

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 3, Episode 37: The Other Walker House

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

Miss Belle Callaway was no stranger to the open road. Not even counting the days spent running from the restless dead of Barlo, Kentucky, Annabelle Callaway had logged more than her share of miles between leaving the husk of that burned out and ruined town before coming to settle down to teach school in Baker's Gap. From the time that her aunts plucked her from the less than tender mercies of an orphanage, the girl who had been known until that time as Sarah Avery had traveled all over Appalachia. Marcie and Ellie Walker had taken her on an impromptu tour of the region, staying in safe houses or the homes of family friends along the way, to make sure that no other things would be able to find the girl. Sarah had told them all about the things that had hunted her through the woods and the things that had not been her Daddy or her Uncle Eddie.

She'd spent time in Esau County, where she slept for what seemed like a week at her Aunt Ellie's house. There were days when she'd work in the garden, or play with Aunt Ellie's cat Vespertillio, and things would almost feel alright. But then the horror and grief of the things she had seen in Barlo would come crashing over her like a wave. Her mommy and daddy were gone. She'd seen her uncle Eddie give up his life — and maybe even his soul — to give her time to escape. She'd seen the dead rise and the town burn, and somehow... somehow in the middle of all of it, she'd called the rain to put it all to rest. She hadn't understood how or why that part had happened at the time, but her aunts had done their best to fill in the blanks. She was part of a long line of gifted women and even if her mama hadn't borne a true gift, she was certainly showing the signs of one. After the things she'd seen in Barlo, she had no trouble believing what her aunts told her. She had seen the darkness up close and watched it swallow her whole family.

After their stop at Ellie's house in Glamorgan, they had traveled to visit with other grannies and friends of Mamaw Sheila, who had also shared their wisdom with her. They'd spent a few days with Mr. Jasper up in South Fork, who showed Sarah how to find water with nothing more than an itchy nose and a dowsing rod. They'd stayed for a long two weeks out near Issac County with

Miss Hester, who Aunt Marcie had known before she'd moved to Tennessee to open the house in Baker's Gap. Miss Hester was a kind woman with short black hair who seemed cut from much the same cloth as her aunt Marcie. Miss Hester had a large collection of pistols, rifles, and long pointy knives that she had shown off to Aunt Marcie with great pride. Sarah had learned a lot about how to kill or unmake the things that come from underneath the mountains from Miss Hester in those two weeks. Miss Hester had also talked a lot about her own mamaw, who she called Granny Alice. Granny Alice kept a place just on this side of Hazard, Kentucky, where she took in young folks with the true gift who'd lost their families one way or another and helped them sort themselves out. Miss Hester had offered to write to her mamaw and ask if she had room for one more, but Ellie and Marcie had demurred. Sarah still had a family, they told her —no offense to Granny Alice.

As Sarah grew older, Aunt Marcie would send her to visit with cousins and other family members who helped her pursue a more mundane sort of education, working on farms and learning about the breeding of stock and the tending of crops. When she was older, she had taken correspondence courses in literature and mathematics, and thus gained her credentials to teach in a classroom. At the wizened old age of 17, Sarah Avery rechristened herself Annabelle Calloway — a name chosen in memory of her own schoolteacher Annie Messer and her best friend Daniel Calloway, and which would offer her a measure of anonymity and protection from anyone or anything who might come looking for the last Avery girl.

West Virginia had been good to her, but she missed the company of the women who'd been there for her when no one else was, so she moved to Baker's Gap to answer an advertisement to teach at the local school. She settled into the house provided for the schoolmarm and had stayed in touch with her mother's sisters, but had done so somewhat discreetly, disclosing their blood relation to only a select few who would need to know. Until now she had managed, with a few notable exceptions, to avoid any of the dark and shadowy business that seemed to seek out those bearing Walker blood. She had been determined to live a quiet life — teach the children of the town their three Rs and be content. Up until this point, she'd mostly got her wish. But now, the road was calling again, and Belle Calloway had to answer.

["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*

In all her travels, she had never been to her mama's hometown of Tourniquet. There had never been a reason to go. By the time she'd been old enough to know the truth about her family, Tourniquet wasn't even a town anymore, just the name of an awful place that her mommy and daddy had left to start a new life. Now here she was, less than a mile from the beast that birthed her whole bloodline into the world. Tourniquet had stood empty for more than ten years, and no passenger rail had run since long before that. Her aunt Marcie had arranged for Mr. Blevins to drive her up the newly opened route 23, turning off onto the county road to the courthouse from whence the notice of the town's demolition had come.

The man behind the counter seemed surprised that a young woman would be answering the notice. He told her that a handful of men from various coal companies had come and gone in the past few months, but only one other family had replied to the notices, and they'd stopped in on their way up to Tourniquet a few days prior. He doubted there'd be anyone up there at all by the time she got there today. Was she sure she felt safe going up there alone? Belle assured him that she had someone driving her up to the house, and the clerk shook his head. "Oh no, no honey, you might be able to get a vehicle up onto the main drag, but if you try to go back on some of them old back roads, where the private houses was? You're practically begging to get stuck in a ditch or swallowed up in a sinkhole. You be careful up there, Miss. Remember, the county ain't responsible for any injuries or anything else that might happen up there. You don't wanna be out after-dark up that way either. No telling what might be out in them woods nowadays."

The main road into town had once been paved with smooth black asphalt pulled dark and soft from the grahamite mines a few counties north. It had been a marvel of modern infrastructure at the time, but now it lolled like a desiccated black tongue from the mouth of a corpse. Her mind couldn't help but wander to her last memories of Barlo, comparing that living nightmare to the withered husk of a town that lay before her. But Barlo had been a town pulled screaming into hell, filled with the stench of burnt flesh and the agonized cries of her dying neighbors as the wronged dead took their vengeance on the place and the people who had sent them to die in the dark. Tourniquet was more like finding old bones in the woods. You could tell something had died here by the scattered pieces and maybe the smell, but you were probably never going to know the true horror of what had happened. You were probably better off not knowing.

Most of the structures that composed what was left of the main drag wouldn't need much help from any demolition team. Apart from a few brick buildings, most of the old saloons and ale houses had suffered some form of damage over the years, be it at the hands of vandals and looters, or the occasional fire not quite snuffed out by careless squatters. None of these abandoned places interested Miss Belle though. Marcie had drawn her a clear and carefully annotated map that directed her away from anything that resembled a street onto the quiet, shaded side roads that led away from the still, blackened heart of this place and out into the thin vestiges of the Green. It didn't take her long to find it: a prim house, with a high porch and dark gray walls that had faded in the sun and been to a lighter shade by time, but which still matched the description passed on to her by her mother's sister.

Belle could feel her family here. The wards that surrounded the Walker House in Baker's Gap felt like a welcoming embrace to her. The times she visited there felt like coming in from playing down by the creek to a warm supper on the table and the sound of her mama calling her daddy and Uncle Eddie to come eat. She knew now it was because her aunts had not only saved her from an awful fate back at the Home, as it was called, but because they'd been there for her birth. Had set the wards around Mama and Daddy's house. Had performed the rites that had eventually avenged her mother's death at the hands of whatever had done for her. The Walker House felt like home to her because the same love and life was poured into the wards protecting both. Belle could feel an echo of that power here. It felt a little different, like the difference between her mama's cornbread and Aunt Ellie's cornbread. One was a little drier and one was a

little softer, but either one would make your bowl of soup beans a thousand times better if you crumbled it into them all the same.

The walk up to the steps of the porch was made of four large, flat rectangular stones cut and laid out like a proper sidewalk. Belle bet if you flipped them over they'd be rife with sigils and workings that were even now keeping the house safe. You see, while other buildings within the bounds of Tourniquet were like rotten teeth jutting up through a dead man's jawbone, Miss Sheila's Charm School for Well Instructed Ladies stood like a long-sealed hope chest gathering dust in a spinster's attic. The windows were all intact. The porch steps were not rotted through nor broken. The rocking chairs on the front porch were weathered but still looked stout and functional. The front door stood dust covered but untouched, its rich, dark wood grain evident in the afternoon sun. The Charm School looked for all the world like a fine hotel that had closed for the season more than anything else.

Belle Calloway stepped to the first of the four stones of the path to the porch and said, as her aunt Marcie had instructed, "The first day was the same as the last. The house is empty, but there is hope." The air shifted a bit. A breeze blew, and the light in the shaded yard dimmed slightly.

Belle stepped to the next stone and felt it pulse with power beneath her as her heart began to race, and called out, "Gerald was loved and John was kind." The overgrown yard seemed to inhale and hold its breath around her as she spoke. Her first words had announced her presence, but this litany — which Marcie made sure she could recite from memory and would not explain — had gotten the place's attention. She felt as though she had woken a bear... or something much, much bigger.

She swallowed hard and stepped to the next stone, and went on, "Nathaniel wasn't worth two shits. Theodore lied at the end, and we don't talk about Kenneth." Something moved in a second storey window and drew her eyes upward. One of the old rocking chairs on the porch began to gently see-saw back and forth as if occupied.

Marcie had told her how the house's wards might respond, and that she had to be ready. She stared at the rocking chair, as if addressing its occupant and stated plainly, with only a slight

quiver in her voice: “John-Phillip left his knife, and Harry died too young He’d probably have been proud.”

A tension built in the air around her, the curious pull she’d feel sometimes before a storm broke over the valley back in the Gap — that pull she felt that last awful night in Barlo when the rains come. Before anything else could happen, Belle stepped forward onto the final stone and said as confidently as she could, “The last day has come, and it’s the same as the first, but there is hope. I beg sanctuary and succor, and claim both by right.”

Belle then pricked the pad of her thumb with the short-bladed knife she carried, and squeezed out a fat drop of rich red blood, and let it fall onto the fourth and final stone. The breath the overgrown yard had been holding seemed to release, and the tension in the air and behind her eyes ebbed away. There was a click, and the front door to Miss Sheila’s Charm School for Well Instructed Ladies swung open.

The foyer was almost as striking in its forsaken state as it was when the Charm School was in its heyday. Polished wood floors stared up through a shroud of dust, and the walls gleamed with ivory and gold flake wallpaper that spoke to an elegance far removed from the deep mines of West Virginia. Belle carefully made her way through the rooms of the first floor. She tried to imagine them full of folks dressed as nice as they could be and out for an evening of fine entertainment, while keeping her eyes and ears sharp for anything that might be a threat or an item of interest. The grand sitting room with its player piano hidden beneath a white canvas drape seemed to cry out for folks to take to the empty floor and dance. Most of Sheila Walker’s furniture had been sold at auction when the house closed, or else passed on to family and friends elsewhere in the wide world. The side rooms where men once sat with cigars and bourbon and beautiful girls sat empty and cold as closets without clothes, the wall hangings and fine rugs long since rolled away and disposed of.

Belle could sense something watching her, could feel the same presence that flitted from the upstairs window, that had held its breath until she spoke the right words and shed her own blood to prove her birthright to purchase entry. The Charm School — the house itself — was watching her as she moved from empty room to empty room, until she finally found the staircase. Two flights up, one flight down.

Marcie had given her specific instructions. There would be nothing of value in the rooms on the upper floors. They had been stripped and scrubbed and left sitting empty when the house closed. There was no point in trying to salvage any furniture left behind, or anything large enough not to be carried out by Belle herself. If Melvin could have come along with the truck, that might be a different story, but the roads were in too bad a state for that. So Melvin waited for her at the end of the side road. He knew enough to understand that as much as he wanted to protect Miss Walker's niece, that this was family business, and Melvin Blevins knew well some things could only be settled by blood.

In any case, no one was overly concerned about a few old dressers and bookcases. The room that Aunt Marcie's eldest sister Rosie had expressed concerns about was the downstairs room. When the Charm School was open for business, downstairs was simply off limits to everyone except Sheila Walker. Her daughters knew they could stand at the top of the stairs and call down to her if they needed her, and she'd answer them as she could. But often the work done in that room was dangerous and of a nature that had little to do with the family business. Sheila Walker's private bedroom was on the third floor with her girls', but the downstairs room was her sanctum. If there was anything left behind that could be of value to folks who served the Inner Dark or the Green, Belle would find it in the room at the bottom of those stairs.

She placed her foot down on the first step, and the walls trembled. With the next step, the air grew heavy with the scent of rotten cucumbers and venomous, slithering things that threatened to strike. As she placed her feet on the third step, a deep growl rumbled from the walls.

Belle sighed and stopped where she stood. "You let me in here. You've had my blood. You know who I am."

The growling stopped. The smell of snakes and befouled vegetation remained.

"Seriously? My mamaw is gone."

The stairs groaned under her feet.

“Sheila Walker left this world a long time ago, and I am of her blood. I come in kindness and in service to her memory. If you want to play games with me, house, I will sit here until they tear you down, or I pick apart the protections my mamaw put on this place myself.”

The scent of potential snakebite faded, and Belle continued to the bottom of the stairs, which ended before a thick oaken door. She reached for the knob, which of course was stuck fast.

“Really?” she asked the air as the brass doorknob refused to budge. “Fine,” she muttered as she squeezed her thumb to open the small wound she’d created earlier, smearing her blood across the keyhole. “I am the daughter of Carol Anne Walker, granddaughter of Sheila Walker, mistress and keeper of this place, and by the blood of my line, I command you to open to me, to keep no secret from me, and to stand not between me and my birthright. Open and give me what is mine!”

The lock gave a soft click — which somehow managed to sound resentful — and the door swung open. And Miss Belle walked into her mamaw’s workroom for the first and only time. Her aunt Marcie had simply instructed her to trust her gift to guide her. Belle would know what to take — what would best be kept in the family in the name of safety and in the name of the Green — she had assured her. In the face of all that awaited her in the downstairs room, it was little comfort. Bookshelves lined the entire west wall — generations of knowledge lay amongst the pages contained there, and Belle wondered if she’d know truly which ones to take and which to leave behind.

Best to get at it, she thought as she pulled a book of matches from her pocket to light the dusty candles that still waited in sconces along the walls, and in the cluster of candlesticks on her mamaw's sturdy desk.

She took her time perusing the shelves, and eventually — as Marcie predicted — felt her eyes drawn again and again to a few particular volumes. There were a couple of obvious ones marked with binding sigils, or fastened with straps and actual locks around their covers. A set of combs and a mirror that clearly bore her Aunt Ellie’s handiwork rested on a nearby worktable. Those may or may not have been of value to anyone else, but Ellie might want them, so they went into Belle’s satchel as well. She was about to move on to the next bookcase when a slim, hand bound

volume caught her eye. It was a simple, cheap thing with a well worn cover stamped with a faded gilt print of a forest scene framing two words in curling script: “My Diary.”

Belle felt a sudden pang of nostalgia. This was clearly something intended for a young girl, the sort of dime store gift that would make her feel special with its fancy script and decorative cover — and more importantly, its suggestion that someone felt her thoughts were worth writing down. She wondered if it had belonged to Priscilla Rose or one of the older Walker girls. Curious, she flipped the cover open.

Her heart nearly stopped in her chest. There, written in a careful, school-age hand on the first page, was her answer: Sheila Marietta Walker. This must have belonged to her mamaw when she was a girl. Belle eagerly flipped past it and began to read. What she found between those pages was a story she never could have imagined.

[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. Feel free to curse my name — go ahead, I know you want to. I know we left you hanging there with Miss Belle holding what could be a lost piece of Walker family history that might just remake that part of the story as we know it. Well don't worry — you'll get that piece of the puzzle real soon. Just not right now.

However, Family, I would like to redirect your attention over to the newly revamped, reborn, and reincarnated incarnation of oldgodsofappalacha.com — redesigned and reimagined by one Miss Cam Collins, our own keeper of the coding cauldron — where you can complete your social media ritual, join us on the discord server, or get in on the Old Gods of Appalachia tabletop roleplaying game via backerkit if you didn't get your pledge in on Kickstarter. The link is right there — it's prominent, easy to find.

And if you care to write your name in our black book and support us in a financial fashion, well you can head on over to patreon.com/oldgodsofappalacha where for a reasonable monthly sum

or for a one time annual purchase wherein you save yourself 10%, you can enjoy all of *Build Mama A Coffin*, “Door Under the Floor,” and the newly completed — that’s right, y’all, all ten episodes of — *Black Mouthed Dog*. That’s like two whole other seasons and a two-part slasher film, just for your Patron’s pledge of \$10 or more a month. Also exciting new content involving Steve and Cam and some special guests demonstrating how we attempt to recreate some of the magnificent food you hear us describe within the show. Expect guest stars who have characters based on them to appear in the flesh in this new video series, coming soon exclusively on Patreon. Just shot some footage making soup beans last night with a character you’re going to recognize from Death Island, and it’s a whole lot of fun.

In other exciting news, we did mention on social media that towards the end of summer, we’ll be announcing a select handful of dates for live performances of a special Old Gods of Appalachia live show that will feature musical guests that you know and very, very, very special guest voice live and in person in front of you. These shows will be relatively regionally closer to home for us, so don’t start asking us to come to Texas, California, or places like way, way, way super out. They’re around Appalachia, but that doesn’t mean you can’t travel and come see us if you’re safe and doing it right. As soon as we have information on advanced ticketing and online ticket sales, we’ll make that known to y’all. And Patrons pledging \$15 or more a month will get first bite of the apple. That’s one of the benefits of being an upper level Patreon member. These shows will occur in a variety of venues in a variety of sizes and will probably sell out, so stay frosty, complete your social media ritual, or join us on Patreon to be first in line at the dance.

This is your every so often reminder that OGOA is a production of DeepNerd Media and is distributed by Rusty Quill. Today’s story was written by Steve Shell and 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.