

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 3, Episode 46: Lay Not Upon Us Innocent Blood

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

Hardbuckle, KY

1941

In every mountain community across these old and blessed hills that we call Appalachia, there are folks who stand ever vigilant and watchful. Against what, they would not tell you, not under threat of death nor torture. Bloodlines that are touched neither by the green nor the inner dark directly, but are well aware of both. Ordinary folks, walking and living in plain sight, who would never once give you any indication that they have brushed shoulders with things beyond the understanding of their neighbors. Folks whose families passed down the duties of keeping watch on things that shift through the shadows of small towns and remote hamlets. Wardens of dark things that might bring harm to the good folk that inhabit those precious homesteads.

In the towns closer to the cities, it often fell to the elder folk, who had a hard time in this age of science and industry, to convince the next generation that h'aunts and boogers and witches were real — that old Miz So-and-So back up in Booger Holler actually knew what she was doing with all her granny medicine and hex marks. Young folks didn't wanna listen to mamaw and papaw talk about the old times when there was such an exciting new future just around the bend. But out north of Harlan and out west of Hazard, Kentucky, in the tiny community of Hardbuckle, the eyes and ears of the north fork of the mighty Kentucky River were fortunately a fair bit younger.

Regina Davis and Pamela Roberseon, the former an assistant librarian at the Perry County Public Library and the latter a secretary for Trace Fork Mining, were both in their twenties. The two young women had each called in sick that day and made their way out to the low-lying patch of land that folks called the Devil's Cradle. The Cradle was a crater-like indentation situated between the bosom of the mountain and the river itself. You couldn't see the small compound of rustic bunk houses and neatly laid vegetable gardens that sat within it until you

walked right into the middle of them, and that was no accident. Greta Amburgey had kept her little farm out of the public eye for as long as anyone could remember.

Granny Amburgey, as most people called her, took in children than no church home or orphanage would. If you had a young'un that couldn't stop hitting the others, or cried all night, or spoke in a tongue that no man has ever spoken, that made the fires burn low and the milk turn sour, you called on Granny Amburgey. If you had a little girl who had seen the worst that man or god could offer and didn't talk no more, who sat all silent and scared all day long and who only made a sound when the moon fell new and her shape and shadow changed to something massive filled with teeth and eyes and vengeance, well then you called Granny Amburgey. She'd come in her wagon (or later on in her long white sedan), pick the child up and carry them off to the Devil's Cradle out between Hardbuckle and the Virginia state line, and you wouldn't hear another word about or from them.

People seldom asked what happened to children like that. As a result, the young'uns were able to live without fear on Granny Amburgey's farm, where they'd learn skills, maybe a trade of some sort, and Granny's gift would keep their individual peculiarities in check. Over time, some would gain full control over whatever they carried within them and would eventually rejoin the outside world, making places for themselves in the greater community. Others would go on to live their adult lives mostly in isolation, building their own little homesteads in the shade of the mountains, where hopefully they could be left alone.

Greta Amburgey was known and well liked amongst the elder witches of central Appalachia. She was as no-nonsense as a Teasley, as patient as an Underwood, and as stalwart as a Walker. She was also older than most of the matriarchs of all those revered families, and she had lived her life rescuing littl'uns from the works of darker beings. Most of the time it was the doing of their own kin. Folks caught up in some deal with a Thing that come creeping out of the undergrowth offering wealth and prosperity in exchange for their first born. Folks who signed their families over to the company they served — or worse still, folks getting in bed with the things that writhed and burned beneath the mines they dug and the tracks they laid. These children never asked for none of this, and so Granny Amburgey took them in and did the best she could.

Her considerable gifts had kept her alive long past any reasonable expiration date, but even the power of the green is limited in how long a mortal body can carry on, and in the summer of 1941, Greta Amburgey, known as Granny to most people, went to bed one night and just didn't get up the next morning. Her body had been discovered by Joyce Holiday, a local woman and trusted friend who had helped Greta around the farm these past twenty years. There were only a handful of young folk living out in the Cradle at the time, and Joyce had worked swiftly to bundle the seven youngest children in the farm's care off to homes that could see to their unique needs for awhile. Before she could make arrangements for the remaining older children — two boys and a girl, all in the awkward transition from childhood to their teenage years — the bank showed up. Upon Granny Amburgey's passing, the wards that kept the farm hidden failed, and the tax assessors and process servers who'd come looking for the long-in-arrears property about once a month finally found it. The law was brought in and the property seized, buildings were shuttered, and capitalism slipped another tendril down the collective throat of the hollers of Eastern Kentucky.

Bruce Horne — vice president of something-or-other down at Perry County Bank and Trust — was there to oversee the proceedings, and it was to him that Pamela Roberson and Regina Davis brought their questions.

“Bruce — hey, Bruce — what's going on out here? We heard Miz Greta passed. What's happening?” called Regina as she waved to get the sweaty little man's attention.

“Oh, hey Regina, Miss Roberson. What are y'all doing all the way out here?”

“We heard through the ladies' auxiliary that they might need help with... well, with the young'uns. We know she worked with a special sort out here, babies with health issues and all, and—”

“We thought we'd come to help,” finished Pamela Roberson, a tall woman whose polished, secretarial phone-manners voice carried a little extra helping of gravitas.

“Oh, Joyce done got all the real littl'uns off to one of the church groups she works with. Said they was folks that could take care of children that need special care. Say, did you know there

was a baby out here with its heart on the outside of its body? I mean, how is that even possible? I mean—”

“Bruce,” Regina Davis cut him off. “What about the older children? We heard there was at least three or four of them that might need some special assistance.”

Bruce Horne scowled. He’d been out here all morning, sweating like a pig on a spit, finally foreclosing on a long, long outstanding mortgage, and the last thing he wanted to think about was trouble-making teenagers lurking around the bank’s new property.

“Oh, them. Yeah, we caught a boy and a girl trying to break back into Greta’s cabin after we’d done sealed it up. And looks like they got a few things out of there, but nothing of monetary value. Scotty said they grabbed some sort of big book and took off towards the woods. He set off after them but didn’t get too far.”

“Mr. Horne,” Pamela Roberson cut in, touching the man’s sweaty hand to hold his attention. “Where are the children now?”

“Uh, ma’am, I rightly don’t know, nor do I care. They all looked healthy and able bodied to me. They took off through the woods back that way after they pushed Scotty down the side of the hill. You all right, Scotty?” Bruce Horne called to the older, heavier man who sat on a nearby stump giving a statement to a sheriff’s deputy. The older man threw a thumb in the air to signify that he would live. “Lucky they didn’t kill him. Scotty’s old.”

Regina Davis rolled her eyes and slapped her second cousin, the bank officer, on the arm, hard.

“So you’re telling us that three of Granny Amburgey’s older children — children everybody would just as soon not remember are out here — are just off on their own, in the woods, around Lost Mountain where anything could happen to them?”

Bruce shrugged. “I guess so. I mean like I said, they didn’t seem like they had anything wrong with them, they just took off. Look Gina, I don’t have time to worry about no young’uns running away from home. I got work to do here. Hell, maybe they’ll find work and learn some

responsibility instead of letting an old woman work herself to death taking care of them. I mean really, what's the worst that can happen?"

Regina and Pamela exchanged a look as they hurried back down the path to the main road and their car. There were phone calls to make, messages to send. If the worst was gonna happen, the best they could do was be ready.

["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*

The boy stopped walking for a moment, looked back over his shoulder, and listened. He strained his ears and peered into the darkening woods. No, nothing back there as far he could tell, at least this time. Summer hung heavy on the dark banks of the Kentucky river. The humidity was just a smidge under drowning, and because the sun had gone down didn't mean it wasn't still hotter and stickier than tree sap on a spider's leg. Lord, it'd been a miserable day. Granny dying, Miss Joyce having to pack all the babies and little'uns off with strangers, and the only place he'd ever called home suddenly turned upside down by outsiders and law men. He didn't really know what to think about it, or what they were gonna do, but they couldn't stay there.

His whole life Granny had told them they better not go into the woods north of the Cradle. “There’s panthers all up in them hills,” Granny had said. “Panthers, h’aints, and worse things if you go too far out towards the mountain. If the living don’t get you, the unliving will.”

Sometimes grown folks tell young’uns stories like that to keep ‘em within earshot of home so they don’t get in too much trouble, but that wasn’t the case on Lost Mountain. Jonah had heard the big cats scream in the night. He’d seen the lights that shifted on the far hillsides when the leaves were off of the trees. He knew they weren’t alone out here. The mountain loomed in the near distance. In the evening its shadow fell on the cradle like a purple bruise. Granny told them that the worst boogers came down from that old mountain at night looking for young’uns to gobble up or carry off. He knew there were bad things in them woods — Granny had never lied about that, at least. She’d lied about other things, but not that.

They’d high-tailed it out of there the first chance they got in the early evening, when the bank folks and police started showing up at the cradle, and made their way out towards Butcher’s Rock on the north side of the ridge. It was the furthest any of them had ever dared to go into the woods. Butcher’s Rock was a huge, mossy boulder that jutted out of the ground about two hundred yards from the cleared boundary of Granny Amburgey’s land. It had become sort of a refuge for the older children in the Cradle, its mysteries and location passed down from the farm’s previous residents to the younger kids coming of age. It was a place to go and hide if you were mad at Granny, but not mad enough to run away. It was a place to go smoke if you had something to smoke, and the world would be a horrible place if such a prime, secret location wasn’t utilized for the occasional romantic rendezvous between youngsters as those urges struck and required exploration. There was a cache of jerky, canned fish, and other things skimmed from the kitchen pantry in the event that anybody wanted to hide out there long enough to make Granny worry by staying out overnight. In truth, it was near impossible to make Greta Amburgey worry. She could track any child that had spent time on her land pretty much anywhere and Butcher’s Rock, though seemingly a world away from her little farm of outcasts, was well within her wards and thus under her watchful eye.

Jonah had watched as Miss Joyce’s people came and took little Conroy, Melissa, Jackson, and Elijah in one car and Mason, Patty, and Sweet Tater in the other. Nobody seemed to pay much mind to him and the other, older kids. That always seemed to be the way though, right? You hit

a certain age, you helped raise the littl'uns, and pretty soon they didn't see you as a kid anymore. You were just another set of hands to help make supper or change diapers. Nobody got to stay young long when there was work to be done. Hell, he'd seen a bunch of older boys come and go from the Cradle. Orlan and Timothy had gone to work in the mines over on the far side of Lost Mountain when Granny said they were ready, and they weren't much older than he was now.

He was fifteen, or so he thought. Time passed strangely in his life. His memory was a patchwork of birthdays and sudden shifts, but he was sure he was at least close to fifteen. Granny had called him Jo-Jo when he was little, and that changed to Jonah as he got old enough to learn to read and write. He didn't remember who his folks were or how he come to live in the Cradle with Granny Amburgey, but he'd been here as long as he could remember. Now that she was gone, so was the only home he'd ever known. The other two weren't like him. They'd come to live with Granny after they were at least partly grown.

Rachel had come two or three years ago maybe, and Skeeter the year after her. They were all pretty close in age, he figured. Rachel had lost her mommy in an accident that involved a collapsing bridge, a car chase, and a big explosion... at least to hear her tell it. The girl's story got wilder and more fanciful every time she told it, so Jonah took it with a grain of salt. Everybody wanted to have a fancy story about where they come from when they don't know where they come from, or were too ashamed to say. Rachel's mommy might have just dropped her off and never looked back, for all he knew.

Skeeter, on the other hand, didn't have no story at all. They just woke up and he was at breakfast one morning. His big eyes and slightly darker complexion made him stand out from the other inhabitants of Granny's place, but he was one of them just the same. As of late, Granny and Miss Joyce had been teaching him how to make biscuits in the kitchen in the early dark of the morning, and how to can vegetables down in the cellar until almost supper time. Everybody got to learn how to do at least a couple things living here. If you ended up with Granny Amburgey, it usually meant people didn't want you or couldn't do nothing with you, so out you went. They all knew how that felt. When little Mason touched the boy's arm and asked him why his skin was so brown, Skeeter just smiled and said, "We's Portuguese," and left it at that. That was one of the few times Jonah heard the boy speak to anybody but Granny. Skeeter was smaller than him and

Rachel, but his eyes... his eyes were so deep and cold. Like many of the children brought to this wilderness to find their place, he had seen far too much in his few short years.

Once they realized that there wasn't a car coming to take them away to some church home — or anywhere else, for that matter — they'd quietly left their respective bunkhouses and made their way across the shared yard to Granny's cabin. The bank people had locked it up and nailed a bar across the door, but Rachel made short work of that, the wood falling to pulp as she tugged at it with her slim fingers. They hadn't had a chance to grab much from Granny's house before that old man from the bank came hollering after them, but they got what they'd come for, though. That would have to be enough. Skeeter had gotten his hands on the cigar box that Granny kept under the loose floorboard along the back wall. Rachel had managed to grab a stack of quilts off the bed. But Jonah only had eyes for one thing: Granny's bible.

She had read stories to them from that good book his whole life. Daniel in the lion's den, Moses parting the red sea, and his namesake, Jonah, swallowed by a big ole fish for defying the will of God. But as Jonah got older, he managed to get a closer look at the book as Granny thumbed through its onion skinned pages, turning to her favorite stories. He'd peeked over her shoulder a couple of times and glimpsed *other* pages worked into the book. Some were old and faded and had been stitched into the binding. Others were clearly more recent and looked like envelopes that held even more pages within. There were maps and drawings of things he was willing to bet weren't in any bible you'd find in a church. He didn't think God made things that looked like some of those drawings.

As he gained his letters — thanks to the patient lessons from Miss Joyce and her sister Miss Laura — Jonah spotted names written on those other pages. Names he knew. Names of children that had come and gone from the farm in the Devil's Cradle, including his and Rachel's. Before Granny passed, he'd been cooking up a plan to get his hands on that holy book to see what in the world else was in there. And now, as his whole world was being turned upside down, he had his chance. Jonah had snatched the book up, expecting it to be warm. When Granny Amburgey read from it, it seemed like an extension of her body, a beating heart of stories and scriptures held in her weathered and loving hands. That book was as much a part of her as the iron gray hair she wore wound up in a tight bun, or the sound of her voice when she'd soothe them in their times

of hurt or sickness. But in that moment, it just felt like a big book, bound in a yellowing white leather, fastened shut with a knob that held a leather strap across its overstuffed pages.

They'd run. They'd set up camp on the other side of the Rock and ate a meager supper of saltines and sardines from the stash there. They hadn't talked much. They were all sad about Granny, and the quiet just seemed respectful. Rachel suggested drawing straws to see who would take first watch, but Jonah had insisted that he wanted to go back and see if the bank folks were still down there, so they might as well get some rest. He carried the bible with him as he crept back to the edge of the trees and peered back down at the farm. He could see a sheriff's car parked on the dirt road, the deputy inside it reading a newspaper by flashlight. A voice at his shoulder startled him.

"Don't even think about it, Jo-Jo. There ain't nothing left down there for us."

Jonah almost dropped the tome he was holding as he jumped half a step back. "Jesus, girl! How you move so quiet?"

Rachel smiled unapologetically at him as she pushed her dark hair behind her ears. "Just a little something Mama taught me."

"Well don't go sneakin' up on me like that. You about made me soak my britches." He registered what she said and scowled slightly. "And don't call me Jo-Jo."

Rachel snorted a short laugh then grew serious. "Right. I mean it though, Jonah. That's not home anymore. Not for us."

She tugged at his hand and led him back in the direction of their camp. She looked down at the ancient book as they walked. "Maybe you can read us a bedtime story."

Jonah looked at the cover of the book, shining pale in the moonlight. He didn't know what all was in there, but he was pretty sure it wasn't nothing that would help any of them sleep.

[Panthers on the Mountain by Jon Charles Dwyer]

*We laid my mamaw to rest
The ridge bowed its head
And I tattooed her name
on the top of my wrist
Well six feet too low
when her heart becomes cold
We'll sniff our her bones
and see how bright she glows
See I hear that time is a cold hammer's blow
and that days in this holler are caskets to close
I watch the sun ink and pray it may rise
and hold in the tales I keep buried in my mind*

*Of panthers on the mountainside
The freedom that comes of knowing your bite
I sharpen my teeth, pray my nails become claws
To finally dig out of this hole we've always called home*

Well, hey there, family. Welcome to the final act of Season Three of Old Gods of Appalachia. We brought you back into the woods of eastern Kentucky to follow yet another young person touched by darkness as they search for their place in the whole wide world. We've been waiting and super excited to introduce you to young Jonah and his companions, but I promise you, you ain't expecting this story to go where it's gonna go. So y'all just hang on now, all right?

I'd like to remind everybody that completing your social media ritual is the best way to keep up with us and some new and exciting things are coming down the road. We've got a brand new Patreon mini-series to announce in the near future. And there are some other exciting happenings brewing in the world of live shows for 2023. There's just a whole lot more I wanna tell you about, but I can't. Well I could, but I'm not gonna. Just not right now. So your best bet is to head over to oldgodsofappalachia.com and follow us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Join us on the Discord server to keep up with all of our dark adventures as they unfold.

This is your every dang show reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media distributed by Rusty Quill. Our intro music is by Brother Landon Blood and this episode's outro music is "Panthers On The Mountainside" by our cousin Jon Charles Dwyer. Look for it to drop on our Bandcamp, oldgodsofappalachia.bandcamp.com, real, real soon. Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell. The voice of Rachel was Sarah Doreen Macphee. Talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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