

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA
Season 1 Episode 4: The Sacrifice

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 three-part story, so if you haven't heard the first part go back and listen to that. We'll wait here for you. That being said, listener discretion is advised.

[Door opening and closing. Footsteps approaching.]

[Man's choral singing:] *Are your garments spotless, are they white as snow?
Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?*

[Narrator on the radio:] And behold, Revelations: 12.

[Man's choral singing:] *Lay aside the garments that are stained with sin,
And be washed in the blood of the lamb.*

[Narrator on the radio:] And there appeared a great wonder in Heaven! A woman who was secretly a mountain, clothed with the sun and legions of men inside her, and upon her head a crown of black lungs. And she, being with child, cried--travailing in birth and pained be delivered so they bound her, backbone kept straight by centuries of settlement and privilege that sings silent hymns through a sandstone jawbone. Two

decades from crumbling to dust under the weight of a bad bite. Gutted and rotting in the mouth of a beast that cannot afford seven crowns to cover the holes in its seven heads. Ten horns sound the end of the workday. And one third of the stars in Heaven return from the inner dark just in time for supper and Wednesday night prayer meeting. An autopsy of faith, a congregation of corpses, a murder of faithful crows, gathered in the humble lights of cadaverous sanctity, claiming nothing more than the air they rattled through the desiccated woodsheds of their bodies, singing softly that this is not our home.

[Man's choral singing:] *Are your garments spotless, are they white as snow?*

Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?

[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...

Pastor Cletus Garvin had just finished his... prayers, such as they were, consulting with the voices that guided his hands these past seven years, when a wail rose up from the front of the church that made his heart leap with fear. Ruby, his wife. Cletus jumped up

and ran to the front of the church, where he found his wife on her knees, sobbing, her apron pressed over her face with trembling hands.

And Cletus saw that she knelt beside their second oldest boy, Noah, who lay on what was once a clean white sheet, now stained with blood and soot, half his blackened face melted away, the other a bright pink darkened with the coal dust that marked a day in the life of any miner. His remaining eye stared up at the rafters, its former bright blue now robbed of its color, empty and cold and blind, and Cletus knew he was gone.

But that couldn't be right. There was a strike on. Noah wouldn't have crossed a picket line, he was a union man. He wouldn't...

"P-Pastor?" someone said quietly beside him. Cletus turned to find Dewey Hubbard standing beside him, hat twisting nervously in his hands. When he simply stared, Dewey stammered on. "He - Noah - he went in to help put out the fire this morning. Most of the men were already out, but a few stayed behind. They were looking for more fires, or anyone who might've got hurt. P-Pinky and Eddie Avery were in there too, but... well, we didn't find them..."

"Oh," Cletus said. Of course Noah would want to help, he was a good boy, and of course Dewey Hubbard would want his family to know that their oldest boy hadn't died a scab. Cletus almost laughed... as if that mattered right now.

And then he remembered what the voices had tasked him with, the visions they had shown him. Cletus felt his stomach twist, bile rising in his throat. They'd always promised to keep his family safe.

He spotted his youngest boy, Hershell, lingering behind the lectern, staring at his mother with wide eyes, and Cletus crooked two fingers at him to call him over. Quietly, trying to keep his thoughts clear in case the voices were listening, Cletus told the boy to run back to the house and fetch his mother's round mirror from the vanity, along with the big box of salt from the pantry. And when Hershell started in with the "why daddies," Cletus spoke with the weary voice of his own daddy and every father to ever come from these hills:

"Boy, just do what I said – now go on, git!"

The look in Cletus's eye must have told how thin his patience was, because Hershell didn't waste any time bringing what his father had asked for. Cletus took the mirror, bowl, and the big box of Morton's salt, and told the boy to go check on his mother. Meanwhile, Cletus set the mirror on a small table just inside the church door. The table usually held a small pewter bowl of oil for anointing, and this he set in the center of the mirror. Around the outside edge of the mirror, he carefully poured a generous ring of salt. Cletus's mamaw had always kept a small mirror like this on top of her pie chest;

she said it helped ward off the evil eye and kept eavesdroppers out of her business. He didn't know about all that, but it had proved effective at giving him a little peace and privacy when the voices' chattering started to make his head ache. He hoped it would keep them from knowing what he planned on doing today.

Once he'd set up his mamaw's ward, Cletus went back to the front of the church to check on Ruby. One of the women had helped Ruby up and sat her down in the front pew and fetched her a glass of water. Cletus knelt down by her side and grasped her hand. He fished his handkerchief from his pocket and gently dabbed at the tears on her face as she stared vacantly ahead.

"Ruby?" he said softly, "Ruby, honey, look at me."

Her eyes, swimming in tears and rimmed red in her grief, slowly focused on his face and met his. "Noah," she whispered. "Cletus, our - our—"

Her voice started to hitch, and Cletus spoke gently to her. "Shh, shh. Hush now. Honey, I want you to go back to the house and lie down. Take Hershell and the girls with you. Robert and Clay will be done with their chores soon. Send one of them to tell Lily Ruth what's happened to her brother."

He could tell Ruby wanted to protest - she didn't want to leave her Noah's side - but

Cletus called Hershell, Manda and Virginia over to them, and ushered the four of them out the door, telling Virginia, the oldest of the three, to take her mama home.

With his family headed safely home, he turned back to his congregation – a roomful of hopeful faces watching him expectantly – to do what must be done.

One by one, they carried the victims of the blast down to the cellar: a bare-floored room where a long, low altar of sturdy pine had been placed, carved and sanded and polished by Cletus himself. He'd spent six feverish nights working on the thing, dragging himself from his sweat-soaked bed out to the shed, driven by both the voices and his own desperate need to get their visions out of his head. The pattern carved deep into the wood was nearly impossible to follow with the eye, twisting in whorls and slashes that made your head hurt. When Pastor Garvin told his congregation they had been divinely inspired – well, they said Amen.

A knife rested on the right edge of the altar. It was nothing special, just a good kitchen knife, but Cletus kept it sharp.

The air in the basement was thick with the smoke from candles and burning herbs, and the heat of too many bodies squeezed in under the low ceiling. The men had returned with the livestock Cletus had requested, and stood in a ragged half circle around the altar with the skittish animals. Those men who had not been invited to the sacrifice

stood with the women and children – those old enough for this kind of work, you see – around the fallen men.

Cletus nodded solemnly to the men behind the altar as he took his place and turned to face the Tabernacle of the Elder Covenant.

“Family,” he said to them, “we face a difficult task this day, but with the Lords’ help, we may yet save these men. Are you ready, brothers and sisters, are you ready? Are you prepared to make sacrifices on behalf of our own? Can you do what must be done? Say Amen!”

The chorus of “Amens” filled the cellar. After all, they had turned their hands to this task before, and they had witnessed miracles.

“Amen,” Cletus echoed back to them, and he reached for the knife.

The first cut was his own, a quick slash carved on top of layers of old scars on his left palm. Cletus flicked his hand out into the crowd, blood spattering the altar and the men on the ground. “Lord of the night and of the day, of life and death, we pray: grant us your aid in our time of need. Save our brothers and sisters. Let them be resurrected into the light of day,” he intoned. Then he reached for the first calf.

[Breathy, ghostly whispering.]

Blood spilled over the altar and onto the floor, staining sheets and soaking the men on the floor, and the bodies of Barlo's young animals fell limp. Cletus spoke the words. The congregation swayed on their feet, chorusing some parts back to him or shouting, "Amen! Amen, Brother Cletus!" Some began speaking in tongues, although the voices remained silent this time, not a whisper in Cletus's head of their presence – and truth to tell, he had noticed before that some members of his congregation would begin babbling in what seemed like strange, foreign words whether or not he felt their power coursing through his own words or not.

They prayed. They wept. They made sacrifice.

And at the end of the day, none of the miners stirred. They were dead to a man, as Cletus had known they would be, because the salvation of these men was not part of the plan the voices had for Barlo.

Sweating and hoarse, Cletus wiped his hands on a rag someone handed him, and stepped back from the altar. "Family, we have done what we could for our brothers," he told the assembled flock. "But sometimes we must accept when the Lord calls a man home and rejoice – for they will face the cleansing fire!"

A few scattered, tired “Amen’s” echoed back to him.

“For now, these men have sacrificed their lives in service to Barlo and to their families, and we must honor that sacrifice.”

There were murmurs of agreement, and as always, the men and women of Barlo did as their pastor bid them. No one questioned him when Cletus asked six men to fetch more clean linens from their homes – anything that could be had at this point, even tablecloths would do – and to soak them in running water from the creek, or even when he told the women to bring all the salt they had in their pantries. The other men he tasked with digging graves – seven in total. Six standard for the men of Barlo, and one deep pit for the bodies of them three scabs.

At Cletus’s direction, the congregation carefully cleaned the blood from the bodies of the miners from Barlo, and wrapped them in the wet linens soaked in fresh water from the creek and the salt the women had brought. Cletus said the Lord’s Prayer over the salt and then linens too, and over the men’s bodies once they’d been prepared.

It was late and very dark by the time the Elder Covenant had finished its preparations. Cletus had insisted the burial must be today. When a couple of the men’s wives protested that they wanted to sit vigil with their husbands – it was tradition, after all – he pointed out that after all, no one wanted coyotes or bears to come sniffing around,

interfering with the bodies. They deserved better than that.

And so the families set their misgivings aside, and laid their dead to rest by the light of several lanterns, with all the respect, tears, prayers, and hymns you could ask for. Cletus, for his part, prayed hard, prayed to a god he had long since stopped serving, if he were honest with himself, prayed that the measures he'd taken would be enough to save his son – and those few who died with him – from what was coming.

The miners from out of town they simply wrapped in the blood-soaked sheets from the afternoon's ritual, and lowered them into the mass grave the men had prepared for them. From the point of view of the people of Barlo, they'd done well enough for a bunch of scabs, and black ones at that.

Cletus merely hoped that the voices weren't counting bodies too closely, that the mass grave would disguise what he had done to protect his own.

It was near midnight when the pastor returned to a dark and silent house, and quietly crawled into bed next to his wife. Ruby was sleeping deep enough that he felt sure she must have taken a nip of whiskey or two, and he didn't blame her. They could discuss his plans for the Garvin family tomorrow. There was time, or so he believed, based on what he could figure from Their revelations, and anyway he would need to speak to Cletus Jr. and Lily Ruth and her husband too.

It was near dawn three days later when Annie Messer called on Pastor Garvin, and he received her visit on the front porch so Miss Annie wouldn't ask questions about the obvious moving preparations under way in the Garvin home. Annie hadn't seen Sarah Avery in a few days at school, and yes her family must be grieving – and she'd need to help her mama since Pinky and Eddie had both died in the collapse of old #7 – but someone should go check on them, shouldn't they? Wasn't that the Christian thing to do?

The slithering voices in Cletus's mind went wild at the mention of Sarah Avery's name, the shrieking nearly drowning out Miss Annie's words. Cletus couldn't even make out all they were saying, but one bit was clear enough: *Yesssss! The girl! Bring her! BRING HER!*

Cletus felt sick at the thought – the past few days he'd begun to have quite a few second thoughts about his service to Them – but he knew it was best to follow their orders, at least for now. At least until he could get his family safely out of Barlo.

And so he went inside to fetch his hat and his coat, and he and the schoolteacher headed for Goshun Creek, riding East into the last sunrise Barlo would ever see.

[I Cannot Escape The Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

There is a curse upon my every waking breath,

And I cannot escape the darkness...

How are you, family? Welcome back to Barlo, Kentucky. We're starting to catch up with where our story left off but we're not quite there yet. There are still more things to find but we are uncovering answers, aren't we? Unfortunately for every answer we find, who knows how many questions are underneath? I don't even think we should try counting, do you?

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 by Cam Collins and performed by Steve Shell. *Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb* was performed by Brandon Sartain.

Are your social media rituals up to date, dear family? Have you followed us on Facebook and Instagram as Old Gods of Appalachia? Are you communing with us on Twitter @OldGodsPod? Have you joined the Old Gods of Appalachia Fellowship Group on Facebook? Are you participating in our arts and crafts challenge? Are you? *Really*. We believe you. Sort of. But just to be sure, why don't you head over to www.Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia and make yourself a tithe. For a few mortal dollars a month, you can help us feed the ascension of those greater than you to wake

the sleepers that lie beneath and return this world to its primordial natural state of darkness and entropy. And we'll give you some pretty cool swag, too.

www.Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia

For more information about this show, including cast & creator bios, source material, and links to all episodes, visit us over at www.OldGodsOfAppalachia.com