

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 2 Episode 20: Am I Born to 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.

Baker's Gap, Tennessee—1927, about three months before Frank Tilley died hard.

Esther Campbell was freezing. She was dressed in her warmest layers and standing in the cold outside of Rising Creek Baptist Church in the pre-dawn darkness, shivering, and had been for about a half hour. She'd walked the entire way over from her boarding house carrying a big old picnic basket full of plates and cups and other sundry things in order to be early to do good service for her community. She just hoped her ride wasn't running late and she didn't freeze to death.

Esther had moved to Baker's Gap from Arnie, Tennessee about three months ago, shortly after the town of Arnie officially ceased to be. Now, Arnie weren't but 10 miles or so up the mountain from Baker's Gap and once featured two whole churches, a feed store, and, briefly, a commissary for the railroad. When the railroad work around Arnie was done and the town was passed over for an official stop or station, well, the bleeding started and didn't stop till the corpse was dry. So, Esther, a spinster at the absolutely dusty age of 26, took a secretarial job at Bernie's Industrial Farm Supply in Baker's Gap proper and spent her days organizing the files of that storied establishment's larger

accounts, which lately felt more like filing obituaries for failed farm after failed farm. It was steady work, though, and the people were nice enough.

It'd taken her all of three days on the job to get invited to church at Rising Creek Baptist by Faye Bernie, the boss's wife.

Esther was delighted. She had been adrift since Buckner's Chapel closed its doors, and she never felt quite comfortable just turning up at a strange church uninvited, much less a full-on hollering and shouting Free Will Baptist one like Rising Creek. She had been nervous at first, but a few congregational sings, prayer meetings, and bible studies later, the next thing she knew, she was being invited to join the Ladies' Auxiliary.

For those of y'all who might not be familiar, the Ladies' Auxiliary of a mountain church was the absolute backbone of that body of worship. Organizing food pantries, visiting the sick when the pastor was spread too thin, generally being the mamaws and aunts for the whole community at large: these were the solemn duties of a true lady's auxiliary. This particular body of mothers and sisters was headed up by the pastor's wife herself, Miss Josephine Pickens. Esther was quick to notice she was one of only two single women in the body and took no small amount of pride that these older women saw her good works and wanted her amongst their number. The past 12 weeks had been glorious and exhausting as Esther settled into her new hometown. Miss Pickens had given her and the younger women lots and lots to do during the week—mostly leg work and door knocking and flyer hanging—and most of the older women weren't quite up to trotting

around town in the evening hours or picking up or dropping off meals for the shut-in or the needy. Usually, one or two of the menfolk from the church would drive the women about as needed, or, in a pinch, Mr. Blevins. Though not a churchgoer, he was happy to make sure the ladies made it back to Rising Creek to be picked up by their husbands, or in the case of the two single gals, to be dropped off at their respective boarding houses.

Well, after the meeting to agree upon who would head up that year's Christmas fundraising initiative for the orphanage over in Tipton—surprise, it was Ms. Pickens—Esther had been stopped by the other single woman in the group, Georgie Triplett. She had informed Esther that, while working for the Ladies' Auxiliary at RCB was good and right and undoubtedly pleased the Lord, she knew that being the new girl, and especially the new single girl, could make you feel pretty overworked and underappreciated. Esther told her, no, no, no she was glad to help, and she didn't do her work for the church for praise or position. Georgie had grinned slyly and told her it was all right to feel frustrated by her majesty Ms. Pickens and her hen house, and if she wanted to do some work that might feel a little more gratifying and fulfilling—well then, she worked with an interdenominational group of people from churches and civic organizations all across Appalachia, and this group saw to the people who lay on the outskirts of polite society—folks living rough up in the woods in tents and lean-tos, the drifters who came and went on the rail once they found out they wasn't white enough or holy enough to be wanted in Baker's Gap. Didn't they deserve the love of the almighty as well? church folk would always take care of church folk in little towns like this, but it took a bigger body to truly look after the Lost.

“A lot of these small-town preachers are like shepherds who get fat on the backs of their flocks, and they forget how to look for the lost lambs,” Georgie had said with that sly grin as she handed Esther a pamphlet. “Tell you what: we have a pancake breakfast coming up at one of the poor folks’ camps out off of Peter’s Branch on Saturday. Come help me out with that and see if you don’t feel more seen and appreciated than you do when you’re doing the bidding of her Royal Majesty Queen Pickens and her Court of the Holy Chickens!” and Georgie did a little curtsy while flapping her arms like chicken wings. Esther covered her mouth and snorted in spite of herself.

The two women pulled it together just in time as Ms. Pickens and her inner flock came around the corner. The three other women, Peggy Walcott, Fanny Moore, and Jolene Metcalf, trailing dutifully behind the pastor’s wife like chicks following their mama. Esther fought down a giggle as the pastor himself, Claude Pickens, pulled up in his model T to pick up his wife.

Esther and Georgie watched as the women hemmed and hawwed and oh gosh’d their way through a proper mountain goodbye as their own husbands arrived one by one to pick them up as well. Eventually, each car left the church and vanished into the deepening dusk. As Jolene Metcalf’s husband pulled away, the old biddy leaned out the window and called to the two single women, “Mr. Blevins will be by shortly to give y’all a ride, girls. Make sure he takes you straight home—don’t do nothing that I wouldn’t

do! HOO HOO HOO HOO HOO!” She laughed in such a way that Esther would have sworn she just laid an egg.

She felt her face redden in anger and embarrassment. She knew what they thought about Mr. Blevins. She knew what they said about his daughter, who’d passed years back. Whether he come to church or not, Melvin Blevins was a kind man, and people shouldn’t joke about him that way. She glowered down at the pamphlet Georgie had handed her. it featured a drawing of a woman looking hopefully towards a horizon, a babe nestled at her bosom, and beneath it, “Good Mother Ministries,” and below that, a slogan: “We sow in the Dark Earth so we might sing at dawn.” Well, that seemed hopeful and wholesome.

“Georgie,” she said, “sign me up for Saturday. I’m in.”

[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...

That had been four days ago, and now here she stood, freezing her tail feathers off, waiting for—for who? Not anyone from church. Probably not even Mr. Blevins. Georgie just told her to meet her here by 5 a.m., and her ministry friends would have their ride all worked out. She felt kind of foolish, leaving from her own new home church to go do work for a different group entirely, and she started to fret. What did she know about Georgie Triplett? What did she know about this whole arrangement? There was a reason tramps and train hoppers didn't get visited by the Ladies' Auxiliary. Well, they were often crooked, shifty people from, well... from away. Poor folks, sure, but poor folks that would cut your throat for a half dollar, and the folks living rough off Peter's Branch—a bunch of moonshiners and bootleggers, from what she understood. she heard about little squatter gangs like that, just moving into cleared-out hollers and living outside the law. She'd heard the stories about the women that had been living out in what they used to call the Clutch on the other side of the Gap ten year ago. She heard about that. People who lived like that were downright dangerous. But before she could change her mind and start the long walk home, a big, old work truck pulled up—the kind that hauled lumber for supplies or for the railroad, and out of the back, quick as a rabbit, popped Georgie Triplett. She turned and carefully helped someone else down

from the back of the truck, too—another woman, older and taller, and once she got closer, to Esther’s surprise, Black.

“Esther, this is Miss Darla. Miss Darla, this is my friend, Esther, I told you about.”

The woman did not speak, and Esther noticed she watched Georgie closely during the introduction and then turned her eyes to Esther. Esther had not known many, if any, Black folks in her day. Living in Arnie, her social circle had been about two shades of ivory soap lighter than a glass of milk.

“How do you do, ma’am?” Esther said, speaking slowly. she assumed the woman was Deaf and had been reading Georgie’s lips. She also signed the greeting with her hands. Esther’s great-granny had been deaf most of her life, and Esther had learned both sign language and what her great-granny had taught her was the courteous pace at which to speak to be easily read.

The woman shook her head and signed back, “I can hear you, my new friend. I cannot speak.”

“Oh, uh—Miss Darla had an episode years back and lost her voice,” Georgie explained, “but she can hear you just fine.” She looked back at Miss Darla. “Can I tell her, or would you like to, since y’all seem to be real good at that hand talking.”

Miss Darla shook her head and signed to Esther, “Tell her she can tell you my story on the way. I see light in you, Miss Campbell. Tell her, and let us get on. There is much to see.”

Esther relayed the older woman’s message and the three women climbed into the rear of the truck and settled in as it trundled off into the lightening day.

Miss Darla’s story was one of wonder. She had seen so much darkness in her life. She had endured horrors beyond anything Esther could comprehend, and she’d survived. She had no people left and had to navigate the brutality of the South and the echoes of the War Between the States, and she’d been lost. She made her way from the coast to South Carolina to Tennessee, and for years, had worked as a servant to white families. Finally, when she gave up on trying to fit into their towns and into their worlds, where there was no place for her, she found a community of other people that the towns had no places for. And from that group and from their shared faith, they’d come together to celebrate and worship in the Ministry of the Good Mother.

When they arrived at the site of the pancake breakfast, Esther was amazed. Deep, deep into the woods, off one of the most remote branches of the Nolichucky, was a whole town of tents and makeshift shelters—communal living spaces that were organized and orderly. Men and women, and even children, living together outside. Ms. Darla seemed to be known to all, and many children ran to her and hugged her and talked with her in sign. The truck, which turned out to be loaded with griddles and grills and pots and

pans and other equipment, was unloaded, and the largest meal Esther had ever helped prepare began to come together.

As she peeled potatoes, rationed out bacon and other foods, Esther noticed that all the knives, the pots, the pans, the camp gear, was—it's all brand new. Some still with labels on it, some came straight from wooden shipping crates. The truck itself, she suddenly realized, had had a shipping company name covered up with paint on the doors and on the tailgate. All of this was stolen! Her mind raced. She was among criminals, thieves, and who knew what else, and—and you know what? She didn't care. She saw more caring here, amongst these folks who'd managed to cobble together a community out of nature and nothing, than she ever did at Rising Creek or Buckner's Chapel or any church she belonged to.

After the meal was completed, about a third of the camp—some 30 or 40 people—gathered in what was clearly the communal courtyard for this strange little bit of nowhere. A semicircle started forming around Miss Darla and a little girl, who looked to be about seven or eight years old. Miss Darla signed to her, and she nodded, and then her voice rang out clear as a new day breaking: "It's church time! Everybody, well, come help us sing! We'll get right into service." And a handful of people moved forward to join and form a makeshift choir that belted its way in roughshod harmonies through some of the bloodiest hymns Esther had ever heard strung together. "Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted," "Power in the Blood," and a newer one she'd only heard on the radio about a crimson stream—all songs about the spilling of blood for atonement. She was

sure she heard the Lord's name here and there, but these songs seemed, at their heart, to be about something else entirely.

After a bit, the little girl—Esther would later learn her name was Pearl—asked, “Brother Luther, would you favor us with a song before we hear the true word?”

A tall man, who looked like he could pull a plow on his own, stepped to the front of the assembly and looked to Miss Darla, who smiled warmly and nodded. And Brother Luther opened his mouth, and a song older than any family name in Baker's Gap rolled from his lips:

[Brother Luther sings a cappella]

And am I born to die?

To lay this body down!

And as my trembling spirit flies

Into a world unknown

And as my trembling spirit flies

Into a world unknown

And soon as from earth I go,

What will become of me?

Eternal happiness I know

Must then my portion be!

Eternal happiness I know

Must then my portion be!

A land of deepest shade,

Unpierced by human thought;

That weary region of the dead,

Where all things are forgot!

That weary region of the dead,

Where all things are forgot!

By the end of it, Esther Campbell was sobbing. Tears streamed down her face, and her heart felt as though someone had poked a million holes in it; and all the hurt of burying her great-granny and her mommy and her daddy, and finding out that handsome Bradley Ward from over in the Gap had gone off to war and would never be her husband, came pouring out, like poison sucked out of a snakebite.

Before she could fully recover though, Miss Darla stood and signed to little Pearl, and Esther didn't need to hear the girl say them as she read the words off the older woman's fingers: "And now, let us hear the true word of the Good Mother." Esther thought for a moment that Miss Darla would preach an entire sermon or lead a prayer through the child, when another figure, at least as tall as Brother Luther and even broader, with a barrel chest and heavy belly, stepped up, and even Miss Darla retreated to a seat in the congregation.

The Speaker dressed as a man would for a Sunday service, if he were delivering it while digging a ditch. He wore thick, brown work pants, held up by wide suspenders over a dingy white button-up dress shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. He wore boots like a soldier might. His sandy hair was cut short and parted on the side and falling to the right to the nape of his neck. His skin was the freckled bronze of a fair-skinned child allowed to become a tanned hide in the sun. Every head in attendance bowed as the Speaker knelt and scooped up a handful of soil and held it to the sun, as if to judge its content and color, and asked the gathered number, “Kinfolk, how does the Dark Earth find you?”

The response was instantaneous and in unison: “The Dark Earth by day finds us planting worthy seed.”

“And how by night?” The Speaker asked, drawing out what was clearly a familiar question.

Again, the assembly spoke as one in response: “The Dark Earth at night finds us digging worthy graves.”

What in the world? Esther thought. If that was scripture, it wasn’t one she’d heard, and she knew her way around the King James better than most. Still, though, she listened.

“Kinfolk, I want to thank Sister Georgie and her guest Sister Esther for helping provide us with our morning meal, and welcome Sister Esther to her first gathering here with Good Mother Ministries. I pray it won’t be your last.” Esther blushed to her bones. In all the work she’d done for Rising Creek or Buckner’s Chapel, she’d never once been thanked personally by—the pastor, she assumed. She returned the preacher’s welcoming smile and demurely inclined her head at the compliment.

“Some of y’all know what we’ve gathered here to talk of this fine Saturday, and some of you might be able to guess; but if Miss Darla is right, and the signs I’ve read in the wood and the stars is right, then kinfolk, I believe we have entered the Age of Reckoning after all this time.” Audible gasps ran around the circle. Esther saw a mother clutch her two little boys to her like she’d just been told they’d won a steak dinner every night for a year. She saw an older woman with one arm draw a shape with her foot in the dirt and seemed to direct a steady murmuring string of words to it. Brother Luther actually fell to his knees and dug his sizable hands into the dirt and said the words, “Thank you, Mother. *Thank you, Mother,*” over and over again.

“Now, I know anybody can gets up here and tells you that they are living in the Age of the Reckoning. we all know that preachers and priests and fancy-talking tent revivalists can get up and say whatever they want, and people will fill their collection plates and buy them a fine fish dinner for breathing the Word of the Good News, but I think you can feel in your heart as much as I do that this is real. Can’t ya, church?”

The two boys were now asking their mother, “Really? *Really?*” And she was assuring them that it was so.

Esther looked about the crowd for someone she could ask a question that wasn’t thrown into fits of joy and/or relief at this cryptic announcement, when she caught Miss Darla’s eye and quickly signed, *What?* Ms. Darla smiled archly and signed back, *Patience.*

The sermon went on, and Esther did her best to follow the thread of what the Speaker was saying. The Speaker apparently had been having visions and visitations with spirits and angels that came in all forms in the night. Other folks chimed in the affirmative they had, too—most folks, it seemed. The Speaker went on at length about how they had suffered and persevered, just as all of God’s chosen had had to do at one time or another, be it Moses and the Israelites or those proclaiming the name of Jesus or even them, those who had been wronged and hurt and changed by the cruelties of men and their ways. And the Speaker went on that the angels had come to them and spoken in tongues unimagined and told them that the beasts and the liars that had held the Age of Reckoning at bay had finally failed. The Good Mother walked. She walked with her beloved babe in her arms, and the Days of Blood and Dark Earth were nigh, the Age had begun, that evildoers had already started being punished by the Good Mother. That in the hours before dawn the first week she walked, she had struck down a whole household of outsiders and murderers and those that would harm women. And before that, the Speaker had seen in dreams that the Good Mother had found a whole temple defiled by blasphemy on Black Mountain and had torn it asunder.

The crowd was openly weeping and tearing at their clothes and hair in joy—all except Miss Darla, who, again, signed, *Patience*, to Esther. *You will understand soon.*

“That’s only the beginning for tonight, kinfolk. The Good Mother will smile on us personally. Come with me, and you will behold her with your own two eyes and know how loved and blessed we are. Sister Georgie—Sister Georgie, is the prayer you and I shared when you came to us—is that still held true in your heart?”

Georgie nearly jumped out of her skin. “It is, Speaker Timothy, it is.”

“Then it shall be tonight, darling. We will witness—we will be greatly favored.”

After the closing prayer of the service had ended and the members of the camp drifted back to their lives, abuzz with the excitement that they would meet at a secret location later tonight to witness these blessings firsthand, Ms. Darla drew Esther aside, forestalling her questions for the moment and walking her over to one of the larger lean-to shelters.

She led Esther inside, where the Speaker sat, resting, still red-faced from the exertion of his work in the pulpit, on a seat made from a heavy wooden spool.

“Sister Esther Campbell,” she signed, “this is our Speaker, Evelyn Hall.”

Esther blinked, caught wrong-footed. “I-I’m terribly sorry, I thought I heard Georgie call you Timothy?”

The Speaker smiled a patient and well-practiced smile. “You did, Miss Campbell, you did indeed. I am both Evelyn and Timothy. My mama named me Evelyn, and a lot of the walking-around time, that’s me, but I know my name is also Timothy. My heart started telling me that when I was younger. And when I got called to preach, when I step into the spirit of Speaker, ah—I’m him as sure as I’m standing here.”

“I-I-I see,” Esther stammered.

Evelyn cut in, “I know I’m not what you expected. Hell, I’m not what I expected, frankly, but I am who I am, and if you get to know me, you’ll see that too.” Esther wasn’t sure what to think, but the Speaker went on, “When Georgie brought you here, she told you our ministry is for those who don’t have a place elsewhere, yes?”

Esther nodded. “She did, and I did not come here with a non-judgmental heart, Speaker, and for that, I am so sorr—”

“Please, call me Evelyn. You’re in the middle of nowhere with a whole mess of strangers that a lot of people down in the Gap wouldn’t piss on if they were on fire. You didn’t know what you were walking into. There are plenty of folks here that are wanted by the law. Now, there—there are no rapists or those who would hurt children here, if that

helps, but I won't lie to you and tell you there aren't those who've taken a life to protect their own or their children or for other reasons. And I won't tell you every soul here is born again and baptized, but you are safe here, and on that, I give you my word."

Esther knew in her heart this person was telling her the truth. Anxious to change the subject, Esther turned the topic to the sermon. "So, uh, wh-what is this miracle you're gonna perform for Georgie tomorr—"

Evelyn was certainly very serious. "Oh, Sister, I won't be doing anything but bear witness to the same things you will—if, if you'll join us. I'm but a conduit and a vessel for the will of the Good Mother, the Angel of Vengeance, the Patroness of all mothers and children who have called out for help and been left unheeded by men." Esther thought she could sense the cadence of Speaker Timothy slipping into the conversation. "Come with us, Sister," the Speaker said earnestly and softly, taking Esther's hand. "Come sing the dawn with us."

That would be the first night, but far from the last, that Esther witnessed the holy power of the Good Mother. They had gathered outside of a house that had once belonged to Georgie and her mother out in a holler east of Butler Ridge. The man that was living there now had been Georgie's stepfather. He was not a good man to Georgie's mother before she died, and though she couldn't prove it, Georgie knew he was responsible for her death.

Long story short, Georgie got her miracle. They all watched a tall, pale woman appear, rocking the sleeping infant in her arms. And they watched as she called her angels from the high trees—great, swooping owls that seemed to have too many wings, and too many faces, and feathers made of mold and bark, and claws made of wood and bone—and how they broke the windows and flew in and out of the house until Georgie’s stepfather ran outside and met the tall pale woman and her child himself. They watched as all of Georgie’s prayers were answered.

Esther had found her second new home and a God that actually showed up. Esther and Georgie continued attending Rising Creek Baptist and serving with the Ladies’ Auxiliary. As the weeks went by, they drew one or two new members out to help with their interdenominational outreach activities. Some stayed, others didn’t.

Late one Wednesday night after a meeting of the potluck organizing committee, another veteran member of the group, who wasn’t part of Josie Pickens’s little cluck—uh, clique—approached Georgie while she and Esther were waiting for their ride home.

Bonnie Ward, the sheriff’s sister, and wife of the local hardware store and “chess club” owner, Bill Ward, pulled Georgie—and by default, Esther—aside.

“I talked to Mitch Stapleton the other day when he was making a delivery to the store. he stays out there in that camp that y’all take food to, with that other group, don’t he?”

Georgie nodded. “Yes, I, I, I know Mitch.”

“Mitch told me some of the folks out there can be quite... persuasive, in terms of helping folks see the error of their ways. Says there’s a preacher out there who knows people, who know some people, who know some people?” Georgie gave Esther a subtle head shake, and neither woman spoke. “Yeah, that’s what I figured. Anyway, y’all seen Coralee Tilley lately?”

Esther thought about it for a moment, then frowned. Coralee wasn’t part of the Auxiliary. Come to think of it, the woman barely seemed to speak to anyone at all. She couldn’t remember if she’d ever properly been introduced to the quiet little mouse of a woman, but Georgie nodded. “Yeah, she’s—she’s married to Frank. A lot of the boys out that way know him from his own part of the ‘hardware’ business. What of it?”

“Like I said. Either y’all seen Coralee lately? Let me help you out: no, y’ain’t, cause Frank’s done beat her almost to death again. She’s not been to church for the past three weeks, and that ain’t like her. I tried to get her some help, to get her out of there but she wouldn’t take it from... Well, from some folks I know who help women in those circumstances, but if two good Christian ladies like yourselves wanted to get her involved in a volunteer project, Frank might allow that. You could get her out of the house once in a while, or maybe, you know... forever.” Georgie looked to Esther, who had already rummaged through her purse to produce a pamphlet.

“I think we can do that. And I can assure you,” Esther said, looking up with a soft smile, “that Coralee will be in our prayers. You can count on that.”

[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. Welcome back to Baker’s Gap in the year of this world 1927. Interesting days afoot, in this little window that happened just a few months before Mr. Frank Tilley met his undesirable—or desirable—end, I guess it depends on who you talk to around these parts, and the connection to She Who Walks the Night. Some folks see her as an avatar of death and destruction, and apparently, some folks see her as a very Good Mother. More on that to come.

Family, we appreciate your support, and we enjoy interacting with you on social media. I’ve been having a great time over on our Discord server, uh, chatting about theories and talking about social stuff with people, and I’m in there quite a bit, if you want to come say hey. You can find that, along with links to our Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, the Facebook group—everything you need over at oldgodsofappalachia.com. And that Discord is free and open to the public. There are some Patreon-exclusive items in there and happenings that go on, uh, but anybody’s welcome to come hang out in the main channels.

If you would like to become a patron on Patreon and elevate yourself to the next plane of existence, you can head on over to [patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com), where exciting things like the 17 part *legend* of Build Mama A Coffin, as well as the brand-new, two-part episode miniseries thingamajig Door Under the Floor, written by our very own Cam Collins and featuring the acting skills of the Old Gods of Appalachia family of actors—Allison Mullins, Brandon Sartain, Aliya Johnson, Betsy Puckett—you name them, they are in there, including Cam Collins herself, all for a low, low tithe of \$10 or more a month.

Family, we love you, we need you, and in these trying times, we encourage you to stick together, wear a mask, be safe, and come holler at us. Next week, we're gonna see what Miss D.L. Walker has in store for the legal system in the big town of Baker's Gap, and I just got to let you know that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell. Our intro music is by our brother Landon Blood, as was the in-show performance of "And Am I Born to Die," a classic ballad that dates way back to the homeland, made famous by Doc Boggs and a lot of other great people. Landon Blood on the fly busting out that chilling a cappella version—Brother Landon, keep feeling better. Glad to hear you're back at work, we wish you absolutely the best. And family, we need y'all healthy in one piece and—because we got a lot of exciting things to share with you in the very near future, so stay tuned, stay at home, wear a mask if you have to go out, and we'll see you real soon, family. Real soon.