

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 4, Episode 64: Last Stand at Copper Ridge

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 living are not meant to travel the ways of the dead, and thus the road June Gilbert traversed with her husband, her father, and their strange benefactor did not make for a pleasant journey. The ancient cart creaked and rattled its way down a deeply rutted path that wound into the gathering gloom ahead of them. It was the strangest sensation to June. She could see Mr. Fields, her daddy and her husband. She could see the wood frame of the cart around them and the scratchy old blanket that lined it for her comfort, but she could not see five feet beyond their means of conveyance as they trundled along. The man they called Jack hummed what sounded like an old funeral hymn under his breath as he drove the cart, his eyes set straight ahead, as if the mules' heads were the sights of some precision rifle and he was taking careful aim at whatever lay ahead.

“Mr. Fields?” she called from the back of the cart.

“You can call me Jack, sweetheart. Everything alright back there? You need something?”

She leaned forward as best she could, bracing her weight on her elbows. “Where are we? Who were those boys? If you'll pardon my French, just what the hell is going on?”

Jack chuckled. “Your French is impeccable, Miz June. Our friends back there — none of whom have been young for a very long time — were once just like you. Living people, I mean. Children who died in mine explosions or other disasters, mainly due to negligence, mismanagement and neglect. Those poor souls or... well, whatever they are. They're not really ghosts, not exactly. They're packing a lot more heat than your typical farmhouse door-slammer, though where that power comes from, I can't say for certain. Anyway, those boys are just filled to the brim with rage, and so they remain here, dedicating themselves to seeking vengeance, typically on other folks who would harm children, or allow harm to come to them. As for where we are, we're currently traveling what's known by some as the ways of the dead, a back road of sorts between

our world and... others, including the other side. Or at least, this is part of it. *Their* part — the territory of the Boy and his ilk.”

Ol’ Kev shuddered and gazed into the inky blackness that surrounded them. “So... are we dead, right now? Is this like the road to hell or something?”

Jack glanced over his shoulder with an incredulous scowl. “Are you listening to me at all, boy? There ain’t no road to hell here — nor heaven, either. There are whole towns and other places within yon shadows that are lost to our side of things, along with the people who filled them. But if you go looking for the devil or the lord on this road, you’re gonna be sadly disappointed — which is *not* to give you the idea it ain’t dangerous. Wander off the path here and you might slip through to the other side of the veil and leave our world entire. Or worse.”

As if on cue, a small crowd blossomed from the darkness. These were not boys, but grown men. Their uniforms were covered in dust and blood. Their faces — those that still had them — were burned and blackened, overcooked meat stuck to a bone griddle, the shredded flaps of skin hanging from their faces still sizzling in the shadowy mist. Those who had none marched blindly onward, offering charred, naked skulls to anyone who might witness them. The men did not acknowledge the cart or its occupants, save for the wide berth they gave it, shifting to the other side of the road as if by instinct. As the cart passed, they disappeared once again into the devouring night.

Jack grunted thoughtfully. “Must be getting close to Esau County. Them boys looked like they come from Tacoma.”

Ol’ Kev stared into the darkness after them. His voice was grim when he spoke. “I heard things about Tacoma. Seemed like it was always one accident or another with that place. Government needs to do something about that one — and a bunch more, to be fair.”

“Government ain’t gonna do shit until the people rise up and demand it,” Jack said. “And most of them need the paycheck too bad to speak up. The ones that do...” He shrugged, and Ol’ Kev grunted in agreement. They both knew the fate that often awaited those who opposed the mines.

For a while all was quiet as they passed several more groups of dead men and women hovering by the roadside, all of whom appeared to have died in horrible ways. They rolled through not one, but three, towns where fires smoldered silently in the dark, forever trapped in the act of burning in the space between worlds.

Trevor squinted back at the last of these as they left it behind, returning to the enveloping void. “Where are we?” At a sour glance from Jack, he quickly clarified. “I mean, in relation to... ‘our world’? If we’re close to Esau County — or even Grant County — I ain’t never heard of that many towns that close together burning down like that.”

Jack shrugged. “The ways might carry us in a general direction from point A to point B, but they don’t precisely map to the living side of things. And you’ve gotta remember, son, those towns are long dead. They didn’t all go up at once. One might have burned last year, another a hundred years ago. And even if it was recent, you might never hear about it. There’s a lot these mining operations get away with in the deep hills that don’t never make the news.”

“My cousin Belle lost her whole family when Barlo burned, over in Kentucky,” June offered. “Daddy said there was never a peep about it in the papers..”

“That’s a place best not spoken of, Miz June,” Jack cautioned. “Out here, you say something’s name loud enough? It might answer, and y’all don’t want none of what happened over there. Trust me on that.”

On that note, the cart rolled to a gentle stop as the mules came to a fork in the road. They sniffed the air and listened, long ears twitching, turning this way and that. June listened too, but heard nothing — not the sound of the wind nor the chirp of crickets in the night. But the gentle beasts apparently received some answer that eluded her ears, because after a moment, they veered down the left hand path, resuming their steady gait.

“You tell them to go that way?” asked Ol ‘Kev, eyeing the mules and then Jack with equal suspicion.

“I ain’t done nothing but hold the reins and keep my eyes on the road. Our friends here have

been told where to take us, and I have no choice but to trust in them. I think we're closing in on our destination, though, so you won't have to worry about it much longer."

A hillside emerged from the darkness as they entered this final stretch, a low thing with dead weeds and brambles covering its ancient hide. Atop it, a man sat bound to a chair, soaked to the bone, laughing and wailing in equal measure. A tall, thin woman stood behind him, ladling water from a bucket over his head, so that it ran through his long white hair, down his face, and into his rough thatch of a beard.

"Drink your water, Darby! You'll feel better!" she cried loudly. The man responded with what sounded to Ol' Kev like a pentecostal preacher speaking in tongues as he quaked and writhed and cackled in the chair.

Everyone turned their eyes to Jack, who simply shook his head. "Don't even ask," he sighed. "However, the appearance of Caroline and Darby back there tells me roughly where we are, and I think this might be the end of the line for us — or as far as the mules can carry us, at any rate."

The pair slowed to a halt, snorting, and began cropping the grass at their feet. A gentle breeze began to blow as Jack stepped down from the cart. Trevor hopped out of the back and reached for Junie's hands. As he lowered her carefully to the ground, the wind picked up, increasing in velocity until it began to stir the coal dust in the mules' shaggy manes, whipping the black residue into the air in swirling eddies. June's eyes watered, and she raised her hand to shield them. When the wind finally died down again and she lowered her hand, she saw that the mules were gone, carried off in the gale, and the sun was shining low in the sky.

"Just as I thought," Jack said with satisfaction. "Copper Ridge, or at least near abouts, which means our luck is holding. Y'all get ready to move. We got a little ways to walk — but it's not far, Miz June, I promise. When we get there I should be able to arrange us a ride, but we still got miles to go before we sleep."

Trevor and Kevin hoisted the packs containing their meager belongings onto their backs, and the three of them followed the older man into the low hills of Grant County.

[“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*

The man who styled himself J.T. Fields of Dorchester was as good as his word. The walk wasn't too far, nor was it particularly arduous. The path he navigated led them across wide stretches of farmland where herds of cows basked in the warmth of the late afternoon sun, chewing their cud and watching the quartet pass with little interest. Jack appeared to know the route well, as he directed them unerringly to breaks in fences or gates left open, so that there would be no need for June to crawl under fences or be hoisted over them. The sun was just sinking below the mountains in the distance when they came to a barren field occupied only by a sagging barn, red paint long ago faded to rusty orange, that crouched at the edge of the woods on its far side. Unlike the others they passed through, this field was bordered by a sturdy, well-kept fence broken only by an iron gate outfitted with a heavy chain and stout padlock.

Jack produced a heavy ring of keys from his pocket and fit one into the lock. It opened with a faint click, and he unwound the chain and swung the gate wide, gesturing them through. “Step lively, folks, and head for yon barn,” he instructed, glancing toward the fading orange glow on the horizon. “I'll be with you just as soon as I lock up.”

Hearing a hint of urgency creep into his voice, the little family hurried across the stretch of flat, sparse grass. Jack secured the gate and followed, catching up to them as they reached the barn door, which was similarly protected with a heavy iron padlock. “This one might be a little rusty,” he chuckled nervously and began trying various keys. The lock was clearly far older, battered and speckled with rust, and he jiggled each as he tried fitting it into the mechanism. He cursed

under his breath and glared at the padlock. And then his key turned and the hasp popped free, easy as you please. "That's more like it," he muttered. Then he flung the door wide, and motioned his charges inside.

Once June, Trevor and Kevin were safely within, Jack bolted the barn door and lowered a heavy bar that fit across it. These were unusual measures for the interior of a barn, June thought, as were the electric lights that hung overhead, which hummed to life when he flipped a switch near the door. Gazing around her, she saw that the old structure was in better repair than the exterior would lead one to believe. Unmarked crates and metal drums in various shapes and sizes had been stacked neatly along the walls, and a large storage cupboard of the sort that might hold tools occupied a far corner. It too had been secured with a hefty padlock. In the center of the room, an ancient, rust-bitten Ford lay shrouded in dust.

"Just a moment, folks, and I'll have us on our way." Jack walked over to the vehicle and reached for the driver's side door. It swung open with an ear-splitting creak that made Trevor wince. Dust rose from the bench seat as Jack slid into the driver's seat and tried the ignition. The engine chugged and groaned for a moment, and then fell silent. "Goddamnit," Jack muttered under his breath. He emerged from the cab and popped the hood of the old Ford, rubbing his chin thoughtfully as he peered into its innards. "Maybe a few *more* moments, Miz June. Just make yourself comfortable," he called to her, then headed for the storage cupboard she had noticed before.

Through a high window set at the western corner of the structure, June could see that night was falling quickly. Somewhere in the distance, a high, keening sound rose on the chilly night breeze, the call of some animal in the woods. It was an unusual noise, something like a coyote, but... not. It was wilder and stranger, almost like the call of a loon, but again, not. Closer to them, from the opposite side of the barn, came an answering cry. Then two more from somewhere east of them, followed by three or four to the west. The hair rose on the back of June's neck, and she reached for Trevor.

"What is that?" her husband asked, glancing over at Kevin.

June's daddy shook his head. "I don't know. Never heard anything like it before," he answered quietly.

From the far edge of the field came the sound of screaming metal, followed by a thud. The strange calls rose again, a chittering note entering now that was something akin to laughter. Jack had returned with an old toolbox, which he'd set on the floor by the dusty hulk of the Ford. Lifting his head from under the hood, he listened for a moment to the eerie noises echoing around the valley outside. "Mr. Norris, there is a shotgun in the back of that cupboard over there," he said, indicating the closet from which he'd fetched the tools with a jerk of his head. "Shells are on the top shelf!" he called as Kevin Norris hastened to fetch it.

The unearthly cries grew louder and closer as Ol' Kev riffled through the contents of the cupboard until he found a weathered old sack, into which he dumped all four boxes of shells before slinging it over his shoulder. He returned to his daughter's side, pulled a handful of rounds from the sack of ammunition, and began to load the gun with trembling fingers. The motions seemed to soothe him — or perhaps he was comforted by the protection the weapon offered — and by the time he'd finished, his hands were steady. In the field just beyond the barn, the uncanny noises had risen to a near shriek. It sounded as if they came from just outside the walls, howling and yipping and screaming. June clutched Trevor's elbow.

And then all at once, the creatures outside fell silent. For a long minute, everything was quiet, save for a steady stream of muttered curses and the occasional clank of whatever tool Jack was wielding against the uncooperative engine. "Daddy," June whispered. "Do you think they're—"

"Shh!" Ol' Kev held up a hand for silence, listening intently.

And then she heard it too. A soft scritch sound, coming from the far end of the barn. As if some small animal, like a cat, was digging its claws into the weathered wood. Kevin raised the shotgun to his shoulder, peering into the shadows near the storage cupboard.

Overhead, something skittered across the roof, claws scrabbling, and one of the eerie cries rose into the night, sounding almost like laughter. June startled, her fingernails digging into Trevor's arm. Kevin swung the shotgun upward, adjusting his aim, following the rough position of the

scratching noises with his eyes as they continued across the roof. A high squeal issued from the other side of the barn, drawing his aim toward the western wall, as something drew its claws across one of the glass windows positioned high up near the hayloft. June let out a whimper, and Trevor pulled her close.

Something heavy thumped against the barn door, and the three of them swung around to face it. It came again: *Whump. Whump. Whump.* It was as if an army waited outside, attacking a fortress with a battering ram. The latch splintered in its fittings under the blows, the old wood straining against the iron bar that held the door in place. There was a moment's pause during which June entertained the fleeting hope that perhaps whatever assailed their refuge had given up, that the old barn had proven too much for it. But then it spoke.

“Mr. Giiiiilbeeert...” The strange, grating sing-song voice was not loud, and yet it found their ears easily, even through the walls. “Treeeevooooor, my boy... I’ve come to collect what’s mine.”

A small, choked sob escaped June’s throat, and her hands flew protectively to her belly.

Behind them, the truck finally rumbled to life, and Jack slammed the hood shut. “All right, folks, everybody—”

The barn door exploded in a rain of kindling as a horde of writing, night-black shapes poured through the shattered portal as if the shadows beyond had come to life. Junie screamed as waves of oilslick fur, gnashing teeth, and razor claws flooded into the space around them.

“Get behind me!” Ol’ Kev yelled, pushing his daughter between himself and the Ford as the strange creatures came on. They were like no animal he had ever seen, wriggling shapes like sleek-pelted snakes with fangs and claws. Kevin fired into the throng, and something viscous and green splattered the walls, more like pond slime than blood, as several of the creatures disintegrated in a hail of buckshot. But there were more coming. The shotgun roared again.

Trevor hefted a long, heavy wrench from Jack’s tool box, swinging on the creatures like Babe Ruth as they tried to circle around the edges to get to his wife. The first hit the far wall with a

sickening crunch as he laid into the next. Stinking green ichor soaked his shirtsleeves and pooled at their feet.

Kevin was reloading when the first of the wriggling horrors got to him, leaping onto his shoulder before he even saw it coming. It sank tiny needle teeth into the side of his neck, and June screamed as blood quickly soaked the arm of his shirt. Kevin yanked the thing off him and hurled it into the far wall. From the corner of his eye, he saw Jack shove the passenger side door open, and he put all the command he could muster into his voice as he hollered back at his son-in-law, “Boy! Get her in the truck!”

“Daddy!” Junie cried, reaching out for him.

“Go!” Kevin yelled. “Take her and go!” He slammed shells into the stock and turned back to the writhing mob, the shotgun filling the barn with thunder like the wrath of an angry god.

Trevor Gilbert hustled his wife into the back of the Ford and slammed the door behind them. Jack stomped on the gas, and the truck lurched forward, scattering vicious little beasts in its wake and crushing those that weren’t fast enough to escape under its wheels. June Gilbert pressed her face to the back window, watching with mounting horror and grief as the retreating figure of her father, left alone to face the horde of tiny monstrosities, kept fighting.

The Ford zipped over the empty field toward the gate they had come through earlier, which now sagged open on its hinges, the chain and padlock that had held it shut a pile of twisted metal on the ground beside it. Behind them, a final blast of buckshot rang out in the night, and then the barn fell silent.

[“Atonement” by Jon Charles Dwyer]

Well, hey there, family. And as promised and foretold, the road has grown darker, and we leave our first loved one by the wayside as Kevin Patrick Norris, husband to Agnes Walker Norris and Father to June, falls in the shadow of Copper Ridge. Will he be the last in this particular tale to find his way beyond that old black door? Well, I guess you’ll have to come back and find out, now won’t you? I hope you will. And I bet you will, but I digress.

I want to thank and welcome all of our new Patreon patrons who joined us for the first time for the very special presentation of “Not Worth The Bloodshed: How TailyPo Became Mr. Poe.” Hope y’all enjoyed that one. It’s not a required bit of lore to understand our current storyline, but it was a question folks had been asking, so we answered it in the form of one of the most graphic stories we’ve told here on Old Gods of Appalachia. And me personally, I gotta say I’m mighty proud of how the sound design turned out on that one. I don’t get to do many actual omnomnomnoms in my line of work, so that was special for me. If you aren’t a Patreon patron and you’d like to hear how TailyPo became Mr. Poe and also gain access to hours of exclusive storylines like *Build Mama a Coffin*, *Black Mouthed Dog*, *Familiar & Beloved* and more, you can head on over to patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia and make your tithe today.

And now this is your “everytime we kill a beloved parental figure on this show, Steve and Cam drink a fine craft beverage and giggle like nine year olds who just carved “fart” into the Sunday school classroom wall” reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Today’s story was written by Cam Collins and Steve Shell. Our theme music is by Brother Landon Blood and our outro music, “Atonement” (now available on all streaming platforms and on vinyl at bittermelodyrecords.com) is by Brother Jon Charles Dwyer. We’ll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

© 2024 DeepNerd Media. All rights reserved.