

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 2 Episode 26: Welcome to Paradise

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

You might not have noticed him if you saw him amble into town on that first day. You might have seen the rolled-up shirt sleeves and simple brown work pants, and simpler black suspenders holding them up, and dismissed a slightly dirty face you'd seen a thousand times over in the crowds of workers making their way through the booms and busts of Appalachian coal towns.

Maybe he took your ticket as you boarded a train, or let you hitch a ride on his timber truck. He was probably the one you lost to at cards in that backwoods moonshiner's shack you never could find your way back to. On occasion, he was the bartender who served you that one shot too many that you blamed for all your troubles. He was anyone, and he was everyone. He was every face you'd ever forget, but his name was one you'd always remember—always, family, trust that—and he'd always wanted to come here to this diamond in the rough, wedged in between kissing cousins of a state line: Paradise, a city split down the middle between the commonwealth of Virginia and the state of Tennessee, was a bustling town in the early winter of 1928. The railroads that brought industry, progress, even tourism to this liminal community, whose beautiful new train station was fast becoming a hub for both shipping and travelers. The previous summer had seen the recording of a number of hit records by young musicians pioneering a new

style of music that was becoming mighty popular with folks—hereabouts they just called it “country.” And although prohibition may have officially closed the doors of Paradise’s many saloons, it had spawned a number of swanky speakeasies and put money in many pockets from the bootleggers who passed their goods through town. The little city was just filled with a sense of excitement like it was right on the cusp of something big and it was just the sort of place where a man like him could thrive.

Now, he’d been known by any number of names and faces over the course of time—a silver-tongued devil good for little more than getting into trouble, and as often not, leading other folks there with him. There was little he loved more than thumbing his nose at the high-and-mighty folk who thought they had something like power, and if those folks were your trouble, like as not, he could be just the sort of help you were looking for—if you caught him in the right mood, anyway. Trickster and thief, the stories of his adventures have been handed down for generations, even written down now and again. Some might say he would weave schemes like an old spider waiting to catch him some nice juicy flies, and others would say at the first sight of trouble, he’d light out yipping at the moon like an old coyote. And those things might be true, family, but in Paradise; if you’re looking to rent a cheap house that may or may not be sound, dry rotted, or built atop an old graveyard; or trade a horse; or find the best shine in town—well, you could find this man in a small office in the E.W. King Building. See, back in the winter of 1928, he went by the name of Mr. J.T. Fields III, though to most folks who got to know him, he was simply... *Jack*.

[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...

Throughout the history of Appalachia, and some would say over in the old country too, there has always been a Jack—a Jack be nimble, a Jack be quick; Jack done sold you a whole pallet of candle sticks that were never his to sell in the first place, and the police have some questions for you, family. He had walked these hills for generations before the things that now slept beneath them come, and he intended to walk them long after they were gone. That was a day that couldn't come soon enough for Jack. See, most things that walk this earth by day or by night were sensible when it come to making deals. It's common knowledge—sometimes you end up on the long end of the stick, and sometimes you get the short. People understood that—not them black-hearted haints,

no sir. When his dealings with one of them went sour, Jack ended up with the whole stick shoved where the sun surely didn't shine—trapped him in a body that was slowly dying and rotting and would have left him that way until the end of everything come. Then, some months ago, a certain holler witch had done Jack a great favor, little did she know it at the time, by releasing him from the prison that old deer had made of his body. It hurt like hell, he wouldn't sign up for it again, but at least he was free.

And there's more to that story, family—and if you're lucky, one of your neighbors might tell you where you can go and hear it. But not right now. Right now, we're looking at Jack, made new again.

You see, after sleeping in the soil of Pine Mountain and bathing in the falls over there at Little Stoney, our Jack made himself a whole new body, which just so happened to look very much like the old one, only this one was greatly improved: the wrinkles and liver spots erased, hair that had gone thin and silver once again the thick glossy black of youth. And after laying low and reacquainting himself with the joys of running through the treetops and catching up on the gossip of bears and possums, he found himself a simple set of clothes—always simple, y'all, as our Jack was never one to put on airs, no sir. And he made his way by the light of the fading day to an old bait shop with an office in the back in the community of Dorchester in Esau County, Virginia. He had intended to gather up a few loose odds and ends that he always took with him when he'd worn out his welcome in a place: there was an ax, a harp, an old slipper, a bag of beans, and a couple of feathers tethered to a string, and they all fit neatly in a special burlap poke.

He had just locked up the bait shop and was about to take his leave of the fine people at Dorchester when a voice spoke from the gathering dust.

“Hang on, now. You think you can just show up and tell us he’s dead and get out of town without settling your papaw’s debts, boy?” The jingle of tack and the smell of horses greeted Jack as he turned and saw three men approaching him on horseback, all tall, all thickly bearded and armed. The one who’d spoken brandished a pistol and the other two, a long knife and a pitchfork, respectively.

“Fellers, now listen,” Jack began, looking up at these three would-be highwaymen on their ancient steeds. “I don’t know what Papaw Jack owed y’all, but I ain’t got no money. Hell, I come here myself looking to see if the Fields family fortune was a real thing or just another wild tale he made up.”

“Look at him, Will,” muttered the man with the knife, clearly the oldest brother, gray streaking his thick once black beard.

“Oh, he looks just like him. If he wasn’t so young, I’d think it was him.”

“You ain’t kidding,” said the pitchfork-wielding brother, “I was there when he came and sold Daddy them beans—told him they’d bring the land back and we’d turn a decent crop. And they didn’t do nothing but dry out the land and kill what was growing!”

Jack held up his hands, still holding his bag of belongings. “Boys, I don’t know what to tell you. ain’t none of us seen Papaw in years—hell, we didn’t even know he was here until I heard about him trying to buy up land out by Tom’s Creek. No, seriously, y’all, I got to be going.”

“The hell you are!” Said the brother who spoke first, moving his mount to block Jack’s way. “Your kin ruined our family. We was God-fearing people, and your papaw was a good-for-nothing snake oil salesman stealing from decent folks. So, we’ll be taking whatever you might have on you, starting with that there bag.”

Jack’s eyes flashed with anger—just for a moment. But then he smiled coolly and laughed. “Good God-fearing folks, were you, Tom Meador?”

“How’d you know my name if you don’t know—”

“Shut up, boy. I ain’t got time for this.” Tom Meador had more gray in his beard than brown anymore, and nobody’d called him “boy” in longer than he cared to think about. He turned his head and saw his brother start to brandish his rusty old pistol at this young man, but at a look from Jack, it tumbled loosely to the ground. “Your daddy was Thatch Meador, and his daddy was Burl Meador. Come up his way from Georgia after the war. bought up all that land north of Guest River.”

“Our daddy was a war hero—” Pitchfork began.

“Your daddy was a deserter and a coward. Your granddaddy was worse than him by a mile—he was a slaver and a killer. Took whole families apart—sold babies out of their mama’s arms. Put men in chains like they wasn’t nothing. Between the two of them, they had enough blood on their hands and ghosts in their dreams that the very land refused to yield for ‘em. They called on every granny around here for help—every diviner, too—ground wouldn’t grow, couldn’t find no well water. After people figured out what kind of ‘good, God-fearing men’ they were, nobody that *could* help them *would*. He ended up selling most of their land to Miss White out there for a pittance. Kept that little squat out by Powderkeg for a house and kept trying to make something grow. Well, when people wouldn’t talk to them, they started talking to other *things*, making promises, making deals.”

Young Jack’s voice deepened and aged, and his eyes grew dark as he told his tale. “I told your granddaddy them beans would bring him whatever he put them in the earth with. If he put ‘em in with goodness and love, they’d yield him wheat, corn, whole fruit trees, all he’d ever need for y’all. If he put ‘em in the ground with blood and hate and anger, well, then, the ground would give him what he give it.”

“Now, that’s a lie!” Pitchfork, whose given name was Patrick, muttered weakly.

“Your daddy begged your papaw not to trade with me. Said he’d been out in Josephine and up Hoot Owl, up on Thacker’s Branch—in the deep places, the dark places, he said, making deals with things that lived under bridges and down under the swampy parts by

the river to make y'all rich. He told your papaw he couldn't pay what I was asking because he'd already promised those particular goods to them things—but I told him it was all right, that I'd see to the other parties, that I could broker a deal. And I did—a bag of magic beans for Thatch Meador's first three sons.”

The three men had dropped their weapons and sat slumped loosely in their saddles. They looked like they might be sick or fall over at any given moment. “I mean, he only had the three of you, but a deal was a deal.” Jack walked around to each man and placed the reins of their mounts in their hands, squeezing their limp fingers, so they gripped the leather. “Y'all boys belong to me, but unfortunately, I must travel light this evening, and I have no use for you; so I must alter the terms of my agreement with your father and your grandfather, both of whom have been feeding the worms for a goodly while, so I'm sure they won't mind.” Young Jack cleared his throat and spoke plainly into the darkening sky. “I, Jack of the Wood, known in this place as Jack Timothy Fields III, do relinquish my claims on the lives of the brothers Meador and release that contract to their original purchasers in whatever place they might dwell in this day and time.” Jack cocked his head as if receiving a message as only he could hear, nodding in agreement and affirmation, and then Jack went to each horse and whispered in its ear the place it was to bear its rider: one to Hoot Owl Holler, one to the bridge out by Josephine, and the last—the oldest boy—out to the very end of Thacker's Branch, out to where the trees grew so close they had to pipe in sunlight, they said. And then without even a slap on the rump, the horses turned and carried their riders into the night, none of them ever to be seen again.

Jack took a deep breath, tossed his poke over his shoulder, and before any other trouble could come calling, vanished into the night, heading south at a speed in the way that only Jack could.

A cold winter's evening in early 1928 found Jack settling into the cozy little office he'd established, stoking up the fire and the wood stove, heating up a pot of coffee and gazing out the window as he lit up his pipe. He hadn't had many appointments today and expected a quiet night. Maybe he'd read a good book, play a little solitaire; maybe drink a little of the moonshine a farmer had traded him for a mule that Jack swore could cut his time at the plow in half come spring. He was not expecting to see two young folks come trudging up the road through the snow spotlighted by the street lamps outside, much less the pair of ruffians who came skulking out of the shadows to accost them—one taking a swing at the boy, while the other pushed the girl down in the snow, grabbed her suitcase, and took off down the street.

Well, wasn't that interesting. Jack set down his pipe and reached for his coat. Why, this could turn out to be a profitable—or at least entertaining—evening after all, he thought as he nipped out the door down the back stairs to the street below. Very entertaining indeed.

[God's Dark Heaven by Those Poor Bastards]

[humming]

*Guided by something I cannot describe
Foggy dark presence been choking my mind
The strings hanging down from heaven above
Pokin' like pitchforks in a pure white dove
Through God's dark heaven
Go I, go I
Through God's dark heaven go I...*

Well, hey there, family. Welcome, welcome, welcome back to the present timeline in the winter of 1928 as we venture over to Paradise—the place you've heard about a few times this season on the Virginia-Tennessee border—and introducing you to our man Jack. Now, if you're wondering where you can hear other tales of Jack and some of the mischief he alluded to, well, I'll be happy to tell you you can head on over to our Patreon at patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia, sign up for \$10 or more a month, and it would not surprise me if you found a certain trickster hiding within the story of Build Mama a Coffin. Now, those of you that know that story know the nature of our man Jack and know that this is the beginning of something that is probably not what it seems at all.

Family, it's been a busy couple of weeks over here at DeepNerd media—as you may have heard on our social media or on the live stream, that we have in fact joined the Rusty Quill Podcast Network—meaning Rusty Quill is helping us out with advertising marketing and distribution—but that does not mean anybody owns Old Gods of Appalachia but myself and Cam Collins and the good folks here at DeepNerd media. We

are an Appalachian-based company, owned by Appalachian people, produced by Appalachian people, for Appalachian people and the rest of you all, too—family is family, after all.

We would invite you to join us over at oldgodsofappalachia.com, where you can find links to all the aforementioned social media—Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, the Discord server, all kinds of fun stuff right there, and uh, the Patreon is there as well, if you do wish to catch up on Build Mama a Coffin, Door Under the Floor, and we also just announced two new pieces of Patreon programming on our live stream just the other day: Black Mouthed Dog, which is a Build Mama a Coffin prequel, as well as Porchlight, a new anthology of flash fiction stories that are completely standalone and meant to be bite-sized, easily-consumed snippets of spooky stuff from around the Old Gods universe.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd media. It's distributed by Rusty Quill. Our intro music is by Landon Blood. Our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. Today's story was written by Cam Collins and Steve Shell and performed by Steve Shell. See you soon, family. See you real soon.