

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 3, Episode 38: Diary of a Preacher's Daughter

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

Josiah Constantine Walker was a preacher. More than a mere tender of his flock, he was a worker of miracles, a healer of the broken, a saver of souls, and a light cast unto the path of the poor misbegotten folk who found their way within earshot of the hellfire and brimstone that spewed forth from his mouth like a great conflagration. You could read as much on the side of the painted wagon that he, his wife Bee-Bee, and their young'uns used to travel throughout Appalachia, preaching the good word and performing bonafide, blessed-by-the-almighty miracles — though results might vary based on the amount placed in the collection plate — no refunds.

Now don't get me wrong, family — JC Walker believed in his heart that he was doing God's work. You could not and would not convince that man that the visions he had — or the healing work his three oldest daughters could perform with only their touch and their breath — or the binding and casting out of foul spirits that his three middle boys could do — were anything but the blessing of God and all his saints in heaven channeling the light of their eternal love through the Walker family to heal the ills of the world. Explaining the gifts of illusion, warding, and deception that his youngest daughter wielded from a young age might have involved some mental acrobatics that JC and Bee-Bee weren't comfortable talking about — but ain't none of their children witches, don't you dare suggest it! Ain't none of their children touched by no devil! They were blessed by the good Lord God.

In truth, the services rendered by JC Walker and family were about 60% genuine miracles worked through the power of the Green in the name of their Christian god (or vice versa, depending on your point of view)... and 40% carny-style smoke and mirrors. Folks gathered from all around beneath the canvas cathedral that was the Walker tent: the blind hoping to see, folks whose legs had never worked since birth hoping to take their first steps — all of them drawn by the reputation of this family of angels, who for a meager donation would minister to you as best

they could. JC and Bee-Bee had nurtured their children's gifts, and in their minds employed them in an epic battle against the devil and his ilk.

Then, of course, there was their youngest, Sheila. Her gift for making folks see what they needed to see during the performance of some of their less-than-authentic miracles — and her uncanny ability to keep the family hidden when dissatisfied customers or the law came a-calling — might not have seemed very Christian on the surface. But it enabled them to keep on doing their good work, so they didn't think too hard on it. In particular, no one ever thought to ask little Sheila what she believed, or how she felt using her gifts to deceive folks on the nights the blessings didn't work out the way they wanted. Nor what she thought of helping her daddy take good people's money for something that Jesus never charged two nickels for. The truth was, it didn't sit right with her. Not right at all.

So late one evening, after they'd all bunked down for the night just over the West Virginia line and she heard her daddy begin to snore, Sheila Walker left her family. She would not be used for their gain — nor in the name of any man's god. Her mama had people that she hadn't spoken to in years not that far from where they was. She'd go stay with them and start over — get out of this business of casting out demons and performing so-called miracles — and live a simple, honest life. Maybe settle down the way her aunt Patty had out in 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

From the diary of Sheila Marietta Walker:

September 2, 1873

My aunt Patty opened this boarding house to be just that — a boarding house. A place for decent folks to stay as they pass through this part of the state. But turns out there ain't much in the way of decent folk passing through Tourniquet. Aunt Patty told me that most men come here for the girls that work out of the houses that the companies own out on the main square. She asked me when I come here if I knew what that meant, and I said I did. Daddy preached against whoring as much as he did drinking and gambling. I've known since I was a littl'un what those harlots and women with devils in them were doing to earn their money. Except now that I know a bunch of them from town, they ain't no devils or evil women. They're just... women trying to make ends meet. I ain't saying they all angels or nothing — some of them are downright rotten to the core and would cut you as soon as look at you — but it ain't as cut and dried as Daddy liked to preach. Aunt Patty said we might have to look at renting some rooms to girls like that if we wanna keep our doors open. Shoot, if we can give them a better place than the Black Diamond or that awful Babylon, and why not? People gotta work. If they can work safer here, that's a good thing, right?

September 10, 1873

Aunt Patty rented the back two rooms to a couple of girls from Ohio. They received callers every night last week, and they paid us for two months rent in advance with the proceeds. I think we might be all right.

September 14, 1873

A man tried to threaten one of the girls with a knife last night when he didn't want to pay. The girl, Francine, pulled a pistol and shot the man in the foot. He hobbled out hollering and making threats and Aunt Patty and the girls sat up all night — Francine with her pistol, Aunt Pattie with her shotgun and Carlotta with her knife. No men ever come though.

Belle Calloway flipped forward through her grandmother's diary, reading accounts of girls coming and going, incidents of violence that flared up from time to time, as the boarding house transitioned to a full time parlor house. Her grandmother had served as her aunt's right hand in running the house, keeping the books, and other sundry jobs not related to the servicing of

clientele. It was the pages concerning the spring of 1874 that caused Belle Calloway's gift to surge and press against her mind. She slowed her scanning eyes and read on, settling down into the comfortable old chair behind Mamaw Sheila's desk as the story unfolded.

March 15, 1874

Today was a strange day. A woman called on us before we'd opened for the evening. She asked if we had a room they could rent, as she had heard we were a reputable boarding house and was looking for a place for her father to convalesce. He'd been injured badly in the war and never quite recovered. His leg was badly damaged, and his breathing had been troubled ever since he come home. They'd heard the air around this part of the mountain was "quite restorative" and wanted to rent one of the rooms off the back porch with the windows. We must have looked at her like she was out of her mind. This place? Restorative? I guess if you think coal dust and whiskey can fix something, then maybe, but it didn't make no sense to me. We tried to explain what kind of house we were now but she wouldn't hear it — offered us dang near a suitcase full of money for three months! Aunt Patty was hesitant to let a man stay in the house, but we had some girls moving out soon, and the money would help soften the blow, so we said yes.

March 17, 1874

Our new boarder moved in today. He's a handsome man. Older, but not truly old. His hair is still dark, and he keeps it oiled and parted on the side. I've only seen his face clearly a couple of times but he's quite comely despite the scar that marks his forehead. Two of his daughters came with him today, lovely girls in high collared dresses. You could see the family resemblance. They were polite, if a bit cold. I think they must have run into some of the girls and realized they've booked their daddy into a parlor house and not a hotel. We've been told we can address their father as "the Colonel" and nothing else. Hell for the kind of money they ponied up, I'll call him whatever he wants. Aunt Patty seems quite taken with him. I hope they stay. We do need the money.

Belle shifted in her chair. Something about the mention of the man called the Colonel made her mind itch and her stomach tense. Sheila's entries went on to detail strange goings-on following the old soldier's arrival. Thumps and rattles that came in the night. Long shadows hung about the edges of the wards she'd placed so carefully around the house without her aunt's knowledge. (Patty thought the Walker tent revival thing was all smoke and mirrors and didn't understand the things that Sheila could do and see, and that was just fine.) Lastly, the Colonel's daughters perplexed Sheila. They all wore the same high-necked dresses and blouses, their hair neatly

styled in the latest fashions of the day, which was unusual for a mountain backwater like Tourniquet. They all shared the same handsome if not beautiful visage, but there was a coldness behind their eyes that seemed completely disconnected from their refined and genteel nature. They made Sheila nervous.

June 14, 1874

I don't know how to make sense of what I just saw. I just saw aunt Patty leaving the Colonel's room on her own. We never go in there without one of his girls with us. They're mighty particular about that. I don't know what she was doing in there, and she didn't see me or answer me when I called to her. Then again, we have some new girls moving in tomorrow. Maybe she was letting him know so the noise wouldn't be a surprise and disturb him.

June 30, 1874

The girls that moved in on the 14th are already gone. They came in that day, dropped their belongings in the rooms they rented, went to the back porch and just... stood there in a line. Like they was waiting for something. I watched them for a while, just standing there, and then the door to the Colonel's room opened and a girl I hadn't met yet come out. She looked tired, like she was about to cry. She nodded to the girl at the head of the line, and that one went in next and the door closed. Was the old coot sampling the goods? What is going on here? When the second girl come out, she looked tired and scared. She was with one of the daughters who told the other girls their services were not required today, and they'd call on them when their father needed them. Within a few days of that, the three that had stood in line packed up and moved on. The first one I saw come out of the Colonel's room... well, she just never come home one evening. Her things are still in her room. What in the world have we let into our house? I tried to talk to Aunt Patty about it, but she said, "We have to make concessions for a man like the Colonel. He's rendered great service to our country, and now he's due his tribute." His tribute? Since when does Patience Carson, who never finished the 3rd grade, use words like tribute? This ain't right.

Belle had begun to sweat. The words seemed to leap off the page and into her mind. The entry from July 7th of that same year sprawled before her like a moving picture. She could see the little house and its hallway, could smell the stink of that place — of Tourniquet. The odor of coal and unwashed bodies. The heady musk of a parlor house in summer — thick perfumes and incense lit to cover the bouquet of a hard night's work. She saw the woman with the fashionable

hair and high collar make her way down that little hall to knock on the door where Sheila Walker and her aunt Patty usually slept.

Even though the scene was just old ink on an even older page she could hear the woman's silky smooth voice. "Sheila, honey, come with me. Your aunt would like a word with you in my father's room."

Belle could see her grandmother, barely fourteen years old, follow the woman into a dimly lit room. Sheila's handwriting here was hurried, the script pressed hard into the page as if she were trying to capture the moment before it fled her mind — before she lost her mind, perhaps. The Colonel sat in his wheeled chair, imperious and looming. He was looking much better these days. His skin had lost its sallow tinge. His hair was lush and dark, neatly combed away from his brow so that his battle scars were in plain view in the lamplight. His hair looked very soft. He seemed much heartier than when he'd come here three months ago. His eyes were a warm, dark brown. His bad leg rested in a brace of some sort, clearly disfigured beneath his pant leg. Sheila had noted that she thought maybe he'd lost part of his foot as well. It looked like it bent in the wrong direction, like an animal's hind leg.

efore she could get caught staring, her aunt cleared her throat. It was only then that Sheila noticed that Patty looked absolutely terrified. The other of the Colonel's daughters was clutching her upper arm and smiling in a most unsettling way.

The Colonel spoke. "Come closer, child. My eyes are not what they once were."

Sheila had written with great fervor how she did not want to step forward, did not want to be one inch closer to this scary old man. Her gift had warned her, had screamed at her to run, but she could not.

"Your aunt Patience has been very gracious in helping me recover from a great weakness that took me long ago." The man in the chair smiled and inclined his head toward the frightened woman. "I once wielded great power, child. I commanded men. I made war. I brought forth blood and darkness upon the battlefield until my own pride brought me low." He paused,

seeming to consider her, those dark eyes raking over her, measuring her. “It is a horrid and loathsome thing to be laid belly up and throat bared for the teeth of those who would hunt you.”

“Hunt you, sir?” Sheila stammered.

“Those who would strike at one such as I would be very foolish if they did not try to finish the job. But alas, fools they must be... for here I still am.” He smiled with all his teeth then, and Sheila had known that what sat in that chair in a fine suit, making such a display of genteel manners, was anything but a man — far more and at the same time far less than simply an old soldier with a bad leg and a busted face. She wondered what had really put those scars on his forehead.

“As I was saying,” the Colonel purred. “Your aunt has been very kind, keeping me fed and nourished and comfortable. She has brought me everything I’ve asked for per our agreement. In return, you’ve enjoyed more and finer clientele than she ever dreamed. Your reputation grows and your coffers are full. And yet... despite all of our good will, Miss Patience seems to have reached the limits of her hospitality.” The man’s voice was like a lullaby, clouding Sheila’s mind. When he spoke, she felt like the two of them were the only people in the world. Sheila tore her gaze from the Colonel’s face, her eyes finding Patty’s. It was then that she saw the tears that streamed down her aunt’s cheeks. Patty’s lips worked as though she was trying to frantically speak, but her jaw would not unclench to allow a sound to escape.

The woman in gray holding Patty’s arm sighed dramatically. “Oh, fine. You may speak, you old sow.”

“Sheila... Sheila, forgive me, honey — please — he’s a monster. He killed Judy and Colleen and those other girls that never come back. I came in here last night to bring him his whiskey and he had that girl that come last Wednesday all spread out on the bed and... and c-cut open. He was sifting through her guts like he was digging for treasure, and... and I can’t do it.. I can’t do it no more! Y’all can kill me if you want, but I won’t—”

Before Patty could finish the thought, the Colonel’s other daughter lunged forward. Her body changed as she moved, her dainty hand extending and twisting into something like a monstrous

panther's claw, as her thin arm lashed, boneless as a bullwhip. With a wet snap, she tore out Patience Carson's throat. Blood spurted across Sheila's face as her aunt's body crumpled to the floor. She stared in horror, unable to breathe, unable to move, unable to think. All she could do was stand there, stunned, as her aunt's lifeblood pumped out onto the fancy rug beneath the Colonel's feet.

Sheila looked at the thing in the chair, and he stared placidly back at her. She perceived him fully now — at least as much as her gift could penetrate his handsome guise. This was a beast in its ascendance. It had been cast down, but now it had been feeding and regaining its strength and she'd been helping to nourish it.

"Now, Miss... Sheila, I believe?" the Colonel asked, his voice all smooth, venomous smoke. "I believe this makes you the madame of the house. You will fulfill your aunt's contract with me, and you will do it well. I sense great nerve in you, child. You will not fail me as poor, dear Patience did." Those dark eyes felt as though they were trying to crawl inside her, to seek her thoughts, to claw out the very heart of who and what she was. But Sheila Walker's gift had always lent itself best to obfuscation and concealment. She was a keeper of secrets, and so she hid herself from him, and he sensed her true nature not. "We will grow to know each other well as time goes by, and perhaps... we will speak of many things. For now, you may go. My daughters will give you the same instructions I gave your auntie. Follow them, and we will do great things together, Sheila Walker. Great things, indeed."

Belle's fingers trembled as she turned the next pages, reading how her mamaw had served the Thing That Called Itself the Colonel But Was Not for three more months. She waited on him hand and foot when his daughters were not in residence. She brought him his evening whiskey and listened to him prattle on about the vengeance he would take on those who had wronged him. He was looking for girls touched by the Green. He could drain the light from them, scraping years off their lives and making himself well and strong in the process. Sheila did her best to stall, to avoid bringing him anyone. She'd try to find girls who had no idea they had any sort of gift, hoping it would be more gentle for them if they didn't know what they lost. She kept her own gift hidden, her own true self secreted away from him, and over time, he seemed to even grow fond of her. And of life as a man.

Sheila wrote of how he bragged about enjoying the “sensual pleasures of this flesh.” How scents, sights, and tastes were different “this time” — whatever that meant. She wrote of how easily he could be, and was, captivated by them. And Sheila Walker began to plan.

[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. Yep. We did it again, didn't we? Go ahead. You cursed our name last time. You can do it again. We'll wait. Are you done? All right. Well you can place some of the blame squarely on our beloved Cam Collins this time. She and I just had a dandy old time putting this one together. There's only one more chapter left in act two of season three. What do you think Miss Belle is gonna learn about what her Mamaw Sheila did before any of our beloved Walker sisters were born, hm? Why don't you join us on social media or over on the Discord server? Talk about it with the rest of the family. Head on over to oldgodsofappalachia.com and complete your social media ritual. Follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and jump into the deep waters of speculation with your cousins on the aforementioned Discord server.

Now if you wanna sign your name in our black book and help us keep the deep fires burning, you can head on over to patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia, where for a reasonable sum you can gain access to exclusive content like seventeen episodes of *Build Mama a Coffin*, ten episodes of *Black Mouthed Dog*, and the two-part thriller “Door Under the Floor,” and a whole lot more exciting content that's just right around the corner.

This is 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 by Steve Shell and Cam Collins and performed by Steve Shell. Our intro music is by brother Landon Blood and our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. We'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.