

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 2 Episode 21: A Worthy Grave

Old Gods of Appalachia is a horror anthology podcast, and **this episode contains frank discussion and descriptions of relational violence as well as emotional abuse**, so listener discretion is advised.

Coralee Tilley had been surprised when the two young women approached her after church one Sunday to ask if she might like to help with their missionary work. Well, she didn't know Georgie Triplett and Esther Campbell—not really. Not more than just to say hello at the general store and good morning on Sundays, and when she told them politely, she would have to decline, there was no way her husband would allow it, she was downright taken aback when Georgie looped her arm through Coralee's and said with a wink, "Why don't you let me ask him? I bet I can talk him around to the idea," and marched him over to where Frank stood talking with Arnie Ward and Carl Minor.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Georgie said sweetly. "I'm sorry to interrupt y'all, but might I have a quick word with Mr. Tilley here? Won't take more than a minute, I promise."

From there, Georgie proceeded to explain that she and her friend Esther Campbell did missionary work out of the poor folks' camp off Peter's Branch on Saturdays, taking food and spare clothes and other supplies up to families out that way, and could use some extra help because many of the women of Rising Creek Baptists were, well, you know—of a certain age. They thought a healthy young woman like themselves might be the best choice for the touch work and they thought immediately of Coralee.

“We sure could use her help,” Georgie said. “I hear your wife is a fantastic cook, Mr. Tilley. And sometime—well, when you’re not too busy, of course—perhaps you could stop by yourself. We have some enterprising young men at the camp—I’m sure an experienced businessman such as yourself might find some untapped talent, or at the very least, be able to offer them a little guidance here and there.”

Georgie smiled up at Frank and batted her eyes, and if Coralee didn’t know better, she would swear the young woman was flirting with Frank.

“Frank smiled back. “Well, allows I can spare her on a Saturday every now and again, long—as long as she got our house kept up first, course, and I—I appreciate the invitation, Miss Triplett. I might just do that.”

“We’ll be looking forward to it, then,” Georgie said with another smile and a wink, and Frank grinned. If she were a different sort of woman in a different sort of marriage, Coralee imagined she might have been annoyed. Instead, she found herself impressed by how cleverly the charming, young woman had sold Frank on her proposal. Frank Tilley was the sort of man who’d refuse a thirsty pilgrim a cup of water just because he could, and his wife had long since learned never to ask anything of him or betray any sign that she wanted something. If he could deny her, Frank would do it just for spite. If she had asked his permission herself, and she *needed* permission—Coralee didn’t set foot outside their home without Frank’s approval, or there’d be hell to pay—he would

have said no. He might have given her smack when they got home just for interrupting the men's conversation, but Georgie had made it seem as though Coralee's own wishes were beside the point, and hinted at some personal benefit to Frank besides, and he'd played right into her hands. That Georgie was one to watch out for, Coralee had thought to herself at the time.

Next Saturday she found herself riding up to Pete's Branch with Georgie and Esther and that nice Melvin Blevins. Coralee had risen well before the sun to quietly dress and slip from the house before Frank woke. She left his breakfast wrapped in tinfoil on the stove with a note to remind him that this was the day she was going to help Georgie and Esther out at the poor folks' camp and made the long walk to Rising Creek Baptist Church, where she and the other two women would meet Mr. Blevins, who kindly volunteered to drive them up to camp on Saturday. They spent the morning cooking up a big country breakfast with all the trimmings—biscuits and gravy, bacon and eggs, sausages and potatoes, fresh tomatoes from a little garden the camp folks had planted—and dishing it out to a steady line of grateful, friendly people who shared a meal and fellowship together at a series of picnic tables set up under a big tent. What seemed to be a peaceful community buried deep in the woods off the Nolichucky River, comprised of men and women and children who lived together, or separately, as was their wish, but communally in tents and lean-to shelters and shared the various labors that were inherent to any living situation—cooking and cleaning and the like.

After everyone had eaten their fill and a group of young people had carted off the dishes off toward the river for washing, Coralee was invited to join them for their church service—an invitation she was happy to accept. It'd been a long time since she'd spent a day away from home in a place where she felt safe, and it was a relief to have this time away from Frank from weighing her every word and deed against how he might react.

The service began with singing, of course, and although some of the hymns were unknown to Coralee, and the ones she did know seem to have slightly different verses—”Are you washed in the blood of the... earth” seemed to be an alternate version of “washed in the blood of the lamb,” for example, but she picked up on that one quick enough. The gathered congregation sang there under the tents, and then Speaker Timothy stepped up before them and began to speak, and Coralee opened her ears, and her heart, to the true word of the Good Mother.

At first, much of what the Speaker was saying didn't make much impact on Coralee—there was talk about the stars and signs and the Age of Reckoning, which all had a familiar cadence, but nothing that particularly grabbed her attention. And then Speaker Timothy began to talk about the Good Mother, how she walked with her beloved babe in her arms, punishing evildoers—the sort of men who hurt women and children or anyone weaker themselves—dispensing justice where the laws of men had failed. And he invited Georgie Triplett to stand up and testify. Coralee watched wide-eyed as her new friend walked to the front of the congregation, turned to face them, and began to speak.

She talked about her stepfather, how he'd mistreated her mama for years, and how she knew in her heart that he was responsible for her death. She tried to go to the law, but the Sheriff wouldn't listen to her. She thought there was nothing she could do. But then she'd come to Good Mother Ministries and learned the true word. She'd prayed to the Good Mother for retribution, and the Good Mother had answered. And it wasn't just Georgie's story—this was no unverifiable tale of, “the lord sent me a vision,” that any sensible person would take with a grain of salt. Several members of the congregation raised their hands and swore they'd been there—they had seen the miracle too.

Coralee was stunned. She never heard this scripture before—the pamphlet Georgie had passed her at the beginning of service noted that it was sacred writ that many of the organized denominations sought to conceal. Could it be true? an angel of vengeance walking amongst them now in their very midst?

Finally, Speaker Timothy had said, “Thank you, Georgie,” and she returned to her seat as the Speaker continued his sermon.

Coralee turned to Georgie. “This is true?” She whispered. “You really saw this... Good Mother?”

Georgie gripped Coralee's hand, her face alight with righteous fervor. “She makes things right, Coralee—do you understand what I'm saying? I'm sorry to be so blunt, but

everybody knows your husband's no good. The Good Mother can make things right for you.”

Coralee looked into her new friend's bright eyes and felt her heart crack just a little—just enough to let a tiny sliver of light in, and for the first time in years, she felt something like—well, like hope.

[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’s where I first heard about the Good Mother and the—the Dark Earth,” Coralee told D.L. Walker. the two women sat together at the small table in the tiny room where

Sheriff Andy Hodge had confined her. “Georgie and Esther said that she could set me free, and I—I guess I believed them, because I started praying every day. I prayed for the Good Mother to come and—and—” Here, words failed Coralee as tears sprang to her eyes, and she pressed a shaking hand to her mouth. “Oh, God, forgive me—I prayed for her to come and—and enact vengeance on my husband, and she did,” Coralee sobbed. “I’m sorry.”

D.L. patted her hand gently and reached into her coat pocket for a handkerchief. “Shh, it’s all right. Take your time, there’s no hurry.” Coralee nodded gratefully and took a moment to collect herself, drying her eyes and taking a deep, shaky breath, before she continued her story.

Coralee had been praying daily to the Good Mother for deliverance from her unfortunate marital situation for ‘round about three months, when Frank came home piss-drunk and in a foul temper from the chess club that night. It wasn’t the first time, of course, but that night had been... especially bad. He was drunk and raving, going on about Bonnie Ward pointing a shotgun at him—which had been a long time coming, to be fair, as Frank frequently tried to start fights at Bill’s place whenever he was drinking—and then, as usual, Frank had turned his rage on his home and family, slinging the kitchen table into the counter and throwing the chicken casserole Coralee had made for dinner onto the floor before he grabbed her arms.

In the seven years they'd been married, Coralee had honed a fine ability to gauge her husband's mood—a survival instinct born of hard experience—and she knew there would be no escaping his wrath tonight, no words that could soothe his temper, no gestures she could make to assuage his rage. And so when he reached for her, Coralee ran out the front door and into the woods behind the house as fast as she could, and she was light and fleet as a deer, and all she had to do was make it far enough into the woods before Frank caught up with her—because Frank would never follow her into the Pines. Frank was afraid. Coralee didn't know why, but Frank had always hated the woods behind his family home—had warned her to stay out of them when they first married. But to Coralee, they had become a solace and a sanctuary, a refuge where she could retreat when things got bad, and a quiet place to gather her thoughts when she merely wanted to escape the house that had become less a home than a prison. So it was into the Pines she ran that night, his angry threats ringing in her ears.

“You get back here, girl—you know what's good for you!” The night was moonless, and a bitter November wind cut through the thin house dress she wore. It was dark, and it was cold, but Coralee knew these woods—knew exactly where to go: a huge hollowed-out tree deep in the woods behind the house. She could slip inside and be hidden on the off-chance Frank found his courage and came looking for her after all and relatively safe from the elements. She found her tree and squeezed inside, curled up around herself, listening for the crunch of pursuing footsteps through the autumn leaves. She heard nothing—nothing more than the sound of the cold wind blowing through the pines and the usual night voices: the call of the old hoot owl that lived in an abandoned barn

closer to the reservoir, mice and minks and other small animals scuttling about in the brush. Gradually her heart stopped its pounding in her chest, and Coralee shivered, pulling her legs up closer to her chest, and huddling into the protective curve of the tree, where she was safe from the wind. She listened to the comforting sounds of the pines at night, and eventually, she drifted off to sleep.

When Coralee woke, the woods were silent. Not the calm quiet of nighttime in the Pines with its occasional hoots and rustling and chattering of insects, but dead silent, as if the woods itself were holding its breath. Even the whistling of the wind had ceased. The temperature dropped, and Coralee felt stiff and cold. She rubbed her arms vigorously with her hands, trying to warm them up a bit, then stretched her legs and carefully climbed out of her hiding place in the hollowed-out tree. She didn't think Frank would be in the woods—he never followed her so far in before, but her mama always said there's a first time for everything, so she stopped, and she listened, and she peered into the trees around her. Darkness. Silence. surely Frank was passed out by now. Coralee wasn't sure what time it was, and Frank had pawned the watch her mama and daddy had given to her for her 16th birthday the first year they were married, but she knew it must be late—it should be safe enough to creep into the house and get warm.

Coralee turned in the direction of the house and nearly walked into the woman who had appeared soundlessly behind her. She let out a tiny shriek, quickly stifled with her hand, stumbled back over the roots of the tree behind her, and landed on her hind end in the leaves, staring up into the dark, empty eyes of a woman who could be none other than

the Good Mother—the angel of retribution she had prayed for. Her skin was pale as bones, her dark hair tangled with roots and twigs, and she carried a thin, twisted babe at her breast. As she watched, it turned its head towards her, and Coralee began to whimper. Then it opened its eyes and its glowing green gaze seemed to bore into her very soul. Coralee’s mind was suddenly filled with all her worst memories replaying in her mind—crisp and clear, as if they just happened, and she began to sob. Coralee’s memory grew fuzzy after that, but the next thing she’d remembered, she was following the Good Mother through the pines.

They were well past the reservoir. Coralee had lost her shoes at some point. Her feet ached, and she could feel the sting of cuts and scratches all over her arms and legs. She immediately thought to turn away, to run back through the woods towards her own house, but she found her body would not obey, her limbs marching ceaselessly on in the wake of the Good Mother. She was trapped, a prisoner in her own body. Coralee wanted to scream, but even her jaws would not comply with her simple wish to open her mouth and give voice to her frustration and terror. Soon enough, though, the angel of retribution stopped, coming to a halt near the edge of a clearing by the railroad tracks. Through the trees, Coralee could see several men carrying crates toward the open box car of a train, which had stopped there, in the middle of nowhere on the tracks. A lantern lit their path, and in its glow, she recognized her husband, and suddenly she knew why she had been brought here.

See, Coralee had prayed for justice, for retribution, for deliverance from this man, and—and the Good Mother had answered. Coralee stood silent and confined, rooted to her spot in the woods, as the Good Mother slowly raised her hands, and the ground around them twisted and crashed, spilling forth a swarm of what looked almost like rats, but huge and malformed, bones showing through hide that looked as though rotten flesh and poisonous vines had been woven together, teeth grown far larger and sharper than any rodent Coralee had ever seen, claws that looked more like the talons of giant owls.

The men in the clearing began to scream, falling under the wave of the fast, vicious creatures. Long, fleshy vines shot from the rents in the ground, whipping around the men's arms and legs, pulling them down into the widening cracks in the ground that had opened to release the rat things in the first place, leaving only one.

Frank Tilley was covered in blood, his clothing mostly chewed off, his body horribly maimed. He was missing most of his fingers—what remained, hanging on by a bit of bone or sinew here and there, and chunks of his thighs and chest. Below his waist, there was just a wet, gaping wound. If Coralee's body had been her own in the moment, she might have been sick. Instead, she watched with mute dread as the Good Mother slowly walked into the clearing. Frank was slowly struggling to his knees, or trying to, whimpering and crying, when he spotted the woman approaching him. He began to sob, "Please, please ma'am, I need—I need help. Can you help me?"

The Good Mother stood over Frank Tilley. She touched his cheek, and there against his pale face, Coralee suddenly realized that she too had claws. Her nails were long, thick, black, and slightly curved; and as Coralee watched, she sunk those nails into Frank's neck, gripped his head, and twisted. Frank's head separated from his body with a wet tearing sound and a *pop*. As his body hit the ground, she saw them vines shoot out of the cracks again, wrapping around him and pulling him into the Dark Earth.

The Good Mother turned, and her eyes met Coralee's for the first time. She had the impression the wraith-like woman truly saw her. In a heartbeat, the Good Mother was across the clearing and standing directly in front of her, and Coralee would have flinched if she could move at all. The Good Mother stared down into Coralee's eyes, nodding solemnly as she pressed her husband's severed head into her hands, and she began to scream, flinging the dripping head to the ground.

And suddenly, she knew she was free. She could move—she could run. And run she did, back through the woods in the direction of home. It was a long way—she had no idea how they'd gotten there so fast. Would this awful night never end? But she kept running, and by the time she reached the familiar hollow tree behind the house, it was nearly dawn. She was exhausted and numb with shock. She'd stumbled out of the woods to find Sheriff Hodge and Deputy Mutter waiting in her yard.

Coralee fell silent, having exhausted herself in giving the strange account of the night of her husband's death. She seemed to shrink in on herself now, wrapping her arms around her, head down.

Very gently, D.L. reached out to touch the young woman's shoulder. Coralee flinched and looked up. "It's all right—it's over, and you're safe now," D.L. said quietly, her voice low and soothing.

Coralee sighed. "So, you see what I meant, Miss Walker? Nobody's gonna believe what really happened."

"I believe you," D.L. said. She had heard the ring of it in every word Coralee spoke—true, or at least the truth so far as she knew it—she told no lies.

"I—I thought I was praying to an angel, you understand me? They told me I would get divine justice... but Miss Walker, whatever she is—I don't think she's got anything to do with God."

Then D.L. drew in a breath before she spoke carefully. "No, no she's not—and you need to understand, what happened was not your fault, Coralee. She's nothing to do with the Lord, no, and she doesn't answer prayers, no matter what they told you. You are not to blame, honey.

“A-are you sure?”

“I’m sure, and I’m gonna get you out of here. You sit tight a minute, okay? I’m gonna step outside and have a word with the Sheriff. I’ll be right back.”

D.L. walked over to the door and rapped on it sharply. In a minute or so, she heard the jangling of keys from the other side as Sheriff Hodge came down the corridor. He unlocked the door and poked his head in. “Everything all right in here? You ladies need something?”

“I just need a few moments of your time, Sheriff,” D.L. said with a tight smile. “May we speak in your office?” The Sheriff nodded amiably and stepped back to allow D.L. out of the room. He locked the door behind them and turned and led the way back upstairs to his desk.

The hour had grown late, and Mrs. Hodge was nowhere to be seen now, probably gone home to make dinner, D.L. thought. The Sheriff’s office was deserted except for the two of them, which was ideal for D.L.’s purposes.

Andy Hodge offered her the seat across from his desk, and she took it and got straight to the point. “Mrs. Tilley has accepted my offer to represent her. Sheriff Hodge, as her attorney of record, I’m going to have to ask that you release my client immediately.”

“Now, Ms. Walker, I’ve already told you the reas—”

“Bullshit.”

“...Excuse me, ma’am?” Andy Hodge stammered, flabbergasted.

“You heard me. We both know your reasons are bullshit. Coralee Tilley didn’t kill her husband—she was terrified of the man, apparently like everyone else in this town. He was nearly a foot taller than her and had a good hundred pounds on her, and you and I both know there’s no way she committed this crime. You are holding an innocent woman without charge to divert attention from a more likely suspect. Earlier in the evening on the night of his death, Frank Tilley was held at gunpoint by a woman who was not, in fact, his wife, but—Bonnie Ward, is it? Isn’t she your—your sister, Sheriff?”

The Sheriff glared at her. “Now, listen here—”

“No, you listen, Sheriff Hodge,” D.L. said calmly. “You’re going to release my client tonight. Right now. Quick as you can. Because if you don’t, tomorrow morning, the papers are all going to be running headlines about the local Sheriff who’s persecuting the wife of a murder victim in an attempt to cover up his sister’s—”

“My sister had nothing to do with this!” Andy Hodge snapped. “She was home with Bill and the kids.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s true,” D.L. acknowledged. “But that’s not my concern. My job is to protect my client, and there’s more evidence against your sister than there is against Miss Tilley. I prefer to handle things civilly whenever possible, but if I have to, I will employ whatever leverage is at my disposal to ensure my clients receive the vigorous representation to which they are entitled. Do we understand each other, Sheriff?”

Andy Hodge sat glowering at her, clearly thinking over his options. “Fine,” he snapped finally, reaching for the set of keys he laid on the desk.

It didn’t take long for the Sheriff to release Coralee. She hadn’t been arrested, much less formally charged, so there wasn’t much to do than for her to gather her things. Then the Sheriff filled out some paperwork, which D.L. scrutinized before advising Coralee it was safe to sign and told her she was free to go.

Melvin had been waiting for D.L. outside. That man was a saint, D.L. thought, and he offered her a ride home, which Coralee gratefully accepted. They waited in the drive, watching until Coralee was safely inside, before Melvin turned the truck around.

“Where should I drop you, Miss Walker?” He asked. “Do you need to get back to Boone tonight?”

“I think... no,” D.L. said thoughtfully. “Take me back to my sister’s.” It was highly unorthodox—under normal circumstances, D.L. would never consider breaching attorney-client privilege, but these were extraordinary circumstances. Her sister had been right, and then some. The cycle had come around, and this Good Mother didn’t just walk—oh, no, it was much worse than that.

[In the Pines by Steve Shell & Matt Evans]

My girl, my girl,

Don’t lie to me

Tell me where did you sleep last night?

In the pines, in the pines

Where the sun never shines

And shiver the whole night through...

[CAM:] Hey, family—Cam here. I just wanted to take a moment to talk about today’s show. I know that some of the descriptions of Coralee’s life and the abuse she suffered were not easy to hear—they weren’t easy to write—and I wanted to acknowledge that and say that I hope the content warnings we provided at the beginning of the show helped you make a safe choice regarding the content you consumed today.

Also, although Coralee and Frank are a cis-het couple, Steve and I wanted to say that we recognize that abuse happens to people of all genders. If you need help, please reach out when it feels safe to do so. In the U.S. you can contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at www.thehotline.org or call **800-799-7233**, and as always, thank you for listening.

[STEVE:] Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Today's episode was written by Cam Collins and performed and produced by Steve Shell. Our intro music is by our brother Landon Blood. This week's outro music is performed by Steve Shell and Matt Evans. This ends Act Two of Season Two. We're gonna take a little hiatus and we'll be back on March 25th with the beginning of Act Three.

And shiver, and shiver, and shiver, and shiver...