

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

### Season 2 Episode 27: Strangers in 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.

By the standards of Esau County, Tommy Adkins was an ambitious young man. Whereas most boys in the area had followed their daddies down into the mines by the age of fifteen — if not sooner — Tommy had never wanted to follow in those particular footsteps. No, sir. Boyd Adkins had spent his whole life working in the mines, and it was honest work, sure enough. Tommy'd been down in that hole a few times, to be sure, when they were short handed or the family needed extra money. He'd do what needed doing if it came to it. But the truth was, Tommy hated it deep underground, in the darkness under the mountain. It wasn't that he was scared of the dark — hell no, when they was kids, Tommy and his best friend, Greenie Kiser, used to sneak out all hours of the night to go exploring in the woods, do a little hunting or fishing, the kind of thing boys do. These days Tommy loved little more than camping, being out in the woods alone at night, just you and the hoot owls and other night critters under the stars.

No, what Tommy didn't like about the mines was... well, he never felt quite alone down there. It was all right when he was working close alongside the other men and boys, but as soon as he got a little ways off down some tunnel or other on his own, he started to get a funny feeling. Almost like he was being watched. The hair would rise on the back of his neck, and he'd whip around, but he never saw nobody. Once or twice, he even thought he'd heard... well, voices, almost. Whispers. When he went down in the mines, Tommy felt like there was something waiting for him in the dark underground... something hungry.

Now he'd never told his Daddy any of this, nor anybody else, of course. He went around talking like that, folks'd think he was crazy. So Tommy just said he liked farming, and spent his days helping his mama plant corn and taters, beans, squash, tomaters, cucumbers, pumpkins, and anything else they could put in the ground; taking care of the pigs and chickens and a couple milk cows. The Adkins farm was small, and mostly just supported their family, but with Tommy's help, Emma had been able to expand, and he would take their surplus down to sell at the local market whenever he could. Tommy also took on whatever odd jobs come his way —

mending a fence or a broken window, fixing somebody's ice box or working on somebody's truck that broke down. It wasn't much, but it helped support the family, and gave him a little extra to spare on his girl.

Tommy had been in love with Virginia Estep — who everybody called Ginny — for about as long as he could remember. He'd met Ginny when they were both about six, on their very first day at the Glamorgan School. Little Tommy had never seen anyone with red hair before, and he'd been enchanted by those flaming red locks and bright blue eyes. He'd thought then that she was the prettiest thing he'd ever seen, and fourteen years had not changed this opinion. Ginny Estep was unquestionably the prettiest girl in Esau County, and he'd fight any man who said otherwise, which of course nobody did. Ginny was well thought of in Glamorgan — a pretty, friendly girl from a good family, she was raised right, as folks said: respectful of her elders, went to church on Sundays, volunteered with the Junior Ladies Auxiliary. More importantly, Ginny had talent. She could play piano and guitar, and had the nicest voice in the church choir, where she was often invited to perform solo at holidays and other special events. She was involved with Glamorgan's small community theater group, which worked with the church to put on the annual passion play every Easter, as well as a more secular play every fall during the harvest festival. Ginny could even dance, studying the moves she saw at the picture show, watching the films over and over until she could teach herself the latest dances— the Charleston, the Shimmy, and so on. She'd recruited Tommy to help her learn the ones she needed a partner for, like the Fox Trot. Now the old folks around Esau County didn't much approve of dancing, so only Tommy and few close friends were privy to this particular talent, or understood its source.

Ginny Estep was a girl with big dreams. Next to Ginny, Tommy's own ambitions were like a candle to a bonfire. When Tommy took her to the movies, Ginny would watch with rapt attention the glamorous folks up there on the silver screen, in far-flung places like New York or Rome, with their fine clothes and fancy cars, and she'd say, "That's gonna be me one day, Tommy." She could sing. She could dance. She was just as pretty as any of them Hollywood girls. She wasn't quite as sure of her acting skills — auditioning for Glamorgan Community Theatre didn't exactly offer stiff competition — but Ginny was quite confident she could learn. She had succeeded at everything else she set her hand to, and this would be no different. Ginny dreamed of leaving Esau County behind and going to Hollywood, where she could begin her career as an actress.

She didn't discuss her plans with her parents, of course, or anyone except for Tommy and a few other close friends she trusted. Most everybody wouldn't approve, and even those who didn't precisely disapprove wouldn't understand. Hell, even their friends didn't really.

“When you gonna put a stop to all this nonsense?” Greenie had asked Tommy. “Ain't nobody from Esau County gonna be a famous movie star. Ginny just needs to settle down. Put a ring on her finger and she'll forget all about that Hollywood business.”

But Tommy knew better. Yes, if he asked for her hand, Ginny would be excited. Happy. She might even say yes. But she would not forget about Hollywood. Not forever, anyway. He could imagine her all too well, years down the road, taking their kids to the pictures, still watching with that far-away look in her eye, and wondering what might have been, if she'd only gotten out sooner. If she'd only told him no. Tommy didn't want that for her, or for himself.

“Naw, Greenie. Like mama says, what's meant to be, will be — and not because I clipped her wings when she wanted to fly. Either she'll decide Hollywood's not for her after all and come on home, or she'll send for me like she says, and we'll get married in California.” Tommy grinned. “It'll be the fanciest wedding you ever seen.”

Because Ginny had plans for him too. Once she found a job, she said, she'd find work for Tommy. The studios always needed carpenters and other folks to build sets, run lights, operate cameras, microphones and more, Ginny assured him. There was plenty of work to go around for a smart, industrious young man like Tommy Adkins. Just you wait and see.

It was Ginny's dream of going to Hollywood that had brought them both here — to Paradise, a bright little gem of a city straddling the state line between Virginia and Tennessee — on a cold January night. For folks who've been to someplace like Louisville or Nashville, Paradise might not've seemed like much, but to two kids who'd barely left Esau County before, this was the big city. And Tommy was beginning to think his Daddy had been right all along about the city, and city folks too.

[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 beat-up old Model T that had once belonged to Tommy Adkins' Papaw — which Tommy had salvaged from the back barn a good decade after Papaw had run it into a tree, and managed to get up and running again after a long summer spent wrenching away at it — had run out of gas about a half mile from the train station. That was no great hardship — Tommy and Ginny both being well accustomed to walking before Tommy'd got the truck running last summer. It was cold and snowy, but they were both wearing boots, and a half mile was an easy walk. So Tommy had helped Ginny out of the truck, gentleman-like, and pulled her suitcase out of the back, and they'd continued on foot down the wide, paved street split down the middle by the Virginia-Tennessee state line.

They'd gone only a few blocks when a pair of scruffy-looking young men stepped from the shadows of a narrow alleyway between two buildings, directly into their path.

“Hey there boy, can we help ye with yer bags? Valet service all the way to the station, only cost ye two bits.” The man's tone was polite and simpering, and he held his hat in his hand, waiting to see if either of them would offer up his fee. Tommy figured this was how some people made their money offa tourists and hillfolk, but they didn't have that kinda money when they was young and able bodied and could carry their own bags easy enough.

“No thank you, sir,” replied Ginny, before Tommy could speak. “We’ll be just fine.”

The larger of the two men stepped to block their path fully as his partner snapped his hat back onto his head, and circled behind them, his obsequious posture vanishing in a heartbeat.

“I’m sorry, darlin’, but you misunderstood my friend here. You’ll give us each two bits and we’ll carry your bags as far as we want. That wasn’t a request.”

“Look mister,” Tommy began, stepping forward with one hand raised to keep the man at arm’s length. “We don’t want no trouble, but we ain’t got the money to give you, so why don’t we all just—”

The larger of the two rushed Tommy, throwing one shoulder down and bearing him to the ground in a tackle that would have made any football player proud. Tommy saw stars for a second as his head smacked the pavement, but he recovered quick when he felt the man’s hands around his throat. Tommy had never been one for fighting — his daddy had taught him that there were better ways to solve a problem than with his fists, and he loved to recite that scripture about turning the other cheek — but growing up, he’d had to learn to defend himself, since apparently not everybody’s daddy loved Jesus as much as Boyd Adkins. Working on the farm every day had made him strong, and he quickly turned the tables on the man who’d attacked him, rolling him over onto the pavement and delivering a quick punch to the jaw.

The smaller man — little more than a boy really, scrawny and only a few inches taller than Ginny — grabbed for the handle of her suitcase. “No!” Tommy heard her cry out angrily. From the corner of his eye, he could see her struggling with the boy, before he finally wrenched it from her hand, using its weight to sling her to the ground as well, and took off down the street, back the way Tommy and Ginny had come. Meanwhile, the larger man used Tommy’s momentary distraction to wriggle free of Tommy’s grasp. He stumbled to his feet and ran back down the alley they’d come from.

Tommy didn’t hesitate — the man who’d hit him didn’t matter. He was just a distraction. Tommy sprinted back down the street after the little man. He could still see him ahead, racing

down the street, Ginny's suitcase banging against his leg with every step. Tommy wasn't slow — or at least he'd never thought so — but he was a farm boy, not a runner, and he probably had forty pounds on the kid. Hard as he tried, he couldn't quite close the distance between them, but he kept trying, at least until the thief darted down a side street, and by the time Tommy reached the corner, he had disappeared from sight.

Panting, Tommy finally slowed to a stop and gave up his pursuit, leaning over and bracing his hands against his knees. Once he'd caught his breath, he turned and looked back down the street, to the spot where he'd left Ginny. To his surprise, he found that she was not alone.

Ginny was back on her feet, standing on the sidewalk with a man in a brown overcoat. As Tommy jogged back up to her side, he was able to make out more details of the stranger's appearance. He had one of those faces marked by character rather than time that made it impossible to determine his age — he could have been twenty-five or fifty-five. His coat was clean and simply cut, not fancy but clearly of good quality. There was a bright blue jay's feather tucked into the rim of the otherwise simple brown fedora on his head — a match for the coat, looked like. The hair under his hat was dark, and his brown eyes sparkled merrily, as if he were amused by some joke that only he understood.

"Help you with something, mister?" Tommy asked, frowning.

"Oh, Tommy! This nice man just helped me up," Ginny explained. "This is Mr. Fields."

The man smiled affably and stuck out his hand. "J.T. Fields III," he introduced himself. "My friends call me Jack."

In spite of his reservations and the unpleasant circumstances they now found themselves in, Tommy found himself returning that smile as they shook. "Tommy Adkins. And this is Miss Virginia Estep."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both. I only wish I'd looked out my window in time to do more to help," Jack said, gesturing up to the second story windows of the building behind him. "By the

time I got downstairs, you'd already run off the big lug, and the little ratty one had made off with Miss Virginia's bag. A real shame, that. I hope you didn't lose anything important."

Ginny's face fell. "I— I did, actually. My train tickets were in there... and my money... everything, really." Her eyes were bright with panic as she turned to Tommy. "What am I gonna do? That was everything I had, Tommy! I worked so hard to save up for it..."

"Shh," Tommy said, squeezing her hand. "It'll be ok. We'll figure something out."

Jack sighed. "I'm real sorry to hear that. Do you folks have people here in town we could call? Miss Virginia was just telling me your truck broke down."

"No sir, we don't. We're from Glamorgan — up in Esau County? I can probably fix the truck in the morning, but... well I was just driving Ginny to the train station. I hadn't planned on staying the night, and I don't have much money with me. Not enough to replace her ticket, or her other things."

Jack smiled. "Why, that's no real trouble. I hope you'll allow me to assist. I was just stepping out for a bite to eat, and I'd be honored if you'd both join me. On me. After supper, I can help you get settled in for the night. I happen to know the proprietor of the hotel just down the street here."

"Well, sir, that's a mighty kind offer," Tommy said. "But that wouldn't be proper, seeing as we're not married." But then he caught sight of Ginny, standing shivering on the sidewalk, her coat damp and soiled, the hem of her dress torn, her long red curls knocked free from the pins that held them up this morning. She looked exhausted, the expression on her pale face uncharacteristically defeated, so Tommy amended, "Although I... I guess I could sleep in my truck and Ginny can take the room, if you're sure it's a reputable place."

"Nonsense!" Jack said, waving off his protestations. "Forgive my presumption, Miss Estep. Why don't you take the room? Mr. Adkins here can bunk down for the night on the sofa in my office. Would that suit?"

Ginny beamed. “That sounds like a fine solution! You’re so kind, Mr. Fields.”

“Nonsense! I couldn’t in good conscience allow this experience to tarnish your opinion of our fair city,” Jack said graciously. “And to tell the truth, I wasn’t much looking forward to having supper alone. You’ve saved me from an evening of boredom.”

And so the man called Jack had led Tommy and Ginny to an establishment he referred to as his “supper club.” It was tucked away in the back corner of the basement of the big Woolworth’s five and dime store down the street, and decorated in a style that was far more lavish than what one might expect to find in such an unassuming location. There were crystal chandeliers and cushy booths upholstered in fine red leather and velvet. The gentlemen seated in them wore fine wool suits and smoked cigars. The ladies wore sparkly beaded dresses and wore their hair short, modern cuts that the folks back home would have found scandalous. Liquor even flowed into fine crystal glasses.

Ginny was obviously delighted. This was the exciting new life she imagined she would make for herself in Hollywood — one of luxury, of fine people and classy parties. Tommy was less sure about all this — he felt underdressed and out of place — but since it cheered Ginny up, he tried to relax. The food, when it came, made that a hell of a lot easier. Jack had ordered him something called Beef Wellington, a delicious cut of tenderloin wrapped in herbs, garlic, and layers of flaky, buttery pastry. It was by far the finest thing Tommy had ever tasted — and if anyone ever told his mama that, he’d call ‘em a liar to their face, but it was true. The whiskey Jack poured for them didn’t hurt either — it burned on the way down, and made Tommy cough, but then it filled him with warmth, and he found himself relaxing. Perhaps this place wasn’t half bad after all.

Over the course of dinner, Ginny and Tommy told Jack the whole story — Ginny’s dream of a career in the movies, all the long hours she’d put in working as a secretary for a local attorney, plus the extra time she spent babysitting, taking in sewing, even cleaning a few houses, all to scrape together the money to buy a train ticket to Los Angeles, and a nice dress and shoes to wear to auditions.

“But what about your beau here?” Jack asked. “Seems you got yourself a fine young man, if you don’t mind me saying, Miss Ginny. You just gonna leave him behind?”

“Oh of course not! I’ll send for Tommy just as soon as I land a part in a feature. I’m sure there’s plenty of work for a good man like Tommy,” Ginny gushed, and then proceeded to brag on him for a bit — how smart he was, what a hard worker he was, how good he was with engines and motors of all kinds, not to mention carpentry. Tommy’s cheeks were burning by the time he finally said, “Aw, Ginny, hush.”

Jack chuckled. “Well, it’s good to see young folks who know where they’re going. Y’all seem to have it all mapped out.”

Ginny’s smile faded. “Well, we did anyway. Until that no-good thief ran off with my suitcase.”

“Hmm.” Jack leaned back in the booth and stroked his chin thoughtfully. They had been talking for some time, and it was getting late. The busboy had cleared away their plates nearly an hour ago, and Jack was nursing the last of his after-dinner cocktail. “I think I can help you out with that. I have a proposal. And if it’s acceptable to you folks, we can have you on a train tomorrow, Miss Ginny.”

“Oh, Mr. Fields, no... I couldn’t possibly accept. That’s that’s too generous!”

Jack chuckled. “Generous, hell. It’s a business proposal, not a gift. Here’s what I’m thinking: I’ll replace your train ticket, and provide you with a small cash advance. You can go shopping in the morning, buy everything you need for the trip, and keep anything left over to help you get started out West. I’ll also write you a letter of recommendation. I happen to know a lady in the secretarial pool at Metro Pictures. It’s not an acting job, I know, but it’s a foot in the door. We’ll put you on the afternoon train, and you’ll be well on your way.” He turned to look at Tommy. “You, my boy, will stay here in Paradise with me for awhile. I have a number of, uh... irons in the fire, so to speak... and I could use someone to help take care of things for me — run errands, act as handyman for a couple of properties I own, that sort of thing.”

Tommy hesitated, glancing at Jack's glass. "I, uh... no offense, Mr. Fields, but is it, uh... is it legal? This job you're offering me?"

Jack laughed and slapped Tommy on the shoulder. "Of course it's legal, boy! I wouldn't ask you to do anything like that, son. It's all perfectly above board. And when you've worked off the debt, I'll introduce you to a man I know with the railroad."

"The... railroad?" Tommy asked, baffled.

"You want to join Ginny as soon as possible, am I right? Well son, there is no better place to make the money you need these days than working for the railroad. You do good work, and I'll be happy to make the introduction."

Tommy wasn't at all sure he believed the man. This proposal struck him as a bit too good to be true, and such things most often are. But he looked at Ginny, and saw the renewed hope shining in her bright blue eyes, and he knew he could not deny her this chance. He could see the question in her eyes — would he do this? would he do it... for her? Then he found himself returning Jack's smile, and nodding. "All right then," he said. "That seems more than fair."

Ginny's all but squealed with joy. She threw her arms around him, right there at that table in front of Jack and everybody, and planted a kiss on his cheek. Tommy's heart swelled, and his cheeks flushed again, and he pushed his doubts aside. It would be fine, he told himself. It would be more than fine. It was pure luck — hell, maybe even fate — that those hoodlums had stolen Ginny's bag. It had brought Mr. J.T. Fields III into their lives, a man who'd been kind, and more than generous, and who was offering to help make their dreams come true.

Jack flagged down their waiter and ordered another round of drinks, though Tommy was beginning to think maybe they'd already had one too many, and offered a toast. "Here's to Ginny! May she find all she dreams of in Hollywood. And here's to the beginning of a profitable partnership, Tommy."

And they clinked glasses, and Ginny pressed another kiss to Tommy's cheek. "Here's to love!" she said happily.

“Ah, yes,” Jack said, and this time his smile didn’t quite touch his eyes. “To love.”

[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. I’m glad y’all could join us again here in Paradise to see what our man Jack is up to with young Tommy and Ginny. Mmm, if you think it’s gonna be something they’re not expecting, you’re probably right. No spoilers, no clues though, family. You’re gonna have to join us next time for part three of the Paradise arc as we start to wind down season two of Old Gods of Appalachia, and that brings me to a piece of news that I’ve gotta share with y’all.

We announced at the beginning of season two that our friend Jordan Shiveley would be writing an episode for us as a guest writer. And we’d even, maybe in a comment here and there, maybe snuck some peeks at what that might be. We have made a change. Jordan’s episode will not be appearing in season two, but hold that! Do not throw the tomatoes and taters at me yet! Because Jordan Shiveley is going to be writing a three part mini-series that will appear between seasons two and three, much like the Wolf Sisters. Release date to be announced.

Family, it’s time for me to ask if you’ve completed your social media ritual. If you haven’t, head on over to [oldgodsofappalachia.com](http://oldgodsofappalachia.com), where you will find links to all of our social media — all of it, Facebook, Twitter, the Discord server, Instagram. It’s all there! Links to the Fellowship Hall, links to our merchandise store.

Ooh! Ooh, other big news: we’re gonna be launching five or more new merch designs in the month of June, and these are gonna be by artists that you know and love and some new exciting folks, especially if you’ve been hanging out in the Discord server, you may have come to be familiar with. But we’re gonna be announcing those one at a time and making kind of special, big deals of them as they come out. They will only be available on TeePublic, which is the only place you should be buying your merchandise from. The Threadless store has kind of come and gone. There might be a couple of items there, but TeePublic is our main jam. That is where you

should be buying from. We're not on Amazon. We're not on Etsy. We're not on Redbubble. We're not anywhere but TeePublic, so if you see it anywhere else, it's a bootleg. Report it. Or let us know. We appreciate it either way.

If you truly want to make your tithe official, you can head on over to [patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia](https://patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia). Build Mama a Coffin, in all its 17 episodes of glory is waiting for you there. The Door Under the Floor is waiting for you there. We've got Black Mouth Dog and Porchlight, which are two new series starting this summer that are gonna be exclusive on Patreon. And we just launched Steve Reads. A lot of y'all said you'd listen to me read the phone book, so now you can do that. I read everything from the first chapters of novels I love to teaching lessons on poetry to literally reading the instruction manual for a cat harness. It's all gonna be on there, and that starts at \$5 a month. That's gonna be for everybody. Every episode's about 13-15 minutes long and is designed to help you get to sleep and put your mind in a bucket.

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