

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Date Night

A Tale for the Season

*Old Gods of Appalachia is a horror anthology podcast and therefore may contain material not suitable for all audiences, so listener discretion is advised. Seriously, family. Tonight's episode veers into the realm of true horror, so listen responsibly now.*

*Old Gods of Appalachia presents "Date Night," a tale for the season by Cam Collins.*

Valentine's Day. A day for sweethearts. For cards and flowers and heart-shaped chocolate boxes. For children to swap paper hearts with their closest pals and leave candy hearts on their favorite teachers' desks. For secret admirers and private assignations.

In these modern times, some folks deride Valentine's Day as a "Hallmark holiday," a crass display of consumerism and greed meant only to line the pockets of corporations at the expense of us average folks. Family, that simply isn't so. Whilst February 14th may have become corrupted by those interests in the world we find ourselves today, a holiday in honor of love and romance — or, to be fair, just sex — has been celebrated in the depths of winter for centuries.

While some historians disagree about the exact origins of February's tender-hearted holiday, it's clear that it owes some of its provenance to Lupercalia, an ancient Roman fertility festival celebrated at the ides — or 15th — of February. Lupercalia honored both Faunus, the god of agriculture, and Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of Rome who were said to have been abandoned as infants, then rescued and nurtured by a great she-wolf. To kick off the raucous festival, priests of that Roman order would gather at a cave held sacred as the spot where Romulus and Remus were reared by said wolf mother. Here they would sacrifice a goat, to symbolize fertility. The priests would skin the goat and cut its hide into strips, which would be dipped in the sacrificial blood. Then they would take to the streets, moving through the throngs of Roman citizens, gently slapping the women with the goat hides. This blessing was thought to bring fertility in the coming year. In the evening, the city's unmarried women were said to place their names in a jar from which Rome's bachelors would each choose a name, and these young men and women would become paired for the year. The matches — given the

natural results of such couplings in a time when there was little to be done to safely prevent children — frequently ended in marriage.

Although Lupercalia survived the initial rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire, it was outlawed at the end of the 5th century by the Pope, who instead declared February 14th St. Valentine's Day, though which St. Valentine the old man meant is unclear, given that the Catholic Church recognizes no less than three saints with the moniker of Valentine or Valentinus. Some scholars believe that Valentine's Day was dedicated to St. Valentine of Terni, a third-century bishop who was beheaded by the Emperor Claudius II. Others suggest it celebrates another priest named Valentine who also fell afoul of old Claudius' axeman. When Claudius outlawed marriage for young men in favor of conscripting them into the Roman legions, this Valentine — ever conscious of the Lord's direction that Christians be fruitful and multiply — continued performing marriages for young couples in secret. When his defiance was discovered, Claudius had that priest executed as well, and thus St. Valentine died a martyr for the venerable institution of marriage. Other tales hold that the St. Valentine of legend was killed for helping Christians escape persecution. Or that Valentine himself was imprisoned, and during his incarceration, restored the sight of the jailer's blind daughter. Now in this version, Valentine sent history's first Valentine himself — a letter to the young woman, which he signed "From Your Valentine" — on the eve of his execution.

Whichever story you believe, by the Middle Ages Valentine had become one of the Church's most popular saints in both England and France, and it's easy to see why such heroic narratives would appeal to the popular imagination. Valentine's Day has always been associated with romance, violence and blood.

And that suited Tom just fine.

The thing that would come to be known as Skint Tom was just Tom once, a young man from Tennessee with both a way with his fists and a way with the ladies. His father was a drinker and a wastrel and his mama died before he'd ever had a chance to know her. Mamaw Doris, his mama's mama, had done her best with him, but the streak of mischief in the boy ran all the way to the bone. If he didn't find trouble himself, it was sure to seek him out, and Tom was a

charmer. He'd always been able to talk his way out of whatever consequences tried to find their way to his doorstep, whether with Doris or his school teachers or the law, it didn't matter.

Tom liked sweets, and he seemed constitutionally unable to walk past the candy rack down at the general store without a few pieces finding their way into his pockets. For a while this had gone unnoticed, but as Tom grew bolder and his pockets heavier, eventually the store clerk began to take notice. At first he simply grabbed Tom by the collar and demanded he empty out his pockets, retrieved the boy's ill-gotten treasures, and sent him on his way. When it happened again, the man marched Tom home and had a talk with his Mamaw Doris, who was mortified. She swore she would tan Tom's hide and promised it would never happen again. But she'd always had a gentle hand and Tom a sturdy backside, and of course he was right back at it the next week.

Later on, there was the unauthorized joyride on the neighbor's tractor, which ended up stuck in a creek three fields over. The farmer was not pleased — it took two horses and a handful of men pushing to extricate his equipment from the muddy bank — but no lasting harm was done, and for a wonder, Tom had honored his promise not to do it again. At least not to that particular farmer. There were stories of other tractors in the area going briefly missing, then turning up abandoned a mile or two off, and Doris had her suspicions... but no one ever apprehended the culprit.

It wasn't til Tom was around eighteen that he started getting into trouble of a more serious sort, at least to his mamaw's way of thinking. Trouble with girls. Tom was handsome — smart, funny, smooth talker — the sort of young man who'd come to pick a girl up for a date and have her, her mama, and her grandmommy all giggling and blushing while her daddy fumed in the corner. Women loved him, while lots of men thought his face looked mighty punchable, if you catch my meaning. Doris was sure she saw a shotgun wedding in her grandson's future, and she prayed for him nightly. For the most part it seemed to work. Though Tom left many a broken heart in his wake, there had been no lasting consequences, and thank the Lord for that.

And then Tom met Eleanor.

She was by all accounts a beautiful woman, dark of eye and fair of hair, and she come to town with her husband, the new church pastor, a man a good two decades her senior. Tom wasn't much of a church-goer himself, but he drove his mamaw over to the church for the potluck dinner the congregation threw to welcome the couple to their new home, and after that, he began to show a renewed interest in the word of the Lord. Or at least the words of Miz Eleanor, who sang in the choir, as was only right and proper for the reverend's wife. What she got up to with Tom was neither right nor proper, but they were both young and foolish and neither one of 'em expected they'd get caught.

Nobody was ever real clear on how the pastor found out about Eleanor and Tom. He was a busy man, often away from the parsonage, ministering to members of his flock too frail or aged to make it to Sunday services. Unlike most homes built to house the clergy, the parsonage wasn't located next door to the church proper, but out in the woods a ways, on a piece of property some long-dead deacon had left to the congregation in his will. It was isolated, which ensured there'd been few if any witnesses to Tom and Eleanor's sins — nor to the pastor's vengeance. Some say it was Tom's own fault — that like many a young man before him, he'd boasted of his conquest to his friends, and word reached the husband of his paramour. Others speculate it might have been Doris herself who blew the whistle, too shamed by her grandson's philandering to keep the secret.

However it came about, it seemed plain that someone had tipped the reverend off. He'd come too well prepared for anyone to imagine it was anything less than premeditated. He'd told Eleanor he had to go out of town for the weekend — church business, a regional meeting of church heads, or some other gathering she wouldn't be expected to attend — so she'd believed they'd had the house to themselves. They say the pastor returned late that first night, sneaking real quiet through the darkened woods, and caught the pair red-handed, Tom with his pants around his ankles and the lady in question fully in the nude.

Accounts vary on the subject of how Eleanor died, and police records of the incident have been lost to time. Some say he shot her first, bringing her life to a quick and relatively painless end so that he could focus on the punishment he had in mind for Tom. Others insist he let her live for awhile, tied her up and made her watch and listen as her lover screamed. But no one disputes what happened to Tom.

The pastor got the jump on Tom, whether he hit him over the head or shot him someplace not immediately fatal, no one recalls. But he was able to restrain the young man, and then he went for his hunting knife. The good reverend loved to hunt, it was said. He'd been hunting with his daddy and granddaddy since he was just a little squirt, and he took particular pride in the quality of his field dressing, a skill he now applied to the man who, in his mind, had violated the sanctity of his home and his marriage. Tom begged and he cried and he screamed as Eleanor's husband slowly began slicing long strips of skin from his resisting flesh.

Once the grisly work was done, the pastor dragged Tom's body out of the house and into the woods, leaving it near a creek that marked the edge of the church's property line. Then he went back to the house, washed up and drove back into town to turn himself in. Wrath was a sin, after all, and murder a crime, and he would accept his punishment. Nobody much remembers what happened to him, but they remember Tom. They remember Tom because he won't let anyone forget.

That ole pastor might have thought Tom was already dead, but that weren't quite true. Not yet. And as he lay there bleeding and dying, every nerve burning with all the fires of hell, Tom figured he'd been punished quite enough for any soul, and he swore revenge, if not on Eleanor's husband, then on a world that would allow such things to happen. And three days later, Tom rose, and began his long and bloody campaign of vengeance on the hills of East Tennessee.

He found he enjoyed murder — stabbing folks was a hell of a good time, and skinning 'em wasn't nearly as hard as he'd thought. He'd had a mighty good run up until '28, when the old bear had tapped him to help put Her back in the ground. That trick with the bats had hurt, by God. It had taken him years to get himself back together. So many years and so many sacrifices, and he might not have been able to manage it at all if not for a certain deal he'd made once, a few years after his first death, under a bridge down near Rogersville. It gave him strength. Power. And didn't cost him much at all, just a few offerings tossed on a fire, hearts and eyes and livers and such. Hell, he wasn't using those bits anyway. But after what She did to him, it had taken more. More than anyone ever told him. Barrels of blood. So many lives he'd lost track. He'd almost given up, thinking he would be trapped in between, in some murky half-existence, forever. But eventually, the Thing he served was satiated, and Tom walked the dark earth again.

Most folks might be a little bitter after everything that'd happened, but not Tom. He still loves the ladies, almost as much as he loves slicing them open, along with whatever young man he happens to find them with, out on some lonesome lovers' lane. And on Valentine's Day, he likes to give himself a special treat. A good skin can last awhile, if he stores it right in a nice cold cellar or a disused smokehouse. In February, in the very heart of winter, he can even afford to take more than one. And so he scans the newspapers, looking for just the right advertisement in the lonely hearts column, and he lingers around lunch counters and shops and church suppers, looking for just the right young woman in need of a date for Valentine's Day.

She must be young and single and still living at home with the family — at least mommy and daddy, although an unmarried brother around her age is ideal. And of course she must be pretty — Tom's always been a sucker for a pretty girl. He will bring her flowers, and take her to dinner. Maybe even a show, if there's something playing at the cinema that strikes his fancy. He will charm her and make her laugh. If he's feeling especially nostalgic, he may take her home, to the old abandoned house out in the woods where he and his sweet Eleanor met their fate. Or he may just wrap his arms around her in the back of his car, and hold her tight, and kiss her, as he slips the knife in deep.

He knows how to make it quick, how to keep them still, how to avoid damaging them more than necessary. He's had a lot of practice, after all.

Once he's finished his work, he will slip into her skin like a pretty new dress, and he will drive carefully down the back roads to the home where he picked her up. Often, Tom is met at the door by an unsuspecting mommy or daddy, eager to hear how their daughter's much-anticipated Valentine's night went. And then the real fun begins. He will butcher the whole family and hang them up like fine new suits. He can wear them for at least a week — maybe two, depending on the weather and the family's storage options and how quickly the local busybodies come nosing around.

In February of 1993, the girl's name is Katie Maine. She's tall and big boned enough to make her skin an easy fit for Tom, and pretty as a picture with her little upturned nose and her curly blonde hair and her gray eyes that Tom will cut out and burn for an offering. He will take her to

a movie before he kills her. It's called *Untamed Heart*, Katie's choice, and little does she realize how perfect it is for this Valentine's Day — sweet and romantic and tragic. Tom doesn't take her back to the house in the woods. Instead he takes her to a quiet spot down by the river. The night is cold and clear, the sky full of stars. Katie remarks how romantic the setting is as she leans in for a kiss, and they're the last words she ever says.

Tom takes his time with her, though he's excited about meeting her family. Katie lives with her mother and two brothers. That's a whole goshdurn new wardrobe! And it's been an especially cold winter. He should be able to stretch this out awhile, if he can keep the house nice and cool. He strips out of the skin he wore for their date, and tosses it into the river, where the current will carry it away. It'll probably wash up on shore for some poor fisherman to find. *And won't that give him a fright*, Tom thinks with a chuckle.

He carefully slips into the skin of the girl who was called Katie. He puts on her bloodied dress and covers it with her coat, and returns to his car. He retrieves a tube of the red lipstick she was wearing from her purse, and carefully freshens it up over his own face in the mirror. The illusion is nearly perfect. He pulls up the collar of the coat to cover the hairline cut under the jaw that sometimes gives him away. There's nothing he can do about the eyes, of course, but by the time anyone gets close enough to notice that, it will be far too late.

Tom drives to the Maine family home and parks in the driveway. It's a ranch-style house of the sort built in the 70s, a combination of brick and vinyl siding. It looks very still, more than a place with all the lights on and cars parked in the driveway has any right to be. No shadows flicker past the windows. There's no murmur of voices, no congenial laughter. It's a little weird, Tom thinks, but his date had mentioned she was a big reader. Perhaps her siblings share her passion. The mother is divorced. She could be on a date herself — hell, she might even bring the ole gent home, another fresh new skin to wear!

*What a treat*, Tom thinks with a grin. He fishes Katie's house keys from the pocket of her coat, but when he reaches for the knob, he finds the door ajar. Not much, just a crack. Enough that it could be simple carelessness. But people these days don't tend to leave their doors unlocked, not like they used to.

Tom frowns. It really is quiet. And yet the tempting aroma of a home cooked meal reaches his nose. It smells like fried chicken. Fried chicken and something else, something richer and more primal, with a faint metallic edge.

He knows that fragrance well. It's blood.

Tom nudges the door open quietly, cautiously, and peers into the split foyer. There's a smear of blood and cracked plaster on the wall near the door, like somebody hit their head and hit it hard. A set of bloody footprints lead from the deep shadows pooled at the bottom of the stairs, across the landing, and up to the floor above. Tom follows.

To his right, there's a formal living room, stiff, floral-printed furniture that clearly no one ever sits on draped in doilies. One of the doilies has been snatched up to wipe bloody hands and then abandoned on the floor, but nothing else seems out of place. As Tom follows the trail of footprints across the hall to the dining room door, he hears at last a sound: the soft, almost musical scrape of a knife on Katie's mama's best china.

He finds her sitting at the head of the Maine family dinner table, naked and covered in blood. It soaks the ends of her hair as if she'd dipped her long, pale blonde locks into red paint. It streaks her pretty, fine-boned face, her torso and neck, although yes, she's made the effort to wash her hands before she sat down to eat. She's heaped a plate with Miz Maine's fried chicken and mashed taters and green beans. She cuts into a piece of chicken breast with dainty, elegant motions, careful not to make a mess, and pops the juicy morsel into her mouth with obvious relish.

Tom hasn't seen Miss Lavinia in sixty-five years. By the time he managed to put himself back together after the incident with the bats, he found himself in a whole new world. Liquor was legal again, enjoyed in dive bars and swanky night spots from coast to coast — with the exception of dry counties like the backward holler where he had the misfortune to rise. The country had suffered through something called a Depression and come out the other side, and found itself embroiled — along with most of the rest of the world — in a war over in Europe with some funny-lookin little shit called Hitler. And damnit, by the next time it was his turn to perform the seven years' rite that would keep Her in the ground where she belonged, Miss

Lavinia was nowhere to be found. No one had seen her since the early 30s, and everybody he asked told Tom they believed she was dead, removed from the chess board by some unknown hand. Which was odd, because generally speaking, any h'aint with the juice to take out Lavinia Thrice-Damned would definitely want to make it known. Bragging rights are bragging rights after all. But given the circumstances, he too had believed she must be gone.

Now here she is, fit as a fiddle and flush with power, sd near as he can tell. And she's ruined his new suits, damnit.

Her luminous green eyes flash and she smiles up at him. "Well, hi-dy, Tom. Fancy meeting you here."

Tom can't help but grin as he pulls out a chair and plops down across from her. "I don't guess I have to ask where the family is, do I?"

"Aw, Tom, you know me," she says with a wink.

"You couldn't have left me just one? You chop off the head and the face goes with it. That ain't no good."

"Tom, honey, if I'd known you we're coming, I'd have baked a cake. There's a whole box of fancy chocolates in yon kitchen, though. Help yourself."

Tom walks over to the gold foil box perched on the pass through bar that opens into the kitchen and begins rifling through its contents. He frowns. "You leave anything other than coconut creams?"

"Maybe? I don't know. I don't like those."

"Well, shit." Tom nibbles the edge of a small chocolate Cupid, and finally hits pay dirt. Or caramel, to be specific. He bites off its little baby head with a grin and holds it up to Miss Lavinia in a mocking toast.

Lavinia grins, and holds up her fork, a green bean speared on its tines. “Happy Valentine’s Day Tom,” she says sweetly.

Tom rolls his eyes and shakes his head, amused despite himself. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Lavinia.” He sighs. “Shit.”

[ “The Bride” by Landon Blood ]

Well hey there, family. Happy Valentine’s Day. Thank y’all for joining us for “Date Night” by Cam Collins, your Mistress of the Dark, bringing us more blood and mutilation than we probably deserve on the day of love, but uh, give it up for Cam Collins. Good to see Skint Tom and Miss Lavinia showing their heads around here after the end of Season Two. It’s something y’all have been asking for so we thought we would have a little fun popping those two back together, even for just a little cameo moment there. I hope y’all enjoyed that, and I hope y’all stuck with us to the end.

Family, we were talking on social media for the past week — and by the way, if you’re not following us on social media, head on over to [oldgodsofappalachia.com](http://oldgodsofappalachia.com); follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, join the Discord server, get in the loop. But we’ve been talking about how this is the last holiday episode before Season Three starts. We have not announced the release date for Season Three just yet — it’s just not quite ready for your consumption. Besides, we’ve got some more spooky teasers and trailers to leak out there on social media. So make sure you’ve completed your social media ritual to stay in the loop, to know when we’re coming back full time. We have new characters, new stories, going to whole new spooky places. So keep your eyes peeled on social media. We’ll be releasing the theme for Season Three, and believe me, we’re not anywhere near done.

And we need your support to keep on going. If you would like to become an official member of the family in a uh — in a binding sense, that’s a nice way I can say it — head on over to [patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia](http://patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia). Seventeen episodes of *Build Mama a Coffin* are available; the horrifying two-parter “Door Under the Floor” — that’s Cam’s beautiful horror and peanut butter smoothie you can check out — as well as exclusive series like Steve Reads, Cam Reads. There’s wallpapers for your phone, there’s specialized videos that drop from time to time. And most

excitingly right now, Black Mouthed Dog is starting to head toward the home stretch. That's our prequel to Build Mama a Coffin that's set in the last years of the civil war, thirty years before Big Coal and the railroad actually come to Appalachia. We're gonna be wrapping that up real soon in preparation for the launch of Season Three. So much exciting stuff coming, some stuff I can't even talk about, but please family, stay with us. Continue your walk into the shadows at our sides, and we'll do our best not to let you down.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's intro music was by Landon Blood, as is our outro music. Today's story was written by Cam Collins and narrated by Steve Shell. The voice of Miss Lavinia was Cam Collins. Talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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