

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 2 Episode 17: The Boy Who Could Not Die

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

There are places in these mountains that are safer than others. There are mining towns that bustle with life and prosperity by day, that turn dark with drink and the blowing off of steam in the night. There are heart-built communities and homesteads that stand strong and reliable, the very bedrock of the heritage of folks who work and live on this land. There are churches that stand as the beacons of God's light amongst the wilderness, and others where pride and bigotry and hypocrisy have shuttered that light. There are miles and miles of dark woods rife with dangerous critters, both natural and unnatural, and neither one knowed any fear of man. There are deep caves that seem like shelter until you venture further in, as well as questionable-looking shacks and old concrete bunkers that provide a much safer refuge, but none of those havens were as remotely as safe as the Walker House.

Built on a hill overlooking the expanse of Baker's Gap proper, the Walker House was both a refuge and comfort and a fortress against both the seen and unseen worlds. Originally conceived as Pleasant Evenings, a parlor house in a less complicated time, the building was sound and handsome. The house was tall and held a story above and a story below the main floor. How many rooms each floor held was a debate that might never be solved, but that's a discussion for another day. Then the light of that business

with the Railroad Man and the Local Magistrate 15 or so years back, the Walker House had become a place of sanctuary for people in need—women escaping the unkind hands of a poorly-matched husband, children who found cruelty rather than compassion at home, or just strangers with nowhere else to turn, who needed a warm bed and a warmer meal, often filled its halls. It was a waystation for other grannies and practitioners passing through or leaving the area when safe lodgings were not available elsewhere. When the sky fell, and there was nowhere else to go, there was always the Walker House.

So when Sarah Avery, daughter of the late Carol Anne and Pinky, niece to the late Eddie Avery, as well as to Ellie and Marcie Walker, needed help, she thanked her stars the Walker House was a short ride in Melvin's old truck away. On the other hand, Cowboy Absher, once called Caleb Gibson, did not know what to make of his current surroundings. Since that night on the Island, his world had been in perpetual decay. If he looked around him and thought about it for a minute, he could see how every living thing would pass—could see trees sprout, flourish, and rot. He could see men age, die, and decay in front of him, and how it would happen. He could shake his head and stop seeing it for a bit, but sooner or later, it would all come back.

But here in this strange and wonderful place, everything was alive. The trees here appeared to his curse-bound eyes to be wrapped in vines of light and sky. The very ground swirled and glowed with markings, made not on the earth, but *within* it; and there was a wind that seemed to blow without disturbing a single leaf that sang of life

and birth and—and Green. It was so much that he could barely take it in. He almost felt like it was going to swallow him whole, like the ground would open up and he'd be lost, falling into a lush and merciless world of vines and leaves and briars and branches, and the whole place would just gobble him right up.

His vision flickered—his mind traveled...

A dark grove of pine. A hawthorn tree, marking a mass grave. Eyes of dark madness, drawing him to her cold and lifeless hand.

Caleb—not Cowboy now—Caleb's head swam, and he reached for something to steady him, and he felt the shadows begin to stir around him, felt the earth start to shift under his feet.

And he looked up and saw kind Miss Belle talking to the two other women, none of whom he could *see* the way he could see the heavysset old man who'd driven him out here, aging away before him. And when they felt their eyes on him, felt what he felt in the ground, maybe—they all stopped their laughter and smiling speech. Caleb saw the worry on their faces. As his vision tunneled, as the darkness began to rise, he heard Miss Belle say his name in concern, saw her move towards him quickly, her small yet strong hands catching him by the shoulders as he was about to pitch over.

“Cowboy? Honey? Are you okay? Come on now, sugar—let's get you inside.”

[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

The young schoolteacher, who had once been Sarah Avery and now, for reasons of her own independence, and perhaps safety, was now known as Miss Annabelle Callaway, sat at her Aunt Marcie's kitchen table, dicing onions for tonight's supper. It was a familiar, comforting routine, and Marcie had to admit, it was good to have the girl home, if only for a few hours. The boy, Cowboy—Marcie knew that was not the name his actual mama had given him, but Cowboy would do for now—sat next to her, carefully peeling a bunch of sweet taters, as Marcie had instructed him. Marcie Walker was not shy about sharing the workload in her kitchen, particularly if doing so afforded her an opportunity to

quietly observe her helpers.

The boy was pale and very quiet—too quiet, more quiet than mere shyness could account for. He barely seemed to breathe, and in some ways, it seemed as though his physical being barely took up any space in the room at all. And yet his presence held a weight, a gravity, that Marcie could feel in her bones, something that commanded her attention. It warranted her to investigate—no doubt about that. Belle had been right to bring Cowboy to her and Ellie.

Ellie Walker bustled into the kitchen, coming straight in from feeding the chickens and joining Marcie at the sink to wash her hands. As she leaned forward, Marcie saw her gaze go to Cowboy. She cocked her head to one side, her expression thoughtful, slowly and thoroughly scrubbing her hands as she watched the boy for a moment. Then she stood up straight and reached for the dish towel, quickly drying her hands. When her eyes met Marcie's, the look at him was troubled. Marcie nodded, and Ellie returned the gesture.

When she turned back to the table, however, Ellie was all smiles. "It's good to see you," she said, "and to meet this fine young gentleman. I'm assuming Mr. Cowboy here is one of your students, Miss Belle?"

Belle smiled and nodded. "Yes, Cowboy and his brother Floyd are both in my class."

“Is that so?” Ellie shined, sitting down opposite the pair of them. “So what’s your favorite subject, good sir?”

Cowboy shrugged a little, his eyes still on the knife and the orange flesh of the sweet tater. “I don’t know. I like reading okay.” He raised his eyes to look up at Miss Ellie, and again tried to *see* her, and was rewarded with an unchanged woman with warm freckled skin, deep knowing eyes, and hair the color of spun fire. Cowboy could see the same light from the woods, playing over and across her from time to time. She was dressed in choring clothes, and he could see the life and the dirt smudged here and there, even where she’d washed her hands. There was a knife tied in a sheath on her belt that drew his eye, and focused his sight just for a second. The light that welled up from behind that worked leather spoke of the moon, spoke of the cold power of rain and wind. He quickly looked away.

“Well, then,” said Ellie, tracking the boy’s gaze and sliding Moonbone back along her belt and outside. “Let me see if Marcie needs any more help in the kitchen.”

Supper was a simple affair of ham and biscuits and sweet tater hash—good, country comfort food—and the three women dug in eagerly. It’d been a long day for all three, Belle having been at the schoolhouse since shortly after sunup, and the Walker women having spent most of the day working in the garden. The boy, however, seemed strangely lacking in appetite for a child of 11, taking only small bites and pushing his food around the plate, as if to disguise how little he actually consumed. Both Marcie and

Ellie noticed this, and exchanged a significant look, but neither commented on it. Not yet. The time for questions would come later.

After they had finished, Cowboy helped clear the table, while Ellie rolled up her sleeves and began scrubbing the dishes. Belle offered to help dry. Marcie sat back down at the table and pulled out this morning's copy of the *Johnson County Banner*, which she'd begun reading that morning, casually perusing the classified advertisements while she kept one eye on the boy. Within minutes, Cowboy excused himself and headed out to the back door to the privy, with noticeable haste. Marcie hopped up from her seat and quietly followed, slipping through a side door that would take her around the side of the house where she could quietly slip behind the outhouse unnoticed. From within, she heard the sounds of retching, just as she'd feared. Quickly, she retraced her steps back to the house, settling back into her seat at the table just as Cowboy made it back to the kitchen.

Marcie looked up at the boy and smiled, folding her newspaper and setting it aside.

"Well, now," she said, gesturing for Cowboy to take a seat. "I guess we have a few things to talk about, don't we, young sir?" Cowboy sighed, his chin dropping toward his chest.

"Yes'm," he said quietly. The look of weariness and defeat on his face like to broke Marcie's heart. No child should have to bear the burden this boy was carrying, of that much she was certain; so when she spoke next, it was as gentle as she could manage.

“I know we’re all but strangers to you, Cowboy,” she said, “but I promise you, we mean you no harm. Miss Belle says you’ve been having some trouble lately, that you had an accident? And she brought you to meet us because she thought Miss Ellie and I might be able to help. Now, I can’t promise you we can, but we’d like to try, if you’re willing. Would you like that, Cowboy?”

And the dam broke.

All the fear and pain of the past couple days washed over him, and the boy who’d been known as Cowboy began to cry, and slowly, haltingly, the whole story came pouring out. A Sunday afternoon of adventure with his new friends that had turned into a nightmare, and one that had not yet ended for the boy, who now saw death everywhere he looked. As his sniffles finally subsided, Cowboy took a deep, shuddering breath, beginning to settle down at last, and turned his exhausted gaze up to Marcie.

“Do you really think y’all can help me, Miss Marcie?” Marcie smiled and reached across the table. The boy let her take his hand, looking up into her eyes with what looked like the beginnings of hope.

“I’m gonna try my very best,” she promised, and she nodded towards her sister, who had stood very quietly by the door this whole time, just listening.

“Miss Ellie, could you fetch me an egg?”

Ellie smiled at Cowboy, too. “Course, she said. “Be right back.” And she ducked out the back door and was back in moments with a fresh egg, straight from the chicken coop out back, which she carefully washed in the sink and placed in a teacup, which she sat on the table next to Marcie. Knowing the method Marcie planned to use, she fetched a jug of fresh, clean, spring water from a shelf in the pantry, poured a bit in the kettle, and set it on the stove to warm up. Marcie took a large mixing bowl from the cabinet, half-filled it with more of the water from the jug, then pulled down another, special bottle from a high shelf and mixed a bit of the clear liquid inside into the water. The kitchen filled with the light, cheery fragrance of sweet orange, roses, and herbs. Marcie carefully and thoroughly washed her hands and face in the aromatic water and directed Cowboy to do the same. Then, she pulled a chair from the table, which she set in the middle of the kitchen floor, and asked Cowboy to remove his shoes and have a seat.

“Now, Cowboy,” Marcie said, “I want you to close your eyes and take a deep breath. Can you do that for me? Nice and slow, that’s it. Now take another one—good, just like that. Now, I know you’ve had a scary few days, but I want you to try to settle your heart, okay? You’re safe here—no harm can come to you under this roof. This I can promise you with no reservations—no one and nothing can hurt you here. You’re safe, so you just breathe and let yourself feel calm and safe and comfortable, okay?”

Cowboy nodded, smiling. Marcie could see that her words had taken root and helped the boy to relax, and that was good. She gently lifted the fresh, clean egg from the

teacup and held it up before Cowboy.

“This here egg is gonna help me figure out what’s happened to you,” she explained, “if it’s okay with you. I might touch you with it on your arms and your legs, but I don’t have to. I’m not gonna smash it on you or anything,” she said with a grin, “but if that’s not okay with you, please tell me so. Okay?”

Cowboy nodded and shrugged. “It’s okay, Miss Marcie. A little egg never hurt nobody.”

Marcie chuckled. “All right then, you just relax and sit quiet. That’s all you have to do.” And Marcie proceeded slowly and methodically, moving the egg around the boy, working in gentle circles about an inch away from him, from the crown of his head down to his neck and his chest. When she reached his arms, he lifted them one at a time and gently rolled the egg down, top to bottom, shoulder to fingertips. She repeated the procedure with his legs. When she reached his feet, she asked him to lift them one at a time and repeated the circular process she’d used previously, as feet tended to be ticklish.

“Okay then,” she told him with a smile. “All done. You just sit right there for a minute, young man.” Marcie resumed her seat at the table, and Ellie brought her a glass filled with the water she’d heated on the stove. Marcie rapped the egg against the edge of the table and gently cracked it into the glass. What swirled around the water was... different.

Marcie had used this method of diagnosing all manner of spiritual ailments many times, but this was new to her. The egg yolk was laced through with spidery veins of black, while the white was cloudy, swirling with tendrils of gray—which she might have expected, given the black lace to the yolk—but also... Green. The haziness had spread throughout the water, swirling with potency.

“Huh,” Marcie said thoughtfully. She turned to her sister. “Ellie?”

Ellie, who’d been watching quietly from her place by the stove, took the kettle off the heat and returned to the table herself. She took a seat near Cowboy with a smile.

“Honey, can I hold your hand for a minute?” Cowboy complied, and Ellie turned to look, really *look*, at the boy, opening her mind and reaching out with her sight to try to better comprehend what Marcie’s divination told them.

The ties that bind us to this world are usually fragile things, gossamer strands spun on the looms of great-great-grandmamas that we will never meet, until our thread is snipped clean. Sometimes if she looked right, squinted just out of the corner of her right eye, Ellie could see those strands. Cowboy held no such ties. These were no mere threads binding this precious boy together, but heavy chains, forged to the stygian soil of death itself and tempered in the cold river of eternity.

Cowboy was bound to the earth, and no magic she knew could break that hold.

This was going to require an entirely different set of skills than those honed by any of the Walker women.

Ellie exchanged a glance with Marcie and turned back to the boy with a smile. “Cowboy, how’d you like to come visit my house in Virginia? I got a little place up in Esau County, and we—Miss Marcie and I—we know a nice lady there who might be able to help sort things out. Would that be all right with you?”

Cowboy thought about it for a minute and finally gave a slow nod. “I—I’d really like to see my mama, though, and Floyd. Just, you know, just to let them know it’s—it’s all right, and, and make sure it’s okay with Mama and Daddy?”

“Of course,” Miss Ellie assured him. “We can go talk to them first thing in the morning.” And then Miss Marcie said she thought it was time for everyone to get some rest. Cowboy and Miss Ellie and Miss Belle would all have to be up early in the morning so that Mr. Blevins could drive them all back into town in time for Miss Belle to open up the schoolhouse before driving Cowboy and Miss Ellie on to Virginia.

The Walker House held its own type of quiet in the hours between sundown and dawn, though all three of the adult women in the house were sleeping in their respective rooms, and Mr. Blevins was sleeping at the foot of the driveway in his old truck, snoring with such a ferocity that Cowboy could hear him all the way up here on the porch.

Cowboy found that sleep wasn't something he did much anymore, and so here in the dark hours after midnight, he found himself on the porch of the Walker House. He was fascinated by the lights and the patterns and the shapes that pulsed and glowed across the grounds under his new sight. The wood of the porch itself seemed to swarm with power—power that could bind, shut out, protect, and in some places, even kill. His new senses also told him it was not turning its might on him at the moment. Whatever was out there protecting this place saw him as an invited and welcomed guest, but he could also feel they weren't exactly turning their back on him yet, either.

From somewhere in the dark corners, far beyond the chain of bushes that mark the edge of the first row of pulsing protective energy, came a sound. [Whistle] A sound that Caleb—he thought of himself as Caleb more than Cowboy now, when he was alone—thought he'd imagined. Until it came a second time. [Whistle] It was a badly-done bird call. It was the call that he and the other boys used any time they were playing out in the woods and needed to call to the others. It was the “hey, are you there?” whistle that Archie would give Curt outside his bedroom window when they was sneaking out. It was the whistle Floyd used to call for him when they were playing soldier and he wanted to make sure Cowboy was ready to ambush Dallas or Shane or whoever was coming through the brush.

[Whistle]

When the whistle come a third time, Caleb peered out into the darkness and returned it.

[Response whistle]

The response was immediate: the sound of running paws coming through the Green. *Sam!* To anyone else, it would look like the old, blind beagle was running in random directions, taking wide loops around some trees and jumping way further than he had to over some small piles of stones and leaves, but to Caleb's new eyes, he could see that Sam was avoiding all the dangerous pulses of energy, all the dark green snares that would snatch an intruder, as if he could see them all plain as day. The old boy gave a low "ruff" and panted happily, then ran the exact same path back up the grounds to the edge of the woods where shadows joined him. Caleb, feeling more like Cowboy now, felt a grin break across his face as those shadows resolved into Archie, Curt, Dallas, and Shane, all following blind, old Sam as he led them patiently along the safe path just in front of the porch.

"Hey, kid," Archie called. Cowboy ran down the steps, minding his own steps, to meet his friends in the middle of the yard. He noticed Floyd wasn't with them.

"Hey, Arch! Hey, Curt! Hey, boys—what are y'all doing out here in the middle of the night? It's, it's dangerous out here and—how'd you know to follow Sam like that?"

Archie blinked. "I—I don't rightly know. Dallas?"

Dallas Shepard looked like a proud papa as he rubbed Sam's head and ears. "He just told me, I guess. He's a good boy."

Curt stepped up and hugged Cowboy without a word. "Thank you, little man. My daddy's not been back around our yard since you—well, since—"

"That wasn't your daddy, Curt," Cowboy said softly. "That was, that was something that got in the place that hurt when your daddy died. That's what some of them do—they find a crack where they can get in, and they, they do bad things."

"Whatever you did, he ain't been back. Just, just wanted you to know you didn't—you didn't take that lick for nothing."

"Well, that's—that's good, Curt. I hope things get better for y'all." Cowboy's sight showed him that Curt Kilgore would not have an easy life, pretty much ever, but he wouldn't go out young nor easy. He'd just get tougher and quieter.

Shane stepped up beside Curt and looked Cowboy up and down. "You're really okay? I mean, you hit that tree like a meteorite, Cowboy. How did you—"

Cowboy looked at Shane with the gravity that a boy that small shouldn't be able to manage, seeing his friend's life expand out for him. Not as long as Floyd's, but longer than Curt's. It'd be a good run with no kids and lots of friends, and they'd bury him

beside his mamaw and papaw and nowhere near either of his wives. That was for the best.

“Please, Shane, I don’t want to talk about it. But I’m okay, see?” Cowboy shimmied a silly circle dance to make Shane smirk that half-smile that would always be his trademark.

Before Shane could say anything else, Archie interrupted. “Floyd said he’d be up with your maw and paw in the morning. He said he’d see you then. Your mom’s pretty upset after she talked to Miss Belle again. You going away, kid?” When Cowboy looked up at Archie, he saw more kids and grandkids than the Woodchuck of Baker’s Gap would know what to do with, and he grinned a little to himself. The Stallard men lived long, long lives; and Archie would be no exception.

“Yeah, Miss Belle’s family is gonna help me find my people, I guess. Gonna go up to Virginia for a while, I think.”

“Well.... well, that’s good,” Archie said, nervously, and a little too loud. “Maybe you won’t get on your own people’s nerves as much.” Archie smiled and ruffled Cowboy’s hair. “Gonna miss you, kid. Just a little bit.”

Cowboy felt something wet and looked down to see Sam nuzzling the back of his hand. “Hey, boy!” As Cowboy knelt down to love on the old feller who had brought his friends

to see him off, Dallas caught his eye.

“He’s always liked you, see? I trust his judgment most of the time. You take care of yourself up there, now.”

Cowboy looked at Dallas, the only boy of seven kids, and knew that his friend would bring more than a few daughters into the world before he left it, and that he’d bury most of his friends but Archie, if things held as they were.

“Thanks, Dal. I appreciate it.”

“We just wanted to see you before you headed out. And here—Mamaw sent this,” said Shane, thrusting a wax paper bundle into Cowboy’s hands. “It’s cornbread. We didn’t eat *too* much of it.” Mamaw Marie’s cornbread was so good, it was legal currency in some places, so Cowboy accepted the package with the reverence it deserved.

“We gotta get back,” Archie said. “It’ll be sunup by the time we get everybody home.” One by one, the boys either shook hands or slapped Cowboy on the back—except for Curt, who crushed Cowboy into one more long hug.

“You take care of yourself, now—I mean it.”

“Thank you.” Cowboy watched his friends carefully pick their steps, following the

steady trot of Sam, as he led the boys of Baker's Gap back toward the dawn and towards home.

By 10 the next morning, Miss Ellie, Mr. Melvin Blevins, and their young passenger had been on the road for more than a couple of hours. The goodbye with the family went as expected—Deborah Absher bawled and told Cowboy how much she loved him. Junebug had a serious man-talk with him about minding Miss Ellie, how proud he was of him for being brave and looking out for his friends. Floyd gave him a stack of old pulp magazines and a tight hug. Brothers didn't need to say much, and at this point, Floyd and Cowboy had already said plenty.

Ellie had decided and instructed Melvin to take the roundabout way back to Esau county. It would be best to stay off the main roads here and there. Whatever had bound the boy was serious business, and she didn't know who or what else might have eyes on him. Between Deborah Absher and her sister, Marcie, she had enough food to feed him for a week. So they'd stop for a nice picnic lunch around the state line, and then again for dinner before sundown. She had a safe place they could spend the night if they needed to, but once she got him to her place, she'd feel worlds better. She and her sister knew a fair share of workings and bindings, but the grannies up around South Fork and Boggs Holler knew their way around death rites better than just about anybody. If there was anybody in the world that could help him, it would be them.

And so, family, we'll leave Miss Ellie and Cowboy here as they make their way back up

into the southwest Virginia mountains this evening because our business is still right here in Baker's Gap. There's a cold wind blowing that'll bring with it a whole 'nother family reunion, along with accusations of murder most foul. We'll get to that story real soon, family—just not right now.

[In the Pines by Keena Graham]

Hey girl, hey girl,

Don't lie to me

Tell me where did you sleep last night?

In the pines, in the pines...

Well, hey there, family. Look at where we are—the closing of our first circle, the end of Act One of Season Two of Old Gods of Appalachia, In the Pines. That means we're going to take a little hiatus so we can prepare for Act Two, which is going to be helmed by the magnificent writing of one Cam Collins and will feature all kinds of horrific things that are going to mess you up on the inside, and maybe the outside—you never can tell. We're not responsible for any bruising.

Now, just because we're at the end of Act One does not mean you're gonna be without content—no, no, no. No, family. Now, our regular episodes do not resume until January 7th, but—whoa, calm down—that does not mean you will be bereft of content. If you

were at Door Under the Floor, our live event for patrons pledging \$15 or more, you have some inside info. Let me fill you in: Part Two of Door Under the Floor, which is a two-part story, will be available for patrons on Discord on December 19th. In the time between now and then, a full-cast production of that story will be available on [Patreon](#), featuring the acting skills of Aliya Johnson, Allison Mullins, Brandon Sartain, and Granny White herself—not playing Granny White, but all the same—Betsy Puckett. We'll be producing a full-cast version of that story that patrons will have access to.

“But Steve, I’m not a patron. I can’t do that, it’s slim pickings times right now, with the ’rona.” I got you, fam—you’re going to get a Christmas gift from us: The Holiest Days of Bone and Shadow—that trilogy returns on Christmas Day, and littl’uns, y’all know we open our presents at the same time, so there’s not even an advance Patreon listen on that one. It will be live on the public feed only, for everybody at the same time. How does that grab you? Become a patron, get a little more—or you at least get something for Christmas, right? That’s how it works, y’all.

It has been my distinct honor and pleasure to bring you all into this first act of Season Two, to have you meet the boys of Baker’s Gap—and look at where we left us. Cowboy is as fine as Cowboy is going to be. Sam is just fine—he’s well-fed. Matter of fact, he’s probably eating or sleeping or snoring or farting or something right now—he’s fine, he’s a beagle. That’s what he does. Melvin’s on the road, Miss Ellie’s on the road, and we’ll catch up with them at some point, but I happen to know what Miss Cam has in store for y’all. You ain’t ready. Think you are? Guess what—you ain’t.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Today's story was written by Cam Collins and Steve Shell and was performed by Steve Shell. Our intro music was by our brother Landon Blood, and our outro music is by Keena Graham of Blood on the Harp. For all our social media contacts, transcripts, and more, join us at oldgodsofappalachia.com. We hope everybody has a happy and safe holiday time, whichever one you happen to celebrate, or not. Either way, we'll see you soon, family. Real soon.