

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 2 Episode 15: A Funeral in Pine

Old Gods of Appalachia is a horror anthology podcast and therefore may contain material not suitable for all audiences. Also, this is part two of a three-part story, so if you ain't listened to part one, go back and do that. We'll meet you right here. Oh, and listener discretion is advised.

Before we begin our journey today, family, a word on Death Island: as Floyd Absher already explained, Death Island is, in fact, not an island. Most of the year, you'd be hard-pressed to call it anything more than a grove of old pine trees on the edge of a reservoir. Fancy word like "peninsula" wouldn't even come into play. But once the summer rains come and the lake was up, the water did indeed rise like conquering armies around three sides of that shattered glen.

The perpetual carpet of pine needles seemed to taint everything on the ground with the rust of blood stains, and the shadows that spun from overhead painted the ground like prophecies—each one showing the precise placement of the next layer to be added to the sound-sealing cushion of evergreen that was everywhere.

Countless packs of boys had deemed it hideout and fortress, clubhouse and sanctum sanctorum. It was a quiet place—perfect for sword fighting with sticks and the swearing of blood oaths. It was a place you could tell your deepest and darkest because what happened and what was said there stayed there. It was a place for the young to be young

away from the prying eyes of the grown folk—at least in the daylight.

The island had a way of letting you know when your time there was up. The wind would kick up off the reservoir, and it'd suddenly be too cold to enjoy whatever it was you'd been enjoying. The shadows would loom long and deep, and any illusion of safety you might have been entertaining was quickly swept away.

There was always the rumor amongst the younger boys about the roving bunches of older boys who would come to places like the island to drink and fight and carry on in the darkness. Tales of young lovers come here to do the devil's business as well. And there'd been times as our boys were leaving and the woods were darkening, they'd hear laughter and the crashing of branches in the distance, and they'd hustle even faster along the scant trail, thinking they were just missing the Cook or Connor boys or any of the other rougher-necked older kids who could make their lives much harder at the drop of a hat.

They had no idea how wrong they were.

Even a hard nail like Brad Connor wouldn't dare set foot on the island after dark or even be up on the cliffs up above it, and even a ladies' man like Charlie Cook would never dream of trying to bring a girl to the island at night. All it took was that haunted old grove showing you its teeth once to make all the aforementioned pastimes sound as stupid as cussing deer in bible study at Rising Creek Baptist when Deacon Walter Ray

Shepard was in charge of the reading.

Much like the island itself, Dallas Shepard's daddy was not a force to be trifled with. Escaping his notice was not something easily done, neither.

"Dallas Christopher!" Walter Ray had called as his only boy had started off in the opposite direction from home at the end of services that Sunday morning. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Uh, Shane's papaw said I could come over for Sunday dinner, if that was all right with y'all. We, we might go play behind their house, sir. If that's okay."

Walter Ray was a man you always called "sir." He kept a tight house. When you had six girls ranging in age from "babe in arms" to "old enough to have their own babe in arms," you had to. Or so the deacon believed. He also knew there were days when he had to let his only boy breathe.

"And will you be back for Sunday night service on time and not a minute late?"

Dallas failed to hide a smile. "It's fourth Sunday, sir. No evening service on fourth Sunday."

Walter Ray thought about this for a minute—or pretended to. Nobody knew the service

schedule better than Walter—he helped write the dang thing after all. “Well, so it is. ain’t you the lucky one. Are your chores done?”

Dallas gave in and smiled even bigger. He’d been expecting this. “Yes, sir—my room is clean, the porches are swept, and Sam has water and food, and you won’t find no dog leavings in the yard, neither.”

Walter Ray smiled back at his boy. “And your mama said it was okay? You’re sure Shane asked his papaw?”

Dallas was about to explode waiting for the official go-ahead, and he was pretty sure his daddy was enjoying dragging it out but that was all right. Daddies needed their own weird old-person kind of fun sometimes, he guessed. “All right then, go on—but go get Sam and take him with you. some time out in the woods will do him good.”

“*He’s already over at Shaaaaaaaaaaaaane’s!*” Dallas called as he sped into the distance toward his cousin’s house, where he knew most of the crew would already be assembled. Once he arrived, the journey to Death Island would begin.

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

Her 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

For the rest of the Baker's Gap boys, the journey out to Shane Shepard's house could be a haul. On a usual visit to the island, they'd just meet there. Dallas lived close enough to Shane, they'd usually meet up at Old Flat Top overlooking the east edge of the lake.

Archie and Curtis lived on the north side and might have had the shortest path straight to the island, but it was also the most treacherous. Floyd and Cowboy lived out closer to town, and thus would have a long straight walk out Burnside Mountain, at the end of which they'd be the only ones to enter the reservoir through its main gate.

Today was special, though. Since it was Cowboy's first trip to the island, it was agreed they would meet at Shane's house and eat first. Marie Duncan, Shane's mama's mama, was the mamaw of all mamaws. if Mamaw Duncan fixed your Sunday plate, you ate like a prince. Fried chicken, fresh corn, mashed taters. Whole plate of green onions, cucumbers, and sliced 'maters on the table, and some green beans cooked for so long

and so slow with a ham hock—*mm!* They were practically a pork product themselves. A dinner like that would render the grownest of men into a deep and restful food coma. But the metabolism of boys of a certain age is an ever-burning furnace that knows no rest, so with full bellies and full hearts, our boys set out on their grand sojourn.

“The important thing to remember is you have to listen to us carefully, kid,” extolled Archie from the head of the pack as they crossed the Shepard property line, ducking under a well-stretched barbed wire fence. “From here on, we are in the lands of the wild—unclaimed by any man and kept in check only by mother nature herself.”

“Or Jackson County Public Works, Arch. This is county land, and you know—”

“Unclaimed and unmarked by any boundary!” Archie went on, shooting Shane a dirty look. Shane laughed and covered his mouth.

“Archie ain’t all the way wrong, little brother,” Floyd said kindly. “Just walk where we walk, and be careful, and you’ll be fine. It is real easy to get lost once we get on the back side of the lake, so you stick by me, got it?”

“Got it!” Cowboy said excitedly. Of all the new things his family and friends had included him in, this was by far the best.

The woods seemed to grow thicker and the trees taller as they moved over the hill for

what passed for The Dam: an obviously man-made edge of the lake that had the shoreline on one side and a drop-off down to three drainage pools on the other. The county had taken a narrow little valley and dug themselves a reservoir to provide drinking water for the whole town and then some. As pretty as the lake and the surrounding woods were, it was still something wedged into nature by the hands of men. Water stolen from rivers and collected here like a dragon's hoard, grounds that had lain untouched and unseen for centuries carved up and reshaped to serve human desires. seals broken and reset. All to meet the needs of the encroaching horde of townsfolk and hill folk alike. Acts such as these have consequences, family. Trust that they do.

They'd gone another half mile or so off the dam when Curt called to stop. Curt was the most cautious of the lot. Archie was the most knowledgeable about the woods and how to get by in it, but he got comfortable and forgot to remind others of things he knew automatic sometimes. Curt pointed out a stretch of rocks along the shore that extended out across a narrow corner of the lake. On the other side, you got your first look into the deeper woods as the land faded back into the shadow of the trees. A tantalizing view for any size sense of adventure.

"Right here," said Curt pushing his hair out of his face. "This right here is Copperhead Den. Snakes sometimes. You gotta be careful. Watch where you step, or you'll end up walking on water like Jesus over here," he nodded toward Archie.

“I saved y’all’s life running across the water like that,” Archie sneered. “Y’all’d’ve stumbled right in there and got bit.”

Curt tried to stay serious in his explaining, but the image of Archie running across the surface of the lake like a khaki-clad Christ, screaming, “*SNAAAAKE! SNAAAAAKE!!*” was too funny to not at least grin at. Curt straightened his face. “Either way, be careful here. We, we ain’t seen none the past few times, but you never know.”

Dallas whistled from the rear of the group, and out of the woods closest to them, shot a fireplug-sized canine projectile that nearly collided with Shane, coming instead to a dead stop at his feet. Shane, lost in his own daydreams as he often was, yelled in surprise, “SAM!”

Sam was a beagle mix who was older than the boys themselves, blind as the day is long, and thick-necked as a log. Sam had been Dallas’s guardian angel most of his life. He was an old soldier who was too good of a boy to know how few years he probably had left.

“Oh, Lord, I hate it when he does that,” whined Shane.

Dallas laughed. “He loves you too.”

“Hey, Sam!” Cowboy cried, and sure enough the blind old boy sauntered over for head pettings and ear rubbings and general spoiling before Dallas called him.

“Go on, boy—see what’s out there.” And like a shot, Sam ran off up ahead and around the rocks, giving them a wide berth as he disappeared up the hill, into the woods at the backside of the lake.

The journey across Copperheads Den proved uneventful, however, as any snakes in the vicinity apparently had other business that day. And the boys touched down on the entrance to the woods proper on the far side of the lake. This would be officially out of bounds for any place they’d be allowed to play at their age.

“Last chance to turn back,” Archie teased.

“No way!” said Cowboy as he pushed past the taller boy and into the shadows of the path.

This part of the trip, where the road, the path, and sometimes the lake, were all out of view, and all you saw were big rocks and bigger trees—it’s like entering a strange new world of color and texture. Mushrooms grew wild at the base of trees like the fins of some great dry land fish. Mosses of various colors crawled across fallen trees and cliff-sized rocks. The sun played through the green, painting a mosaic of dappled light and shadow on the path before them.

Cowboy was beside himself with joy. He’d spent his first couple of weeks in and around

Baker's Gap sleeping in old woodsheds and abandoned lean-tos. The woods were just what was around him then, their splendor meaning no more to him than the green grass meant to Larry Collins's cows. But now, after a season of living indoors again and having school and lessons and chores, this was an adventure—this was living!

For the next 20 minutes or so, the boys climbed the hills that Shane had named the Rockbone Cliffs, which were, in actuality, enormous rocks jutting from the hillside. Fearsome and bald, the biggest one's rounded edge almost looked like a skull, maybe, if you squinted... but you had to want it real bad. And as they walked, Shane told them the story of Old Man Rockbone, who haunted these cliffs—a brave explorer and friend to the Cherokee who lived here long ago, and how he'd been betrayed and abandoned by his white brothers and then saved from being mauled by a mountain cat by the bravery of his native friends, who stitched up his wounds and treated him like one of their own. Dirk Rockbone swore that day to guard these cliffs with his li—

Curt snorted. "Dirk Rockbone."

Shane was about to protest, when he started laughing so hard, he almost fell off the ledge.

[snickers.] "Rockbone..."

[giggles and boyish cackling]

“Easy there, cousin,” said Dallas, pulling him back.

“Yeah,” laughed Archie, “you don’t want to fall on your Dirk Rockbone!”

...Family, we’re just going to leave these boys here to laugh this out. It might take a minute.

[laughter fades]

The first time one sets foot on Death Island, it’s normal to feel like you stepped into a different world. The air is cooler, maybe from the water being high and the rainwater being cold, maybe from the thick blanket of pine overhead that all but chokes out the afternoon sun. It feels as if you have walked *into* another space, rather than *through* another space, if that makes sense. The island feels like its very own empty planet, and for boys like ours, that’s the closest thing to heaven most of them might ever see.

“Show the kid around, Floyd, he’s your brother,” Archie commanded as he climbed up into a nearby tree and straddled a branch.

“Yeah, come on Cowboy,” Floyd grinned. And thus Cowboy Absher was given the grand tour of Death Island. The hollowed-out spot where the good swords—the ones made from trees around the lake—were hidden. The ones they’d driven real nails into as hand

guards. Shane's papaw would skin him alive for sneaking his good hammer out in the woods and wasting perfectly good iron nails like that if he ever found out. Cowboy had to admit they were way better than the sticks they played with in the school yard or at home. He fought several grand duels with his brother and against Shane, winning some, losing some more. They showed him the place where they'd all carved their initials into a fallen log and helped him carve his with the very sharp hunting knife that Dallas had snuck out of his house—but his daddy wouldn't have said no to, probably, because Dallas was a careful boy; but Dallas still took without asking because somehow that made it *better*. They played Adventure, where they pretended to discover the island and planned a camp and had invisible fights with pirates and the enemy army that pursued them. Who that enemy army was, they had no idea. The magazine Shane got the story from never really said—they was just referred to as “the enemy,” and thus our merry band of boys were dedicated to their overthrow and defeat.

It was around the third time the enemy had been repelled via the throwing of pinecones and the brandishing of greatswords that Curt noticed it was getting dark.

“It's time to start heading back, boys. Dallas, call Sam in.”

Dallas whistled three short bursts and the sound of his canine thunderbolt came rattling in the distance as the old blind boy deftly navigated his surroundings before barreling down the hill and—intentionally this time—colliding with Shane, taking the smaller boy off his feet.

“DANG IT, SAM!”

“Quiet,” came Curt’s voice from the edge of the water. And then, “No. Oh, no.” He seemed to be staring at something on the cliff behind them.

“What is it, the ghost of old Dirk Rockbone?” Floyd began.

“Shut up, Floyd... All y’all. Oh God oh God oh God oh God no no no...” Curt had gone rigid and balled up his hands and was pressing them to his eyes.

“Curt, buddy, what—what’s wrong?” Archie looked up at the darkening slopes of the Rockbone Cliffs and felt his stomach drop out of his body entirely.

A night-black shadow in the shape of a man stared back down from the top of the slippery rocks. Sam began to growl. The boys all gathered around the dog and the frozen boy, looking up at the shadow of Curt’s daddy as it started to shamble down the side of the hill towards them.

The wind picked up off the lake, and the air grew colder. The light filtering through the trees was all but gone. Sam began to bark the thundering bark of the guardian beast he was as the figure shuffled closer and a voice roiled across the island.

“Curtis, boy. Why ain’t you working. We got things to do. I told you not to go, and you run off with your lazy, little dog turd friends when we got work to do.”

Curtis was crying now, his voice shaking as he yelled back, “You ain’t my daddy, you ain’t, you ain’t, you ain’t, you ain’t... you can’t make me go back in them woods no more with you! I ain’t burying no more! I ain’t! I ain’t, you hear me!?”

And then a wave of something more than cold slapped down over the entire island like a tidal wave, and the boys lost their feet. Only Sam stood stalwart against the driving wave of invisible ice and fear, his bark sounding like gunshots—gunshots that were somehow drowned out by the thing’s terrible voice.

“I told you, boy. We got work to do. You better come on with me now, or—”

“No,” said a quiet, confident voice that somehow cut through the thing’s deafening command. The boys looked away from Curt or the shadow to see that Cowboy had stepped out to face it—the shadow, easily now seven foot tall and growing. The thing stopped in mid-sentence cocked its head and stared at Cowboy—least as much as something that has no discernible features can look at anyone or anything.

“Curt’s not going home with you. And you can stop pretending you’re his daddy because you’re not.” Floyd was terrified. He wanted to reach out and grab Cowboy and put him behind him, to protect him, but Cowboy didn’t look afraid. His eyes had taken on that

dreamy cast they had when Floyd first found him in the pasture.

The Shadow That Was Not Curt's Daddy had turned its full attention on Cowboy. Sam had moved up beside him, snarling protectively.

"I see you," Cowboy said, his voice almost playful. "Oh, I *see* you. Curt, he's not gonna hurt you anymore. He's not gonna hurt you anymore because—" but before Cowboy could say another word, the shadow lunged forward, and something struck the boy so hard in the face and chest that he flew backwards and struck the thickest tree on the island with a bone-shattering crack.

And Cowboy Absher fell to the ground, dead as dead could ever be.

The boys stood in stunned silence. The trees shook with The Thing That Was Not Curt's Daddy's rage as it screamed and howled in triumph. It moved towards Cowboy's lifeless form—tentatively though, as if it was unsure of what it had done, or what Cowboy even was, and why he'd even dared to talk back to it that way. Sam had managed to avoid the thing's blow and stood guard over Cowboy's body, barking for all he was worth, determined to protect this sweet boy from any further harm.

"*Sam, no!*" Dallas screamed.

The Thing raised its arm to swat the dog aside, and the ground shook. Sam kept barking

and growling, teeth bared, blind eyes staring out into the void, fearless and good. The thing took another step, and the ground thundered again and began to crack.

Decades of pine needles carpeting the floor of Death Island shifted and congealed. The earth tore itself from centuries of black sleep, bringing with it the bones of animals and men and things that had died or been buried in this land before it had ever been pushed to one side to make room for a man-made lake. Bones twisted and writhed, crafting themselves into a shape that in a long bygone era might have been called a wolf, but by the standards of our time could be named nothing less than a monster.

Its head was easily the size of an entire bear; its body, just as thick with a hide of pine needles, earth, bark, and bone. The angles and proportions of its legs were all wrong, somehow lupine and feline at the same time, but tipped in claws fashioned from the skulls of long dead raptors that had not graced the skies of this Appalachia in a thousand years.

It had no eyes—just a massive maw of fangs shaped from stones and roots and petrified bits of tree. And its muzzle was tipped with an immense nose that snorted and snuffled at the air as it stood over Sam and the empty husk of Cowboy Absher and roared.

[ROAR]

In the silence that followed, it lowered its head, sniffed almost delicately at Sam, and

growled approvingly. Sam chuffed once and then reluctantly surrendered his post and ran to Dallas, who threw the ancient dog over his shoulder and screamed for them to run. Floyd lunged for Cowboy's body, but his friends held him back, pulled him away through the trees, and the last thing Floyd Absher saw before he finally turned to flee with his friends was the Wolf of Death Island lunging at the shadowy Thing that had killed his brother and closing its enormous jaws around the Thing's throat.

[I Cannot Escape The Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

There is a curse upon my every waking breath,

And I cannot escape the darkness...

My oh my, family, how you must be cursing my name right now. Dark times on Death Island—but, I mean, are there any other times in a place called Death Island? I don't think so.

Oh, but, family this was part two of a three-part story, and if you think we're done with our young friends and the boys of Baker's Gap, well then you are sadly mistaken and obviously haven't been paying attention to how we do things around here, so stay with us now.

Dear ones, beloved ones—please complete your social media ritual. Head on over to oldgodsofappalachia.com and you'll find links to our Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, the

Discord server where you too can join the Red String Society and work out all the plot points and scour the transcripts, which are also available in the episode section of oldgodsofappalachia.com.

If you would like to throw your lot in with us and make your tithe to our ministry, go on over to patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia. There's every level of tier you could imagine, and if you go 10 dollars or higher, you get immediate access to the 17-chapter epic of Build Mama A Coffin. Well-worth the investment. We appreciate you, and trust me family, Sam is just fine. Just fine. The rest of 'em... we'll have to see.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Our theme song is by our brother Landon Blood. Our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell.