

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA
Season 1 Episode 7: Afterbirth

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 wind now on your ghost...

Barlo, Kentucky 1917: The Night Before Sarah Avery Ran

The house was emptier without the boys in it, that much was for sure. Carol Anne Avery, wife of Pinky and mother to Sarah sat on her front porch and looked out at the darkening yard. Old #7 had claimed the father of her child and the closest thing to a Papaw that child would ever have, and she was left alone on the side of this mountain by the smelly old creek, knowing it was just a matter of time.

It was beginning – or ending, depending on how you looked at it. Either way, she shouldn't have to wait long. She'd seen the mass graves that old fool Cletus Garvin and

his nonsense talkin' loonies had dug with the help of the union boys. She'd see what was left of them city boys they barely bothered to sift out of the rubble. She saw bones. She saw blood. She foresaw fire. She knew what a burnt offering looked like when she saw one. Tonight of all nights, she'd sent Sarah to stay at the Calloway's. She needed a night to herself in this house to settle all the old ghosts – and the new ones that might come.

Carol Anne Avery, formerly Carol Anne Walker from Tourniquet, West Virginia – a town even smaller and dirtier than Barlo, so named because it was meant to stop the bleeding, the exodus of failed settlements and mines from the area, and rightly named because all it did was cause the amputation of the very same things – had come to Barlo with her new husband and full belly ten years ago. Pinky, a kind but cowardly man, had thought he was delivering his bride and babe to be to the promised land of milk and honey, when in reality he was just settling them down in to live in the shadow of his servitude to the deep, dark mines of Kentucky coal.

Now, life in Tourniquet had been hard. As a woman trying to live, you either knew how to sell or you knew how to be sold, and the Walker girls weren't anyone's property. Carol Anne was one of seven sisters, a litter born to an iron-spined, never-married mama who never had to sell the house they lived and worked out of. She had built the prosperous enterprise she held in those cold hills and did her best to see her girls go on to better and safer lives. Life was what it was and you did what you had to do in the now.

Tourniquet was two saloons, a brothel house and a half, and a graveyard that was running out of room. Where the town sat in the West Virginia mountains, coal should be abundant, but strangely, mine after mine had petered out. Company after company folded or sold. Money was drying up like a mud puddle on an August afternoon and Carol Anne's mama saw the writing on the wall and doubled down on getting her girls out and either into better houses if they wanted to stay workin', or into their own houses to be married off if they didn't. Carol Anne's mama had moved the other six Walker girls out just fine – two weddings, two relocations, one midnight departure that was a bit unexpected, and one brand new parlor house opening – leaving only Carol Anne behind.

Calling in one last favor, Sheila Walker introduced her daughter to a favorite regular customer of her own named Eddie Avery. Now, Eddie was not to be her patron or customer; Eddie did want to help, though. Eddie was moving to Kentucky to work for B&L, and had a nephew who was young, dumb and full of hope for the future. It didn't hurt that he was sweet and kind and had a strong back. He took one look at Carol Anne and you might as well have tattooed her name on his forehead right there – he was in love, brother, and how. Pinky never had to know that Uncle Eddie paid for his first date with Carol Anne, though he'd never have to pay for another. Before long Carol Anne was looking at him with those same goo-goo eyes and had a swelling tummy and there was a ring on order from the Sears catalog.

On their wedding day, Carol Anne's Mommy had said, "Well, there goes the last Walker gal," to which Pinky had sweetly, yet stupidly replied, "N-n-no Ma'am – that there's the first new Avery girl!" Never mind that didn't make no sense, it was sweet in the moment.

Sarah was born two months after they set up house in Barlo. Uncle Eddie had a little money set aside and made sure they didn't have to live in no shotgun house down in the main camptown, instead buying a lot for cash and setting up on the side of the mountain over in Goshun Creek.

Eddie was a good man – he never saw Carol Anne as anything other than 'Sheila's littlest,' and he also never got over Carol Anne's mama not coming with them. He couldn't know she was sick, nor how little time she had left. And when word come that she'd been put in the ground right after Sarah was born, well, he didn't speak for a week. But Edgar Avery swore after that, though, that he'd take care of Sheila Walker's little girl, and now *her* little girl even if it killed him. After all this time, it looked like it finally had. They'd not found Pinky nor Eddie's bodies. Carol Anne didn't think anyone ever would.

When she saw the weird little man in the long coat come to the edge of their yard, she knew it had begun.

Her mama had warned her when she found out that she was pregnant. See, she was one of seven sisters, born from one of seven sisters. She knew her mama kept stores of nettles and herbs and could brew up a cup that would take a bun out of the oven as gently as it could. She knew her mama didn't take to no church, and not just because of the whorin' – Sheila Walker kept ways that most decent men wouldn't understand. She knew her mama had dreams they could set their watch by in terms of comin' true. She knew her mama could look at a customer and know if he meant harm – and she was never, ever wrong about that. She never questioned the nights her mama had her and her sisters sippin' milk with chamomile mixed in when they were little – to help with good dreams, she'd promise. They'd never say the word, but she knew what their mama was. She knew what her little sisters Ellie and Marcy were too. Word had it that if you needed an empty belly or a man gone over in Baker's Gap, Tennessee – Marcy Walker was the one to see. Just so you know.

Carol Anne's mama had told her that her daughter would more than likely bear gifts. Now she might not, since Carol Anne herself had never shown much in the way of promise, that gift might be saving itself up to skip a generation, and that would draw attention from the wrong places. So when Sarah Avery came screamin' into the world, Carol Anne made sure she was attended by her two closest sisters. Marcy would know what to do with what come out with the baby – know where to bury it, charms to say to protect child and mama alike. But Ellie would know the more secret words that would

bind Carol Anne and what small shimmerings of a gift she might possess to protecting her daughter in the case of her death. She always thought of it as a just in case... but here it was.

She knew the little man could not nor would not be able to enter their yard. Her little sister Ellie's other job while she was here had involved small mason jars and iron nails and even though her little sister was miles away in Esau County, she knew those lines would hold. And Hell on top of that, a tiny trickle of the Creek itself broke off to form the north property line of the Avery homestead. And if this was anything like what her mama had warned her about, that little line of runnin' water would hold better than any hand turned craft.

The distance between the edge of the yard and the porch might have been 15 feet, but Carol Anne could see the stranger. A short, skinny man dressed in boss's clothes. Black boots and slacks, a white button up shirt and a long, strange black overcoat. The man stood stock still, like he was holding a poseto be painted. It was like he was trying to stand how he thought a man was supposed to stand, and that weird overcoat flappin' and twitchin' despite there not being a bit of breeze.

"Mizzz Avery?" he droned.

His voice sounded like a mouthful of wasps. His tongue swollen and uncertain, as though words were something he'd only recently discovered. He had thin, cracked lips and pale skin flushed from the exertion of the walk up the path to the house.

“Mizz Avery.” he repeated. “My name is Ignatius Combzzz. I am with B&L Mineral Resourcezz. I am here to offer you our condolences on the death of your Huzband Pinkerton.”

Carol Anne almost laughed. She hadn't heard Pinky's given name since their wedding day. She held her tongue though. Her mama had taught her you never give nothing away. Especially your name.

“You are Carol Avery, are you not?”

Caro Anne said nothing and the little man went on.

“Mizz Avery, are you aware you are entitled to a substantial payout for your huzzband's passing? That he died in a rezzcue attempt in an effort to protect Company assetzz, and B&L are very grateful for hizz sacrificize.” He paused, consulting a sheet of yellow paper, and then continued. “Edgar Avery it seems was also a resident here wazz he not? And it seems he was the actual deed holder as well. Unfortunately his beneficiaries are no longer living and he has never redirected his will to anyone we could reach...”

Carol Anne wasn't paying attention to the man's droning, buzzing voice. She was watching his blotchy face. Things were moving under his skin. Long segmented shapes pressed from beneath his cheekbones and chin. Bulged his lips, flared his nostrils. Somehow she knew that his eyes were a dull green with burst blood vessels staining the whites. He looked like he was straining himself to stay upright, like if he blinked or breathed wrong, he'd just deflate and whatever was moving under his skin would just come pouring out, and the idea made Carol Anne almost vomit and faint at the same time. What was he?

He was the beginning. That's what he was.

"Mizz Avery - if you would invite us in, I would be glad to sign over the check so that you and your daughter could live more comfortablyzz. Alternatively, B&L would be happy to relocate you zomeplace much zafer azz a thank you for your huzbands years of zervizzzzzz..." His words seemed to distort more and more as he rambled on - his eyes pleading for her to interrupt him, to ask a question - to let him not have to speak.

Carol Anne let him sweat.

His breathing became more rapid, the squirming under his skin more pronounced.

"Mizzz Avery, pleazzze let us come in and help in thizz trying time."

Carol Anne could hold her tongue no more.

“Us?” she laughed “You got a mouse in your pocket there, sonny boy?”

“Mizzz Avery if you could just...”

“Send the check in the mail if you have one to send,” she said and turned back into the house.

“That izz not an option,” she heard the man say, “there are protocolz in situationz like theeez.”

Carol Anne stepped off the porch as she rounded on the man, temper flaring, patience and caution all run out.

“My husband is dead, the closest thing I ever knowed to a daddy is dead – and your money ain’t gonna bring them back.”

“Mizzz Avery,” he buzzed, “Pleazzz, we have resourcezzz you do not. Do not make this any more difficult than it has to be – let us make this eazzy for you.”

“Get off my land, you weird little vulture.”

Ignatius Combs sighed resignedly and held up his yellow sheet of paper that was covered with tiny print.

“You aren’t liszteneing Missez Avery. When Pinkerton’s Uncle Edgar passed, his assets were liquidated so a cash payment could be made to his beneficiaries – but none of them, including Ms Sheila Walker, can be found living. So this land wazz sold. We purchazzed it, so I’m afraid you have no llleverage in this situationn...”

With that, the man raised his hand in a casual wave and Carol Anne felt all sense of safety vanish. At that, the narrow branch of Goshun Creek that blocked the little man’s path stopped. Parted like the Bible, and he stepped across towards her, his strange swelling, shifting face never changing expression despite the swarm of activity under his skin.

Carol Anne began to scream Sarah’s name in warning, forgetting in the moment that her child was away safe, but then there was a blur of motion near the corner of the house and everything went black.

Carol Anne woke up under the tree in the corner of the front yard. The big one where they’d buried the old dog that had come with Pinky and Ed to Barlo, the one Pinky had

carved their names into the day they moved in, and the place where Carol Anne's sister and buried the afterbirth on the day Sarah was born. She felt the rope around her neck. It was good hemp and strong. She felt weak and muddleheaded. Something was in the house. She could hear furniture breaking, animals growling and roaring, and she thought of Sarah, but before she could try to speak, Ignatius Combs was right in her face, the skin on his own a nightmare of unnatural movement and stretched and strained tissue. She could count the segments of the worm that squirmed under his left eye.

"Thizz wasn't as hard as she said it would be. I could do this all day, couldn't I?" The odd little man flexed his hands and swung his arms like he was trying to break in the strange overcoat he wore.

"Nothing to you monkeezz at all – nothing so hard."

Someone or something out of her line of vision started pulling on the rope and she began rising into the air, the hemp fibers biting into her soft skin, her airway suddenly constricted as her body sought breath that would not come.

"Thizz is what they do with witchezz in this place, yezz? Not so much of a witch you are. We'll choke you and choke you until you are soft and blue and very good to eat."

Carole Anne's vision was fading, her skin indeed turning blue. Ignatius Combs's skin was doing the same. He breathed in deep and sighed in pleasure. "Oh there we are. There's not much of you, but some."

Carol Anne's last sight was the two massive things blinking into existence, one emerging from the house covered in feathers from her good down comforter, the other digging up the yard. Massive creatures, their skin the same shade of blue as her dying face.

"If only we had more time, or you were more... filling. But I zuppose we must be merciful... or at least efficient. Goodbye, Mizz Avery..."

Carol Anne's body lifted into the air, letting the noose slacken for a second – as some supernatural force pulled her skyward, and then let her fall, snapping the rope taught and breaking her neck cleanly.

The effect of the charm was immediate.

[Deep rumble of force, like the preshocks of an earthquake.]

As Carol Anne's body slumped into the shape and state Annie Messer would one day discover her in, a wave of pure, blinding force radiated from her like a sonic boom.

[Multiple deafening explosions from the earth.]

The ground where the leavings of her daughter's birth had been buried erupted in fire and wind, the soil becoming a tarry slurry. Both explosions converged on Ignatius Combs, blasting his skull into a small ocean of ichor and pus. Blind white worms that screamed with the voices of children flew from that shattered face as finger-length scarlet wasps with the faces of eyeless rats burst from his gut. This primordial chum of venom and burned bile splattered the yard, with quantities so great it filled the tracks and holes of the beast with a hazy mustard brown sewage swimming with the larvae of the dread wasps. The parents of these infant abominations, blind and rat-headed, wilted into ash, unprepared for worlds outside of their host's body. So there was some mercy in that. The screaming white worms splattered into the ruined Avery living space through the shattered windows and began slowly, blindly trying to find each other as if to knit the ruptured little man back together, but found themselves stuck like flypaper to the cursed mud that erupted from the earth.

Carol Anne's body swung in its deathsong, breathless and cooling. I wish I could tell you that she was there to look down and watch as our world stretched and pulled apart the abomination of the swarm that had lived inside of Ignatius Combs, but those who die like Carol Anne died, like Pinky died, like Eddie died... if I told you they were in a better place I'd be lying to you, family. Best not to dwell on it.

[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. Thanks for coming back with me into the past one more time. The story from this point on moves forward, I promise. But as I crafted this week's missive and planned it out, there was one soul that just needed her story told. The mother of Sarah Avery wasn't a faceless, sad woman who couldn't go on. No disrespect to those who can't go on, sometimes you just can't, but Carol Anne needed her story told and she was heavy on my heart until it got told. And even though Sarah might not ever know what her momma done, you do. That means something. Don't you think? We got three more pieces to go, family. Hold on tight.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Our intro music is by our friend Landon Blood. Our outro music, of course, is by Those Poor Bastards. Check out their new record, Evil Seeds, on true tribulation recording company at ThosePoorBastards.com

Have you completed all the rituals required to enter the sarcophagus of the eternal night and stars of screaming raving babies who wear hats? Have you followed us on Facebook

at Old Gods Of Appalachia and on Instagram under that same name? Are you tweeting at us @OldGodsPod? Are you visiting our merch store at OldGodsOfAppalachia.Threadless.com? All these things will open doors. Open portals, bring you to a place where you understand the world and the night more fully.

And if you truly wish to become one with us, to walk the roads of glass and blood and smoke and madness, make your tithe. Promise your offering. Become a patron on Patreon, Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia For a few dollars a month you, too, can receive great treasures in the mail – which I know some of you have just received your first official raiments. Some of you have purchased t-shirts from the Threadless store, but I know our covenant of the black breath and our blood kin have received those very special once-in-a-lifetime limited edition black and white shirts, and I really hope you love and treasure them the way we do ours.

Also the month of February brings with it our patrons-only storyline, Build Momma a Coffin, our most ambitious storyline to date, and it is an exclusive for patrons of \$10 dollars a month and up. Only available at Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia and also there are special instructions to have those episodes delivered to your podcast catcher of choice. And those are on Patreon as well.

Family, we appreciate you, we love you, and we treasure you. We only have three pieces left to go before we are leaving Barlo for the foreseeable future. Stay with us, join us, support us, and we will support you.

For more information about the show including cast and creator bios, head over to www.OldGodsOfAppalachia.com