

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 3, Episode 36: Eminent Domain

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 envelope had lain on her roll-top desk in the front room for three days now. It was a puny thing, made of a thin off-white paper, and had apparently been stepped on so that a footprint almost obscured the mailing address. It sat sealed, a soiled and dangerous thing, with the rest of the mail that had been opened and read. Couple of bills from the farm supply for the new fence posts and the lumber for the new shed they were building out back. A proper thank you note from a friend in West Virginia for help in a delicate matter a little while back. A lengthy letter from her younger sister detailing the comings and goings up in Esau County, which read more like gossip than anything of concern unless you knew what you were looking for. She pored over it a few times, chuckling at the stories of her sister's travels and nodding gravely at the bits between the lines, scribbling a few notes in her journal for future reference.

She'd worked hard to distract herself from opening that dirty envelope that appeared in her mailbox as if it had traveled through time. She'd tended the chickens, brought in the laundry from the line in the side yard, swept the back porch, mopped the kitchen, washed her hands, and pondered starting supper even though it was far too early to do so. Still she could feel the potential menace that radiated from that stepped-on piece of correspondence taunting her from the front of the house. She'd bet that footprint had been made by a steel-toed work boot and that the faded outline of that stranger's foot was etched into the paper by coal dust. There were few things, when it come to cleaning, that she hated more than coal dust. She imagined opening it and an ocean of that dusty shadow pouring from the folds like the breaking water of some foul thing in labor, giving birth deep within the earth, bringing darkness and choking damp into the world. Anything that came from whence that particular document had come was tainted by the touch and taste of coal at the very least. The return address alone was enough to lay a month's worth of frost on her tired joints.

She sighed.

She had just set the steel in her spine to carry herself into the front room, tear the thing open and get it over with, when the phone rang. She jumped and almost peed her pants with fright. She stared at the black handset by the door that led from the kitchen to the front room as it rang twice more, and then picked up the receiver. Daisy McGinnis, local phone operator and the best keeper of other people's secrets in Johnson County, TN, bubbled into her ear.

"Miss Walker? I got a long distance call for you, hon. Please hold the line."

Before Marcie could even thank the young woman, a voice that carried nearly as much space and time as the dread letter itself purred into her ear. "Well, did you open it yet?"

A smile bloomed, unbidden, across Marcie Walker's face. "Priscilla-Rose? Rosie — is that you?"

"Oh, it's me, little sister, and I asked you a question. Have you opened it yet?"

Marcie swallowed and glanced across the room at the waiting pile of mail. "I have not. You know I hate even thinking about that place. I can't imagine it's good news."

"It's not as bad as you think it might be, but it ain't great either."

Priscilla-Rose Walker, eldest daughter of Sheila Walker, drawled across the phone lines from... well, from god-knew-where. Rosie hadn't kept to one fixed address in years. The last time Marcie had heard from her was when Carole Anne passed. Rosie had sent along a box of items to contribute to the warding Marcie and Ellie had laid around Carole Anne's house when she and Pinky got married — for all the good that had done — along with a note conferring her best wishes for Carole Anne. That had been followed by the letter ten years later when Carol Anne and Pinky were killed — a brief note that said "Find out what did this, or I will." To Marcie's knowledge neither one of them had enjoyed much luck with that particular quest.

"Well, what is it?" Marcie asked, her anxiety and irritation bleeding through her joy at hearing from her oldest sister.

"Open it and see. I'll wait."

She could hear Rosie smoking a cigarette and imagined her leaning, sleepy eyed and languid, perched on a barstool or a divan in some parlor house, all doe eyes and blushing cheeks and full painted lips — with at least three knives and probably a pistol somewhere on her person at all times. That was their Rose — all glowing petals and sweet perfume, with more thorns than you'd realize until it was far, far too late.

Marcie sighed in frustration and put the phone down and walked over to the roll top desk. Finally, she snatched up the envelope and tore it open. The paper inside was thin, yellow and official looking. It bore a county seal from up in the middle of West Virginia, and she read over the brief missive as she walked back to the phone. “Rosie, are you still there?”

“I’m here, little Marcie-pan.”

Marcie scowled and then smiled at the old nickname. “No one else has ever called me that, and I’ll thank you to stop trying. It’s never gonna stick. Anyway, what is this? It says they’re tearing down the town? I thought the whole place was abandoned years ago after the coal went bad.”

Rosie chuckled. “It takes a lot more than time to wipe a stain like that place off the face of the world, Marce. Company ceded the land to the county some twenty years back, but it finally became a done deal this month. Fairmont, Pocahontas — hell even B&L pulled out and retrieved their assets ages ago. But they left the town standing empty, including...”

“Mama’s house,” Marcie finished her sister’s sentence.

“Eminent domain is in fact imminent, little sister — but you know as well as I do there could be things in that house we should have fetched years ago. Shoot, I bet there’s stuff in Mama’s downstairs room we don’t even know about. Someone should take a look. In the interest of public safety.”

Marcie closed her eyes and tightened her grip on the receiver. “Rosie, please don’t say what I think you’re about to say...”

“Sorry, baby girl, but one of us is gonna have to go back to Tourniquet.”

[“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

Tourniquet, West Virginia, was a place that had never been right. The air seemed to sink to the bottom of your lungs, carrying with it the dust of dried blood scraped from a cold iron altar. Tourniquet wasn't even really a town — because people live in a town. Tourniquet was a place where bad things went to die. Sometimes those bad things might be of the dark shadow creeping through the woods variety, and sometimes they might be of the industry in its death throes variety, and hell family, sometimes both. There had been mines dug all around the part of West Virginia where Tourniquet lay for decades. They had dug and blasted and hauled the meat of the mountain from its deep places up to the surface to keep the home fires burning in various and sundry places in Appalachia and beyond, until one day the unthinkable happened. The coal ran out. Well, sort of. There was *some* left, just none that was worth the cost of digging it up.

One by one, the larger coal companies began to drift from the area when new digs didn't yield the same tonnage or the same quality of coal. What came from the ground around Tourniquet was empty and dry, coal that somehow lacked its usual rich black sheen and flammability. Coal that crumbled like ashes under pick and shovel. It was as though it had already been burned somehow. It was dead, just like the town would be.

Tourniquet started its life as a red light district of sorts, not dissimilar to Ash Bottom a decade or two earlier: a playground of women, whiskey and whatever other pleasures wet your beak. The difference was that most of Tourniquet was owned by the companies that mined the land around it. While you might have had a house or two maintained by B&L down south in Ash Bottom, the main drag of Tourniquet was company owned and operated. You had Dawson's Boarding House on the corner as you rolled into town, serving all your discrete by-the-hour needs — no frills, nothing fancy, just good clean work for an honest dollar, like the sign said. The place was closely watched by bulls hired by Fairmont Mining and was not a place to show one's ass — figuratively speaking, anyway. Across the street was the Black Diamond Saloon and Revue, owned by Pocahontas Coal, though you'd have a dang hard time finding the paperwork to prove it. All the booze that was barely safe to drink and burlesque shows featuring girls all the way from Paris and London — Kentucky that is, but all the same it was a wild ride if you'd never seen such a thing. There were a dozen rooms above the bar for those who had the money or the scrip to spend. And way down at the end of the lane sat a squat brick building with no windows and the word "Babylon" painted over a black, iron-banded door in white block letters. I'll give you one guess which company owned that one.

At the height of the boom around Tourniquet thought, a cluster of smaller private houses — all of whom paid protection money and such to the companies in question — dotted the backroads that spread out of the town like roots seeking water. Yolanda's Hotel, The Harper's Tavern, Old Patty's Place — these were houses built and paid for by independent contractors. They often shared staff and traded talent so that everybody got a good night here and there. Only Harper's ran boys. It was dangerous running boys in Tourniquet. The sort of men who were looking for a good time with other men in a place like that, and in a time like that, had been known to kill to keep that a secret. These small-timers managed to keep their doors open while remaining selective about their clientele until the companies started shutting down the big houses when the coal ran dry. As operations pulled out, the men who were left behind were so rowdy and had so little left to lose that it just wasn't safe anymore. One by one, Yolanda's and Patty's and even old Harper's closed their doors.

There was one house, though, that stayed open until the bitter, bloodless end — a house whose madam was there the day the last company came and told the few folks left to get out, or get

buried. It sat further back from the main part of town, shrouded in trees, with a wide swampy yard that sloped up between the gravel road and the house proper. It was a little ways up a hill, not so much to be remote, but it felt... set apart somehow. Miss Sheila's Charm School for Well Instructed Ladies had a tall porch with rocking chairs out front where tea was served along with whiskey. The siding of the house had been painted a deep, tasteful gray that made the building seem as though it sat even further away from the everyday world of work and strife. Gauzy curtains covered the windows, through which the light glowed almost ethereally at night.

When folks come to Miss Sheila's Charm School for Well Instructed Ladies for a night of entertainment, they truly felt as if they were someplace else. There was a sense of elegance about the place that was neither stuffy nor put-on. Even if you showed up half drunk and unwashed, you'd tuck your shirt in and brush your hair back before you walked through the front door, and feel bad you didn't change your socks. You minded your Ps and Qs at the Charm School too, or you'd find yourself in a world of hurt. There wasn't no proper law to be found in Tourniquet, but Miss Sheila Walker suffered neither fools nor violence on her property. Raise your hand to one of Miss Sheila's girls, and you will likely draw back a stump. There were more than a handful of men walking around with bodily reminders of their own foolishness who would never darken the doors of the Charm School again. And there were others still who weren't walking around at all, if you catch my meaning, Family.

Sheila Walker was a witch — a powerful one whose reputation commanded respect in some circles and outright fear in others. She had stood for the Green and against all things that come in the night to prey on women and babies since she saw her auntie Patience die at the hands of something that wasn't no man, and wasn't no panther, but moved like both. She had learned how to use her gifts to confound those that would feed on the flesh of the less powerful, how to undo deals done by red-eyed, cloven-hoofed beasts in the moonlight, and how to protect her family — both blood and chosen. She was not the most powerful witch to ever walk — oh, far from it — but she was one of seven daughters who herself had birthed seven daughters, all of whom had grown up in that house. Their daddies were all different, some selected by Sheila and some by fate. Some worked when they was old enough. Some did not. Some survived what came, and some did not. They were as varied and individual as wildflowers growing on the side of the road, but they all sprung from the same West Virginia soil.

Priscilla Rose was the first of the brood. She was smart and savvy and saw a lot of awful things in that pothole of a town. She worked at the house from the time she was old enough until circumstances involving things beyond the ken of regular folks had sent her running — and running is how she'd stayed alive ever since.

Carol Anne was the second and littlest baby — poor thing never grew bigger than just under five feet. Shrewd and sweet, Carol Anne would stay by her mama's side until the very end of the house's run in Tourniquet. In the end, Sheila managed to marry her off to Edgar Avery's dopey nephew, Pinky. They got a baby and ten good years before the darkness came for them. But y'all know that story.

Agnes Persephone Walker came next. Aggie was whip-smart and took no shit from nobody, no ma'am. Aggie worked at the house 'til she got sick of her Mama's nagging and tired of West Virginia boys, and thus took her trade on the road. After working in half a dozen houses, she got out, got married and had a little girl of her own down over the Virginia line. Wasn't nothing more sinister than tainted water and a wasting sickness that took Aggie Walker from this world. Different kind of darkness, but gone is gone, Family.

Two years after Aggie was born, Sheila met a man who swore he was gonna "take her away from all this" before skipping town the moment she told him she was expecting. Sheila's fourth daughter was unlike the rest of the girls. While she was never cut out for working the house in the traditional sense, she was good with numbers, was a crack shot, and could break a grown man's kneecap by the age of ten. Born in the middle of a thunderstorm, it was no surprise to Sheila that Marcia Lynn Walker would be the first girl since Rosie to bear a true gift in the family. It was also no surprise that when she was grown, Marcie proposed going into business with her mama, all official-like, and went to open her own fine house down in Tennessee. Sheila had never been so proud. And no matter what work that house did now, it was still a grand achievement.

It was a good few years after Marcie was born before her sister Rebecca Victoria followed. Becky was ashamed of what her mama and some of her sisters did for a living and wanted no part of it. She took a job as a secretary with Fairmont Mining, and eventually one of their foremen married her and carried her off to exotic Ohio. She would not allow her sisters or mother to attend to the

birth of her first child. She insisted that her family's superstitious and backward ways had no place in the modern city of Cincinnati or its state of the art hospital. Neither she nor the baby made it through the delivery, and Sheila never quite forgave herself for not fighting harder to be at her stubborn daughter's side.

A couple years after Becky was born, one of Sheila's regulars — a man she strongly sensed bore a gift of his own — blessed her with a child that burned bright in her belly. When Heloise Jane Walker came into the world, it was as though spring came early to West Virginia that year. She got her Daddy's icy blue eyes, a more fiery version of Sheila's own auburn locks, and eventually more curves than the back road from Switchbend to Galax. Rosie, Marcie and Ellie all studied with their mama in the ways of the craft and the Green. Rosie was a smoldering pot on the stove. Marcie was bedrock and solid earth, but Ellie... Ellie was lighting and starlight, a razor-sharp blade honed by the joining of gifts into something that not even her mama fully grasped. She worked in the house for a while, but found that her work helping girls get to safer houses or out of the profession altogether took much of her time. Ellie relocated to Esau County, Virginia, where she kept a private residence while traveling to visit and work with her sister in Tennessee from time to time.

The baby of the family was little Douglass Lillian Walker. Book-smart and world weary by the time she was old enough to say so, Dougie Walker (as her older siblings called her) had zero interest in the family business and even less in what she deemed “woo-woo bullshit” — witchcraft and things that went bump in the night. A born skeptic and realist, Douglass Walker ran away from home and joined the circus, so to speak. She passed the bar and got herself licensed to practice law in both Tennessee and her adopted home state of North Carolina, where she opened up a little practice in Boone.

All of the Walker sisters had seen the darkness in one form or another. Four still lived to tell the tale and to continue the fight, whether they liked it or not. And thank your lucky stars for that, Family. Thank them good and proper.

Marcie Walker's bones ached as she shuffled down Turnbow Street away from the main square of Baker's Gap. She had sustained a lot of wear and tear to her hip and knee over the past couple of years, and walking on her own wasn't easy. Her silver-tipped walking stick helped keep her upright, but it didn't ease the pain. Melvin had driven her to town so that they could pick up groceries. She'd sent him back to the house to unload them and told him where to meet her in an hour. Melvin knew better than to argue.

Marcie had gone back and forth with her older sister for the better part of an hour over who would have to return to their hometown and go through their mother's house. It had to be someone with Walker blood, or else the wards would eat them alive. It also had to be done within the next seven days, as demolition began on the eighth.

Rosie couldn't go because there were certain men — and certain Things — in that part of the world who had been looking for the girl who cost the Barrow & Locke Mining Combine a whole lot of money over the course of than two decades. Priscilla Rose Walker had lived on the run for over 25 years, and living at least 25 more was what she intended to do. Marcie would lay even odds she was nowhere near enough to get there in time anyway. Ellie was down in North Carolina doing some work that Marcie dare not distract her from, even if she could get in touch with her in time. And Marcie knew better than to bother asking Dougie. She knew only too well what the answer would be.

Marcie couldn't go herself for a number of reasons. She felt like she'd aged five years for each of the past two. She still had more sleepless nights than restful ones, and if she was honest, the idea of seeing her Mama's house without her mama in it might break her in a way she just wouldn't be able to come back from. Shameful as it was, she just couldn't do it. Her body and her soul just weren't up to it. So here she was, dragging her beat up old bones through the side streets and toward the edge of Baker's Gap, her walking stick bearing her up like an old war buddy.

And maybe she'd overestimated herself walking this far out, but it wasn't much further now. A sizable group of young folk passed her going the opposite way on the other side of the road, chattering and showing out and carrying on the way young'uns do. Marcie smiled at the sight of them. Good. That meant she'd timed it almost perfectly.

Across the road, one boy threw up his hand and hollered, “Hey Miss Walker!”

Marcie paused and squinted over the passing crowd to pick out the face of the handsome young man who’d recognized her. “Well hey, Floyd! Look at you! I bet you’re as tall as your Daddy now. You tell your mama I said hi, and to come see me sometime, you hear?”

Floyd Absher grinned back. “Yes’m. I will. You be careful, ma’am — it’s a little slick over by the steps there.”

Marcie waved him on and carefully made her way down the street to her destination. She was cautiously climbing the steps of the schoolhouse when her bad leg and hip told her this was as far as they were going, and she swayed. Damn it, she was about to lose her balance and go ass over elbows back down the way she’d come — but before she could fall, a steadying hand reached out and grabbed her arm.

“Aunt Marcie? Are you ok?”

Marcie panted for a second, bracing herself against the pain in her leg, and then turned and looked into the eyes of her sister’s only daughter. “Well, hey there, Miss Belle. You’re just the person I needed to see. I hate to ask, darlin’, but I need a favor.”

[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. Welcome to act two of season three, As Above, So Below. We brought you some familiar faces so that you might learn some new things about them and learn all about the blighted land that brought forth one of the most beloved bloodlines in all of our Appalachia. I, of course, am talking about the Walker family. There’s so much more to come in this one y’all, so get yourselves ready.

I do want to take a second to thank everyone who helped us break every record that Monte Cook Games had in house with the Old Gods of Appalachia tabletop roleplaying game Kickstarter. Now I know some of y'all missed the boat, either because the financial stars did not align or you just hadn't found your way home to us yet, but if you go over to oldgodsofappalachia.com you can still get in on the tabletop roleplaying game with a late pledge via BackerKit. Head on over there to oldgodsofappalachia.com, and while you're there, you can complete your social media ritual by following us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. Joining us on the Discord Server is always a good time.

And if you want to truly help us keep the homefires burning, you can join us at patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia and for as little as \$10 a month or more, you can gain access to all 17 episodes of *Build Mama a Coffin*, catch up on *Black Mouthed Dog* before the finale (and that is coming), scare yourself to death with "Door Under the Floor," or just relax to the dulcet tones of "Steve Reads" or "Cam Reads." It's a good time, and we work hard to make it worth it.

This is just your every so often reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell, edited by Cam Collins. Our intro music is by our brother Landon Blood and our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. We'll talk to you soon, Family. Talk to you real soon.

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