

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA
Season 1 Episode 9: You Ready to Go Home?

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...

You wouldn't have called it an orphanage, not exactly. They called it a Home. Wasn't that either, but it's where she was. You play the hand you're dealt, her daddy taught her, and Sarah Avery was about to play hers. The morning after the burning of Barlo, Sarah had been awoken from her strange and deep state of dreaming by women and men she did not know. They had descended on the husk of Barlo like benevolent scavengers. Coaxing children from hiding places and finding what folks survived the night of the burning dead and bringing them blankets and water and soup and bandages and just... just help.

Church folk. Huh. Sarah could smell 'em from a mile off. Clean-clothed and pressed, tender-eyed and soft-hearted, they'd worked hard to reunite what families they could find. Gather what remained or, had none, referred their assistance in relocation. She was an orphan now. What with her daddy and Uncle Dddie lost and Momma hung, Sarah Avery didn't know any of her other family. She knew Momma had sisters in West Virginia and Tennessee, but Momma never talked about them much. She didn't even know their names.

She also knew her daddy's family was all dead, so when they asked her if there was anyone she could go to, she just shook her head and they gave her a clean dress with a number pinned to it. She never got to go looking for the bear or the deep place in the woods she saw in her dreams. She never got to seek out the Voice that weaved its way in and out of her deeper moments of sleep. She just woke up and there they were. The kind and blessed folk of His Undying and Unending Grace, handing out coffee and Jesus.

Tents were set up to house the children and the women, which honestly was all there was about left, and arrangements were made for them to be taken to the Home. Which, after everything else that had happened, was just fine... and absolutely not fine at all at the same time.

The Home was a massive stone and wood behemoth that sat on a wide swath of land that was tended by the women and children who lived there. Brush cut, weeds pulled, stones hauled, the sad mealy apples that haunted the orchard on the west side of the property gathered and cleaned, processed into whatever they could be. The work wasn't too hard and she was fed regular and had a bed to sleep in. Time passed. Soon enough, what was left of that burning August drifted into a sticky September. September sank into a cooling October that whispered of leaf rot and bone-soaking rain.

The church folk that ran the home were nice enough in the daylight, bright and cheery Sunday types full of hymns and smiles. They came and took the apple butter and the cider and the occasional sealed-up box from the cellar, probably out to a market somewhere miles away. But it felt like the Home was nowhere. Trees and hills rolled all around it and the road was clearly marked and clearly maintained, but where it went who could tell?

Brother Carson and Sister Darlene watched over the littlest while they worked. They seemed good folks, full of easy smiles and 'praise the Lord's. The only time she saw a shadow cross their faces was when they talked about Elder Henry. Elder Henry was the minister who ran the Home. Story was, he'd been a miner once himself but a gas explosion had disfigured the man's face and blown him backwards, left him with a

dragging limp and a twisted back that made him hard to look at, much less listen to from the pulpit. The church district had given him the Home to run, and so he did.

He wasn't seen much by day, though, preferring to work from his study deep in the bowels of the sprawling hallways of the Home. He developed the strange affectation of wearing a long robe with a monk's hood to hide his disfigured form, a departure from pentecostal tradition, but – well it was a bit odd, all it took was a few times of hearing his soft voice rasp out of “*bless you*” if you were the one charged with taking him his supper or he happened to cross your path while you took dishes to the kitchen to make it seem like the best idea to cover him right up.

One older girl had told Sarah she'd saw him without the hood once. He looked like half-cooked pork butt. Sarah had only seen him a couple of times in her months at the Home, from a distance. But she didn't like how the room felt with him in it. Not to be unkind but she'd had her share of folks disfigured by the mines come back and none of them had ever come back right. So, she did what she could to steer clear of Elder Henry.

The Home in the daytime was one thing. In the nighttime, well that's another matter entirely. The stone hallways beneath the main floor creeping like a great serpentine beast deeper into the earth. Candlelit sconces casting iron-clad shadows. Floors that seemed to swallow footprints in their dust leaving no evidence of your coming or your

going. Some doors, old within an inch of their lives – some opened silent as the nighttime wind, others so creaky and cranky that they'd scream like damnation if you even looked at them and thought about opening them when you weren't supposed to.

The ladies that tended to the nighttime needs of the Home were... off-putting. You never saw 'em in the daylight hours or working outside. They seemed impossibly old and tall. Their skin held a papery gray pall that seemed to absorb the pale candlelight of the hallways. Each of them wore a high-collared black dress and spoke very little. Sarah probably couldn't tell you any of their names – hell, she'd be hard-pressed to tell them apart. But everybody knew it was best to work hard and go to bed tired and sleep deep than let the gray ladies find you wandering the halls.

It was halfway through November when the girls started disappearing. The first was Nora Sturgel, 12 years old and an orphan from the flu outbreak over at Southport 'cross the Virginia line. She got picked to help pack boxes in the basement one Saturday, and... never come up from supper. Brother Carson told her that Nora got adopted and that the family had been so excited to have her they took her right in the night without any chance to say any goodbyes. Next was Velma Mullens. She got sent down to the apple house to help with some cleaning in the down-below rooms. She never came back. Sister Darlene said she got her a job over in Jenkins and had to go start right away.

It just went on from there: girls going on odd jobs and just not coming home. After six girls had not turned up for breakfast, right around the time that fall started to but had not quite withered into the early gray streaks of winter, Sarah Avery decided it was time to go. She did not escape the horrors of Barlo just to die at the hands of some creepy old man with a burned-up face. She planned her plan and packed away dried apples and bits of jerky from her work lunches and treats. She listened to comings and goings and found out which cart was taking the sealed boxes of apples or cider or shine or whatever from the basement to market. She would hide in that cart. She'd find some place else to be.

So Sarah waited until the gray ladies had walked the halls – checking beds, counting heads, their footsteps sounding more like slithering than walking as their pale eyes prowled the corridors – before making her way down to the back of the home, where the cart stood already loaded with boxes wrapped in clean white paper: bushels of apples, jugs of cider, other sundries for market, surely. So she curled up and under an old canvas tarp covering the apples and then, within minutes, drifted off to sleep.

Sarah woke and instantly knew she'd make a mistake. There was no sound of a bustling market, no smell of horses or tobacco or smoke or anything to indicate a town or a city or nothing like that. She could smell dank water and the stilled air scent of decay. She crept to the side of the cart and peered out into the near darkness and saw a horror.

Elder Henry was there, his hood thrown back and his misshapen head, neck, and shoulder partially visible from this angle, shaking and flexing as he tore into a chunk of meat in his hand. A grizzly black sack that Sarah first thought might be some sort of horrible apple, plucked from a tree she hoped she'd never see. Her head swam and she shook it hard to clear it. And she watched as Elder Henry went to one of the white paper-wrapped boxes and pulled out another piece of meat, this one wobbly and shiny like a calf's liver she'd seen her momma make a thousand times. She watched in horror as the keeper of the closest thing to home she'd had in months buried his face in it like a dog and rooted and snorted and sucked and bit and chewed and swallowed, groaning with pleasure. Before pulling back, looking at the mess in his hands and discarding the bulk of the liver to the floor. Elder Henry looked about as if suddenly aware that he was being watched and pulled his hood back into place covering the burned and broken visage that he worked so hard to conceal in public, covering the gore-stuffed hole of his mouth.

Sarah's stomach had turned. She had seen some pretty horrific things in her day, but she wasn't prepared for this. She knew what she was seeing, though. Just like her daddy, just like Uncle Eddie, scabs in old #7, Elder Henry had done God took. That's what it had to be. Whatever had filled those dead men was probably filling him right now. Sarah's eyes moved from the shuffling awful smeared former pastor and looked at the table where his open and now blood-smeared box sat alongside five others just like it.

Six boxes. Six girls. Sarah was willing to bet there were hearts and livers and lungs and God knows what else in those boxes. Sarah kept her eyes on the Elder as she slowly tried to creep over the side of the cart to the ground below without making a sound.

Waiting until she heard the sound of Elder Henry tearing into the next white-papered box, trying not to wonder whose parts were next, slowly she moved one leg over the side of the cart trying to keep her balance, but – whether it was fear or nerves or just being little – she lost her footing and slipped, falling hard onto the ground. Elder Henry snapped his head up and saw her there. Froze.

And with a casual movement of his shoulders, adjusted his hood back into its proper place, produced a handkerchief from nowhere and began to clean his hands and mouth as he walked towards her as she tried to get to her feet. But suddenly the air was heavy. Crushing sense of wrongness, of brokenness filled the air. It was like a giant hand was trying to push her down and hold her in place, but it was missing fingers and she could slip through them. She struggled to her feet and looked up at the hooded figure as it spoke to her.

[Malicious, animalistic snarling.]

“Child... What is your name?”

Sarah stared at him. There was something larger than him here, but it was like it was leaking out of him; it was like looking at a fire that was spreading but thinning out and, in doing so, was going out. But still, the feeling was enough to freeze her heart.

“Sarah?” was all she could manage.

The man’s expression shifted under the hood. “Sarah... What is your Christian name, child?”

“M-my what, sir?”

“Your last name, girl. What is it?”

Now, Sarah knewed that she’d already messed up by giving him her true first name.

Sarah stammered, “I-I don’t rightly know, I been on my own since I was real little—”

“Do. Not. Lie,” said Elder Henry. “I can smell it when you do.” As if to demonstrate, he took a long, lingering *inhale* over Sarah’s head and stopped dead. “Why do you smell like her?” he demanded, sounding almost panicked. The preacher’s blood-smeared fingers closed on her wrist and pulled her to her feet where he’d sniffed and snorted in her hair. “*Why do you smell like her?!*”

At first she didn’t raise her eyes and was treated to a glimpse of the Elder’s bad leg which was so misshapen it looked more like an animal’s hoof than a human foot. And he growled and shook her, the oppressive feeling of wrongness, of brokenness rose to a peak as she looked into the face of Elder Henry, his hood thrown fully back as she took in the disaster that was his face.

At first, she thought he had to be wearing a mask. He was not human. He was not animal. It looked like he was somewhere in between. The color and texture of his skin was inhuman. It looked like some black-furred animal eaten by mange and faded gray like someone had sheared something wild, and the skin underneath was dark and leathery and it looked like it had been stitched together again and again and... again Sarah thought of a mask.

His eyes looked like every blood vessel in them had bust and were cloudy red, set deep in his distorted face. His nose was long and bestial but the strangest thing, and the

absolute confirmation that Sarah Avery had somehow ended up back in a situation as bad as Barlo, was his forehead. It looked like somebody had busted his head open and dug out boney stumps or broken horns through the skin of his forehead – no, not broken horns... antlers. Antlers that were broken and bleeding but not bleeding blood, bleeding a pale amber light, sparks and ash drifting from his head as his anger rose to a peak.

“*Who. Are you? What. Are you? Why. Do you smell like her?!*” His patchwork face was a mass of rage and confusion... and fear. The broken antlers jutting from above his blood clot-colored eyes pulsed with hate and he seemed completely... lost.

Sarah took advantage of this last part to kick at his deformed, beast-like leg as hard as she could and to her surprise it flew out from under him as if it were hollow, and the monstrous thing fell to the ground heavily.

Sarah Avery did what she seemed born to do: she ran. She ran out of that cave and into the late morning sun when an unseen force knocked her to the ground and she felt herself being pulled back the way she came. She writhed and spun and tried to right herself so she could see and she could see Elder Henry standing in the mouth of the cave out of the sunlight holding both his hands outstretched, calling her to him as if she was bound with an invisible rope.

He had replaced his hood now and looked almost human, almost like a benevolent father calling a lost lamb home. Sarah swore she saw that ruined mouth start to smile.

From nowhere, a voice spoke.

“Elder? We have guests.”

Sarah and the church elder – whose name sounded something like Henry but definitely was not – started and turned, the force pulling Sarah Avery to him vanishing as quickly as it lay on. One of the gray ladies stood there, looking for all the world like she might be the referee in whatever game was being played here.

But she was not alone. Beside her stood two women. The first: tall with broad, powerful shoulders and a long chestnut braid down her back, dressed in men’s hunting clothes all rich leather belts and fine boots. She carried a walking stick tipped in silver. Beside her was a shorter, softer girl with a cascade of bright red hair dressed for all the world like she was off to a fine ladies’ tea – except for the very obvious and very sharp hunting knife she had half-drawn from a leather scabbard on her belt.

“Elder,” the gray lady continued, “This is Miss Marcia and Miss Heloïse Walker. They are blood relations to little Sarah here and they’ve come to take her... home.”

Elder Henry sneered, “Are their papers in order—”

“We were both there the day she was born, pastor,” said Marcie Walker. “I pulled her from betwixt my sister’s legs myself, and Ellie here cut the cord.” And at this Ellie Walker fully drew the hunting knife and seemed to examine it before returning it to its sheath. “We got the papers you’re asking for, we can show you those. And we can show you a whole lot more if you need showing. But based on the shape you’re in, I suspect you might just want to make your mark on the going home form and let us carry on. Think careful on that, now.”

Sarah looked back and forth between the two women and almost cried. She could see her mamma’s eyes on her Aunt Marcie and her mother’s smile radiated out from her Aunt Ellie’s glowing face. These were her kin, alright. She ran to Ellie, who scooped her up and ushered her behind the larger Walker girl, who had stepped dangerously close to Elder Henry.

“I don’t know your name, beast, but I could smell what you are. And I could smell that you’re not what you were or what you might be again, and that makes this day mine, I

think. No bargains. No offering. We walk away right now or I swear by my mother's name I'll bind you in that busted tent of a body until the sea takes this place and the last crow sees you sink. My sister's girl keeps her life. You keep yours such as it is. *We clear?*"

The hate that shone in that thing's blood-colored eyes spoke more words than could be counted, but it nodded and slid silently back into the cave which sat not a hundred yards behind the orchard which was behind the Home, and vanished.

Marcie Walker turned and faced Sarah, who was hitched across Ellie Walker's hip.

"Hey there, darlin'. You ready to go 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...

Well hey, family. So how was that? Our time with Sarah Avery has come to an end and I guess all y'all wondering if she was gonna make it out alive have your answer. It's not always the happiest answer or the easiest way to get there, but we got there, didn't we,

family? It means there's one piece left. And you know who it's gotta be about. Daughter Dooley will be waiting for you next week while we wrap up Season 1. Appreciate y'all so much, family, there is so much going on.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Our theme song is by our good friend and buddy Landon Blood. Our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards.

Check out their new record Evil Seeds at ThosePoorBastards.com Family, you know the drill by now: complete your social media ritual. Old Gods of Appalachia on Instagram and Facebook, @OldGodsPod on Twitter. If you care to tithe to us and help support our mission, feel free to make a monthly contribution at Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia

There is so much going on, family, you know when I don't make jokes about the Patreon that I got stuff to tell you. The live show has been announced at Reverie and Arts Festival in Marion, North Carolina, April 17th and 18th in the year of our Lord 2020. Details are being posted in the Fellowship Hall group and will be on the general Facebook feed and on Twitter very soon. Advanced tickets will go on sale for Patreon patrons of all level first on February 1st, and then a week later in the Fellowship Hall. I told you I would give you guys priority and I'm doing just that. There's only 160 seats a night. Blood on the Harp will be on both nights. The Gravesend Weavers which – if you haven't heard those folks they're brand new but they're dear friends in the Fellowship

Hall, and you gotta hear them. They're coming on tour from Texas and Oklahoma and making their way up to Baltimore on tour, so that's gonna be super exciting.

Family, I have news that I can't tell you yet. Because it's definitely not set in stone, but there's some life-changing stuff possibly ahead and if it doesn't change my life - I never said that. But thank you so much for being with me. Please keep bringing us your friends and your family. Once Season 1 is done, we'll be moving on to Build Momma a Coffin on patrons - uh, for patrons only on Patreon for \$10 or more a month and then there's so much more stuff planned, some I can't talk about yet and I'm dying to.

For more information about the show, head on over to OldGodsOfAppalachia.com, find out who I am, find out who Cam Collins is, who Allison Mullins is, who Veronica Limeberry is. We're gonna be adding a ton more people on there soon and we can't wait to meet you, family. Talk to you soon.

And I cannot escape the darkness...