, and so he did, the burden of his responsibilities an extra weight on his shoulders as he dug deep into the mountain on those last few days. He was sick, sick and tired – so very tired – and he began to worry how Ruby would get on without him, his thoughts running circles like a rat in his brain, chewing, chewing, chewing to find a way out. He found himself wandering deeper into the mine, away from the other men, where he could work uninterrupted, alone with his thoughts.

Cletus had almost begun to hope he might die there in the mine, before his shift was done. If he died on the job, why, the company would take care of Ruby and the kids. They’d at least get a little better pension, and Ruby would have one less mouth to feed, once they laid him down in the ground where he’d spent his whole life anyway.

And it was there, down deep in the mine, alone with his growing despair, where Cletus first heard them speak his name.

[Soft, incoherent whispers.]

At first, he thought the whisper he heard might have come from Edgar Avery, the last man he'd seen down here, passed him on his way into the tunnel hours ago now.

"I'm here," he called. "That you, Eddie?" But he got no answer, and when the whisper came again, Cletus realized it was coming from further down the mine, not behind him. He shone his light down into the darkness, wandering further down and around a bend, thinking some dummy might have got himself lost. "Who's down there?" he called. "Do you need help?"

At first, there was nothing more, and Cletus thought he might have imagined the voice he'd heard. As he started to turn back though, the voices – for they were many, as it turned out, not just the one – began to speak.

They told him they could help him. That they could take the pain and sickness, make him strong and whole again. Cletus chuckled uneasily, thinking he must be hearing things, that years of living and breathing black dust had finally got to his mind as well as his lungs. But the voices knew things. They knew where he got the scar that twisted

around his right thumb and into the meat of his palm. They knew what had happened to his little sister, why she'd had to leave the county all those years ago. Knew what his father had done.

And when Cletus was convinced of their power – when, sobbing, he begged them to stop offering their proofs – they once more promised to help him. In return, they asked for service. The voices would not restore his life only to have him bleed it away again in old #7. They needed a man on the outside, and he would be that man.

A lifelong member of the Tabernacle of the Elder Covenant, the local Pentecostal house of preaching, Cletus had served as a deacon for years. He'd never shown much gift for preaching, but the voices helped with that too, and he soon began delivering sermons filled with a righteous zeal that seemed divinely inspired to the people of Barlo. So when Pastor Reeves died suddenly in an unfortunate hunting accident later that year, Cletus was asked to take his place.

The voices rarely placed outright demands on the new pastor, well not precisely anyway. There were days he barely felt their touch on his mind at all. And others, he heard them more clearly, often not giving orders but making... suggestions. Improvements to certain turns of phrases in his sermons. Interpretations of Bible verses he might not have considered on his own and, truth to tell, Cletus's congregation certainly seemed to cleave to his new style of preaching, their eyes glowing with the fervor in the light of a

gospel of fire and brimstone and blood.

It was Pastor Garvin who introduced the practice of speaking in tongues to the Elder Covenant's congregation, though it was a common one in these hills and most were familiar with it. The harsh, dissonant sounds that the Pastor wrenched from the throats of his flock grated against his eardrums and caused his stomach to churn with bile, yet he could not deny their power. Combined with a laying on of hands, perhaps anointed with oil or smeared with the blood of a calf or goat, they had the power to heal... or in some cases, to kill, though Cletus liked to think those times were a mercy, a quick death wrapped up in a frenzy of religion as opposed to a slow death from the black lung or the cancer. And if the ones that weren't saved had a tendency to come back... not quite unchanged... well, there was always a price to be paid.

So when the dying men from #7 were carried into the church on that muggy August morning, the Tabernacle of the Elder Covenant also sprang into action. Ruby Garvin fetched candles and dried herbs from the cupboard, sent the women of the congregation home to gather whatever spare linens could be found. The men folk consulted with Pastor Cletus, who let the voices guide him with regard to how much would be required from which one, and to their credit, none of his congregants argued. Those asked simply nodded grimly and went home to fetch a pig, chicken, goat – in one case, the family dog – for the sacrifice.

While his congregation went about their preparations, Pastor Garvin took a moment to himself, sitting quietly on a pew in the very back of the church, to listen to the voices, to learn what he'd be tasked with this day. Now over the course of his service, Cletus had been asked to do many things that didn't set well with him, though he told himself it was for the good of his family and flock, the good of his neighbors and congregations. But the visions they showed him that day – the last day – froze his heart and turned his stomach with fear and sickness. This, he knew, would do no good for anybody – not in Barlo, not in the world.

[I Cannot Escape The Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

There is a curse upon my every waking breath,

And I cannot escape the darkness...

Hey, family, welcome back to Barlo and welcome back to 1917. We're still chasing those answers. Still trying to answer that one question that haunts us from the first time we get up 'til the last time we lay down and that's: "How did we even get here?" In the husk of a town a hundred years gone from the worst disaster in Kentucky mining history, but it feels like the body's not even cold. Maybe next episode will give us some answers.

Prob'ly not.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Our intro music is written and performed by Landon Blood. Our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. Today's episode was written by Cam Collins and performed by Steve Shell. All thanks and offerings unto those who have completed their social media ritual. Follow us on Instagram and Facebook as Old Gods of Appalachia and come have a nice conversation with us and follow us on Twitter @OldGodsPod. We've had some wonderful exchanges with our family there, and it seems like they grow by the day.

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And I cannot escape the darkness...

