

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 3, Episode 44: A Brace of Kinsmen

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

Wildcat, Virginia

1935

The changing of the seasons in Appalachia is a curious and temperamental time that cares not for the comfort of mortal men. On occasion, autumn will subtly slip into the mountains of southwestern Virginia, maybe do a slow dance with summer as the warmer nights are nudged out the door against a tapestry of turning leaves and cooler mornings. Other times, she swoops through the door on a cloud of rain and cold that seeps into your bones and rattles your lungs with every breath. In these mountains, seasons do not apologize. In the fall of 1935, autumn came colder than a sockful of silver dollars and left summer picking up its proverbial teeth in the parking lot.

Morning chores brought Milton Kinsman the closest he ever felt to God, or any other benevolent being of creation for that matter. Watching the sunrise pour itself like honey over the small farmstead that he and his beloved Audry tended in their old age was the nearest thing to holiness he'd ever known in his many years walking this world. He'd seen hard times and dark times and worse times. He'd had money, had women, had... well he wouldn't call it fame, but something like it. These days he found stepping down the path from the house to sling feed to the chickens was a ritual that brought him more joy than any bottle of spirits, any roll of bills, or any girl in any bar between central Pennsylvania and southwestern Virginia. Even on the coldest mornings, his breath huffing out like steam from a dragon's snout before him, Milton was steeped in gratitude. The work made him feel alive and appreciated. Aching joints and a thumb that didn't really work right no more seemed a small price to pay for the piece of land he shared with the love of his life.

Milton was Audry Webb's second husband. Her first had been a good for nothing lout who skipped out on her and turned up dead in the river two towns over, leaving Audrey with two baby girls still in diapers to raise. She'd worked hard to provide for her girls in the years

following Charlie Webb's death. She took in sewing and laundry, cleaned other people's houses, and babysat other people's young'uns when there was need for such a thing. She made do on her own til her girls were eight and ten, keeping up the property and the old house as best she could, and then the latch on the front gate broke. She asked another widow lady, Sarah Coffin on the other side of the holler, if she could recommend somebody to repair it. If anyone knew someone who could fix her gate and not rob her blind, it would be Sarah.

Miz Coffin had lost her husband David the year they'd moved to Grant County. She could have moved back up north, easy as you please, but she not only tended and kept up her own little homestead, she sold the timber off the back of it and ended up one of the richest women in Grant County. The old bird was well thought of and connected to some of the best craftsmen and contractors on this side of the mountain.

Milton Kinsman was neither a craftsman nor a contractor, but he was a hard worker and honest, so Miz Coffin had introduced them. Milton — new to the area and desperate to make a good impression — not only fixed Audry's gate, he patched up her fence and weeded her garden at no extra charge. She called on him again to fix the loose boards on her porch, and he painted those boards shortly thereafter. Every time Audry needed something done around her place, be it the grass cut or a window unstuck, Milton was there to help. Sometimes he'd take his payment in cash, but in leaner times, he was more than amenable to the currency of soup beans and cornbread. After a while, Audry's girls, Caroline and Miranda, took to calling him Uncle Milty, and it delighted him. It had been so long since he'd been any sort of kin to anybody.

Audry and the girls shone a bright light on the dreary solitude that had been Milton's life in recent years. Audry saw the love in her girls' eyes when they looked at their Uncle Milty. They'd never had a daddy, and hell she'd never had a husband, really — not one worth anything. She realized that she too had grown quite fond of the kind man with the big blue eyes. He was soft spoken and gentle and hell, he wasn't hard to look at, and she was pretty sure he'd do anything for them. It didn't make sense for him to keep coming and going from their place, since he was always there doing one odd job or another anyhow. So four years to the day that he fixed her front gate, Audry welcomed Milton Kinsman into her home as her common law husband and stepdaddy to her girls. Audry didn't ever plan on getting married ever again, so they didn't. She'd seen what the first one got her, and she'd kept Charlie Webb's last name as a reminder. That had

been twenty five years ago. Now Audry's grandchildren called him "Papaw," and they shared this place and had built a happy little life together. He was Audry's second chance at love, and she was his second chance at... well, pretty much everything.

The chickens fed, the cow milked, and the other animals tended to, Milton came back into the house, dropping his work boots on the porch, and went to stoke up the fire in the pot-bellied stove in the back of the kitchen. He made himself a cup of coffee and moved through the cozy little house, the happy memories of his second life surrounding him. Here was the doorframe where first Audry, and then later the two of them, had marked the girls' heights as they grew, the opposing side now bearing the newer marks of the grandchildren. The small living room where Christmas mornings and birthdays had unfolded — in whatever degree of modesty or affluence the times had afforded them — was just beyond the kitchen. Milton smiled as he remembered Audry serving up birthday cakes and Christmas hams and all manner of things that woman managed to wrangle out of their tiny kitchen.

Today, the house was quiet, which was unusual. Even on a morning like this, cold and gray as it was, Audry would usually be up bustling about, tending to her own chores, and singing while she did them. There were songs her mother taught her, things she learned at church — if it had a melody, Audry Webb probably knew at least some of it. The absence of the familiar voice of his heart's one true love made his bones ache. Audry had just gone to visit her girls and celebrate her granddaughter Tammy's birthday, an annual tradition for the couple. For one week each October, Milton and Audry would take a little holiday. Either Milton would pack up to go hunting on the far side of the mountain with some old army buddies, or Audry would visit with her daughters. Over the years, Milton's beloved had come to understand that it was important for Milton to connect with other men who knew the horrors of war and to have time away from the farm for a few days. She herself had come to treasure her trips up to Issac County on the West Virginia line, when she would reconnect with her girls and spend quality time with the grandbabies. She wished Milton would come with her, but she knew he would see the kids come summer, when their parents would ship them off to Mamaw and Papaw for a month of fishing and swimming and sleeping out under the stars.

Milton had been taking his hunting trips for a good while before little Tammy was born. He was thankful the child had come in October, as it meant at least some years he wouldn't have to

spend that week outside in the cold. Alone. No matter how sweet these golden years were for Milton, that one week carried him back in the direction of the life he'd left behind. Truth was, there were no old war buddies. He had never fought in a war, nor served in the army at all. But for one week every October, he absolutely could not be around other people, especially not the ones he loved.

["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 community of Wildcat lay nestled deep in the highlands of a southwestern Virginia county where the coal industry had declined into "strictly domestic production" around the time the stock market crashed. The mountains of Grant County had once been a veritable garden of Eden before big coal and timber rolled through in the early part of the century, all bladed maws and hungry shovels. Barrow & Locke and a handful of other outfits had bought up every piece of land they could and roared through the sparsely populated green of the commonwealth's westernmost county like a plague of bitter locusts. It was still a beautiful place — rolling hills where the stubble of pine struggled to regrow itself into proper groves, lush fields still more than fertile enough for planting — but the industries had changed the land in fundamental ways that would not become apparent for generations.

Milton had seen communities decimated by the coal and timber companies in the past — had seen how towns could pop up overnight, boom with prosperity, and then wilt back into the ground like weeds just as quickly. By the time he'd settled in Wildcat, a middle aged man with no prospects but a variety of useful skills, its boom had already come and went. The trees would take the better part of a century to recover. The biggest coal deposits had already been scraped clean, and all that was mined now was enough to provide for the region. There wasn't much more you could take from a place like Wildcat. It wasn't the sort of community where you came looking for anything or anyone, and that suited Milton Kinsman just fine. These days, the life he had led before he met his Audry felt like it belonged to someone else.

He had started out a good man, as pure a soul as ever was born on this earth. Then through a long, bloody chain of events, Milton Stapleton — for he'd worn a different name then — had become a hard man. A cold man. A cruel man. He had done horrible things to people — some who deserved it, some who didn't. Even more horrible things had been done to him — some he asked for, most he didn't. He was pretty sure he had deserved all of them. His body was a constellation of scars. The first night he and Audry had lain together, she had run her fingers the mangled landscape of his chest, tracing the ghosts of old stitches. She had tried not to stare at the wreckage of his left leg, but he caught her anyway.

“Is that what the mortar round did to you, or was this the land mine?” she asked timidly, stroking the massive scar that wrapped around his thigh and dragged a finger's width of marred tissue around his kneecap.

He had told her a little about his time in the trenches, mainly just to explain the slight limp he walked with and why he wasn't gonna be so pretty once his clothes were off.

“Neither. I got this when I was a — you know what, never mind. I can think of nicer things to talk about than that,” he'd grinned as he buried his face in her neck, whispering things that made Audry giggle and blush and pull his battered and leathery body to the softness of her own and hold him there through the night.

Milton always felt like a shitheel for lying to her about his scars — hell, for lying to her about everything. He'd gotten them in situations as brutal as the trenches of the western front, but he

was not the kind of soldier she thought him to be. Audry would not have loved the man that he had been before he came to Wildcat. She would have feared him just as much as everyone else. Milton Kinsman was a good man, a member of the church, a Papaw, somebody folks had come to accept and trust. Milton Stapleton had been a monster, a living nightmare who undoubtedly still haunted the dreams of those who had managed to crawl, still breathing, from the destruction he left in his wake.

He had lived a life dominated by rage. He had run liquor and stolen cars and busted heads where he'd been told to. He'd gone into places no man would believe existed and done things there that he doubted even the good lord could forgive. He had been truly and soundly feared by every man or woman who had known him. He'd given himself to the dark impulses that lurk in the hearts of men who have been betrayed and who have literally nothing left to lose. He had looked at his life, all salted fields and scorched earth, and reveled in it. He had howled beneath a blood moon and torn men limb from limb in the hate-fueled haze that overtook him when the well inside him couldn't hold the grief and the rage anymore. He had taken that power and let it be used to the advantage of men even more wicked than himself, men willing to pay to keep him in their pockets until they needed to unleash hell upon their enemies. For years he had been pledged to their service. Then one night about thirty years ago, a job went south, and Milton Stapleton died. Milton Kinsman had taken his place.

Milton went about his day, tending to the things that needed tending. By design, their little farm only needed a few hours' upkeep a day. He brought in the eggs, finished up a small repair on the back wall of the shed out back where a board was beginning to split, and then sat on the porch in the waning afternoon to read from the local newspaper until he lost the light.

As the sun set and the moon rose high and not quite full overhead, the man once known as Milton Stapleton went back into the house and sat himself down cross legged in the middle of the small living room. He knew it would begin soon. He could feel the air becoming charged, like that moment before the first thundercrack of a proper gullywasher. He stilled his mind and took deep, calming breaths. He concentrated on the feeling of warm air filling his lungs, where he held it for just a moment, then released it through his mouth. Another deep breath in through his nose, and he brought Audry's face to mind. A smile rose unbidden to his lips. His beloved, his sun, his moon and his stars and his—

A pain shot through his abdomen and up through his breastbone like he'd been kicked by a small horse. It came again, and again. Milton grunted and tensed with each impact, and eventually the sensation passed as he took another series of long, slow breaths. This time he focused on Audry's face and her voice. How it felt when she sang in the kitchen making supper. The smells of cornbread in the oven and Audry's beautiful voice drifting along with it. Food for the belly and the soul. The pain threatened to come again, so he pressed his memory on, focusing on how she hummed to him when she held him on the nights when the nightmares came, making himself remember the feel of her breathing as she tried to take his fear away. His sweet, sweet girl. How he—

Milton's body tensed as a searing pain lashed across his back like the kiss of a bullwhip studded with broken glass. His breath froze. He expected to feel blood rise from the scars that wove across his back like a tapestry, the scars he'd told Audry came from a mortar attack that killed his non-existent war buddies in the war he never fought in. No blood came, and the pain ebbed a little but still lingered like a new burn. Milton resumed his slow breathing once again. He leaned hard into the memory of holding his granddaughter for the first time, and the first time his grandson called him Papaw. He clung to the joys of being an old man rich in family and love, and his heart swelled and overflowed, and the pain in his back faded completely.

Milton stood up and stretched. The first night of the week was always like this. Make a man hurt enough and he'll do anything to make it stop. Tonight was just a taste of what was to come. There would be more bursts of misery tomorrow night and probably the next, but nothing he couldn't handle. Last year he spent Tuesday night convinced they'd broken both his legs, but come Wednesday morning he was up and feeding the chickens. The physical pain never bothered him. As the week moved on though, things would change. When they came for his mind, that's where things got murky. By Thursday, he'd be shaken to his core, and he never remembered the Fridays and Saturdays.

He would eventually break and the darkness would come, but it came every year, and every year he made it to the other side. There was nobody around him he could hurt, and he'd made it through before. This year would be no different. He was about to relax and pour himself a cup of

coffee from the pot on the stove when a sound came from outside — the crunch of tires turning slowly over gravel maybe? No, surely not—

In the yard, a car door thunked shut. It wasn't quite a slam, but there was no mistaking the sound. Without thinking, Milton crossed the room and threw the front door open. He found himself face to face with a thick man wearing a black overcoat and a finely tailored, matching black suit standing on the front porch, his fist poised to knock on the door. The man's face was flushed and a fine sheen of sweat stood out on his upper lip.

“Oh!” the man said, clearly startled. Milton jumped back as though he beheld a ghost.

“Forgive me for disturbing you, my friend, but my name is Henricus Cronin. I work for Barrow Mineral Resources, and I'm afraid I need your help.”

[I Cannot Escape the Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

*There is a curse upon my every waking breath,
And I cannot escape the darkness...*

Well, hey there, family. And welcome to the tail end of Act III of Season 3 of Old Gods of Appalachia. And welcome to the far end of southwestern Virginia — as far west as you can go without having any more west to do — where you're gonna spend some time with Mr. Milton Kinsman and the shadows of his past and the light of his present. We appreciate y'all staying with us as we wrap up the first two-thirds of Season 3.

Super excited as, at the time of this recording, we are making the final preparations for our live shows here in October of 2022. Both the Asheville shows, the show in Wise County, Virginia, and the show at Radford University in Radford, Virginia, are all sold out. Every last seat is gone. You might be able to find something if you're looking on the Discord server or around the Fellowship Hall on Facebook — there's been some people who can't make it — but as far as the box office is concerned, this is sold out across the board.

Special shout out to all our supporters over on Patreon. The first Asheville show we put on sale sold all but twenty of its seats as part of a Patreon presale, which is one of many perks you can obtain by supporting us on Patreon. You can head on over to patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia and pledge at the Not Blood Kin But Almost level to get access to over thirty episodes of exclusive stories and special programming. And also, if you don't mind, go complete your social media ritual by following us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as gaining access to the Discord server, over there at oldgodsofappalachia.com.

This is your every stinking time reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill, with special audio equipment consideration by Lauten Audio. Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell. The theme song is by our brother Landon Blood, and our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. The singing voice of Audry Webb was Keena Graham. Talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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