

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 2 Episode 13: The Dark Earth at Night

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Craw, Tennessee. 1927. One week before Caleb Gibson went missing.

Between the crooked spine of the Cumberland plateau and the broad shoulders of the Blue Ridge lies a place of the richest green and deepest shadow. A holler covered by rivers and man that bridges the gap between old Virginie and North Caroline; I speak of course of the Great Appalachian Valley. Or, as it's better known, the Tennessee Valley. Rarely has there been such a place where the green and the inner dark twine around each other like lovers. Lovers that have one hand around each other's throat and a knife in t'other but, lovers all the same. It is a place of railroads and passage. Of river barges and deep pockets hidden away like heartache; towns lost to the swallowing tongue of the green or that lay fallen beneath dark lakes of the inner dark. It is deep within a nook, hidden inside a cranny, that we lay our scene.

There used to be a road that led to this place. But both sides agreed that it would be best if it was forgotten. And so it was. There used to be folks that lived around here but both sides agreed it would be best if they moved or passed on. And so they did. It was deemed a place too tainted and too dangerous for man or haint to inhabit, and so they didn't. There are forces that even the glorious vastness of the green and the ravaging hunger of the inner dark do not understand and cannot harness or destroy. So binding is the best they can do.

Generations ago something rose from the earth bearing a mantle of death stitched from a tapestry of stolen life. It took the deaths of many a good man and woman and the disillusion of many a haint and creeping shadow before they were able to count her pattern and to find where she laid her head. There are things that have walked these mountains since those who sleep beneath were entombed in their black earth slumber, that are capable of destroying or devouring the bones and minds of those they encountered. Things beyond mere life and death. Perhaps she's one of these. Perhaps she is some aberration of the green, turned inward and gone to rot. Perhaps she's a haint or a booger that grew so dark and hungry that she found her own way to feed. Regardless, the stories and the research led them to this nameless, faceless place every seven years to renew the bonds. Dead earth and still air. This place where there lay a single grave. A grave that every seven years would birth death in the shape of a woman and a babe. A grave that had lain silent for the past fourteen or so it had seemed. The rite was complicated and involved arts unknown except to the wisest and oldest grannies, fueled by the blood of two of the foulest things to ever crawl from the inner dark - two from each. Two to weave, two to be the wool. And so it leads us here tonight.

The thing that detached itself from the dark patch under a mess of laurel bushes wore what was almost the form of a young man. It walked like a young man and when it spoke it sounded mostly like a young man, and if he approached you alongside the road asking for a ride to town you might almost pick him up. Until you realized he had no skin at all. He wore, for the sake of modesty and the terms of the pact, a cloak over his shoulders with a deep hood to hide his raw and bleeding face. Now, he took joy in the ways that eyes widened in

fear once they saw him good and proper, all lipless mouth and screaming teeth. He relished the feel of their yielding flesh as he would pounce upon them and take their skins for his own. Some he might wear a while, go about a few nights like an actor in a play but it never lasted. A skin rots and it just came right back to the knife again when folks found him out. He had walked a long, long time and his stories were many. But tonight he would hide his face and form as per the terms of the agreement. The second thing took the form of a black mist that hovered beside the first. And if the first thing had been a man he would have felt the screaming dread and cold that poured from that floating shadow; lost his mind to madness if he dared to meet the gleaming green eyes that floated within it. The first thing that men called Skin Tom was irritated. He was quite certain that they were early. That they'd beaten the old hags here this time. The last time they'd been late and it had been close so when he was chosen to come again he made a point to be early. These woods were dead to him, though. He could not feel the reassuring pull of his master's breath or the tantalizing fruit of the green. Everything here was unknowable to Skin Tom and he was starting to worry that they were lost. He had been here last time the rite was needed but he had played the part of the wool, not a weaver, meaning that his power, his essence, was drawn on to fuel the working just as one of the women - and it was always women - on the other side would be used for this same night. He had been very tired when they were done or else he would have eaten both those old crones for supper heh, well, one of 'em. The other, the Teasley woman, well, she looked mean.

"Oh, where is it?" Skin Tom asked the floating black mist beside him. "We put it in the ground! Sealed it with my own red blood! Careful, careful not to waste a drop. The old witches spit on the mound of the smooth, smooth earth yes they did, bled their blood and said their words and we shut it tight."

Skin Tom had come with the beast that was called Miss Lavinia back then, who had been full to bursting with the dark touch of their masters. She showed up buck naked and covered in somebody else's blood, which the granny ladies found distasteful and show-offy. And the end result was that Skin Tom had to wear this damn hood and cape now, an injustice he deeply

resented. Miss Lavinia wasn't nowhere to be found these days. So they sent old green eyes with him this time. But they did their due and for two cycles now that bitch stayed in the ground. She was bad for the world. She'd laid waste to a whole camp of the old black stag's church people up on the high mountain, human-type people, just getting started being turned. She tore through all of 'em. Tore their heads clean off and lined the road to the camp as a welcome for whoever might not have been home while she called. Tom looked all around. He was lost on his own out here and old green eyes wasn't no help, hell, he didn't even think it talked.

"Ah!" Tom exclaimed, relaxing as he and the black mist moved into a patch of bare earth.

"Yes, this must be the place. Yes, I remember it well. I..."

"Hey, y'all! You're late! And you're in the wrong place, get over here!" came a woman's sour and angry voice.

Dorothy Sargeant and her sister in law Virgie of Sandy Ridge, Virginia stood in the gloom a good twenty yards away. Tom hissed, his hand gripping the knife that always seemed to be there. These flesh bags best not test him today. He did not know these two and if they were trusted with this errand, well, he'd probably do well to keep to the letter of the agreement. He was hungry, he wasn't stupid.

"I mean it, pork rind, get over here! We got us a problem. All of us."

The black mist floating at Tom's shoulder made a sound that could have been laughter. Tom glowered at it and made his way across the dead and oddly muted clearing to where the two old women stood. This place, by the rite, was to have no name. It was not to be marked on any map or written in any book. Green eyes' voice suddenly slithered into the heads of all in attendance.

"What has happened here, Granny Sargeant?" he asked in an oddly respectful tone. *As if they knew each other*, Tom thought suspiciously. The taller of the two women met those poisonous emerald pinpricks without fear and wordlessly pointed to the ground at her feet where there should have been a nondescript mound of earth bearing no stone, marked with no name.

Instead there was a hole. An empty hole. Skin Tom met the black mist's eyes for a moment and then turned back to the woman.

“Well, shit.”

[The Land Unknown: Hollow Heart version by Landon Blood]

A cold wind calls

And so I follow

No time to rest these weary bones;

I hear her song

And my heart goes hollow

Best not to walk these woods alone

Best stick to the roads

Stay out of the shadow;

Best get on home

Best to leave them ghosts alone

Robert Gibson was convinced he was cursed. Hell, he'd been told so when he was a boy. His daddy's daddy had killed a man in cold blood in the middle of the town proper and was hung for it. His daddy done the same thing in a bar fight when Robert was ten. Old lady out the church told him to his face that the Gibsons was “*bad blood. Ain't never gonna be no count.*” She wasn't wrong. He'd grown up and grown his own demons, done his own bad things, dug more graves than he ever planted seeds. When the law found out about the still he kept out back of the house for years he figured they'd find what was buried underneath it soon enough. But before he could give himself up his boy Jimmy, Big Jim they call him now, turned himself in. Busted up the still himself and brought it to the sheriff. They locked Jimmy up and he did the time that would have ended Robert Gibson's life, especially if they'd

gone digging in the woods behind the house. Now Ricky Lee had not gone in on anyone else's behalf, but just for running and drinking and helling enough to get locked up over some stolen goods and some bootleg hooch of his own but all that was supposed to be behind them now. Jimmy was out, and Ricky was, too. Robert had him a grandson now, and a daughter in law who loved him like a daddy and it was supposed to be alright but, here they were, in the dead of the night, his daughter in law in tears and his grandbaby missing in the woods. Brunetta had awoken to find Caleb's bed empty and the front door standing wide open. The menfolk had done their best to try to calm her but Brunetta insisted that someone had taken Caleb. She told them about Caleb's dreams and about the dogs he said he saw and that he kept seeing a woman out by the hawthorn tree. When she mentioned the tree Robert's face grew pale and his tone grew serious.

"Guns," he said. "Now."

And with that the three men of Craw when to their houses, retrieved their respective firearms, and followed their pa as he led them past the old tree at the edge of the yard.

"We need to stay together. We'll not be able to trust our eyes."

"Daddy, what are you talkin about?" Ricky demanded. "Caleb just went out to have himself an adventure, you know how I was, now come on now!"

Robert Gibson leveled a stern look at his youngest boy whose three years in the tender care of the state pen at Moundsville had inspired a sizable portion of this decision to depart West Virginia for the hopefully greener hills of Tennessee.

"Caleb is not you. He doesn't have the same spark of dumbass in him. If he saw, if he saw the dead woman and her dogs there's trouble or there's sickness. Caleb ain't been well so there might be both. Hell, even if we find him it might be too late."

Big Jim shook his head.

"Daddy this ain't no time for haint stories. My boy's sick and he's out there and I'm gonna find him. Y'all and gonna stop me, naw."

And before Robert could say another word Big Jim Gibson, not Jimmy but Big Jim, took off down the side of the hill past the hawthorn tree and could be heard calling for his son.

Robert turned then to Ricky to get him to hold the goddarn on for a second but Ricky was already running down the side of the hill hollering for his brother to wait up. Robert cussed something awful before collecting himself and apologizing to his daughter in law as he patted her shoulder and told her to go on back to the house and he'd do his best to bring all three of them back safe and sound. And then he took his own first halting steps down the side of the hill and into the dark woods.

Ricky Lee never saw his older brother nor his daddy ever again. Now Ricky'd lived down in this part of the mountains the longest and he knew his way around these woods better'n the rest of 'em, yet somehow he lost the trail and the sound of his brother calling for Caleb after, after just a few minutes. He knew there was a little pond about a quarter mile around this next hill and he bet anything he'd find Caleb pitching a little camp out there trying to catch a fish or some little dumb kid shit like that. This was all a waste of time. Boys sneak out and explore in the woods, it's practically what they're made for at Caleb's age. Ricky had come around the hillside where, in the daylight, the pond would be in clear sight when he heard a thrashing in the brush. A sound of something much larger than a small boy moving through the brambles and he stopped and listened and cocked his pistol, a cheaply made thing he got from a pawn shop over in Paradise on the Virginia state line. Whatever it was it was coming on fast. It might be an old dog running down a rabbit, maybe, but whatever it was sounded awful big and you can't be too careful out in the woods at night, Ricky knew that. So Ricky sat right still and waited for it to pass. He heard it slow down to a trot and then he saw it. It was a dog, alright. Big'un. Hell, biggest damn dog Ricky Lee Gibson reckoned he'd ever seen. Come sniffing into the clearing right by where he had stopped and as it caught Ricky's scent a low, thick growl rose from its throat.

"Easy, boy. Easy," Ricky began. "Ain't no reason either of us has to get hurt here. You just take yourself and you get on and nobody-"

The dog advanced on him slowly, hackles up, teeth bared, still half in shadow. Ricky's first thought was that it was rabid maybe because it moved and jerks and stuttering back steps

gnawing on itself. Hell, it almost looked like it was taking bites out of itself when it did that. It must have the mange something awful. What he could see of its hide was covered in thick scabs looking more like mottled tree bark than fur. Oh, yeah, this old boy was sick alright. Now Ricky Lee wasn't one to hurt no animal, 'cept for deer hunting, that didn't count of course but, particularly not a dog. He liked dogs. Hell, who didn't like dogs? But, well, he was pretty sure he'd be doing it a mercy to put the old thing down. He'd appreciate it if somebody did that for him when he got too old and sick to run in the woods. Ricky held his pistol at the ready, fully prepared to act as the angel of mercy, and then the thing stepped fully into the moonlight and all thoughts of heaven fled Ricky Lee Gibson. The dog's muzzle frothed and shook, if you could call it a dog - Ricky wasn't at all sure about that anymore. Its first set of jaws were locked in a vicious shaking snarl so fierce that bits of itself seemed to be falling from its face as the second set of jaws yawned open from its mangy throat and it made a wet awful sound that he supposed must have been some hideous approximation of a bark. The very sound rooted him to the ground, frozen in horror and a kind of sick fascination. Ricky's heart slowed as the dog's eyes - the usual two in the front of its head and the other pair that slowly opened just above them - radiating a cold and shuddering glow, met his. Ricky Lee screamed, all thoughts of mercy or marksmanship lost to panic as he fired his gun blindly at the creature advancing upon him. He would have kept shooting until the cheap thing clicked empty but he never had the chance. Big Jim heard the shots and his brother's screams and took off in that direction, his feet pounding the dry leaves of early autumn on the ground as he called for his boy over and over, called for his brother too, desperate to find any sort of an answer. He slowed to catch his breath, willing himself not to surrender to the panic and fear that were racing through him like snake bite, and then he saw her. Standing in the moonlight, a spectre from his childhood. The witchy woman. Just like Brunetta told their Caleb, Big Jim's ma had told him. The witch woman'd come if he'd been a bad boy; if he'd been messing around with that little girl from down the holler, if he'd been using them bad words the bigger boys taught him, and now here she stood. Large as life. Large as death. This wasn't fair, he'd tried to do right. He did his time. Hell, it wasn't

even *his* time. Everybody knew his daddy was the one who kept that still and did that thing but he wasn't going to let an old man die in prison. This was supposed to be their second chance. They bought this land fair and square and they were going to have a place to own and now, this? At her right side stood little Caleb. Big Jim's boy had his eyes squeezed shut, the balls of them rolling wildly behind his eyelids like he was sleeping and having the worst dream you could ever think of. In the crook of the woman's left arm she held a baby. A wrinkled, scrawny little thing with big old eyes that seemed to glow in the dark like fireflies. It seen him first and it made a tiny sound that alerted the woman. She held up her hand and Big Jim stopped. Stopped cold. Not of his own will he just couldn't move anymore. His body, his lungs, his breath, did not obey. He could not move, he could not breathe, he could not even fall. He could do nothing but watch as the woman from his childhood nightmares knelt down, kissed his son on the forehead, and sent him on his way. Big Jim dimly realized that at least if the boy kept going that way he'd get on the main road and maybe he could make it to the next few houses and get help. May-maybe... Jim's vision was blurring, getting dark around the edges as his lungs struggled for breath he could not take, and the last thing he saw of this world was the woman turning to fix her gaze directly on him and mouthing a single soundless word. And then everything went black and Big Jim Gibson was gone.

Robert Gibson's aging hips and back hadn't let him get too far into the woods when the quiet fell across all of Craw. The song of the evening woods died and a sudden coldness pressed to the early September evening. Robert knew it must be her. He'd heard the stories. He'd known coming here without facing justice might have been a risk but if it meant a new home and a new start well then... Robert changed course, turning back toward the house. If nothing else maybe he could get there in time to warn Brunetta. He'd heard the dead woman would spare wives and daughters sometimes and he'd made it as far as the hawthorn tree just past the property line when the ground started to shake. The earth heaved and quaked. The sky seemed to bend. Robert turned his gaze on his own house and watched as the ground against the foundation began to crack and burst. The narrow pillars supporting the front

porch softened and fell to mulch as if they'd been left to rot a hundred year ago. As the house began to sink into the shivering ground Robert lurched toward Jim and Brunetta's house. Half climbed half crawled, damn these old hips, up the stairs and found his daughter in law watching from the high upstairs window, trembling, unable to look away from the destruction below. Every little thing the Gibson family had built, from the storage shed out back to the lean-to covering the leftover wood from the building of the houses, crumbled as if time itself folded on top of them. Robert went to Brunetta, pulled her into his arms and held her tight as he felt the upstairs floor began to rock and sway beneath their feet. As this house too began to die. Looking out the window he saw her. She stood fishbelly white as if carved from bleached bone. Her skeletal hands raised as the hungry dark soil slowly digested the structures the family had dared to build here. Just retribution for the blasphemy of their claim.

Cursed, Robert thought. He thought he'd escape the shame that his daddy's daddy, his daddy, and now he, had brought to the family name. He hadn't meant to kill that girl. He just meant to scare her. He caught her stealing bottles out of his stash by the still and reached to grab her and she fell, and... And his mind reeled in despair and guilt as he watched the earth below erupt with nightmarish creatures that vaguely resembled dogs, wolves, and rats, and possums and all other manner of critter that had lived and died on this land, clawing their way to the surface at her command. Every one was an affront to any god that you could think of in its own unique wrongness. An extra set of gleaming eyes here, claws on a bobcat made from jaws of a red wolf there, a possum with three impossible mouths open and screaming with teeth like needles, beasts whose bodies were made up more of fouled earth and dead vines than flesh, all rising at her behest. This hellish menagerie advanced on the last house in Craw as it slowly began to sink into the earth. Brunetta was screaming now, but her voice sounded far away to Robert, his mind numb and growing dim with fear. He was vaguely aware that his daughter in law had torn away from him, made it downstairs, and run into the yard where her screams were cut off abruptly amidst the rumbling earth and the snapping and chittering of countless jaws.

Cursed, Robert thought over and over again until the roof buckled and caved and the darkness took everything else away.

[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 there, Family. Welcome back to, well, what used to be Craw, Tennessee here on season two of Old Gods of Appalachia. Young Caleb on his way to where we cannot say. We'll drift away from the remnants of this horrible happening, see what else we can find this season. Come with me, won't you? I think you will.

Family, it has come that time again wherein I implore you to complete your social media ritual to follow us on Facebook and Instagram as Old Gods of Appalachia, tweet into the void @OldGodsPod, in fact just head on over to oldgodsofappalachia.com where you will find all of our social media options including a link to the Discord server and our merch store along with a million other things at oldgodsofappalachia.com. You may have noticed at the beginning of the show, if you are not listening on Patreon, that we had our very first advertisement. Ads are becoming a thing, we've got more bills to pay. More money, more listeners, more blessings. Dark, dark blessings, my Family. So if you want ad-free episodes join us on Patreon for \$5 or more and you can do that at Patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia, where throwing your blood-stained, ichor-soaked thirty pieces of silver into the hat will get you access to digital exclusives like Build Mama a Coffin, a brand new storyline that'll be announced in the new year, and tons of digital extras and some goodies in the mail. Um, and some really exciting things in the higher up tiers if you're into role playing games and naming characters on the show. Go check it out, it's all over at oldgodsofappalachia.com, links to everything are right there. Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell. Our intro music was by Landon Blood and our outro music was by Those Poor Bastards.

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