

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 2 Episode 14: On Death Island

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[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*

In this world there are kingdoms and principalities, nations and dominions, lands ruled by monarchs and presidents, kings and long dead emperors. There are lands where the

possibility of glory, conquest and thriving prosperity lie just beneath the topsoil, waiting to be found by the hands of those willing to turn a well worn spade. There're sprawling expanses of mineral rich land cut by rivers that run with the heartbeat of thunderstorms, topped by woods that offer up timber and game, as if the Almighty had laid out a Sunday spread and called to the yard and said, "Y'all come eat, now."

None of these places, however, no matter how glorious, matched the splendor and treasure of the domain claimed by an eleven year old boy. Or in this case a whole mess of 'em. You give a group of boys from anywhere a backyard, a stretch of woods, hell, a vacant lot even, and you can watch it rise to a place of hallowed glory. A patch of trees between houses can become an ancient battlefield where two sides of some long remembered or forgotten conflict plays out again and again after school hours. An empty, fallow field becomes an arena or tournament ground where rassing, foot racing and some sort of ball-related sport are contested and pushed to the highest form of the game. Friendships and rivalries will rise, fall, and be remembered in legend forever and ever. You give a group of boys not yet concerned with matters of what's in their britches just yet a place of their own and I promise you it will outshine Rome in the eyes of its citizens.

In the town of Baker's Gap, Tennessee, blood lines run way back to the settling of these hills. Old families come from all over the place to find their new tomorrow in the hills of east Tennessee. To lay track, dig from the earth, cut timber, what have you. So there was no shortage of packs of boys passing through their rites on the way to being men but we're only going to visit with one of 'em.

Archie Stallard came from a long line of Stallards that had been in these mountains for as long as anyone could be. He was a tall and somber boy with big eyes and head full of what he learned from his daddy, who had come with his daddy and helped carve out this part of the mountain. He was smart and charming if a bit awkward. You try being five foot ten at age

eleven. But if you needed somebody who knew their way around the woods, Archie could get you set up and camp safe with good sense. Hell, he spent so much time in the woods his older brother Gregory had started calling him Woodchuck which he pretended to enjoy, but, his real friends just usually called him Archie.

Dallas and Shane Shepherd were two cousins from out by Bear Creek Reservoir. Dallas's family lived on the far side from town with his whole dang family, him being the only boy amongst six girls. He was as loyal as they come and as long-suffering as any eleven year old boy had any right to be. Dallas's daddy was a deacon over at Rising Creek Baptist and if there was one thing Dallas knew better than chapter and verse of the good book it was how to sneak out of his house for a late night fishing expedition and somehow not sleep through Sunday service the next day. His cousin Shane lived on the other side of the lake with his mamaw and papaw as you sometimes do. Shane was a smart mouthed and scrawny thing. His mamaw once commented that he looked like a fish worm with the poop slung out of him. He didn't care for being outside at all, unlike the others. He'd have stayed home reading through his mamaw's cookbooks and dictionaries if you let him. But he'd come out if any of the other boys came calling. And they always did.

Curtis Kilgore was a year older. Lived down the road from the Stallard family with his mama and littler brother Luke. Curtis worked on their little piece of property from the minute he woke up til he left for school, and then after school and right before supper. See, his daddy had passed in a bad accident on their land a year ago and Curtis had to make up for him being gone. Now his papaw and his uncle on his mom's side come down to help some weekends but that was about all the help Curt had. It was a wonder he was even able to go to school or sneak off for anything. But Curtis always found a way to make time.

The last two of our band are an interesting pair. Brothers, but not blood. You see in these mountains families grew and shrunk not just by birth and death but by coming and going. Say you might have a friend who's living rough at home; daddy's a drunk, mama's pretty

much a ghost; maybe one night they come home for supper with you. Maybe they come walk to school with you the next morning and your mama feeds 'em again. And maybe they show up for supper again and then they just don't go home. And just like that you got yourself a brand new sibling, happened all the time. My own mamaw's brother, Coo, well, he wasn't no blood to her at all. His family just up and left the holler one day and he come home with Mamaw. He's family. Just like y'all.

So it was a similar albeit more mysterious situation that brings us to Floyd and Cowboy Absher. You heard me right, I said Cowboy. Young Floyd was Junebug and Debra Absher's only boy. Sharp as a tack and as handsome as his mama was purty, Floyd Absher was well liked and respected by his peers. Smart, but not bookish, he read everything from the Bible to the pulp magazines his uncle Raymond would bring in but Floyd lived to be outside. He stayed tan and lean and no one doubted he would grow up to be just as tall and strong as his daddy who checked in around 6'5 and was probably the best blacksmith this side of the valley. Now Junebug had been working for Lock Railroad for a while, as well as doing smithing on the side, burning the candle at both ends of the grindstone if you will, to pay off the lien on their land. He worked hard for his family, and when it grew by one more June said, well, why not. Worked a little harder. You see, after the last harvest before it got proper cold, there was a little boy who kept coming around the edge of Larry Collins's pasture where his cows grazed, right across the road from the Absher place, looking just as lost as lost could be. Larry's wife Barb tried to see who he was and what he was doing on their land, said he was just a pitiful little thing. Sickly and pale looking, just walking amongst the cows and petting them and ordinarily she'd run him off cause that's, that's dangerous to be doing, but the cows didn't seem to mind and they were content to let this odd little feller love on 'em. When Barb got too close he ran. If you know Barb Collins she ain't no mind to chase nobody. But everyday he'd turn back up, dirtier than the day before, walking amongst and petting the cows. Wasn't hurting nothing, so they just let him be, strange as that might sound.

After a week or so Floyd Absher saw the boy from the edge of their yard and called out to him,

“Hey! Hey, boy! What’chu doin’ with Mr. Collins’s stock?”

The boy seemed to vaguely register him and looked from Floyd back to his bovine companions.

“Hey. I - I’m Floyd. What’s your name?”

The smaller boy pointed toward the fields. “Cows,” he said dreamily.

Floyd blinked.

“Yeah, th-them’s cows. I, I said what’s your name?”

The boy shrugged and turned back to the pasture.

“Cows.”

“Are, are you hungry? You look like you been sleeping outside. Where, where’s your mommy and daddy?”

The boy screwed up his face like he was trying to remember something then just shrugged and pointed again.

“Cows.”

“I bet you’re hungry, let me see what mama’s got.”

Floyd ran back to the house and returned a few minutes later with some bread and an apple and a mug of milk. The boy took the food as if he didn’t recognize it at first, but then tore into it with a fervor.

“Heh. There you go, Cowboy. Eat up,” Floyd said, half tickled.

“Mm, Cowboy?” the boy echoed in between bites, his face breaking into a huge smile and pointed to himself and nodded. “Cowboy.”

That would be the first of many lunches and breakfasts snuck down from the house to the edge of the yard over the next week or so. The boy was small and looked young, even though he said he was, “Almost eleven,” when Floyd asked him.

Eventually those secret breakfasts and lunches turned into a trip home to ask if Cowboy could eat supper with them. Of course Mama said yes and, after a few of those, Cowboy just never went back to wherever he was sleeping before. And Junebug knew he’d have to work a little harder to pay for another young’un but, you couldn’t not want to help the little feller. He’s just precious. A winter of good meals and the occasional bath and Sunday school brought out a whole new child in Cowboy. While he still couldn’t or wouldn’t tell the Abshers where he come from, and they’d asked around and talked to the law in town-proper, and nobody was missing a little boy that age. And well he took to Debra like she was his own mama and “Yes, sir” and “No, sir”’d Junebug. And wherever the boy come from he knew manners. He could read and knew some of his numbers. Tying his shoes was still a work in progress as was writing his new name but, soon enough it was decided. When school time come back around the newest name on the fourth grade roll would be Cowboy Absher.

Cowboy had fallen in with Floyd's running buddies like any other little brother would. Archie and Curtis wanted to give the new kid a hard time but Floyd had vouched for him and that made it difficult. See Floyd wasn't their de-facto leader, not by a long shot. That would be Archie until they were almost grown but Floyd's opinion still held weight. He was easily the most mature and the most grown of all of them even if Archie was a good four inches taller. Wasn't none of 'em ever willing to scrap with Floyd neither. They all play rassled and threw each other down the hill behind the school for funsies so they knew how strong Floyd was. So old Archie was stuck with trying to get Cowpie to stick as a nickname, but all it took was Shane Shepherd chiming in with, "What'd you say, Woodchuck?" to shut that right down.

Cowboy fit in well enough. After the first couple of weeks of being at school he proved he could climb the same trees as they all did and he knew his way around a simple fishing pole and surprised everybody, himself included, by knowing a fancy knot that kept your hook on better than even Archie knowed.

One day that spring, on a day that Curt and Dallas couldn't make it; Curt having to work and Dallas roped into church duties with his daddy; Floyd and Cowboy made the long trek to the far side of the reservoir out to Shane's house where his mamaw would feed them a big lunch of ham sandwiches and fresh vegetables from the garden. It was while they were digesting this fine afternoon meal of white bread, smoked pork and 'maters that Archie made the proclamation,

"Well I think it's time the kid gets to see the island."

Archie had taken to calling Cowboy 'the kid' when his ill-fated nickname attempts had been rebuffed even though he was the same age. Floyd and Shane looked at each other, honestly a

little shocked. The island was their big secret. The holiest of holies, it was their place and it had been since last summer.

“Are you sure he’s ready?” Shane grinned, his voice taking on that of the pulp magazines he’d borrowed from Floyd. “Greater men than he have been lost on that journey.”

Shane stood and rose to his unimposing but still somehow impressive height like a papaw at a campfire, raising his hands and gesturing grandly, could he make it cross copperhead’s den? Could he scale the rockbone cliffs? Why, the skeeters alone could carry him away! On Death Island, the very land hungers for your blooooooood!” And he punctuated this last bit by turning his hands into mock mosquitoes and dive bombing Cowboy with them, which turned into a wrestling and subsequent tickling match until both boys were breathless and laughing.

“What-what’s Death Island?” Cowboy asked finally. “I-I didn’t know there was no islands around here. Is it out in the middle of the lake where you can’t see it?”

Floyd laughed.

“It’s not really an island, buddy, look here,” Floyd moved back up onto the high porch in front of Shane’s house where you had a real good view of the reservoir and Cowboy followed him.

“You see that bit that sticks out there, that bunch of pine trees, way out there, yeah, right there. Well the way the waters cut in that little grove of pines is surrounded except on the very back side. If you don’t know how to get there you have to take a boat which, we ain’t got no boat, but we know the secret way don’t we, Arch?”

Archie Stallard nodded sagely.

“Indeed we do, my friend. Indeed we do.”

“But why, why’s it called Death Island?” asked Cowboy. “Who died out there?”

Floyd laughed nervously.

“Haha, well, oh, Curt, Curt just started calling it that the second time we went out there cause it got real spooky when it started getting dark, he was just funnin’.”

Shane snorted.

“When have you known Curtis Kilgore to fun a day in his life? Curt told me he saw a ghost out there. Just didn’t want to spook the rest of us.”

If Shane had been talking about anybody else they might’ve laughed at this as more of his bullshittery but Curt was a serious and haunted boy. He lost his daddy to a bad fall right there on their land. Nobody liked to talk about it, ‘specially not Curt. Well they were doing something with their chimney on that old house and Curt’s daddy Marsh was on the roof and the rock of the thing just give way and he fell. Curt tried to get help, ran across the field and the road to the Stallard’s house but by the time Archie’s daddy got there Marshall Kilgore was on his way out. Archie overheard his daddy telling his mama that Marsh had died hard, bleeding out of his ear and his mouth, clutching the front of Curtis’s shirt moaning awful things. Things no boy should hear come out of his own daddy’s mouth, especially not on his deathbed. Confessions. Condemnations, secret shame and iniquities most foul all sprayed in the blood kissed mist of his daddy’s dying breath. Curtis’s mama and little brother didn’t hear none of it, just him and Grover Stallard there to bear witness to Marsh Kilgore’s sudden and horrible passing.

Now Curt wasn't a super happy-go-lucky kid before his daddy died but his light grew even dimmer that day. Curt wasn't on his own, though. His friends never stopped checking on him and their parents kept his mama in casseroles for months after the fact. There'd be nights when Archie would sneak out to go fishing or just to go out in the woods the way boys do and sometimes he'd go over to the Kilgore place and wake Curt up and invite him along. One night about a month after they'd buried Curt's daddy, when the moon was new and the sky was empty, Archie went over and found Curt already up and sitting on his porch, his back to the front wall of the house, eyes hidden behind his unruly mop of dirty hair. "Let's go, boy! I got my daddy's good rod and bait to last us all night," Archie had whispered. But Curt just shook his head and pointed across the yard where the crumbled stone of the fallen chimney had been left a month earlier.

"Can't," he said in his slow thoughtful monotone. "Daddy's watchin'."

Archie looked where Curt pointed and aged a whole year on the spot it felt like. He saw a tall, lean shadow moving in the yard like a man going about his chores. The man shape had no features, no dimension, just a flat black hole in the world cut out in the shape of Marshall Kilgore. As it bent to lift something heavy from the ground the blackness inside it seemed to ripple and quiver.

"Who's," Archie began.

"Shh!" Curt spat. But it was too late. The shadow stopped its work and it turned its gaze on the two boys. Now there was no face nor eyes to see but Archie could tell he was being looked at. Looked *through*, even. Archie felt all the blood drain away from his freckled face and it felt like every hair on his head was standing on end and he heard, no, *felt*, a voice speak to him.

“Go home, Archie. Curtis has work to do. ‘M on, boy.”

Archie stood frozen as he watched his best friend stand up and follow that beckoning shade into the dark of the yard where they vanished from sight. Archie didn't need to be told twice. He ran all the way home fast as he can, hid under that fancy captain's bed his daddy built for him, praying that the good Lord would keep him safe and that he would get to see his best friend again. Archie had indeed seen Curtis on the way to school the next day and he was just full of irritated questions about why Archie never came and got him the night before. Well he'd stayed up half the night on the porch so he could sneak out without waking his mama. Why didn't Archie come and get him? Archie stammered half a lie about his daddy not going to bed til late and never spoke about that night again.

“What d'y'all do out there?” Cowboy asked, startling Archie out of his reverie.

“My, my, my,” Archie intoned, trying to sound like the wise old explorer he fancied himself to be. “The kid's just full of questions ain't he? The island will reveal all its mysteries when we get there my young Cowboy.” He turned to Floyd. “Can y'all get out on Sunday night? We got family coming to visit and they ain't leaving til Saturday evening. Shane, you holler at Dallas at church and make sure he can get loose.”

“What about Curt?” Floyd asked.

Archie seemed to almost flinch at the sound of his best friend's name.

“Oh sure, sure, I'll fill him on the walk to school tomorrow.”

Cowboy looked out across the lake. Sundown would start good and proper soon. They'd better get a move on to get home before dark. His eyes lingered on the dark smear of the grove of blue-green pines in the distance. To Cowboy's dreamy eyes they seemed to blend

together like the hungry mouth of a cave. That seemed right somehow. Whatever was out there seemed like it was waiting to be fed.

[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 there, Family. It's good to see everybody gathered together again. Welcome back to Baker's Gap, Tennessee, official. Hope y'all are enjoying your time in the beautiful mountains of eastern Tennessee. I spent a lot of my youth traveling back and forth from southwest Virginia out that way and I hope y'all are enjoying that side of the state line on our side of the veil. Death Island's got a lot waiting for y'all. Thought we might get to it this week but, turns out, needed a little time to percolate, a little time to brew, a little time to steep in the nettles of what's waiting for y'all out there and I promise you-it ain't good. Family, it is that time once again where I ask you to complete your social media ritual and I am gonna make it easy for you. Head on over to [oldgodsofappalachia.com](http://oldgodsofappalachia.com). You'll find links to our Facebook group, to the main Facebook page, you can tweet into the void with us @OldGodsPod, there's a link to our Twitter right there, link to the Discord server which is free for everybody. There are Patreon-specific things on Discord you can do but the Discord's open for everybody, you don't have to be a patron. You can go hang out there right now. Matter of fact, why don't you do that, there's some lovely people you can go meet that'll greet you when you get there and welcome you in with memes and make you feel like you been part of the family the whole dang time. Also on that website there are transcripts for every episode so if my accent does befuddle you, or our dialect and slang's a little hard to keep up with and you want to ask questions, or if you want to do detective work like some fantastic folks on the Discord server did this week putting together clues and family names by gosh the ah, the transcripts are good for that too. They're just in the Episodes section. Just head over to [oldgodsofappalachia.com](http://oldgodsofappalachia.com), click on Episodes and you'll see a link to the

transcripts right there. Family, if you truly want to become one with us and help us grow this thing even bigger than it already is, uh, the past couple of weeks we showed up in the New York Times, we showed up in Vulture, um, it's been... And y'all put us there, we don't have a publicist - like, we're fancy but we ain't that fancy - like, everywhere we've gotten has been through word of mouth and for y'all talking about it, uh, and I can't thank y'all enough for that but if you want to be one with us, if you want to look up from a darkened night wondering how you got there standing on blood-soaked pine needles while we're asking you for the shovel; if you want to be one with us that way head on over to [patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia](https://patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia) and become a member of the family by casting your thirty pieces of well-earned silver into that basket. You will be rewarded by access to things like Build Mama a Coffin, the seventeen part epic secret storyline that is only available to Patreon patrons as well as new bits of swag that are in production right now, thank y'all for your patience on that. 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 our brother Landon Blood and our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. We'll see you next time, Family. See you real soon.