

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 4, Episode 57: The Land of Nod

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

The gallery packed with folks called to both the Green and the Dark had finally grown quiet in the cavernous room located somewhere beneath the mountains of Pennsylvania as Hiram Cook worked to build a case against the man known as J.T. Fields of Paradise, or most commonly known as simply Jack. Every eye was fixed on the young woman seated before the assembly, every ear trained to catch her words.

HIRAM: And how did you meet the proprietor of Erebus Cain's Travelling Marvels, Miss Benton?

Jade Louise Benton had been called to give evidence after her pack- and fellow bandmate, Clover Meaders, had proven a less than ideal witness. Clover was curt — at times even borderline disrespectful — to the man who had been appointed to represent the Green. Cook's method of questioning made it plain that he considered Clover and the other members of the Bone Pickin' String Band merely hapless victims of the sickly, shabby-looking man seated at the table opposite his own, and Clover was having none of it. To Clover, there was nothing finer than shedding her tender human flesh in favor of fang and claw and her heavy, protective pelt and racing through the night with her friends under the benevolent gaze of the moon. If Anthony hadn't been stuck in half-form, they wouldn't even be here, and it was downright insulting for the little witch man to imply otherwise. When Hiram had pressed on the point of "how much better her life would have been, had she not been born with this curse," Clover's lip had twisted into an expression that could only be called a snarl, the light in her eyes suggesting she'd like to demonstrate the effects of her "awful moon-borne affliction" for him up close and personal.

Hiram Cook was perhaps not the wisest of men, but he was not a complete fool, and thus he had chosen to dismiss Clover and invite Jade to the stand, in the hope that her responses might be more... malleable. The Meaders girl had frankly unsettled him, her dark eyes too hungry for his liking and her overall demeanor more self-assured than he thought at all proper in a young

woman. Jade Louise Benton was another matter. A good girl from a good family — her mother's youthful misadventures notwithstanding — she was dressed appropriately for the occasion in a modest blue dress that matched her eyes, her soft, shoulder-length brown curls pinned neatly back beneath a gray felt hat. Unlike Clover, her mama was not present. In fact, neither Jade nor Anthony's parents could be located, and the cousins had made it clear that they would participate in these proceedings only upon the condition that their families be left out of the matter.

JADE: I searched for Anthony for what seemed like forever. I couldn't believe how much ground he'd managed to cover in such a short time. Once I found him, I wasn't gonna leave his side 'til he was prepared to come home with me. But he wasn't ready. He can be plum mulish sometimes. Gets that from his papaw, or so Mama says.

Jade shot a look of affectionate irritation at the young man who stood by Clover. He blushed and dipped his head a little. Despite the embarrassment reddening his face, he looked pale and exhausted. The effort of shifting in and out of his half-wolf form seemed to have taken a greater toll on him than the girls' transitions.

JADE: So I stayed there with him,

Jade continued.

JADE: Thank y'all, by the way, for helping him change back, at least while we're here. It's so good to see his face again. We were hoping y'all can help him figure out how to—

HIRAM: Yes, yes, we'll get to that in good time, Miss Benton. Pending the outcome of this trial, of course. Again, how did you come to be in the employ of Mr. Cain?

Sitting at his assigned table next to his own counsel, D.L. Walker, Jack noticed how the girl's brow furrowed at the representative of the Green's words. Interesting. It would seem old Hiram had made promises to secure these young'uns' testimony. Jack peeked over his shoulder at the other two members of the string band, who stood quietly near the front of the gallery in case there were further questions for them. The pair exchanged a concerned look, and the girl who'd

already testified scowled at Cook. Clearly they'd noticed that "pending the outcome of this trial" bit too, and it didn't sit well. Interesting. Very interesting indeed. Jack turned back to the front of the room as Jade Benton continued her story.

JADE: Anyway, as I was saying, when I finally found Anthony, he was digging food out of the garbage cans and such. I knew I had to bring him home, but well... he was too ashamed to come. I couldn't leave him there on his own, so I figured I'd just be patient. I sent him out to scrounge up more useful things — clean clothes somebody forgot to bring in off the line, a pan to cook in, and the like — while I hunted us some fresh meat. It was rough living, but I knew sooner or later, he'd get tired of it and come on home with me. But then the third day after I found him, Anthony was out looking for supplies and I was getting ready to go down to the little creek and wash up, when Mr. Cain came out of the woods. He was making a fuss, saying we were trespassing on his land. Of course it wasn't his land — I found that out soon enough — but then he started telling me how he wasn't angry with us, just come to offer his help. Said he'd get us off the road and take us somewhere we could get three hots and a cot. I tried to be polite, told him no thank you, we didn't need his help, but my cousin and I would pack up and get off his land just as soon as Anthony got back. Cain just laughed and told me he'd already met my cousin. Then the biggest man I've ever seen in my life stepped out of the trees with Anthony slung over his shoulder like a sack of taters. If I'd been wolf at the time, I'd have gone after 'em both. But well... you saw us change, Mr. Cook. It takes a minute, and I was afraid of what they'd do to Anthony. I didn't have no choice but to go along with them. It was one of the worst days of my life. But it was also the day we met Clover, so as it turns out, it was also one of the best.

["The Land Unknown (The Bloody Roots Verses)" by Landon Blood]

*These old roots run
into a ground so bloody
Full of broken dreams and dusty bones
They feed a tree so dark and hungry
where its branches split and new blood flows
And the ghosts of a past you thought long-buried
rise to haunt the young
The shadow falls as judgment comes
Tread soft, my friend, amongst your fellows
Make your bond your word*

Lest you get what you deserve

CAIN: Here we are, my young friends. Welcome to our humble abode, the base of operations if you will of our grand enterprise. It might be a bit of a mess at the moment. It's been a while since we've hosted guests in this particular part of the facility, but I imagine it will be warmer and drier than camping out in the woods, especially with this rain coming in.

Thunder rolled overhead as Anthony and Jade stared up at the rundown warehouse situated at the end of a long service road on the outskirts of a town whose name Jade did not know. Anthony's wrists and ankles had been shackled, a dog's muzzle fit poorly over his pitiful snout. Ordinarily, such measures should not have been sufficient to hold one of their kind, but these chains, Cain had informed them with a sort of nasty pride, were made special, the iron blended with a touch of silver that rendered them particularly effective for restraining certain types of folks. When Jade had demanded his release, Erebus assured her that they were only a temporary precaution and would be removed once they arrived at their destination.

The destination in question was two stories of decrepit cinder block and weather-worn sheet metal surrounded on all sides by an overgrown gravel lot, a rusty chain link fence topped with barbed wire carving out its borders. Their means of entry was a rolling door of the sort commonly found on auto repair bays and loading docks. Cain unfastened a set of heavy padlocks at its base, and his imposing companion worked the chain that slowly raised the rusty portcullis, revealing the shadowy interior within.

JADE: What is this place? I thought you were taking us to a shelter or something. Three hots and a cot and all that.

CAIN: *[laughs dryly]*: You think we could waltz you and your cousin into the local soup kitchen with him looking like that? Come now, young lady. As for this place? This is where those whom society cannot accept are accepted. This is where outcasts are embraced, and refuge can be found, no matter who—

Cain looked Anthony up and down with a look that spoke both of disgust and fascination.

CAIN: —or *what* you are.

Erebus Cain cleared his throat and recited in a grand yet solemn voice.

CAIN: “And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.” Genesis chapter four, verse sixteen. Story of my life. Goliath, bring them.

The hulking man who had carried Anthony from the woods loomed up behind the cousins, stinking of sour sweat and burnt onions, and the pair hastened to follow Cain through the rolling door. A moment later, it rattled shut behind them with a clang, leaving them in a darkness that challenged even their excellent night vision. They could see Cain’s shadow moving about a wide space littered with various objects draped in sheets and hear his footsteps shuffling about. After a moment, there was the sharp snap of some lever being pulled, followed by a distinct buzzing as hanging bulbs flickered to life overhead, bathing the cluttered warehouse in a greasy yellow light.

Rows upon rows of shelves lined the walls, and brightly painted road cases cluttered the floor. Leering clowns and snarling tigers were painted on the sides of some of these, while others featured images that appeared to be the work of a deeply disturbed mind. A tall black box featured a lanky, gaunt man, his mouth stretched wide to display a terrifying forest of needle-sharp fangs. “The Vampire of Haw Creek” arched over his head in garish red letters fashioned to look as though they dripped blood. The next box featured a painting of what had to be the giant who had ushered them into this place, except instead of voluminous overalls and a flannel shirt, the figure was clad in bronze colored armor and brandished a wicked-looking spear. “The Goliath: Colossus of the Cumberland” read the stylized legend beneath his portrait, each letter appearing as though it were carved from ancient stone.

CAIN: You can sleep here until we have more suitable quarters prepared for you, then tomorrow, we get to work on your part of the show.

JADE: Show? What sort of show?

CAIN: Why, the greatest show on earth, of course! Don't be coy, now. I saw what you can do down by the creek. Between you two and your new roommate, we'll have one of the more unique exhibitions traveling the southeast circuit. It's been a while since anyone rolled out a dog-faced boy. I don't think anybody's ever had genuine werewolves. If we do this right, we're gonna make a lot of money.

JADE: What roommate?

CAIN: Oh, you'll meet her soon enough. I think she's made herself a little den in the back there where we store the costumes. Feel free to poke around, by the way, see if anything grabs you. Always open to input from the talent.

Cain made his way back to the warehouse door, careful never to turn his back on them, Jade noticed. He banged a fist on the door, which began to roll up, its chain rattling. The man apparently known as the Goliath stooped to peer in at them, and Erebus Cain stepped quickly to join him on the other side. The lights overhead flickered.

CAIN: She's a real charmer. I'm sure y'all will get along famously.

Remembering her cousin's predicament, Jade called after him.

JADE: Wait! What about Anthony? You said you'd turn him loose once we got here!

CAIN: Oh, well... it seems I've forgotten the key. I'm afraid it'll have to wait til morning. Nighty-night, kids!

As if on cue, something skittered through the shadows behind them. Jade and Anthony turned to look, and the warehouse's bay door thundered shut. They heard the clank of the heavy padlocks being refastened on the other sound, and then the footsteps of Erebus Cain and his giant friend faded into the night.

From the darkness where they'd heard movement before, a voice called out to them.

CLOVER: He was never gonna set you free, kid. That man's never uttered a true word in his life.

Soft footsteps crunched over the grit and debris littering the floor, and a moment later, a tall, dark-haired girl stepped from the shadows. She wore a pair of dusty coveralls at least two sizes too big for her narrow frame and sturdy black boots that had clearly seen a lot of miles.

JADE: I guess you must be the "roommate" Mr. Cain mentioned.

The young woman nodded.

CLOVER: My name's Clover. Clover Meaders.

Clover nodded at the shackles binding Anthony's wrists.

CLOVER: I can help you out with that, if you want.

JADE: You find a key somewhere in... all this?

Jade gestured at the clutter surrounding them on all sides, a veritable treasure trove for a determined enough antique hunter perhaps... or just as likely nothing more than heaps upon heaps of junk.

The dark-haired young woman grinned.

CLOVER: Ain't got no key, but I never let a little bitty thing like an old lock stand in my way. C'mon. Follow me.

Clover turned on her heel and strode purposefully back toward the shadows. As Anthony began to shuffle after her, chains clanking, she paused and turned back to them.

CLOVER: On second thought, y'all wait right here. This'll all be easier once I get you out of those.

Jade nodded, and looked up at her younger cousin, giving his back a reassuring pat.

Clover disappeared into the darkness at the back of the warehouse. They could hear her rattling around in the far recesses of the building for a few minutes, but before long, she returned, carrying a few assorted tools and bits of random metal in one hand.

CLOVER: These ain't proper lockpicks, but they should do well enough. Hold still, now.

Clover knelt on the dusty floor beside Anthony, and got to work on the cuffs that bound his wrists, prodding around in the lock mechanism with what looked like a screwdriver that had been sharpened on one end, and what was quite plainly a rusty nail file. Occasionally she would cuss and try another tool from the small pile at her lap. Jade couldn't easily make out what she was doing in the gloom, but before long, she heard a sharp click, and the shackles fell to the floor at their feet. Anthony rolled his wrists and rubbed at his skin, which Jade noticed was a little red under the thick hair on his arms. Having defeated the first set of restraints, the pair securing the wolf-boy's ankles took Clover no time at all, and within minutes, Anthony was free. He paced around them in a circle, stretching. Clover kicked the hateful shackles into a corner with a scowl, rubbing her hands against the legs of her coveralls.

CLOVER: Goddamn silver. You ok, kid? Those things didn't cut you, did they?

Anthony took a moment to examine his wrists and ankles carefully. While his wrists were flushed and itchy, his pant legs seemed to have protected his ankles. He looked back at Clover and slowly, distinctly, shook his head, then grinned and gave her a thumbs-up.

Understanding, Clover nodded and returned the gesture.

CLOVER: That's good. Y'all know about silver, right?

Glancing at Anthony, Jade shook her head.

JADE: Mr. Cain mentioned the shackles being made with silver, said something about that making them more effective for "certain types of people."

Clover snorted.

CLOVER: Oh I'm sure he did. That sonofabitch loves to gloat. See, silver is dangerous to folks like us. It's like an allergy of sorts.

Moving closer to the cousins, Clover held up her hands for inspection, and Jade saw they were bright red, the fingertips blistered.

CLOVER: This is what it can do to bare skin. As you saw, it makes us weaker, which is why your friend there couldn't break those chains. And you don't ever wanna let it cut you — you can get blood poisoning, and that's a nasty business. If it don't kill you, it'll make you wish it did.

Jade shuddered, and squeezed her cousin's hand.

JADE: How do you know—

CLOVER: What y'all are? From the looks of him, it don't take no genius to figure it out.

Clover gestured at Anthony's face, then tapped her nose.

CLOVER: And anyway, I can tell. Can't you?

The warehouse was full of dust and mold and the distinct odor of rat shit, and Jade had been too distracted by their predicament to focus properly on what her senses could tell her about the place. When she was in her human shape, her nose wasn't nearly as keen as her wolf's, but it was a far sight better than average. Now, as she closed her eyes and focused, she caught it: the unmistakable scent of another lupine presence. Not her... not Anthony... Jade's eyes turned with wonder to Clover's face.

JADE: You're like us!

Clover smiled slyly and said,

CLOVER: Woof.

The three spent the next hour getting to know each other over a meager supper that Clover scratched together out of canned beans and taters she'd found on the shelves nearest the warehouse door. Erebus had picked up Clover a couple weeks back, she told them. She'd been hitching a ride out of Louisville when the sideshow's caravan happened by her on the road. Clover rode along with them for a couple of days, making her way south, when to her great misfortune, Erebus Cain chanced upon her returning from the night's hunt the morning after the full moon. He'd clapped her in what were likely the same shackles he'd used on Anthony and locked her up in the warehouse where they now found themselves.

JADE: Have you tried to escape? The way you went at those locks—

CLOVER: Sure. Of course I *tried*. But I didn't get very far. He's got people watching, always. That big feller who brought y'all here — that's the Goliath — but he ain't the only one. There's guards with guns, and... then there's the Eater.

Clover gave a shudder as the word left her lips, but when Jade pressed for more details, she simply shook her head.

CLOVER: You don't want to know,

she said, and would speak no further on the matter. Instead she turned the conversation back to the two of them, and Jade recounted how they had fallen afoul of Erebus Cain. She explained how they were related, the children of two sisters who had become wolves, and how their mamas had revealed their family history when Jade began to near her first change, a story that began in a small community in East Tennessee known as the Clutch. When she finished her account, Jade noticed Clover's eyes were alight.

JADE: What is it?

Clover shook her head and grinned.

CLOVER: Y'all may not believe this, and it's a hell of a coincidence, but... when your mamas told you about their time in the Clutch, did they ever mention a woman named Bettie Jo?

Slowly, the three of them had put the pieces together, comparing nuggets of shared family lore over their meal as they came to the realization that the three of them were not only all wolves, but that their gift sprang from the same source — an old tin of wolf grease that a woman named Naisme Jiminez had shared with her younger friends long ago. As they finished their supper, Jade wondered aloud where Clover had come across the rusty old camp stove she'd used to heat up the tinned food. Clover explained that she'd scavenged the old camp stove out of a pile of various busted old gear the first night she was there. That was how she'd found the tools — she'd needed them to repair it, and held onto them figuring they might prove useful.

CLOVER: There's all kinds of stuff in here. Most of it's like... circus stuff, you know? The kind of thing they must use in the sideshow. A lot of it's junk, but I can show you if you want to look around.

Having nothing better to do, Jade and Anthony followed her lead. They wandered the aisles of Erebus Cain's warehouse late into the night, rummaging through bins of old costumes and wigs, occasionally chuckling at the curiosities they found there: items such as oversized tuxedos and ridiculously long shoes overflowed from bins that looked as though they hadn't seen a proper cleaning in far too long. Jade held up both ends of a horse costume built for two, front and rear sections dyed an alarming shade of orange with purple yarn making up the mane and tail, to her younger cousin's cackling delight. Anthony made a fetching clown in an elegant lace ruff paired with a sunshine-yellow wig. He loped down one aisle and back, his face lit with a goofy, wolfish grin. Anthony had always known how to make Jade laugh, and even here, imprisoned in some old carnies' warehouse, he managed to lighten her mood.

Clover had smiled at his antics, but she remained a hard nut to crack. Reaching the end of the costume storage, they had begun to explore the racks of props. Blunted swords and a set of strongman dumbbells hung from heavy metal hooks and pegs along one wall, while another was festooned with wooden hoops and coils of rope. Jade and Anthony looked about in wonder at what seemed like a whole circus deconstructed into its constituent parts. Meanwhile, Clover

drifted over to a packing crate with FRAGILE: MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS stamped on its side in bright red ink. Jade glanced over as she lifted the lid to peer inside, and saw Clover go stock still, her eyes widening.

JADE: Clover? You all right? What's in there? Old Mr. Cain starting a marching band for the bearded ladies?

Clover shook her head, reaching into the wooden chest with shaking hands and beginning to paw through its contents. Wandering over to join her, Jade noticed a delivery address stamped on the lid of the crate. She might not know precisely where she was at present, but it was a long way from Goodson's Music Shop in Paradise, Virginia. It seemed Mr. Cain had been stealing more than just wolves from the woods.

Clover's taciturn expression suddenly split into a grin as she peered into the crate.

CLOVER: Well, would you lookee here!

She hooted triumphantly as she reached inside and withdrew a fine black leather banjo case.

Anthony's eyes lit up, and he hurried to her side, peering into the shadowy confines of the packing crate. A moment later, he held aloft a similarly glossy leather valise in the unmistakable shape of a guitar.

JADE: I don't suppose there's a fiddle in there?

Jade ventured hesitantly, and Clover looked up in surprise.

CLOVER: You play?

Jade blushed, nodding.

JADE: A little bit. Our mamas taught us. Anthony and I grew up playing pretty much anything with strings, but I'm partial to the fiddle.

Clover set the banjo case aside for a moment, leaning back into the crate. She fished around a moment, and sure enough, pulled a fiddle case from the depths of the packing materials, which she passed over to Jade. The younger woman beamed as she felt the familiar weight in her hands. Clutching their new treasures, the three of them absconded back to the corner of the warehouse Clover had done her best to make habitable to inspect the instruments Mr. Cain had stolen from the merchants of Paradise.

The fiddle and guitar were well made and serviceable, but nothing remarkable. They were clearly well loved, and had been kept in good condition, but were equally clearly not new. Jade knew what it meant to truly love an instrument, to feel it as an extension of oneself when lost in the music. She knew she would love the fiddle as well as its original owner. The banjo turned out to be another matter entirely. When Clover lifted the lid of its case, she gasped. Peering over her shoulder, Jade took in the leaves and bows on the mother-of-pearl inlay, the top of the line tailpiece, and most importantly the name etched across the top of the headstock: Gibson.

CLOVER: I think this is an RB-1? I saw one in a music store in Lexington once. High dollar.

Anthony nodded, smiling. His mama owned a banjo very much like this one, which had once belonged to their grandfather, a gift from its makers. It was a valuable instrument indeed. Before anybody could say another word, he reached out to Clover, his multi-jointed, bestial hand clearly requesting the banjo. Clover glanced at Jade, who shrugged, and the exquisite instrument was handed over to the wolfboy. Clover felt a bit nervous as his claws neared its polished surface, but Anthony handled the RB-1 with meticulous care as he began tuning the strings. The expression of intense focus and intimate affection for the simple task spoke to his obvious experience, and after a moment, Jade and Clover turned their hands to the task of doing the same for the fiddle and guitar.

Once he was situated, Anthony took a deep breath and let his strange new fingers rest upon the strings as he began to coax forth a tune. Clover nodded along with the piece, one she seemed to know, and then began following his lead on guitar. Jade grinned and tucked the fiddle beneath her chin, and as easy as breathing, they became a band.

In the more comfortably appointed rooms located above the warehouse, Erebus Cain paused in his reading of the local paper as something unexpected reached his ears. At first, he couldn't quite place it, and considered sending the Goliath down just to see what his three new charges were up to. Then the strains of music began to come together, and a grin spilled like an oil slick across Erebus' stubbly face as he heard the Bone Pickin' String Band play for the first time in the dark and dusty space beneath his feet.

CAIN: Well, well, well. Looks like we've found ourselves a new headliner.

["Atonement" by Jon Charles Dwyer]

Well, hey there, family. Thank you for joining us once again as we wind through the lives of brand new characters in brand new places in brand new new situations, all that tie back to that old snake we all know and love, Mr. J.T. Fields of Paradise. We're about to put a bow on the tale of the Bone Pickin' String Band and to ope on to other folks affected and afflicted by our man Jack. We hope you'll join us as we do so. Won't you come? I think you will.

We encourage each and every one of you to venture on over to oldgodsofappalachia.com and complete your social media ritual by following us at the altar of your choosing, and if you wish to cast said offering into the collection plate, you can do so over at patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia, where you can enjoy hours and hours and hours and hours and hours — time is a lie — and hours of exclusive Patreon storylines and extras all for a reasonable sum.

This is your every time you see your people, you'd better hug their neck and tell them you love them 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. Our intro music is by Brother Landon Blood, our outro music, "Atonement," is by Brother Jon Charles Dwy. The music of the Bone Pickin' String Band is performed and provided by Laurel Hells Ramblers. The voice of Erebus Cain is Darren Marshall. We'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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