

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 2 Episode 16: Between the Unburied and Miss Belle

Old Gods of Appalachia is a horror anthology podcast and therefore may contain material not suitable for all audiences, so listener discretion is advised.

Annabelle Callaway had been the teacher at Baker's Gap school for going on three years now. She was a grown and mature woman at the ripe old age of 20, and she was a bit of an anomaly for this part of east Tennessee. Miss Belle, as her students called her, was not a native of Baker's Gap, for one. She had kinfolk in the general area, but so did everybody else.

She'd spent her early days up in the Cumberland and then traveled all over the whole state of West Virginia, learning about animal husbandry and the proper management of bloodlines from her extended family.

When she was 16, she went down to North Carolina, got properly educated to be a schoolteacher, and it was rumored that in that time, she even saw the ocean. Compared to the average folk of the Gap, why, she was a world traveler and a nomad—downright worldly.

Like many schoolteachers of the day, she had no husband, and no man had dared to try his hand to court her just yet. She was pretty enough by their standards, though some rougher tongues might call her "plain." She kept her dark brown hair cropped

scandalously just below her ears—a cut more of practicality than of high fashion, though. In the summer months, she helped some of the local farmers with their stock, and the delivering of calves and foals was not a business that lent itself to the long, flowing locks that many of the local women clung to as vestiges of their femininity. Her eyes were what caught attention, though. A deep dark brown—so deep they were almost black. And there was a thoughtfulness there, a constant calculation. All those miles logged, learning the ways of the road and the classroom and the barn—they'd etched a story into those eyes.

In the front of the classroom, however, they sparkled and shone, drawing children into lessons on reading, and history, and geography, and how to figure 'rithmetics, and the rights and responsibilities they'd need to understand to become outstanding and contributing members of the great American nation—that was but a few years from choking on its own greed. She was a true and called teacher, and the children loved her.

Miss Belle lived alone in a small cottage on the very edge of town that was provided for the schoolteacher. The geographical Gap the little village's name referenced was mostly just a tangle of wild wood, dotted with tiny homesteads. A place of dark green shadows, rumors of witches, and a certain house of ill repute. It was a place most town folks didn't go unless they had reason.

The town of Baker's Gap sat on a flat stretch of land cut up by the railroad and the businesses that would attend it. It was a pleasant little walk from her front door to the

schoolhouse, and on most days an easy one; but this particular Sunday evening, a storm had dropped out of nowhere and pushed the evening into an early night. Rain slapped the ground like leather-soled shoes, and the wind pried hard at shutters and doors; and still, Miss Belle stepped out into the rain to make her way into town for her Sunday evening routine.

Before each school week began, she'd go in and clean the schoolhouse in preparation—wipe and clean the new slate blackboards they just got the year prior, sweeping up the floor and cleaning up the little bits of trash and detritus that come in the natural wake of children. She loved the quiet of the classroom when it was just her. There was a peace that came over her that she could not obtain elsewhere. She had come here a near-stranger and won over the superintendent to land this job, and in the time since, she had built strong bridges with the parents and the families. Baker's Gap School had a grand total of 35 students, ranging in age from 5 to 15. She taught little ones in the mornings in reading, writing, and 'rithmetic, while the older ones took lessons with Mr. and Mrs. Shelton, who showed the boys smithing and agriculture in the back lot, and the girls home care and cooking over in the Church Fellowship Hall. Then the little ones would go home after lunch, and the older bunch would come in for their book learning til two.

This storm did not bother nor scare her in the least. She always felt that the rain was the world's way of washing away what needed washing away, and who was she to complain about that? So through the dying light and falling rain she walked, drinking in the dark

and sovereign beauty of an evening gullywasher.

The walk to school was wet and cold, but as she saw the familiar clapboard building, she smiled knowing she could dry off by the stove and start her weekly ritual off right. As she drew nearer to the door, though, her smile faded. The main door of the school stood slightly ajar; its simple lock had clearly been worked loose. *Someone was in school.*

Now, being a town on the tracks, Baker's Gap was no stranger to travelers and ne'er-dowells seeking shelter in between hoppin' trains. Miss Belle's hand dipped into the leather satchel she used to carry her school supplies and found the narrow-bladed knife tucked into the bottom, her fingers playing across the handle in a nervous twitter before gripping the knife properly. She knew the kind of men that could break into buildings looking for shelter, and they were the kind of men she did not want to encounter alone on a dark and stormy night.

But then, she heard the unmistakable sound of a child sobbing, and her reservations abated. Belle quickly climbed carefully up the steps and rushed into the school's main room to find not a band of hungry train jumpers, but boys she'd known since they were in the littluns' class her first year in the Gap. Archie Stallard, Shane and Dallas Shepard, Curtis Kilgore, and Floyd Absher. Dallas Shepard's blind old beagle Sam woofed softly as she come into the room and padded up to her for pets and ear rubbings, as was his custom. She automatically knelt down to provide said services, as one does with a good boy like Sam.

“Miss Belle,” Archie Stallard stammered, “we didn’t mean to break in, Miss Belle—we, we were just over at the lake when we when the storm come, and we, we, we, we got scared, so we, we ducked in here to to wait it out. We, we’re real sorry.”

Archie Stallard was usually the smooth-talker out of this bunch—a master of excuses and academic procrastination. Even at his age, she knew Archie took pride in leading her off topic during lessons, asking questions about her travel, and where she was from, and such. But now Archie was stammering, tripping over his words—anything but his usual confident self. She ignored Archie for the moment and looked for the source of the sobbing she’d heard, and she found Shane Shepard crying hard into his cousin’s shoulder. Dallas didn’t look like he knew what to do with his hysterical, smaller cousin but he was patting Shane’s shoulder and doing his best, given that he looked like he’d been through something just as rough. Wide-eyed and vacant, Curt Kilgore sat against the far wall, hugging his knees, trembling and shaking in a way that had nothing to do with the cold. Floyd Absher stood at the window across the room, his eyes swollen and lips trembling, as he absently wiped snot on his sleeve.

“Boys, what’s going on here? I don’t mind you getting out of the rain, but... Shane? Shane, honey, what’s wrong? Dallas?” Upon her asking, Dallas Shepard joined his cousin in his tears and was suddenly inconsolable.

“Archie, what’s wrong with them? What’s happened?”

Archie tried, “We, we was on the lake path to cliffs on the island, and we were just getting ready to come home, and then Curt’s daddy come, and he was getting real big, and then the blind wolf come, and we just—we just, we just—” Archie was trying real hard to make some sort of sense but Belle couldn’t make hide nor hair of what he was talking about. Curt Kilgore’s daddy had been dead for a long time, and there weren’t no wolves in the Gap. At least, not any kind that would come as close to town—not anymore. But she recognized the naked fear and rawness in their respective gazes—something had happened to these boys.

She could see their hearts and minds were pink and pricking red at the edges where their innocence had been torn away with such force, they’d not even had a chance to bleed yet. She had no idea what she could do here, but getting them home would be a start.

“Well, the least I can do is call your parents and let them know you’re all right.”

The telephone was a recent miracle to Baker’s Gap, and not every household had one of course; but the town proper was all wired up, and she knew that most of these boys’ families fell well within the bounds. Curtis Kilgore might not, but the Stallards across the way could run and tell his mama he was safe here too. She went to her desk and pulled out the roll where each child’s name, address, and newly penciled-in phone exchange, if there was one, would be listed.

“You can’t do that!” Roared Floyd Absher from the window, and as he raised his voice, the storm kicked up a thundercrack and a blast of wind that rattled the jimmied front door open. It flapped like a busted bird wing as Floyd went on. “You can’t call Mommy and Daddy—we ain’t gone back for him yet! I was supposed to watch out for him—I was supposed to take care of him! I was the big brother! *I was the big brother!*”

“But, but I failed, Miss Belle—he just got hit so hard he fell. You can’t tell ’em yet Miss Belle, you can’t!” The door slammed hard in the wind and settled closed into its frame.

“Floyd, what are you on about? Wait... where’s Cowboy? Floyd, did you lose Cowboy in this storm?” The storm seemed to swallow itself as the silence fell on the schoolhouse for just a second, only to be broken by a small quiet voice from over by the door.

“I’m—I’m right here, Miss Belle.”

[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

As the storm abated, the boys made their ways home. Shane's papaw, on the direction of his wife, came for him in the work truck and agreed to drop Dallas and Sam on the way. Archie and Curt vanished into a shortcut through the woods with Miss Belle's umbrella that she lent them for the walk through the dripping trees. That left Cowboy and Floyd to walk home on their own.

"Uh, are you okay little brother?" Floyd managed to ask after 10 minutes of walking in silence.

"I... I think so."

"You, you hit that tree awful hard. We, we thought you were—"

"Don't," said Cowboy gravely. Floyd had never seen him so serious. "Don't you say what you thought I was. I'm not that, you understand? I'm not, okay?"

“Well, we should probably get you checked out though. your head—”

“I’m fine. I’m cold, though. Let’s just get home. Don’t tell them what happened, Floyd, please.”

“I... okay, little brother,” Floyd agreed reluctantly. “You sure you’re okay, though? You’re, you’re awful pale.”

Cowboy stopped suddenly and turned to his adopted brother, looking up into his handsome face. “I’m not like you, Floyd. I’m not like any of you. I can pretend to be, and I like pretending. Pretending makes it easier. So we went to the lake, and we got caught in the storm. I... I fell down. But I’m okay. Okay?”

Floyd suddenly felt like the littler brother in this situation “O—okay, Cowboy, I just—”

“I’m fine,” said Cowboy, as they turned up the hill and came into their own yard. “I’m... I’m just cold.”

Deborah Absher made a mighty fuss of getting the boys dried off and looking at all their respective scrapes and bumps. Cowboy had a whopper of a knot on the back of his head, but “I fell” was his only explanation. Floyd was fine—good as new, once he dried off and ate the supper his mama had kept warm for him.

Cowboy only ate a few bites of his dinner. To him, the food tasted of ashes and rain. He could taste the drained life of the pig in the ham. He could taste the earth in the boiled taters. He could taste the dead things in the earth that had made it rich for the growing of food. When he went out to the outhouse before bed, he quietly emptied himself of all of it, his body not wanting to hold that much death at once, sicking up into the hole so nobody would find it.

He did not sleep that night. His eyes were drawn to the window of his shared room with Floyd, where he watched the night—watched the trees in the distance bloom, thrive, wither, and die.

See, in Cowboy's eyes, the world rotted away. Every moment of decay and entropy put into motion, he could tell you where every grave—marked and unmarked—lay across their family's property, and across the road to the Collins's. If he shook his head and closed his eyes, it all went away, and the world looked normal. But if he looked—*really* looked—he could see the death that waited in everything.

He'd fallen out there, into the literal weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. He fell. He should have stayed down, but for some reason he hadn't.

He looked and saw his daddy on the porch smoking a cigarette, tired and aching from working on the railroad, *all the livelong day*, as the song went. And if he looked hard enough, he could see his daddy's heart and know that it would give out right after Floyd

moved out of the house and into his own place, seven years from now. He knew that his daddy would lay down after cutting some wood or doing some other chore, and that his big old blacksmith's heart would just... quit. Knew it as well and as true as his own given name. His daddy had some time left, but Cowboy knew how much, and that's a burden no child should ever bear. Finally, Cowboy laid back down in bed, turning his back so that he would not look at his brother as he slept.

Belle Callaway didn't sleep much that night, either. She'd been relieved when Cowboy had turned up, safe and sound and not drowned or lost out by the lake. That lake could have claimed any number of foolish souls over the years, but something was off in the way the other boys had reacted to him. This should have been their moment of relief, their moment to calm down and tell her what really happened. Instead, they seemed, well... frankly terrified. Shane had started to say, "Hey, Cowboy," but Dallas punched him in the arm and shook his head.

And as she dressed in the pre-dawn darkness and got ready for her walk to school, she made a promise to herself that she'd watch the boys today. If something bad had happened out there, she and other adults needed to know.

Her morning with the little ones went smoothly enough, but she could feel an... an *itching* sort of feeling in her bones that told her the day was about to take a turn, and sure enough, it did.

Joshua Cook had come back to school. The Cook boys were trouble—no easy way to say it. Jerry and Jackie were old enough not to come back to school, but Joshua had one more year before the state left his poor old mama alone about it. Now, Belle didn't believe that boys were born bad or cruel, but the Cook boys were almost certainly an exception. Belle had secretly been grateful when the truant officer couldn't produce Joshua at the first of the school year. Joshua knew everybody in the school, and pretty much everybody in the town knew everybody else, as was the usual case in a place the size of Baker's Gap, but he did not know Cowboy. He'd heard of the Abshers' foundling, but he didn't know he was so small, didn't know he was such a runt—and he liked that word, *runt*—and predictably, as school let out, he started in on Cowboy and Floyd.

“Hey Absher, why'd your old man let this little *runt* follow you home, anyway? Hey, *runt*—why you gotta glom onto old Floyd, here, anyway? Ain't you got no people? I heard they found you eating cow pies out in Old Man Collins's field—is that true? You like a good, warm cow pie, *runt*? I bet you do. You know what, I bet your mommy and daddy were bums. Hobos, right off the rail. I bet they was so hungry, they threw you out so they wouldn't et you, and just keeled right over in a box car, their bones probably still out there, riding the Locke line all the way up to the coal mines! *HAW HAW HAW HAW!*” Joshua squawked, his mocking laugh like a rusty nail against a broken tooth.

Cowboy looked dumbly at the boy. No one had ever talked to him like this. Certainly nobody had ever talked about his first family—that sort of thing just... it just wasn't done. His mind spun...

A hawthorn tree. A dark grove of pine. A cold damp kiss on his cheek.

His hand rose to that cheek and came away wet. Joshua had spit on him.

Floyd had finally had enough. “You take that back, Josh, you ain’t no better. Your daddy’s deader than a doornail, too, you know!”

A hushed “ooh” went through the schoolyard. This could be good.

Everybody knew that Floyd wasn’t to be trifled with, and everybody knew how rough Joshua was, and they hadn’t seen a fight this even in a long time. “My daddy was a war hero! He died fighting the Hun in France while your daddy stayed here and made horseshoes, you chickenshit pretty boy!” Josh bellowed. “Say something else about my daddy if you want to go—he was a *hero*, damn it!”

Cowboy wiped the spittle from his face and stared at it, really looked at it, and took the measure of Joshua Cook in his whole life.

“No,” said Cowboy placidly, “he wasn’t a hero, was he, Josh? he barely made it to France before he deserted. Broke into a woman’s house and hid there till she was able to tell somebody. Then they came and got him. Your daddy died begging for his life in front of a firing squad of his own people. Your mama didn’t even get a check from him dying,

did she? She tried to keep you from knowing, but you heard her talking to your granny about it when they thought you was sleeping. I know it's easier to pretend that's not true. But it is, ain't it, Josh?"

Belle Callaway stood stunned into silence on the front steps of the school. She'd remain perched there, prepared to step in if things actually came to blows, but how in the world would Cowboy know about Frank Cook? Every grown person in town knew about the shame of the Cook family. It was why Judy didn't come to town no more, and it's why she didn't want to make her boy come to school, just in case the kids found out. And now they had.

Her eyes fixed on Cowboy as he stared up at the much bigger, much meaner boy. There was no fear there, there was no hurt. But there was something else. Her stomach dropped as she noticed the shadows that clung to Cowboy, shifting and moving in a way no breeze could explain, stirring the earth at his feet like a little dust devil. He wiped his hands clean on his britches and looked placidly back up at the larger boy. Joshua looked like he was about to fly into a rage.

"Joshua Dean Cook!" miss Belle called in her best not-to-be-contradicted teacher voice as she strode swiftly toward the boys. "Leave them alone and get on with you!" Then once she was closer, more softly, "Just go on home, Josh. Ain't nothing here for you right now. I'll make sure this don't get brought up again—not here." Josh gazed into Miss Belle's kind face with a scowl, but instead of lashing out, he turned and bolted

from the schoolyard, leaving the whispering student body behind.

Belle took a deep breath and motioned the smaller boy over. “Cowboy, come here, sir. We need to have a little talk.” Cowboy obediently trotted over to Miss Belle who nodded to his brother.

“Floyd, you can wait outside, please.” Belle led Cowboy into the cool, afternoon shade of the schoolhouse and instructed him to have a seat at his desk. Rather than sitting behind her own desk, she took a seat across from him, at Floyd’s desk in the next row, and turned to face him.

“Am I in trouble?” Cowboy asked suddenly, realizing he was the only student in the room, his affect slipping between dreamy and present.

“Not at all, darling,” said Miss Belle. “I just want to ask you some questions about the other day.”

“I’m fine, Miss Belle. I—”

“You fell, I heard. Your mama told me you had a walnut-sized knot on the back of your head.”

“It doesn’t hurt, ma’am,” Cowboy said, almost pleadingly.

“Cowboy, has anyone you don’t know spoken to you lately? Maybe when no one else is around?”

“...Miss?”

“Strangers, people who talk, but maybe don’t move their mouths. Ones that whispers, especially.” Cowboy shook his head. “What about shadows? Have you met anyone who didn’t have one? Or had more than one?”

“Are, are you feeling okay, Miss Belle? Because—”

“No, honey, I’m fine. Don’t you worry about it. Now this is important: I need you to hold real, real still for me, sugar.” Belle leaned over and took Cowboy’s hand, and then reached out with one of the many skills she had learned on her travels—reached more with her heart and mind than her hand, and tried to know, to feel if there was, in fact, a shadow or something marking the boy or following him. She focused her senses and the gift that rested deep within her and looked at Cowboy Absher. What she saw shook her in a way that nothing had in a very long time.

She saw Cowboy, but she saw him with a different name and in a different place. She saw him surrounded by death—by a culling, in fact, his entire blood family simply wiped out. Only Cowboy left standing, and then she saw *her*. Belle saw Cowboy, once called

Caleb, accepting the kiss of a bone-white wraith woman on his cheek, and in her mind eye, that kiss was like a heavy, iron lock, fastening the boy to this world. She watched his little body break and die; and then reform, and break, and die; and then reform, over and over again, a nightmare played out in her mind, until she felt like she was gonna unravel and scream.

When she opened her eyes, Cowboy was staring directly at her, his eyes were wide with what looked like a mix of wonder and near-panic. "I can't see you," he said. "Not like the others. Why can't I see you Miss Belle? What are you?"

Belle took a deep and steadying breath and went to the door. "Floyd, I'm gonna get the granny lady who looks after me when I feel poorly to look at that knot on the back of Cowboy's head. She lives right out in the Gap."

Floyd looked up, startled. "Is he okay?"

"He will be. Now, you listen: I'm gonna call your mama and let her know what's going on. Everything's gonna be fine."

Floyd walked over to his brother, who seemed, in that moment, as distant and strange as he did the first time Floyd saw him. He almost expected him to say, "Cows."

"Hey, buddy. Miss Belle's gonna get your head looked at. Now, you mind her, and do

what she says. She's calling mama right now."

"I'm fine, Floyd, why can't—"

Floyd stopped Cowboy's protest with a hand on his shoulder. Quietly, so Miss Belle wouldn't hear, he said, "Buddy, we all know what happened on the island, even if we don't understand it. You got hurt, Cowboy—real bad, whether it hurts or not. And we got to make sure you're not gonna—you're not gonna fall again, okay?"

Cowboy refused to look at his brother "What if I'm not okay?"

"You trust me, little brother?" Floyd asked.

"Of course I do," Cowboy began.

"Well, I trust Miss Belle. Go on with her, now. I'll see you back at the house—real soon."

Cowboy finally looked at Floyd, meeting his eyes full on, and in doing so, saw the years and years of life and living and children and love that his brother had ahead of him. He had time. Floyd had plenty of time.

"Okay, big brother," he said finally, and then, "I love you."

“I love you too, little man.” Floyd hugged his little brother tight and then turned to Miss Belle. “Miss Belle, it’ll be dark before you can walk halfway to the Gap,” Floyd began.

“I can get a ride, honey. Go on now, I just talked to your mama. She’s waiting on you.” Belle closed the door behind Floyd and walked over to the telephone on the far wall of the room, picked up the handset, and spoke to the operator. “Yes, Baker’s Gap, four five seven five, please, Myrtle. Clara? Yes, it’s me, honey. Can I speak to Melvin, please? I need a ride.”

The truck pulled up to the tall house in the Gap an hour or so later. Melvin Blevins had been more than happy to give the pair a ride out to the Gap. He’d been meaning to get out that way anyhow.

“Y’all wait right here, I—I’ll let them know they got company. You know as well as I do that surprises don’t go real well out here,” Melvin half-chuckled.

“Melvin, don’t be silly,” Belle said as she opened the passenger side door and stepped out into the drive.

Melvin turned to Cowboy. “You sit tight, young feller. Everything’s going to be just fine,” and Melvin popped out of the truck, before Belle could approach the high steps to the main porch, and called out, “Uh, Miss Walker? Miss Ellie? Uh, y’all, y’all got company out here. Just—just lettin’ you know, so no nobody is surprised, nor nothing.”

Marcie Walker appeared at the top of the steps dressed in her choring clothes, dirty from the thumbs to the elbows in rich, dark planting soil. “Melvin, what are you on about...? Well, hey. Hey there, miss girl! This is a pleasant surprise.”

“Hey, Aunt Marcie. It’s good to see you too.”

Ellie Walker came around the corner, also in choring clothes and grinning. “Marce, what’s going on? Did I hear Sarah?”

“Now, Ellie,” Marcie Walker corrected her sister, “you know it’s Miss Belle now.”

“Hey, Aunt Ellie. We need y’all’s help.”

[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. How do you feel about cursing my name now? I hope you all enjoyed that one as we begin our movement into the next part of season two. Y’all, now is the time that I invite you to head on over to oldgodsofappalachia.com to complete your social media ritual: following us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, as well as the Discord server, which is open to the public. We do have some Patreon-specific events

coming up over there—speaking of which, one of those is Saturday, November 28th. Live on Discord, a performance of a brand-new story set in the Old Gods universe by Cam Collins: *The Door Under the Floor*, performed live by yours truly, Steve Shell. uh, if you enjoyed the Wolf Sisters readings that we did last spring, this is going to be very much in the spirit of that. Just me, my voice, and your ears. And Cam’s dark, dark, evil words. And it’s going to be a good time! That’s for patrons \$15 and up on Saturday, November 28th, starting at 8pm eastern time. All the details are there on the website or on our social media.

And if you’re not a Patreon patron, go on over to patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia. The *The Door Under the Floor* event is for patrons pledging 15 and more, but heck, that amount also checks you in for 17 episodes of *Build Mama A Coffin*, a completed, full-cast storyline set in the same universe as *Old Gods of Appalachia*.

Of course, family, *Old Gods of Appalachia* is a production of DeepNerd Media. Our intro music is by our brother Landon Blood’s. Our outro music, of course, is by Those Poor Bastards. Today’s story was written and performed by Steve Shell—that’s me. We’ll see y’all real soon, family. Real soon.