

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 3, Episode 32: Runs in the Family

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

The Barrow clan began digging deep in the mountains of Appalachia and selling what they found there long before this country was even the radical dream of a few folks looking to dodge some tax men from across the ocean. By the 1800s, their influence in the mountains of Pennsylvania had become such an accepted fact of life that the little mountain township of Pinegrove was renamed Barrow to honor the family and the company they had founded. There is power in a name, family — in this case, a great, dark power. The rechristening of the town brought with it a great festival celebrating the glorious history of coal — the bituminous and the anthracite, the soft and the hard, the graves both deep and shallow. The local holiday culminated in a ceremony atop Coal Hill, the high point and center of the town, atop which crouched the Barrow Mining Company's newly-built home office, a grand and sprawling affair of limestone and white columns, topped with a shining copper dome, that shamed the local churches and the county courthouse with its stateliness.

After a marching band played, and paychecks were handed out early, the patriarch of the Barrow family, one Elias Pontias Barrow — known to most folks as simply E.P. — flanked by his adult children, delivered a speech on the front steps of that grand new building, wherein he unveiled the new town sign, which featured the family name and the date carved deep into its stone face. It also bore a line of strange symbols upon it, words etched in a tongue that no human mouth should ever have been able to speak. But E.P. Barrow did just that, his mouth contorting to produce sounds that pierced the ear and clouded the mind, and with those words came a great shaking and breaking of the earth. The hill cracked, and a great crevice opened in the ground, beginning at the foot of Coal Hill and snaking right up to the foundations of the home office. And from it issued a cloud of sooty darkness that swept into the air like sentient ash.

Women and children screamed and ran for cover, but the working men of Barrow — most still in their uniforms — stood rooted to the spot, unable to flee. As the townsfolk of the newly baptized Barrow, PA, breathed in the black dust that blew forth from that breach that had opened

beneath their feet, E.P. Barrow walked calmly up the steps of his new home office, stepped inside, and proceeded down to the cellar, where the shiny new marble floor had split wide. His two eldest sons, Conrad and Benuel, followed in his wake. Without another word, E.P. took off his coat and his hat and lay down, still breathing, in a coffin carved from a cold, ebony wood. The box was etched, inside and out, in the alien script that adorned the new town sign, the same fel tongue that had cracked the earth, which still groaned and trembled beneath the foundations. With a nod to his boys, E.P. Barrow was sealed up and lowered into the widening crack of the breach as the ground trembled and shook. When the chains lowering the coffin were pulled taut, and he could be lowered no further, and it seemed like the whole damn hill was gonna fold into itself, Conrad turned to Benuel, and without so much as a hurried breath, slashed his younger sibling's throat with a hunting knife.

Conrad tossed his bleeding brother after their father's casket into the roaring darkness, and silence fell across the town.

In the gathering dusk on Coal Hill, the employees of the Barrow Mining Company were still gathered, rooted in the place where they had listened to E.P.'s address. Their mouths hung slack and their eyes stretched wide, cast skyward, a light the color of rotten plums blossoming in those dilated black portals. The dust... or soot... or whatever it was that had issued from the breach swept through the unresistant crowd like a swarm of locusts, moving through each body in turn to consume blood and soft tissue, and carve out the living soul that resided in each, creating empty vessels for the Barrow family to work its will upon the world, and leaving them as hollow as hollow can be.

And with its capital thus established, the Barrow Mining Company set its sights on expansion.

["The Land Unknown (The Pound of Flesh Verses)" by Landon Blood]

These old hills call

For the blood of my body

A pound of flesh for a ton of coal

So down I go

Into a dark hell waiting

Where lungs turn black and hearts grow cold

*And I'll take to the hills and run from the devil
Into the dying sun
Something wicked my way comes
And tread soft, my friend, into these shadows
Where the old ones roam
For in these hills we die alone*

Throughout the 1800s, Barrow operations spread throughout the hills and hollers of Appalachia like a blight, absorbing smaller mines and acquiring adjacent land from the people who'd settled there by whatever means proved necessary. And for some families it didn't take much, truth to tell — frontier life was hard, breaking the backs and hearts of a goodly number of folks who pushed west in search of a place they could put down roots and call their own. Flash a little coin their way — enough, say, to let them return to the more established cities back east — and they were more than happy to cede their claim to a land that had never wanted them here in the first place. Others, though... others had managed to carve out a home for themselves in this unforgiving land, settling into the mountains like a hand into a glove, and those would require a different approach.

The approach in question often involved a visit from a special representative of the Barrow Mining Company, someone with the requisite skills to clarify for the more intransigent residents why accepting the Barrows' offer was in fact in the best interest of them, their families, and quite possibly everyone they knew. If the landowners proved more resistant than usual, a member of the Barrow family might need to pay a personal call. For decades, this duty fell to E.P.'s younger son, Benueel, a visit from a dead man making quite the impression on most folks, who suddenly found they might be willing to reconsider the Barrows' generous offer after all.

Over the years, however, Benueel started to be... more of a problem, becoming less predictable and harder to control. He might be sent to a tiny coal camp in some misbegotten holler in West Virginia, tasked with ridding the Barrows of a meddlesome tax assessor, and end up laying waste to the entire town. It's a common thing with h'aunts who have overstayed their welcome on this mortal plane, you see, clinging to a life that has long since ceased to be theirs to claim. Their

behavior becomes more erratic and dangerous. While E.P. had no concern for the collateral damage his younger boy might do to the communities where he was sent, Benuel's disobedience was becoming a problem. Replacing a town's entire labor force was costly and inefficient.

Benuel was fast becoming a liability in the field, and Conrad had the whole of the Barrow clan's business interests to attend to on his father's behalf. And thus, E.P. turned his eye to the concept of producing another heir. The process of expanding the Barrow family was lengthy, and was delicate work. Conrad and Benuel were not E.P.'s only progeny — no, they were simply his only children fit to represent the public face of Barrow Mining Company, the only ones who could pass relatively unnoticed amongst its human workforce. Yet something had to be done, and so E.P. instructed his sons to add more links to the great iron chain that suspended the black box that had been prepared for him, and they lowered him even further into the earth, deep beneath the grand home office he had constructed. Conrad barred the door that led beneath the building so that none might disturb him, and dismissed the staff for several months so none could carry the tales of the sounds that echoed up from beneath the family's headquarters. The foundations trembled. The air inside that place grew unaccountably cold, far colder than the snow that fell on the mountains around Coal Hill. Dread voices echoed up from the places below, in a language that even Conrad and Benuel could not understand, and E.P.'s sons quaked with fear. And then, on a bleak night in the heart of winter, beneath a moonless, empty sky, the heavy chains rattled and clanked again, as E.P.'s box emerged from the depths.

And unto him was born a daughter.

Polly Barrow was everything the Barrow patriarch could have desired in his progeny — brilliant, beautiful, and strong. Oh, so strong. Her particular talents began to manifest at the tender age of three, when a well-meaning nanny clasped the hand of the fussy toddler, who wanted to stay outside and chase lightning bugs around the family's sprawling country estate rather than come inside for dinner. The young woman had meant only to draw the little girl alongside her into the house, but Polly responded with force, her tiny hand morphing suddenly into a huge gauntlet, armored with plates of bone. Little Polly had simply crushed the bones of the nanny's hand, and then — her mutant paw returned to its normal dimensions — slipped free of her pulpy grasp and returned to trailing her new glowing friends around the manicured lawn.

E.P. could not have been more proud. His daughter's strength was matched only by her relentlessness in pursuit of her aims, and E.P. set about honing her into a weapon that could be used deftly in any number of situations, depending on his need. E.P. needed a tool that was versatile, adaptable, and above all ruthless, and pretty Polly more than fit the bill. Were there palms to be greased on the halls of government? Polly's intelligence, her stature and demeanor, demanded respect, even from the human men who played at their petty politics. Must deals be struck with the wealthy and the powerful? Polly was a shrewd negotiator and a charming dinner guest. The foreman at one of the smaller mining operations taking more than his fair share from the cookie jar, thinking no one in far-away Barrow would notice? Polly was there to swing the ax and cut off the offending hand. Grubby roughnecks making a fuss about working conditions in the mines? Well, sweet Polly could be counted on to make an example that made a lasting impression.

The need for those examples became more and more persistent as the new century progressed and the unions began to take hold. The rabble had seized upon the troubling idea that they were owed something by those for whom they toiled beneath the dark earth, and this simply would not do. Thus, it fell to Polly to collapse mine shafts and break spines and mount heads on pikes wherever a lesson needed to be taught. It was becoming a rather annoying waste of her time, particularly as the workers grew more agitated with the hardships visited upon them by the previous year's stock market crash. It seemed, however, that her father had devised a plan to put the cattle firmly in their places once and for all, and thus, in the autumn of 1930, Polly's older brother Conrad summoned her home to hear the voice of their patriarch.

The sun had just sunk beneath the hills, painting the sky in orange fire, when the sleek black Cadillac pulled up the gently-curving, paved road that wound up Coal Hill to the stately limestone mansion that had come to be known as Barrow House, which had served as the family's base of operations now for more than a hundred years. Though they had allied themselves with Locke Rail some time ago to form the Barrow & Locke Mining Combine, the two families maintained a number of separate business interests... and their distance, trust being in short supply among the heirs and those who served them.

Two men — one a towering, lanky man with a perpetual stoop, the other compact, solidly built, and elegantly dressed — stepped out of the car, and the driver turned to quickly open the door

for his backseat passenger. The woman who emerged was tall and shapely, with glossy black hair pinned back in soft waves, smooth alabaster skin, and amber eyes. She wore a fine gray wool suit with a narrow, pleated skirt and a graceful swing coat and matching hat, and a deep red blouse printed with white lilies. Her fine leather t-strap heels matched the blouse perfectly. They made a sharp clicking sound as she ascended the marble steps to a pair of wide double doors, already peeling off her gloves as she walked.

The doors swung open as soon as her foot struck the top step, held wide for her by a pair of nervous-looking clerks, who kept their eyes on their toes as they mumbled, “Evening, Miss Barrow.”

Polly Barrow removed her hat and handed it to the nearest of the two, while the tall man who had driven the car stepped forward to take her coat. Coat and gloves were also deposited with the clerk.

POLLY: Mr. Crain, Mr. Churchman — with me, please.

She proceeded with quick, purposeful strides down a dark hallway off to the right of the entrance, her two subordinates trailing in her wake. Crain and Churchman had served Polly almost exclusively since the mid-twenties, an honor they had earned through hard work and a willingness to get their hands dirty when the situation called for it. This was not the first time they had been called into the presence of the patriarch, and they did not hesitate. Still, she could sense their discomfort. Even among the Hollow there remained a healthy fear of those who bore the name of Barrow. And that was good. A tool which had no sense of self-preservation could not be relied upon to behave appropriately in certain situations. Complications could arise. *Look at Benuel*, Polly thought as she descended the shallow marble stairs into the basement, a space that had become her father’s office and throne room and sanctuary and temple.

The sigils that adorned the black box that was E.P. Barrow’s bier and throne had spread over the years, creeping up the walls and etching their way deep into the marble beneath her feet. Many of these had accompanied Polly’s own conception — a powerful evocation that had further cracked the foundations of Barrow House, shattering glass up above and nearly shaking the

walls apart — and thus had been present all her life. Others had appeared later, mementos of her father's will made manifest.

As they stepped through the door of the sanctuary, Crain and Churchman each sank to one knee on either side of the door, bowing their heads in reverence. Across the room, Polly's brothers each held a similar position on the edge of the crevasse into which their father's coffin was sunk. A heavy crate rested on the floor between them. It was hewn from the same night-black wood as their father's coffin, carved with runes that the eye couldn't quite settle on, and curiously, featured a number of holes cut into the sides along its top edges.

Polly's heels echoed on the cold marble as she approached. She did not kneel as her brothers did, though she inclined her head respectfully as she greeted their father.

POLLY: Evening, Daddy. Boys.

Conrad and Benuel glared at her over their shoulders. Relations between the Barrow siblings had never been particularly warm, and E.P.'s obvious preference for the child he spoke of as his greatest creation had not improved matters. Duty was duty, however, and Polly's eldest brother Conrad was nothing if not an obedient soldier in E.P. Barrow's service. He inclined his head to his younger sister in greeting as he spoke.

CONRAD: Our father has an important errand which he has chosen to entrust to you.

BENUEL: Again,

Benuel grated angrily, eyeing Polly with malice. If her incorporeal brother could do her harm, Polly didn't doubt that he would. But Benuel didn't have the juice these days. He might still be driving half-starved hillfolk to madness with a whisper, but he'd long since grown too weak to affect her. His days on this plane were numbered.

POLLY: Of course. I am — *as always* — at your disposal, Daddy.

E.P.'s voice echoed from the depths, harsh and resonant, as his children flinched, snapping to attention.

POLLY: Yes, Daddy.

CONRAD: Yes, sir.

BENUEL: Yes, Daddy.

[More rumblings from E.P.]

POLLY: Yes, of course.

[More rumblings from E.P.]

POLLY: I understand. Thy will be done, Daddy.

Conrad rose to his feet, gesturing to the heavy crate that Polly had noticed when she entered the sanctuary.

CONRAD: The weapon is here, in the box.

Polly strolled over to the crate, resting a hand lightly against its surface as she examined it. The wood was cold to the touch, but seemed unremarkable otherwise.

POLLY: What is it?

BENUEL: You'll see.

Polly knelt down to peer inside through one of the holes carved into the black walls of the box. Her eyes widened in surprise.

CONRAD: Just take it to the coal camps and set it loose. It will perform the task it was created for, and then you just load it back into the box, move on to the next. Just as Father said.

BENUEL: Unless of course you... can't handle it? I'd be happy to take it off your hands.

Polly narrowed her eyes and shot her brother a poisonous smile.

POLLY: We'll be just fine, brother dear. But I appreciate your concern. Gentlemen? In the back of the car, if you please.

Crain and Churchman rose to their feet, and dutifully hoisted the unwieldy crate between them. She headed for the door, footsteps echoing on the stairs, and the two Hollow Men followed. Polly had learned long ago what could happen if you turned your back on Benuel Barrow, and she didn't think it wise to underestimate Conrad either. It paid to be cautious.

The two clerks occupying the front desk in the lobby snapped to attention as soon as they saw her, one holding her coat for her while the other held the door open for her companions. Polly put on her coat, hat, and gloves, and followed the two men outside. They had already loaded the crate onto the back of the car, and Mr. Churchman was sliding behind the wheel. Mr. Crain awaited Polly, holding the back door open for her.

CRAIN: Home, Miss Barrow?

Crain asked as she slid into the plush interior.

POLLY: No. West Virginia, I'm afraid. We're told the union organizers are sniffing around again. The children have forgotten their lessons, and it falls to me once again to play schoolmistress.

CRAIN: Yes, ma'am.

Crain joined Churchman up front, passing on Polly's instructions. The car's powerful engine roared to life, and the three sped off into the night, southbound for the Barrow coal fields.

[“Pretty Polly,” performed by Landon Blood and John Lee Bullard]

Oh Polly, Pretty Polly, come go along with me

Polly, Pretty Polly, go along with me

Before we get married, some pleasures to see...

Well, hey there, family. Welcome to the first proper story arc of Season 3 of Old Gods of Appalachia, “As Above, So Below.” Are y’all surprised to meet Miss Polly Barrow once again, and so soon? Well she has missed the pleasure of your company. And if you don’t know who Polly Barrow is, I highly suggest you make sure you didn’t miss out on our holiday special, “Salt of the Earth,” back around Christmas time. We are so excited to have y’all with us for Season 3. It’s hard to believe that we’re already on our third season. We have so many exciting stories to tell you this time around — new characters, new places, maybe a familiar face or two. But it’s just good to be home. It’s good to be back with y’all.

And we ask that, if you want to keep up with everything, please complete your social media ritual. Head on over to oldgodsofappalachia.com. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, the Discord server, all that good stuff. You can get all the upcoming news on our tabletop roleplaying game that the Kickstarter is getting ready to launch for. Monte Cook Games and DeepNerd Media are joining forces to produced Old Gods of Appalachia, the tabletop roleplaying game. You can head on over to montecookgames.com to sign up to be notified, or just look on our social media. We’ve been putting that everywhere. So you can get that email for the day the Kickstarter launches, and get in on all the goodies. And as somebody who’s on the inside of this crypt, let me tell ya, there is some exciting goodies being developed for this thing, and you wanna get in on that and not mess around or miss out.

Family, if you truly want to help us out, though — if you want to become one with us, truly and wholly — head on over to our Patreon at patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia, where you can find 17 episodes of *Build Mama a Coffin*; the two-parter “Door Under the Floor.” We’re getting ready to wrap up *Black Mouthed Dog*, our newest prequel to *Build Mama a Coffin*. There’s so much great content on there. We do our best to make it worth it, because y’all keep our lights on. Y’all have enabled us to make this our full time thing, and we owe it all to you. So please, if you want to get in on that and truly join with us, patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia.

And Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill Today's story was written by Cam Collins and Steve Shell. Our intro music was by our brother Landon Blood, and our outro music was by Landon Blood featuring John Lee Bullard on the banjo. And the voice of Polly Barrow was Tracey Johnson Crumb. Talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

© 2022 DeepNerd Media. All rights reserved.