

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

### Season 3, Episode 49: Sackcloth and Ashes

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

Henricus Crain had never expected to find himself working in the grand edifice of the Barrow family home office again. He had — not to put too fine a point on it — fucked up. *They* had fucked up. He and his associate, Johann Churchman, had failed their mistress. They had failed in their duty to reclaim a certain asset from its last assignment. They had failed to protect Polly Barrow from the filthy rabble who had stolen that asset from under their noses. Worst of all, they had failed to divert the blame for the whole fiasco in Bower County from Miss Barrow herself, and had stood by and watched as she was dragged into the deeps beneath Barrow House for... “reeducation,” as Mr. Conrad liked to call it. Pfah! To use the term “punishment” would still be a lie by omission. “Torture” was more an accurate word.

Henricus and Johann had spent their own time in the dark beneath Barrow House, but were released within a month or so. Their punishment had primarily taken the form of demotion — rather than serving at the right hand of a family member, they returned to the rank and file, just two more hollow bodies providing muscle or cannon fodder as Barrow & Locke required. For awhile, Henricus had been assigned to a dangerous project down in Virginia, answering to a petty, stupid excuse for a handler overseeing a limestone deposit out in the back of beyond. At least until their supervisor had met with an unfortunate accident. Crain had it through the company grapevine that Churchman had been sent up Ohio way, though he knew nothing of the details of the man’s assignment.

Henricus Crain had not set eyes on Johann Churchman for at least a decade when he was summoned back to Barrow House. Thus, when he descended the cold marble staircase that led down to the basement, he was startled to find Churchman waiting, alone, at the bottom. When the telegram arrived from the home office, Crain had assumed the family had finally learned the truth of what had happened at the Copper Ridge job, and he was being called in to face the consequences. *So be it*, he had thought. He was tired, and bitter, and ready enough to have done with things.

He had expected to be confronted by Mr. Conrad and Mr. Benuel — or god forbid, old E.P. himself — but there was only Johann, kneeling reverently, head down, at the edge of the crevasse from which E.P.'s bier was hefted by great chains when the patriarch deigned to address his subordinates directly. At the sound of his footsteps, Johann glanced up, his long neck twisting to peer toward the stairs. At the sight of his old compatriot, the faintest hint of a smile crossed his thin lips, and he nodded. Crain returned the gesture, but neither man spoke. It was unwise to draw attention to oneself in this place. Crain had simply settled on his knees beside Churchman and waited, confused, for the reason behind their summons to present itself.

When the great chains began to creak and groan and the rumble of stone grating on stone reached their ears, Crain had braced himself to face Mr. Barrow. But when the stone pillar rose from the depths, E.P. Barrow's coffin was nowhere to be found. The plinth was empty but for the bloody, shivering form of a tall, pale woman. Crain lurched to his feet, stumbling forward to gather her up in his arms. Her bare skin was covered in some sort of blue-ish, stinking ooze, and her teeth were chattering with cold.

“Your coat, Churchman!” Crain had snapped, and the tall man hurried to his side, wrapping her up in the folds of his voluminous black coat.

When she first spoke, he could not hear her. Her voice was but the softest of whispers. But when he leaned close, the faint words became clear.

POLLY: Henricus... home.

Henricus Crain had long ago resigned himself to the idea that he would never see his mistress again, that perhaps her father had chosen to dispose of her when they returned from West Virginia ten years ago. E.P. Barrow did not tolerate failure. And yet some tiny kernel of hope must have remained, buried deep down inside, for he had seen to it that her rooms in Pittsburgh — in the penthouse suite atop the finest hotel in the city, of course — were dusted regularly, the linens freshened, her closets aired out seasonally. They were ready to receive her at a moment's notice, should she ever return.

“Yes, ma’am, of course,” he said, glancing up at Johann. The pale, spindly man inclined his head and turned for the stairs with an alacrity Henricus was unused to seeing in his dignified, taciturn comrade. The man could move when the situation called for it. Crain had hoisted Polly Barrow from the floor and followed him up the stairs. Outside, Churchman already had the car waiting, and the two hollow men — returned at last to the service of their mistress — had sped away into the night.

That had been some half a year back. Since then, Miss Barrow had resumed her duties at the home office, Crain and Churchman at her side. She was, if anything, an even more exacting administrator than before. Every I must be dotted, every T crossed, and woe be to the underling who let an error slip by unnoticed before his report reached her desk. Polly Barrow had something to prove. They all did, Crain knew. The three of them were here on sufferance, their continued employment — hell, their very existence — contingent upon proving to E.P. Barrow that his daughter was worth the time and trouble he’d invested in her “reeducation.”

Today, on midweek afternoon in the summer of 1941, Henricus Crain sat at the glossy, polished oak reception desk separated from Miss Barrow’s office by a heavy wooden door inset with a pane of glass frosted in an intricate pattern of sigils woven subtly into a pattern of leaves. He held the telephone to his ear, listening to the voice on the other end of the line, nodding thoughtfully to himself and occasionally asking a question for clarity, but mostly allowing the other party to give their report unhindered. When the call was finished, he gently returned the receiver to its cradle, and rose from his desk. He rapped lightly on the door to the inner office before stepping inside.

CRAIN: Um, Miss Barrow?

Polly Barrow sat behind an ornate ebony desk embellished with more of the same clever runework found on her door and resting on carved lion’s feet. Her desk was littered with paperwork, and her chair was currently turned to face a typewriter resting on a small shelf to her right. Not pausing to look up from her page, she answered distractedly,

POLLY: Yes?

CRAIN: There's been a.... uh, development.

Polly Barrow favored him with an impatient glance.

POLLY: Well? Spit it out, Mr. Crain. Daddy wants my report promptly at sunset, and I don't have time for you to waste.

CRAIN: The weapon, ma'am. The one we... misplaced... some years ago? It's been spotted by our people.

Polly Barrow's hands froze on the keys. For a moment, she was stunned, her mind reeling at the implications. Then she turned to face the man hovering in her doorway, rising to her feet.

POLLY: *What?* When? And where? Details, Mr. Crain!

CRAIN: Kentucky, ma'am, within the week. Then Virginia, less than forty-eight hours ago. It appears to be on the move, but I'm certain we can catch it up.

A slow smile spread over the tall woman's lovely face. It might have been the first genuine smile Crain had seen since she returned to them.

POLLY: Well, well, well. The prodigal surfaces at last, hm? Mr. Crain, draft a memo to Daddy. I'm afraid that report will have to wait. We have more important business to attend.

Henricus Crain hesitated.

CRAIN: Are... are you sure that's wise, ma'am? Under the circumstances. Given you've only recently... rejoined us?

POLLY: Oh, Mr. Crain... I've never been more sure of anything in my life.

[ "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*

Jonah Hellbender told himself that he was just being paranoid. There was no reason he should feel so unsettled, so ill at ease, on a bright midsummer morning, with the sun's rays baking down, birds calling in the trees, chipmunks and squirrels and other small critters scurrying through the underbrush. When he'd quietly asked Rachel if she thought maybe they were being watched, she'd laughed.

RACHEL: Quit borrowing trouble, JoJo. Ain't nobody watching us out here but the squirrels. And maybe a deer or two.

And hell, Skeeter was as relaxed as Jonah thought he'd ever seen the smaller boy, stretched out in the soft moss at the foot of a stately old oak tree, dreamily watching the clouds drift by overhead.

The three friends had made camp overnight in a nice, flat clearing on the banks of the Clinch River, and Jonah had to admit he was feeling better than he had in days. They'd washed up in the cold, fresh water as best they could, lacking one of the bars of Granny's homemade soap that none of them had thought to swipe during their raid on their late guardian's cabin. Skeeter had proven a deft hand at snatching fish out of the water, and they'd feasted on fresh trout last night,

a better supper than they'd enjoyed in more than a week. He should have been feeling pretty damn good right about now.

And yet something nagged at him, a subtle tickle at the edge of his awareness, the creeping sense that they just... weren't quite as alone as it seemed.

Shaking his head, Jonah returned to his perusal of the maps tucked within Granny's bible. He didn't know how current Greta Amburgey's sketches might be — or how skilled her cartography — but he didn't think it would take them too long to reach the place she'd described within its page. Leastways, not if they were lucky enough to hitch a ride down to Benge County. There they could find one Ruth Barber. Miz Barber ran the general store down in Blackford, and according to Granny's records, if a shopper knew just the right questions to ask, they might be shown through a narrow door behind the candy counter, and shown into the back of the store, where one might procure certain goods of a more... specialized nature. Be it a pack of real tarot cards discreetly acquired from a French trader, or a tincture of certain herbs that would help alleviate the consequences of a marital indiscretion, or a powder that could help convince an annoying neighbor that the time might be ripe to vacate the premises next door, Barber's Bazaar offered singular solutions for the discerning customer. For the right price, of course.

More importantly, from Jonah's point of view, Ruth Barber was known to be a trader in information. According to Granny, every practitioner between Hardbuckle and Boone found their way to the little shop in Blackford sooner or later. Whether they needed to procure a particular root that grew nowhere near their home county, or needed to plumb the depths of her knowledge, the woman knew just about everybody with the tiniest tickle of a gift. The fact that she was willing to barter information about all of them? Well, that was part of the price you paid for the convenience of dealing with Miz Barber, a woman you could be almost certain either had what you needed, or could procure it in a reasonable time frame. If secrecy was more important than speed, you'd best look elsewhere. And of course, as with any physical item on her shelves, her information came at a cost.

RACHEL: And just how do you propose to pay this woman, Jonah Hellbender?

Rachel had asked when Jonah showed the page with the profile of the shopkeep to her and Skeeter.

RACHEL: We ain't got any money.

Jonah had anticipated this question, and he was ready for it. Leaning back in the cool grass and feeling pleased with himself, he closed the book and smiled.

JONAH: Why, you're looking at it,

he told her.

JONAH: If she helps us, she gets to take a peek at the book.

Jonah figured there could be no greater enticement to a person such as this Ruth Barber than a chance to delve into the many secrets Granny's book contained. Neither Rachel nor Skeeter could find any fault in that logic, and so they packed up their few meager belongings and tramped up through the woods down to the shoulder of Highway 58, which ran east all the way from Grant County to the other end of the state, and would take them in a more or less straight line to Barber's Bazaar in Blackford.

The hour was early yet, but not so early they had to contend with many folks on their way to work. By this time of morning, most of the traffic was coal trucks and beat-up old pickups affixed with "Farm Use" tags. But they only had to walk for about an hour before Rachel managed to flag down a shiny Packard heading east. Jonah had to admit, the girl had a real gift for hitchhiking. Whether any of that was a Gift with a capital G, or it could all be attributed to her being a "pretty little thing," as one of the folks who'd given them a ride had noted, he couldn't say.

The driver of the Packard was a woman in her thirties with a shock of unruly curls struggling against the confines of the red floral scarf she'd tied around it, a pair of round tortoiseshell glasses, and an easy smile. She told them they were in luck. She was on her way to interview for

a secretarial position at Russell College in Benge County, so she could take them straight on through.

The drive to Blackford was uneventful and blessedly cool, a far cry from the backs of hay trucks and busted-up old model T's they'd ridden in since they left Hardbuckle. The driver explained proudly that her daddy had just bought the car, fresh off the showroom floor with all the bells and whistles, including something called the "Bishop and Babcock Weather Conditioner," which kept the car cool in the summer and warm in the winter. Thus, when they arrived at the front door of Ruth Barber's shop, they were a good deal more presentable than when they'd entered Virginia some days ago, a bit of good fortune that boosted Jonah's confidence considerably as they surveyed the storefront.

Blackford, Virginia, was an old town. It was originally established as a wilderness outpost in the 1770s, a fort where local settlers could seek protection from any of the surrounding area's indigenous folk who took exception with being forced off their ancestral lands by a bunch of rude and entitled interlopers from across the sea. Given its position at the intersection of two major animal migration trails that were vital to the native community's hunters, its location was perhaps a poor choice for people who claimed to want to live peacefully. Blackford's legacy was a bloody one, and unsurprisingly, the region was rife with tales of the h'aints and boogers that slinked through the shadows of its shady streets and haunted its historic structures. You reap what you sow, family.

Barber's Bazaar was situated in a weathered three-story red brick building across the street from the Blackford Depot, a convenient location for the customers it drew from surrounding communities. The thick, wavering panes of glass in its windows, its sagging door frames and the peeling, yellowed white paint of its trim were a testament to its age. Barber's seemed to operate as something of a general store, its windows displaying everything from dressmaker's dummies draped in the season's latest fabrics to displays of seed and fertilizer to sacks of flour, barley, and other staples. There was nothing, on its face, that spoke to the sort of business Granny described in her book. As Jonah pushed open the right of a pair of glass-paned front doors, a bell tinkled overhead, and all the smells of an old building that had served for many years as a shop front filled their noses: yeast and barley and fresh fruits from the grocery section, dark loam and fertilizer and tomato stems and other green, growing things from garden supply, peppermint



and licorice and caramel and chocolate from the candy bins, and the faint, underlying odor of dust and damp that permeated any structure of its age. Overlying all of it, however, was a scent the three teenagers knew well, one that reminded them, jarringly, of Granny Amburgey's cabin: the distinct aroma of drying herbs. There were many that Jonah could see and identify, hanging up in bundles overhead: lavender and thyme and rosemary, sage and yarrow and dandelion, catnip and blackberry leaf and mugwort. But there were others — some bitter, some cloyingly sweet — that he could neither identify nor spot among the neat bundles. Those, he imagined, must be tucked away out of sight somewhere else.

They wandered around the interior of the shop for a few minutes, peering into glass cases stocked with candy and fresh breads, soaps and shaving supplies, and sundry other goods. There was no sign of the proprietor. Jonah was considering whether to tap the call bell situated on the counter by the cash register next to a “please ring for service” sign, when a door banged against the wall somewhere toward the rear of the building, and a slight figure bustled out from between towering shelves laden with bolts of fabric, her arms laden with a box of used books.

RUTH BARBER: Just let me set these down. I'll be with you in a moment.

The woman called to them from across the room as she carried the load of paperbacks to a rotating wire book rack near the front of the store. The shiny covers, Jonah noted, were painted in lurid shades of red and black and street lamp yellow, and featured frightened-looking women in low-cut dresses and men with stern faces under fedoras pulling pistols from the pockets of their trench coats. The latest and greatest pulp fiction, hot off the press. Setting down her burden, the shopkeep turned back to them.

Ruth Barber was a narrow woman with bright black eyes and sharp features that put Jonah in mind of nothing so much as a bird. Her nose was a thin, beakish blade set in the center of her face, and her chin came to a distinct point. The bones of her hands were clearly visible beneath the skin, knuckles prominent within delicate fingers with nails that came to a point. Her silvery hair was pinned up beneath a wide-brimmed black felt hat, and she wore an old-fashioned frock coat of black velvet with brass buttons gone green with age over a shapeless gray dress. She moved almost silently in a pair of old black boots made of soft leather.

As curious as Jonah found the woman's appearance, she appeared equally fascinated by them — or, to be specific, by Skeeter. Her eyes lit with an expression that was avid, almost... greedy, somehow... as they fell on the smaller boy with his unruly dark hair and tanned skin and wide eyes like deep pools. Her smile was wide and white and sharp, her manner almost deferential as she paced a slow circle around him.

RUTH: Welcome! Welcome to Barber's Bazaar, young man. My goodness! I never expected to see one of your folk so far south. Is there anything I can assist you with?

One of her hands darted out to touch Skeeter's hair, almost as if on its own accord, a dark lock gliding between her thumb and forefinger. Skeeter shot Jonah a nervous look, shaking his head and stepping away from her prying eyes and intrusive hands.

Jonah cleared his throat.

JONAH: Excuse me. Miz Barber?

He interjected, diverting her attention from the smaller boy.

JONAH: My name is Jonah Hellbender. These are my friends, Skeeter and Rachel.

Remembering the phrase Granny's book had instructed them to use, he continued:

JONAH: We come to barter with you in good faith and enjoy the hospitality of your establishment. Upon our oath, we bring no harm to your doorstep, nor expect to depart in ill will.

Turning her attention to Jonah and Rachel, Ruth Barber raised an eyebrow. Her lips pursed as her gaze swept over their hand-me-down clothes and worn shoes from the church charity bin.

RUTH: Really,

she said skeptically.

Jonah stood up straighter under her critical perusal.

JONAH: Yes, ma'am,

he said firmly.

RUTH: And where did you come by my name, boy?

RACHEL: Granny Amburgey sent us,

Rachel chimed in. Jonah shot her an irritated look out of the corner of his eye, and Rachel could almost pluck the thought right out of his head. *What if she's heard Granny's dead?* Rachel smiled back unrepentantly. It wasn't a lie. Not really. And apparently it was the correct thing to say, as the woman's entire demeanor changed.

RUTH: Oh! You're three of Greta's young'uns, are you? I see.

Ruth glanced around the front of her shop — which was currently devoid of other customers — and then pulled a heavy old pocket watch from inside her coat. Glancing down at the time, she nodded. Then she hustled over to her front door, flipped the “Open” sign around to the “Closed” side, and bolted the door. Gesturing for them to follow her behind the counter, she explained,

RUTH: I always take dinner right about now anyhow. Come on back.

Jonah, Rachel and Skeeter followed the woman through a narrow door behind the counter and down a cramped, musty-smelling hallway that led into a windowless room lit by a single gas lamp, its flame turned low. Ruth reached over to turn up the flame, and then lit a second lamp, casting the room in flickering yellow light with deep pockets of shadow. The walls of the space were lined, floor to ceiling, in wooden shelves groaning under the weight of old books and dusty bottles, stones of varying colors and sizes, taxidermied critters and clean polished bones, Mason jars filled with all manner of preserved foods and... other things. It was hard to make out in the gloom, but Rachel was almost certain one of them was filled with eyes. As with the front of the

shop, bundles of herbs hung from the ceiling, though none of these were any species they recognized.

Ruth Barber took a seat behind a small, round table draped in red velvet cloth, and motioned the three of them to the bench across from her. The table held a deck of playing cards, gone soft and gray at the edges with age and use, and what appeared to be an ancient silver hand mirror, the metal nearly black with tarnish, though its glass was backed with glossy black as opposed to silver.

RUTH: So,

she said as the three of them squeezed onto the narrow bench, picking up the stack of cards and shuffling them idly, the unconscious motion of long habit.

RUTH: What brings you children to my door?

Jonah gave her the short version: Granny Amburgey had passed, and they had come into possession of her bible, which turned out to be more of a journal. While the book contained some information about the backgrounds of the many children she had taken in, the details on Jonah's origins were scant. Perusing the contents of the book, they had come across her name as someone with connections to folks throughout the mountains, and here they had come in the hope that she might have some idea who he could reach out to to learn more about his birth family. They understood that her assistance would come at a cost, and while they had no money, they did have the book.

Ruth Barber's eyes gleamed as she smiled and leaned back in her chair, deck of cards fluttering softly in her hands.

RUTH: Why, yes. I'd be more than happy to take Greta's book off your hands. As it happens, I do believe I can be of some service in this matter.

Jonah hesitated, leaning away from the table, his fingers tightening on Granny's bible.

JONAH: Uh... no, ma'am. I can't let you *have* it. You can have a look, but that's all.

Ruth Barber's keen eyes followed him, assessing, noting the grip he held on the book.

RUTH: Oh, come now. What good is it to you? I can put you in contact with your people, and I'll put money in your pocket on top of that — which, if you don't mind me saying, you three look like you could use.

RACHEL: How do we even know you can help Jonah? For all we know, you're just blowin' smoke up his ass so you can get your hands on Granny's book.

JONAH: She's right. Even I don't know who my real family is. Granny never told me. She wouldn't even write it down, and she put everything in that damn book. Why should I believe she told you?

RUTH: Because some years ago, I helped to arrange passage for one very special child from West Virginia all the way to a little farm out in the back end of nowhere in Kentucky. I wasn't supposed to know anything of the young'un's origins, but I did some digging. Asked a few discreet questions of the right people. It wasn't hard to figure out.

Jonah glanced at Rachel. She gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head, but the message was clear: stand firm.

JONAH: I still can't let you have it. I don't think Granny Amburgey would want it to go... well, to just anyone, if you don't mind me saying.

He met the woman's eyes, gazing at her for a long second, before conceding reluctantly,

JONAH: Buuuut I don't see the harm in letting you take some notes, copy down what you can in the time we have.

The look of triumph on Ruth Barber's face was enough to unnerve Jonah. She smiled broadly and stuck out her hand.

RUTH: Deal?

Swallowing his doubts, Jonah shook.

JONAH: Uh, deal.

Their bargain struck, Miz Barber left the room for several minutes, disappearing back into the storefront while she “made some calls.” She returned with good news: she had made contact with some folks who she understood to be cousins (once or twice removed) of the child she had helped deliver into Greta Amburgey’s care some years ago. They were eager to meet the young man and, if he proved to be the lost child the family sought, would only be too happy to see him into the loving arms of his birth family.

RUTH: They’ve agreed to come to my house. The shop is too public for such delicate circumstances, and the drive will take some time. If it’s agreeable to you, I’ll close up for the afternoon and drive us up to my house. You three can rest while I use the time to peruse Greta’s journal. I should be finished by the time they arrive, and you young’uns can be on your way.

Jonah shot a look at Rachel and Skeeter. Something about this idea made him uneasy. It was too simple, too easy after all the trouble they’d gone through to make it to this point. But Rachel nodded and Skeeter shrugged, so Jonah allowed that’d be all right. Miz Barber drove them out of town a ways, back up Highway 58, turning down a narrow, rutted gravel lane that led out into farm country. Eventually, she left the gravels for a dirt road that snaked up around the side of a mountain, through overhanging trees and overgrown brush.

Ruth Barber lived in a tall, narrow house made of what looked like river rocks, situated on the top of a ridge looking down over a valley dotted with small farms, and nestled into the shadowy cradle of deep, fragrant pine woods. A covered porch with a sagging roof formed an L across the front and around one side. The porch featured a long bench carved out of a log, and a swing dangling at one end. As they stepped into the cool shade of Miz Barber’s front yard, that creeping feeling wiggled up Jonah’s spine again, the sense of being watched. He looked over his shoulder, back down the mountain, but there was nothing. He peered uneasily into the woods

behind the house, searching for the gleam of eyes in the shadows, listening for the rustle of leaves under foot, some sign of whoever — or whatever — might be following them. But there was nothing. Shaking his head, he followed the shopkeeper and his friends up the porch and into the house.

Inside, Miz Barber's home reminded Rachel of nothing so much as that cramped back room at her shop — its walls were lined with shelves featuring musty old books, animal skulls, and strange figures carved from wood that were only vaguely humanoid. A curio cabinet held more dusty old bottles and bits of crockery, and jars that resembled medical specimens. Then there were the dolls. There were dolls on every shelf — faceless, eyeless old poppets made of straw and corn husks, dollies knitted out of yarn and stuffed with cotton with buttons sewn on for eyes, porcelain figures in silk dresses with painted eyes, dollbabies made to look like real babies, with rolling glass eyes that closed when you laid them down and opened when you sat them up. Wherever she turned, Rachel felt like those eyes were watching her. She didn't like it. Catching their owner watching her, she tried to be polite.

RACHEL: You sure have a lot of... interesting knickknacks.

RUTH: Yes, and many of them are valuable. Don't touch anything.

Miz Barber placed three glasses and a pitcher of lemonade on a tray, which she handed to Rachel, and suggested rather firmly that they go sit on the porch while she worked. Not entirely convinced she wouldn't lock the door behind them, Jonah insisted on remaining with the book, but he accepted a glass of lemonade. Rachel and Skeeter accepted their banishment with good grace, and stepped outside to enjoy the remainder of the sunny afternoon, settling onto the porch with a deck of cards to pass the time while they waited.

The shadow of Ruth Barber's tall, skinny house stretched long across the front yard by the time the company they were expecting appeared. A sleek black Cadillac limousine drove slowly, carefully up the narrow, rutted lane that led to the sagging farmhouse, followed by a second, less luxurious sedan of the same color. Hearing the sound of their engines, Miz Barber stood quickly, snapping Granny's book shut with her dainty, birdlike hands. Before she could pick it up, Jonah

snatched the volume from the table. Ruth's expression soured as she watched him tuck it away into his bag, and he offered her a thin smile in return.

Miz Barber's dainty hands fluttered to her hair, smoothing flyaway strands of her silver locks, and then to her coat, smoothing it down over her dress. Jonah could have sworn she seemed... nervous, almost. Then she squared her shoulders and walked out onto the porch, motioning to the three teenagers to follow her as she stepped down into the yard. The two Caddies rolled to a stop behind Miz Barber's car in the semi-circular patch of packed dirt in front of the house, idling patiently. A compact, heavily muscled man in a tailored black suit with wide lapels and subtle pinstripes stepped from the passenger seat of the lead car and walked around the driver's side to open the rear door.

The most beautiful woman Rachel had ever seen unfolded herself from the depths of the limousine's plush interior. She was remarkably tall — far taller than the man who'd handed her out of the car — and she had no need for a moment to fiddle with her hair or her clothes. Her sleek, dark waves were pinned back away from her face, falling over her shoulder, not a hair out of place. She wore a white linen suit, tailored perfectly to her statuesque form, its creases neat and perfect, not a wrinkle in sight. She looked like a movie star. Rachel felt her cheeks heat, feeling almost embarrassed standing in the presence of a woman so refined, so confident, in her secondhand dress and scuffed shoes that were about a half size too big. When she spoke, her voice was as fine and cultured as the rest of her.

POLLY: Ms. Barber. I understand you've come into possession of our missing... ward.

RUTH BARBER: I got the boy, as you can plainly see. You got my money?

A small, cold smile flitted across Polly Barrow's perfect cupid's-bow mouth.

POLLY: Mr. Crain? Give Ms. Barber her due.

The muscular man nodded and reached into the inner pocket of his neat black suit. What he retrieved from his coat was a compact black pistol. Miz Barber stumbled back with a gasp.



RUTH: What? What are you doing?

Mr. Crain pointed the firearm almost casually at the thin older woman and pulled the trigger. Ruth Barber fell bonelessly to the dirt like a puppet with its strings snipped, a neat round hole in the corner of her forehead, just above her left eyebrow.

Rachel screamed, backpedaling until she almost stumbled over the front porch steps. She pressed her hands to her mouth, stifling the whimper of fear that threatened to escape her throat.

The beautiful woman walked slowly toward Jonah, her eyes narrowing as she peered critically into his face, as if searching for something. Then she smiled broadly, nodding to the brawny man in the fine suit before returning her eyes to Jonah's face.

POLLY: Well, well. Here you are at last. After all these years. You've caused me a world of trouble, young man. I've half a mind to take it out of your hide.

JONAH: Y-you just try us, lady. And see what you get.

Recovering herself, Rachel lifted her chin defiantly and stepped forward again, standing shoulder to shoulder with Jonah on his right side. Nodding, Skeeter joined them on his left.

The pretty woman chuckled.

POLLY: Oh, delightful! You three are just precious. But I'm afraid you've quite seriously misjudged your situation.

At a gesture from her associate — who had tucked his gun away, at least — the driver's side door of the limousine opened, and a gaunt man slowly unfolded himself from within. He was almost impossibly tall, and pale, with the sort of long, skinny fingers that put Rachel in mind of the *Nosferatu* (a movie she'd snuck out to watch at the penny matinee in Harlan one Sunday, violating Granny Amburgey's strict prohibition against such films). She gave an involuntary shiver at the memory, pressing closer to her friends.

The doors of the second car opened as well, and three hard-looking men in flat caps, with denim work shirts pushed up at the elbows and stout work boots, joined the more fashionably dressed trio in the dead woman's driveway.

Polly Barrow smiled benevolently down at Jonah and his friends.

POLLY: Now you've had your fun, but it is time to come home, my dear boy.

[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. We thank you for joining us for this, the penultimate episode of Season 3 of Old Gods of Appalachia. Just one more episode left to go, and I promise y'all, you are not prepared for what's coming over the mountain either metaphorically or literally. I promise you. We also want to thank everyone who joined us and had such kind words regarding our holiday

special that dropped on New Year's Day, especially those of you of a certain age who walked the dark roads of the days of the satanic panic as a young person and understand that the horror of those times was often much worse than any monsters we can write about in stories. Thank you for taking that journey with us.

Now as we move into the literal end of Season 3 next week, we encourage you to make sure you've completed your social media ritual by heading on over to [oldgodsofappalachia.com](http://oldgodsofappalachia.com) and following us on all the relevant social media, coming onto the Discord server. It's the best way to keep up with all the exciting developments coming in the new year. There's gonna be new live shows, new patreon content, and just a whole lot of big things coming in 2023. So to make sure you're keeping up with us, so you hear about those things first, head on over to [oldgodsofappalachia.com](http://oldgodsofappalachia.com). Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram at the very least. If you are interested in that Patreon exclusive content, you can make your head on over to [patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia](http://patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia). Make your tithing of at least \$10 a month to get access to over thirty episodes of stories and special content that's just sitting there waiting for you.

This is your every-time-I-can-bang-on-a-cast-iron-skillet-and-holler-at-the-neighbors-I-will reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill. Our intro music is by our brother Landon Blood and our outro music, which is available on our bandcamp, is by Jon Charles Dwyer. Today's story was written by Cam Collins and performed by Steve Shell. The voice of Pretty Polly Barrow is Tracey Johnston-Crum, the voice of Rachel McCoy is Sarah Doreen MacPhee, and the voice of Ruth Barber was our beloved Betsy Puckett. Talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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