

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 3, Episode 33: Special Delivery

*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 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*

Night stretched across the mountains of West Virginia, the sky a twinkling blanket of stardust in the years before the ubiquitous light pollution of the modern world hid most of them from our view. A long black Cadillac drove through the night, navigating its way around the treacherous switchbacks as it slipped into the heart of coal country. Bower County was dotted with numerous little coal towns of varying levels of prosperity, every one of which was owned — lock, stock and barrel — by the Barrow & Locke Mining Combine.

It was nearly morning by the time they reached their destination, a squat log cabin buried deep in the woods outside a thriving coal town called Kayboro. B&L had claimed the structure after its former occupant, an employee who was crushed in a mine shaft collapse, left his surviving family heavily in debt to the Kayboro general store. It had been used since then as a base of operations for visiting management. The little bungalow was situated a bit far from the rest of

the coal camp to assign any of the workers to live there, but its isolation suited their needs perfectly.

The Caddy bumped up the narrow rutted track that led to the secluded cabin, and Mr. Churchman pulled around the back of the house to ensure that no one would detect their presence (although anyone who'd made their way up the drive, which was mostly hidden from the road by overgrown brush, and more than casually curious would be dealt with in a swift and final fashion). Mr. Crain hopped out of the car to open the door for Miss Barrow, while Churchman went round the back of the car to unload the large crate they had obtained from Barrow House. The dimensions of the box were somewhat awkward to manage, but it was not especially heavy, and Churchman needed no assistance maneuvering it inside the cabin, where he deposited it in the middle of the empty front room.

Despite its outward appearance, the little house was quite clean. Someone had swept the dust from the corners of the front room and wiped down the kitchen countertops recently. The double bed that had been squeezed into the cabin's single bedroom was laid with clean linens. The small lavatory wedged into an old closet behind the kitchen — a more recent addition, clearly — appeared to have been scrubbed clean. Crain still gave the place a cursory sweep and wiped down the chairs at the kitchen table — wouldn't do for Miss Barrow to get dust on her skirt, now — but he and Mr. Churchman had visited the cabin not long ago, and they were always careful that their workspaces were scrubbed of any sign of their presence.

Polly Barrow stepped inside and dropped her handbag on the kitchen counter. She hung her coat and hat on a hook by the door, and took a moment to look around. The quarters were a bit cramped, and it certainly lacked the creature comforts she was accustomed to, but the cabin would more than suit their present purposes. One thing it did not afford her, however, was privacy, which was what she required at the moment. So she sent the two Hollow Men out to sit in the car for a while, until she'd done what was needed here.

Polly kicked off her shoes, and settled herself on the floor of the cabin, next to the black wood crate. She crossed her legs in front of her, making herself as comfortable as possible on the hardwood floor, and rested her hands lightly in her lap. She focused on her breathing — slow and deep, counting the seconds to balance each one: in, two, three, four, and out, two, three,

four, until soon she had no need to count. Polly's muscles relaxed. The hardwood floor drifted away. And softly, she began to chant. The words were hard to pronounce — would have come impossible to any human tongue — but she had practiced them since childhood, and she barely had to think about them anymore. Her daddy had taught her very well. As she spoke the words, her voice took on a steady rhythm and cadence born of long practice, and her body began to rock along with it. Her voice rose, and the words drowned out everything else. Her nerves *thrummed*, and her mind opened, and the darkness poured inside... and suddenly she was someplace else.

POLLY: Daddy? I'm here.

Polly called into the darkness, and her father answered.

*[Eldritch rumblings]*

Polly had established the ability to speak with her daddy from outside the walls of Barrow House early in life, and it was, as she understood it, not a talent either of her brothers shared. Polly and E.P. could even communicate privately while in the same room with Conrad and Benuel — and it was in this way that the Barrow patriarch had directed her to make contact with him for further instructions once she arrived in West Virginia. He asked after her first — had she made it safely to West Virginia? Was everything at the cabin in order? Did she have questions about her mission? He seemed unusually curious about her reaction to the assignment at hand.

POLLY: It seems an... unusual choice of vessel, yes, but... I bow to your wisdom, as always.

Polly didn't question her daddy. She was his most faithful disciple, his most dutiful soldier, his steadfast ally in all things. Polly did as she was told, and she reaped the rewards of that loyalty. She had designer dresses and glittering rings to adorn her fingers. She had beautiful combs for her hair carved from the bones of those her family had conquered and painted with gold. Was there a price to pay? Of course. Power always comes at a cost. But the strong — the ruthless — are willing to pay the bill.

Today the account would be paid in pain. That was fine with Polly. Her pain was only a small sacrifice in the face of her father's ambitions, and in any case it was necessary in order to fulfill her mission. Her daddy needed to impart some knowledge to her, the complexity of which would boil any wholly human mind in its skull like an egg. Polly had been built close enough to human that it would cost her, but she could handle it. She could always handle it.

POLLY: Ah. I see. Yes. Yes. Yes, Daddy. I'm ready. *Ahhhh!*

Darkness poured into Polly Barrow's mind, in a language she could not yet read, though she recognized some of the symbols as those adorning Barrow's town sign, and knew it must be the same that her daddy had used long before her birth to crack the skin of the world and establish his burrow deep beneath Barrow House. Her brain was flooded with the strange symbols, bars and swirls of some alien geometry that did not quite square with physics, and she felt her mind might shatter from the terrible beauty of them. She clutched her hands to her head, as if she could physically help hold it inside her skull. Her body began to tremble and jerk, and she found herself on the floor, her heels beating against the floorboards, until finally, she let loose a scream.

And then, all at once, the pain stopped. There was only blessed darkness in her head, and the reassuring clarity of purpose. The native tongue of the Inner Dark filled her mind, entrancing her with its chaotic intricacies, and she took a moment to revel in it, before she began to collect herself. She pushed herself back up into a seated position, one hand held gingerly against her aching head, the other reaching to swipe at a trickle of blood that seeped from her nose.

POLLY: Yes. Yes, Daddy. I have it now.

It wasn't long before she heard a hesitant tap at the cabin door — Crain and Churchman, roused from their exile to the car by her scream, no doubt. They were typically the most obedient of servants, and would not otherwise have disturbed her, but the sound of potential trouble was enough to motivate them to stretch protocol a little bit. Polly decided she would allow it just this once, caught her breath, and called for them to enter. She waved off their questions, but allowed Mr. Crain to help her to her feet. Then she retired to the lavatory for a moment of privacy.

She washed her hands, splashed water on her face, and smoothed her hair. She straightened her suit, and feeling more herself, rejoined the Hollow Men in the front room. Now that Polly had the knowledge she would need to control their unusual weapon, it was time to have a look at it. Churchman fetched a hammer from the toolbox in the trunk of the Cadillac and pried the nails from one side of the crate. He and Crain carefully lowered that side of the box, and Polly knelt on the ground again, peering into the darkness within.

POLLY: *Tch tch tch tch tch tch.* Come on,

Polly called into the shadows of the crate.

POLLY: Come here, little one. Come on. That's it! Good boy.

And slowly, in response to her coaxing, a tow-headed infant toddled out of the box. He appeared to Polly's untrained eye to be a bit past a year old, maybe 14 months or so, with bright eyes, and he was dressed in a white shirt and a neat little checkered pant with suspenders. From beneath his collar peeked the spiky, swirling characters that had flooded Polly's mind only minutes ago. She could see that they reached down his hands and around his tiny fingers, and crawled up the curves of his ears, and two perfect little sigils adorned his face, one on each rosy cheek. Unsteady on his feet, he nearly toppled over, but Polly scooped him up, bouncing him on her knee.

CRAIN: It's... it's a baby, Miss Barrow?

Crain stammered, somewhat shocked.

POLLY: Yes. He's a good little weapon, isn't he? Yes, he is.

CRAIN: A... a new brother, ma'am?

POLLY: Certainly not. What Barrow have you ever known to have green eyes, Mr. Crain? This little one is... is a loaner, shall we say.

CRAIN: I... I see. What do we do with him, Miss Barrow?

POLLY: *We don't have to do much at all, Mr. Crain. That's the beauty of it. We simply set him loose at an appropriate location. Our little friend here will do what he does, and we scoop him back up in the morning. It's rather genius. But I will need to repaint *these*.*

Polly gestured toward the careful markings on the baby's face. Crain nodded.

POLLY: And that will require some rather specialized ingredients. Nothing that you and Mr. Churchman should have any trouble finding nearby. I'll make a list.

CRAIN: Yes, ma'am. We'll see to it.

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The following evening, as the sun began to sink below the gentle curves of the Allegheny Mountains, Polly Barrow's shiny black car wound its way down the mountain into the small but thriving community of Kayboro. It was a bit before suppertime, when children had not been called in to wash up just yet, and their soot-smearred daddies had not begun to stagger home, exhausted, from the day's labors at Pasco #3 mine. Home to 397 souls and counting, Kayboro boasted a rail station, a small but well-appointed family-run hotel, a two-storey general store, and three churches. Pasco #3 and the rail station were, of course, properties of Barrow & Locke, and employed pretty near every able body in Kayboro. One would think the rabble would be grateful. Who provided the roofs over their heads? The food to feed their innumerable broods of children? Why, Barrow & Locke, of course. Polly's father had even approved construction of a baseball field, of all things, to provide evening entertainment for the citizens of Kayboro in the warmer months.

And still they received reports of agitation from their loyal men on the ground in Kayboro. Rumors of unionization meetings held in secret and impending strikes abounded, and the populace was on edge. Crain and Churchman had recently paid a visit to Kayboro Hotel and spent some time in its saloon, chatting with a local miner known to have a taste for gin, after which a bottle was purchased and the cheerful party retired to the very cabin they had

established as their current base of operations. At that point, the conversation had taken a less friendly — but more fruitful — turn. And in good time, Mr. Crain had persuaded the man to provide the name of a coworker he had seen leaving coded messages in other folks' dinner pails around Pasco #3.

Romeo Capriotti was the name this loyal company man had supplied Mr. Crain, along with an address and everything he knew about the Capriotti clan. The Capriottis were a large family of the Catholic persuasion, and attended mass at St. Barbara's every Sunday without fail. Romeo's older sister had taken her vows with the Sisters of St. Joseph, and served in an orphanage up in Charleston. Their mama was known to make the best pepperoni rolls in Bower County, which she made for every church potluck and picnic, and sold out of a little cart at the county fair every summer. Romeo, his three brothers, two remaining sisters, and mother lived in a sprawling old farm house out on the edge of Kayboro, with their granddaddy. Romeo's daddy had passed a few years back with the black lung, but the Capriotti boys had followed him into the mines, and they brought in enough to keep the family afloat, Mrs. Capriotti and the girls working the farm. The family was well liked and well respected in the community. They had influence.

They would have to go.

Mr. Churchman eased the Cadillac off the road, into the high weeds, just down the road from the Capriottis' rambling old house. It was an ideal location, from which they could monitor their bouncing baby bombshell while remaining unseen by the house's occupants. Mr. Crain waited until the sun had fully set, and shadows spilled long across the valley, pooling at the base of the tree line and bathing the Capriottis' yard in shadow. Then he stepped quietly from the passenger seat, picked up a small bundle wrapped in blankets, and moved silently through the tall grass to the edge of the road. As Polly and Churchman watched from the car, he slipped between the weeds, and just like that he was gone, folding the shadows around him so that none could mark his passage, or so much as even hear his footsteps, as he approached the house across the road.

A few minutes later, his sleeping package deposited silently on the family's front porch, Mr. Crain returned to the car, lowered his muscular bulk into the passenger seat, and quietly closed the door behind him. He was just in time. Not five minutes later, they heard the sound of footsteps, accompanied by the murmuring of several voices, coming down the road from the

direction of the mine. A moment later, the porch light across the street snapped on, bathing the Capriottis' front yard in a soft, golden glow... and suddenly an infant's cry split the evening calm.

There was suddenly much ado on the porch across the street, as the four Capriotti brothers ran the rest of the way home in response to the sound, Mrs. Capriotti opening the door and stepping into view. There were a few minutes of heated discussion, punctuated with gesticulating, but in the end, Mama Capriotti scooped the squalling bundle up and began gently bouncing the infant on her hip. His cries soon turned to giggles with her tender ministrations.

"Where do you think he come from, Mama?" one of the men could be heard to ask.

"I don't rightly know, but lot of folks got a hard row to hoe these days. Some poor thing, down on her luck, probably. Just trying to find her boy a good home," she answered sadly. "I'll take him over to Father Murphy at the church in the morning. He'll know what to do. But for now, let's get this little one cleaned up. He's got something on his face, see?"

Polly Barrow smiled.

Awhile later, lanterns were extinguished in the house across the street. The moon rose above the trees, and the crickets began to sing, and for a long while, all was quiet and peaceful in Kayboro. And then, softly — so, so softly — through the open window, came the sound of a little child beginning to fuss in the night, followed by... something else. A strange sound, like fabric tearing, a noise heard more as an echo deep in the skull than anything captured by the ear. The air filled with the smell of ozone, and the hairs rose on the back of Polly's neck. The crickets ceased their endless song, and for a moment, the whole world fell still, as if some great predator moved among them. And then the screaming began.

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In the wee hours before dawn, before anyone could be expected to pass by the farm house, or come looking for Romeo Capriotti and his brothers when they didn't show up for their shifts at Pasco #3, Polly Barrow and the two Hollow Men stepped from the Cadillac and walked across the road to collect their charge. Nobody locked their doors back then — not that it would have

saved Romeo Capriotti and his family — so Mr. Churchman simply opened the front door, ducking to avoid bumping his head on the jamb. The house was a shambles. Furniture was reduced to splinters. The floors were soaked in blood, the walls imprinted with wide red stripes and... swirls, almost as if a painter had attempted to render some great, stylized sea creature in mural. Bodies, or parts of them, lay scattered in corners. The bottom half of a leg, from about halfway down the calf, had become wedged between two rails on the staircase. A gooey black substance dripped from the ceiling, and a strange, dark fungus was climbing its way up the walls.

Polly Barrow stepped gingerly over the devastation — mindful of her shoes — and gently scooped up the fair-haired child that Mr. Crain had left on the doorstep last evening. The little tyke had worn himself plumb out playing with his new friends, and didn't even wake on the ride back to the cabin in the woods. So it was no trouble for Polly to strip the boy down to his nappy and carry out the ritual required to repaint the sigils that the unwitting woman had washed from his skin. And when her task was done, Polly dropped exhausted onto the double bed and fell into the fathomless, dreamless sleep that was all she had ever known.

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In the weeks that followed, Polly, Crain and Churchman would repeat this procedure in various coal towns scattered around the region, dropping off their special delivery where he might be discovered by either the unfortunate folks on their list of reported union agitators, or by those closest to them. A childless woman discovered the precocious babe playing alone by the creek behind her house as she was hanging clothes out on the line, and rushed him inside, a surprise — and perhaps a prayer answered at last? — for her husband when he returned home from a hard day in the mines. A pastor who was said to be offering up his church as a safe space for union organizers discovered the boy on the church doorstep when he came to open its doors for one such meeting, under the guise of “men's evening fellowship.” And so on and so forth.

Folks in Bower County were becoming decidedly unsettled. What happened to the Capriottis had shocked the local community, no doubt about it, but it was generally assumed that the family had been murdered by some drifter passing through on the rails. Nobody they knew would be capable of anything like that, surely. And at first no one thought about Romeo

Capriotti's union talk. Rabble-rousers had been known to turn up dead, sure enough, but not entire families. But as the rash of... incidents... continued, and the bodies piled up, the people of Bower County began to connect the dots. No one knew for sure what was going on — what on earth could even do that kind of thing to a human body? — but everybody knew it must have something to do with unions, and suddenly nobody wanted any part of that business.

As the stars winked out and the sky began to fade from velvety-black to deep blue to gray, Mr. Crain collected the boy from what remained of a boarding house catering to miners in a small coal camp called Nettleburg. He passed the drowsy child to Polly, who settled him in next to her on the back seat.

CRAIN: Where to next, Miss Barrow?

Polly Barrow was ready to return home, to report another successful mission to her daddy, to accept his praise and bask in his love. What might her reward be this time? A new car? A train ride up to New York for a shopping day? Perhaps a trip abroad. A cruise might be nice this time of year. But first, there was one last name on her list — a man who, according to their local informant, seemed undeterred by recent events.

POLLY: Hm. Oak Mountain. Our source there tells us a fellow worker is attempting to organize a union rally. A man by the name of Underwood.

[“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. Thanks y'all for joining us here on the backroads of West Virginia with Miss Polly Barrow and her best friends, Crain and Churchman, up to nefarious acts of no good. But it looks like they're about to meet with some real interesting folks. I think y'all need to come back and check that out next time around, don't you? I thought so.

Family, I just gotta get this out of the way first and foremost. I want to thank everyone who has pledged to our Kickstarter for the Old Gods of Appalachia tabletop roleplaying game with us and Monte Cook Games. We met our initial \$50,000 funding goal in 11 minutes, and ever since then — that’s day one — ever since then, we’ve been blasting through stretch goals. And there are some super exciting things that I want y’all to have, ‘cause we’re like having to think, what household appliances can we include at this point in time? So head on over to Kickstarter — there’s a link down in the show notes. This game looks absolutely gorgeous. We’re working our tails off on it, and it’s not just us handing our license over to say “hey, go make a game with our name on it.” Cam and I are writing. We are creating. We are consulting. We are doing everything to make sure this game has the heart of our alternate Appalachia throbbing, pulsing, beating, burning inside it. So please go check that out. Link in the show notes.

Also, we’re humbled by the support that’s shown up on the Kickstarter, just like we’re humbled by our patrons on Patreon. Whole bunch of new folks signed up this time around, and that’s super exciting. [Patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia](https://patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia), where you can find *Build Mama a Coffin*, “Door Under the Floor,” *Black Mouthed Dog* (whose series finale is just around the corner), and a whole other bunch of cool features like exclusive Discord events, Steve Reads, Cam reads, all that good stuff. [Patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia](https://patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia).

Also complete your social media ritual. Hit up [oldgodsofappalachia.com](https://oldgodsofappalachia.com). Follow us on Facebook, Instagram, tweet into the void with us on Twitter, and join the Discord server and come be part of the family and say hey. Cam and I stop by there pretty regularly and interact with y’all, so always a good time.

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