

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA
Season 1 Episode 8: Homecoming

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...

The town of Barlo, Kentucky, burned, and Cletus Garvin ran. Or tried to, anyway. The family mule wasn't gonna win no races, and the cart slowed her steps even further.

Cletus drove Gracie as hard as he dared, knowing if he pushed too hard the stubborn old bitch would, like as not, to bow up and stop in the middle of the road and refuse to go any farther. He told himself there was time – there *had to be*, or all this was for nothing, and Cletus wouldn't – *couldn't* let that thought take hold.

There was time. He would go to Lily Ruth first – she was closest to town – and tell her husband, Daniel Taylor, to bring the baby and whatever they'd managed to pack up in their own cart and come to the house. Moving day had come a day or two earlier than

expected, but they had to go now. Then he would go to his oldest boy, Cletus Jr., and tell him and his wife the same. Cletus had already told both young couples the family would be moving, so they should be nearly ready to go, just like him and Ruby and the younger children. They should nearly be ready anyway. There was time.

The sun had just sunk behind the ridge as Cletus turned the mule and cart into Lily Ruth and Daniel's tidy yard. The young family lived in a small but sturdy cabin that Daniel had begun building once Cletus gave his permission for Lily Ruth to marry – with the help of his three elder brothers, the Taylor boys having taken up their father's carpentry shop when he passed. Everything was quiet. Shadows stretched long across the cabin's front porch, where he was relieved to see a cart parked, packed neatly with the young'uns' belongings. They looked about ready to go, and for that Cletus thanked a god he hadn't spoken to truly in many long years.

Cletus pulled Gracie to a stop, and tied her up with his cart by the gate. As he stepped down into the yard, he felt goosebumps rise up the back of his neck. It was so quiet. And the cabin was dark, and it was supper time. His daughter and her husband should be just about to sit down for the evening meal, or at the very least Lily Ruth would normally be just finishing her cooking right about now. But there was no sound of clinking dishes or rattling pans, no tempting aromas of fresh biscuits and bacon fat.

Maybe the baby was sick. Little Daniel Jr., the couple's first child, and new parents

always fussed overmuch about such things. They might just have dropped everything to care for the little man – Cletus and Ruby, God knows, had nearly panicked when their firstborn son got colicky. Maybe...

Cletus stepped onto the porch. There were no sounds of a crying infant inside the cabin. There was nothing at all.

Cletus cleared his throat. “Lily Ruth? Daniel? Y’all home?” he called. He reached forward to knock... and the front door swung open under his fist.

The cabin was nearly empty. As Cletus had already observed, Lily Ruth and Daniel had already packed most of their belongings into the cart, with the exception of large pieces of furniture, which Cletus had told them – over their protests about expense, of course – that they could replace later. In a shadowy corner, Cletus could see the bed still heaped with quilts, but the walls and floor were bare. To the right of the door, the dinner table was uncovered. One of the chairs lay on its side in the floor. Next to it was a small quilt Ruby had made for Daniel Jr.

Cletus felt a sudden, nauseating chill sweep over him. Icy sweat broke out on his skin. He stepped outside and walked around the side yard to the barn, where Daniel’s horse and the old milk cow that had been part of Lily Ruth’s dowry drowsed, undisturbed, in their stalls.

“Lily Ruth? Daniel?” he called into the darkness of the barn.

Silence. Then deep in his mind, in the dark corner from whence They always spoke, he heard a gleeful, mocking little laugh.

Cletus turned and ran. Gracie was feeling biddable today, bless her, and he had the little cart back on the road in minutes. He headed toward Cletus Jr.’s house, telling himself he was probably worrying over nothing. Lily Ruth and Daniel were probably just taking supper with her brother and his wife. Cletus Jr. and Daniel had been friends since they were both in the schoolhouse together, and the young’uns frequently spent time together. Those... those Things... they were just playing their tricks, trying to scare him. That was all.

The ride to Cletus Jr.’s house wasn’t long. Even old Gracie made the trip in about twenty minutes. Every one of those minutes was its own small Hell for the former pastor of the Tabernacle of the Elder Covenant, a man who, while not solely responsible for the horrors that had come to the town of Barlo, certainly bore a large portion of the blame. Truth to tell, if Cletus had turned his back on their promises and laid down and died like he should have, They would surely have found some other soul to twist into the shape that served their purposes best. But Cletus could not deny he had been a willing party to it. Had he been deceived? Perhaps. Had he refrained from asking too many

questions? Oh, most assuredly. Cletus Garvin knew – knew in his bones – that he deserved whatever was coming to him, and more. But he had done it for Ruby, for his family, and they didn't deserve it. He only prayed he could see them safely out of Barlo.

As he rode onto his eldest son's property, Cletus's stomach seemed to drop into his boots. The scene was eerily similar to what he'd found over at Lily Ruth's. It was full dark now, and the little company-owned shotgun house where Cletus Jr. lived with his wife and 2-year-old son Isaac was silent and full of shadows. Here too, all was quiet. Here too, he found a cart packed and ready for moving, already hitched up to Junior's horse, who was tied to the porch railing. The gentle mare was sedately cropping grass, her graceful tail swaying peacefully.

Cletus pulled Gracie to a halt beneath the leaves of an old, twisted crabapple tree just inside the property line, tying her lead to a low-hanging branch. As he approached the house on foot, Cletus saw that the front door swung open, stirred gently by the nighttime breeze. A streak of something dark from inside the house stretched over the threshold, across the porch, and down the stairs.

His voice sounded small and hopeless to his own ears as Cletus called out, "C-Cletus Jr.? Mary? You kids... you kids home?"

Silence. And then that awful, mocking laughter in his head, this time not a single titter

but a thunderous chorus of mad, shrieking giggles that filled his skull, made his nose run and his eyes water. Cletus clapped his hands over his ears, although he knew damn well the sound was inside his head, not out there in the night.

[Mad, ghostly cackling.]

“Quiet!” he shouted. And then, in the commanding voice that, ironically, he had learned from Them, the one he thought of as the Pastor’s voice: “Be silent, you goddamned haints!”

Cletus didn’t really expect the voices to listen to his command, but to his immense relief, the laughter tapered off, and finally died. Cletus wiped a shaking hand over his damp face, tasted blood and realized his nose had not been running but bleeding.

They could kill him so easily if they wanted, he thought. They had given him his life, after all. They could no doubt take it back just as easily.

But it was better not to think about that now. He could worry about that another day. Right now, he had to find his family and get them the Hell out of Barlo. That was what mattered. It was the only thing that mattered.

Cletus sprinted back to his cart, and started to unhitch the mule – Gracie would move

more quickly without the added weight – and then his eye fell on Junior’s horse. The mare would be much faster. Knowing, with a pang, that he would not return to collect her, Cletus turned Gracie loose in the yard and unhitched the horse from her cart.

The mare was an agreeable little thing who seemed to have no objection to her unfamiliar passenger, running swift and steady through the night. Cletus rode as fast as he dared in the darkness, steering her up the road toward the Garvin family home. As they passed the fork in the road that led into Barlo proper, a haze of orangey light and smoke hung over the trees down the path into town. In the shadowy woods, Things were moving... jerky, slinking, unnatural in a way that hurt the eye to look upon. Cletus thought he might have heard a scream, but it was cut off so fast he couldn’t be sure.

He rode faster, and he did not look at the woods, his eyes fixed firmly on the road ahead of him. He didn’t want to see what was watching, and – maybe following, as they had followed him and Annie Messer through the woods what seemed like years ago but had somehow only been that afternoon – and it was better not to think about that either.

What he did see – could not help but see out the corner of his eye – twisted shapes flickering in and out of the world, voids in space even darker than the night around him, here and there a flash of teeth, of glowing eyes that were somehow *wrong* – was enough that he knew he would not find sleep easily ever again.

Finally, Cletus turned his son’s mare up the narrow track onto the land that B&L had

ultimately deeded over to his family all those years ago when they told him he couldn't work the mines no more – another “gift” bestowed upon him by the Voices, damn him for a fool for ever accepting them into his heart. Up ahead of him, he saw in the moonlight – as he had both feared and known well enough to expect – his own house, standing dark and silent at the top of the hill. Nothing stirred. Ruby's chickens were put up for the night. Even Cletus's skinny old pointer dog, Rusty, whose hunting days were long behind him, was absent from the spot where he spent most of his time these days, curled up on a worn-out old horse blanket at the corner of the porch.

The Garvin home was nestled up against a mountainside and ringed in by woods. It was a nice piece of land, shady and pleasantly cool in the summertime and sheltered from the worst of the cutting wind and snow in winter. Cletus and Ruby had always counted themselves lucky to have been assigned such an ideal little spot, back when B&L still owned the land. Just now, though, Cletus found he didn't much like the look of those woods. The shadows between the trees didn't shift with the natural swaying of the trees. It was too quiet, too still, as if something or someone held itself motionless, watching.

Cletus slowly stepped down from Junior's horse, and led the docile mare toward the house. She followed along placidly, much like his old mule, unfazed by the presence of... whatever... or else unable to perceive it. Cletus tied her up to the porch railing, much as she'd been when he found her at Junior's house, by a trough of water they'd kept at one end for old Gracie. Then slowly, cautiously, he stepped up onto the porch, with a sense

of dread no man should feel on his own land, in his own home.

The silence was just like what Cletus had found at Lily Ruth's, and at Cletus Jr.'s house, although his own front door remained firmly shut. Cletus stood outside it for a long minute, listening, stretching the limits of his hearing in search of some sign of life, of the presence of his wife and children. Nothing. Not so much as a cricket chirped on the Garvin property that night, not so much as a leaf stirred. The atmosphere was so strange, so alien, Cletus almost raised his hand to knock.

But of course, that was foolish, and he caught his hand and dropped it just shy of the door. Instead, he swallowed hard, and reached for the latch.

The door swung inward with a soft creak, and Cletus stood on the threshold, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the inky blackness within. Before they'd had time, he heard the soft scratch of a match being struck, and a dim, coppery glow spread from the lantern on the kitchen table – wasn't much gas left in that one, Ruby needed to see to that, Cletus thought irrelevantly – as someone lit the wick.

It was Lily Ruth. She stood near midway point of the table, the match still in her hand. She held the baby, little Daniel Jr., in the crook of one arm. The child didn't stir. He seemed... limp, one little hand swinging loosely with his mother's recent movement. The baby's father was seated at the long table next to Lily Ruth, and around her sat her

siblings, as well as Cletus, Jr. and his wife and their boy. All were still, and quiet, as no houseful of children – particularly children related by blood – has ever been, and there was a smoky stench in the air that Cletus did not believe came from any single matchstick.

“Welcome home, Daddy.” Lily Ruth’s voice sounded raw and scratchy, as if her throat was filled with gravel, and when she smiled, Cletus could see there was something wrong with her mouth. Her teeth were broken, her once-lovely smile now a gaping, bloody maw, the skin pale and gray as ash, and when she turned her head towards him, it tipped sideways on her neck with a sudden and unnatural motion like an owl... and stayed there, at an angle that could not be right. No... no, something was very wrong here.

At the table, Cletus’s children turned their heads toward him in unison, a motion so unnerving that he took a step back. What Cletus could see in those faces in the flickering light of the lantern turned his bowels to liquid and set his hands shaking. Their skin was all that same, gray color as Lily Ruth’s. Clay looked to be missing half the right side of his skull, and little Hershell’s left ear was lost in a dark smear of blood that covered half his face. Virginia, dear god help him, had a black pit where her right eye once shined a pretty blue. The left eye was intact, but... changed. Like all of his children, her left eye throbbed with a dull orange glow.

Cletus felt a harsh, painful sob wrench free of his throat before he knew it was coming. His cheeks were wet. So were his pants – had he pissed himself? Yep. Yeah, he must have. There was a low, keening sound in the room, and it took Cletus a moment to understand that the noise – a sound so unlike his normal voice – was coming from deep inside his own chest. He took a deep, shuddering breath and took another step back.

There was someone standing behind him, now standing directly up against Cletus's back. He didn't want to know this familiar shape, and he closed his eyes – *Oh God, no...* but when you spend so many years with someone, you come to know the shape of them, the way their body fits just so against your own. Cletus tried to will the knowledge from his head, as a hand he knew better than he knew his own settled into his palm and began to lightly pull, turning him to face her.

Cletus looked down into the face of the only woman he had ever loved. Ruby's face, though the same ashen color as those of his children, was still as lovely as ever, though her neck was ringed in blackened bruises. But her eyes, once a clear green like peridot, now glowed with the same smoldering, dead orange light as their children's, and Cletus supposed that was fitting.

Ruby smiled down at him as he sank to his knees, and it was like no expression he had ever seen on the face of his wife – sly and full of dark glee. Cletus closed his eyes, and her voice – raspy and broken, but still Ruby's all the same – was the last thing he ever

heard.

“Cletusss... sweetheart. You’re finally home.”

[I Cannot Escape The Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

There is a curse upon my every waking breath,

And I cannot escape the darkness...

Greetings, family. We’re almost home. I hope y’all enjoyed that ride to say goodbye to Cletus Garvin, a sad and tortured man, indeed, but a man who made his own bed and eventually came home to lie in it. That means that we have two more episodes left in this season. Who are we going to say goodbye to next? I guess you’ll have to come back next week and find out, now won’t you?

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 story was written by Cam Collins – holy God did she terrify the crap out of all of us – and was performed by Steve Shell.

Family, we want to thank you for all your support that you have rallied around us in this our first season. Looking back just across social media, it’s been staggering the journey

we've been on together and we do hope you are following us on Facebook and Instagram at Old Gods Of Appalachia and tweeting into the void with us on Twitter @OldGodsPod. We've made so many new friends and family members since we've started this whole thing, and seriously family, we cannot understate how just gobstoppered we are with this whole affair. We thought, maybe a couple a hundred people, tops, would like this – people back home, people who had some tie to Appalachia. We had no idea that y'all would come running and that y'all would want to stay.

If you're not hanging out with us in the Fellowship Hall group on Facebook, you need to get over there. Make a Facebook account just to hang out with us! I know it's old people social media, don't really care. It's like a cult in there and I love it, and I love all y'all. If you want to support us, if you want to help us play more live shows, like our upcoming live debut at the Reverie Festival in Marion, North Carolina, tickets and more information coming soon. Guess where you're going to hear about it first? In the Fellowship Hall group. They get everything a little bit before everybody else does, so you want to get in there.

And we have upcoming appearances at other cons that are still being worked out. We're gonna be at Days of the Dead in February in Atlanta hanging out. Look for us, come get some swag. Y'all, we can't do this without you, so come on over to Patreon, [Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia](https://www.patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia) We're getting ready to mail out more t-shirts; we've

got a ton of new swag coming in and Build Momma a Coffin, our patrons-only storyline launches next month for patrons \$10 a month and more. We want you on that ride with us. So won't you come tithe? Won't you give? And if you don't want to sign up for a monthly pledge, then please walk forth in our raiment. Head on over to OldGodsOfAppalachia.Threadless.com We have t-shirts, stickers, mugs – you name it, we got it, and every dollar helps keep this show growing and staying productive and moving forward.

For more information on the show and the people who create it, head over to www.OldGodsOfAppalachia.com and learn about us like we wanna learn about you. We'll see you soon, family.