

Not Worth The Bloodshed

How TailyPo Became Mr. Poe

Old Gods of Appalachia is a horror anthology podcast, and therefore may — and this episode definitely does — contain material not suitable for all audiences, so listener discretion (and you've been warned, family) is advised.

The last shredded remains of the man's throat stretched and snapped free, and the thing that had killed him quickly gobbled them up. It crouched on the old-timer's chest, narrow muzzle drenched to the eyeballs in his heart's blood. With the precision of long established routine, the creature known to men and h'aunts alike as TailyPo set about ripping the hunter's flannel shirt open and digging into his sunken abdomen like a tunneling weasel, rending and devouring what little fat there was before tearing into the internal organs. When he reached the liver, however, he paused. Wriggling back out the entry wound, he popped up like a groundhog from its burrow, his mouth twisted in a disconcertingly human fashion for a moment before he spat out a mouthful of bitter offal.

"I was afraid of that. Pickled and rotten as a crabapple in August," TailyPo wailed miserably. "Can these stupid beasts not drink themselves into an inedible state? Is it too much to ask for a nice, fat belly and a clean set of bowels?" the tiny terror muttered to himself as his razor sharp claws sliced the man's already frayed shirt sleeves into ribbons. The thing that was neither bobcat, nor fox — nor anything that would fit within any part of the animal kingdom — set about the bloody business of tearing the stringy meat of the biceps and forearms into ragged strips that vanished into his gnashing maw. "Hard enough to snag one of their kind with more than five mouthfuls of decent meat on them, and half of them are riddled with sickness! Black rot in the lungs, livers half putrefied by that poison they drink."

TailyPo's mouth screwed up in a snarl of disgust as he chewed the last bit of palatable meat from the unfortunate hunter. He glared down at gore spattered remains of a bald-headed hermit who had, like many before him, taken a shot at a creature that he could not identify, wounding it by severing its long skinny tail. That brief moment of what seemed like good luck would end in an evening of terror that had played out hundreds of times in the backwoods of deepest Appalachia, wherein the offending woodsman would find himself stalked by the mysterious

beast he'd maimed as it cried and pined for its "tailypo." Eventually the beast of that same name would grow bored, tear the man to shreds, and eat its fill.

In the old days the prey he managed to procure were simply delicious, their blood and meat pristine. Very rarely did he find one of the Cherokee or Shawnee with a rock-hard liver and smoke-stained lungs. They were harder to hunt and even tougher to take down, but the end result was always worth it. They were utter delicacies by comparison. Even those who came later to steal the land from the tribes — the woods-clearing, house-building brutes who bullied their way into the dark hills on a tide of betrayal and bloody murder — had tasted sweet. The big men from over the sea, with their thick accents and thicker slabs of muscle, turned his corner of the woods into a veritable buffet.

TailyPo's mouth watered thinking about the days when men with names like Klaus and Walter would wander into his woods looking for new stands of timber or hunting for game to feed a new settlement that had sprung up over the river. He only knew their names because their fellows or their wives would call them when they came searching for them, and sometimes he got them too. Other times it was too risky — some of them fellers were mighty good shots, and losing a tail was one thing, but he wasn't sure he could regrow a new leg the same way.

These days the land where TailyPo ranged was a tough row to hoe. The soil wasn't giving, riddled as it was with the roots of ancient trees that grew close and thick, choking out the sunlight. Once they'd found prosperous living elsewhere, the land thieves left his little domain behind, uninhabited and forgotten. He looked down at the butchered corpse of the poor soul he had tormented through the wee hours of the morning and sighed. This is what he'd been reduced to, preying on men who were half-dead already before their own bad choices could kill them. He was a hunter, damn it — a master of the wood who had taken down men better armed and far cleverer than this pathetic wretch. He deserved more than desiccated jerky barely bound to brittle bones as his reward.

A dull ache in his backside interrupted TailyPo's sulky woolgathering. He glanced back over his shoulder and noted that his tail was already mostly regrown. He dared not try to twitch or swish it yet, as it was always tender for a day or so. That was the worst part, he mused — that he had to bleed to purchase these shabby evening meals. Hell, these days it hardly seemed worth the

bloodshed. He supposed he could just stalk the men and kill and eat them the way catamounts and the night's other predators did. He'd done that a couple of times, when opportunity knocked. He'd come upon passed-out men sleeping under a lean to — even face-to-face out in the open — and he'd taken them right then and there. It had been... fine? The meat had nourished him and he'd had a full belly, but it felt incomplete somehow. It just wasn't *fun*.

There was something to be said for drawing things out, letting the poor fool carry the ratty tail back to his campfire with the hope of something good to eat, only to find it rank and foul. The despair that comes with hunger and isolation out in the deep woods provided excellent seasoning for TailyPo's meat. He'd gradually turn up the heat by running any dogs or other animals his prey might have off into the wilds, as he clambered up walls and scritch-scratched at windows, all the while singing his song. "Where's my taiiiiiilypoooooo? Where's my taiiiiiilypoooooo?" He'd do this for hours until he knew his quarry was on the verge of losing its nerve or its mind or both, drinking in that fear like clear water from a mountain stream. Then — and only then — would he find himself so hungry he could no longer resist taking what was his, and he would feast. Nights like tonight could hardly be deemed a feast, though, and it was with bitterness and disappointment that TailyPo lept from the tent of the man who had provided his meager meal and beheld wonders on the mountainside.

It had been a clear, bitterly cold night when TailyPo had set to preparing his dinner beneath a blanket of twinkling stars. Now heavy clouds swirled overhead, the kind of clouds that promised big snows and deep drifts, and TailyPo groaned at the sight of them. He hated deep snow. Deep snow drifts meant people didn't go hunting. Some couldn't even get their front doors open to step outside. The big, dark boogers overhead were moving in fast, he noted. The clouds flowed like a river of deep shadow toward one specific point, where they spun and swirled around a high ridge, circling there like a flock of buzzards.

When was the last time he'd seen clouds move like that? Had he ever? TailyPo sniffed the air, expecting the bitter notes that heralded the coming of deeper winter, but instead he smelled the acrid tang of burning. Fire was as dangerous to TailyPo as it was to any h'aunt or critter in these woods, and his ears laid back as he peered up the side of the mountain to where the clouds lay the heaviest. Was it smoke he had seen, rather than clouds? Was the mountain burning? Every

instinct in his monstrous little form screamed for him to run, to get away from whatever was happening up on the side of the mountain and lay low until it all blew over.

But something else whispered to him, tickling and teasing, calling to the part of TailyPo's brain that was more monster than animal, and he sprinted through the woods, his blood soaked muzzle pointing towards the place where the clouds that smelled like hellfire gathered. As he wound his way through the trees toward the crest of the ridge, TailyPo knew for certain that this was no winter storm come calling, nor was it a wildfire burning its way across the backside of the mountain. No, this was something else entirely.

As he neared a broad-mouthed path that led up toward the eye of the storm, the unseen world lay in chaos before him. Spirits of the dead choked the hillside — men, animals and others, all trembling and quaking, their spectral forms blue-gray streaks to TailyPo's eyes. Some stretched their mouths wide in screams of desperate horror. Others were being torn apart at their middles by some unseen force, dissolving into wisps of nothingness. A few even less fortunate souls were being yanked back up the path, fear etched into their dead faces.

TailyPo could see other critters like himself scurrying away into the trees. Wolfkin and wampus cats — usually natural enemies — ran side by side, their fur singed by the heat of some great, unnatural blaze. Something low and serpentine slithered through the dry leaves and vanished with preternatural speed down a hole that was not there. There were other things lurking in the shadows of that place that he did not recognize, but he could see they too were in a state of panic, their amorphous, faceless forms whipping to and fro. A lucky few managed to vanish back to wherever things like them come from, while others were pulled, just like the luckless dead, back up the path to whatever awaited them there.

Thunder shook the night, and TailyPo could feel that call again, urging him up the path, to come and see, come and learn. He stood mesmerized for a moment, until the roar of hooves sounded nearly as loud as thunder, and he caught a glimpse of a great black form with glowing golden antlers loping down from the ridge with unnatural grace and then pounding westward in great haste until it vanished in a greasy smear of shadow and cinder-light in the near distance. The Stag. TailyPo had heard tales of the The Thing Whose Name Sounded like Hornèd Head But Was Not, but he'd never laid eyes on it before. Sweet merciful night, it was enormous, not to

mention terrifying. TailyPo might have peed a little at the great beast's sudden arrival, but he was pretty sure no one saw.

From higher up the path he heard mad, joyful laughter, rising to a fever pitch, when suddenly another voice cried out, "OH NO YOU DON'T!" There was an mighty boom, and then all was quiet. The woods around him lay deathly still. TailyPo could neither sense nor scent any creatures like himself, nor did any of the restless dead make themselves known. The peculiar spiraling movement of the shroud of clouds or smoke overhead slowed and then stopped altogether, dissipating into nothing as the clear night sky showed its face once more, starlight glimmering down like the distant hope of heaven taunting poor sinners stuck in Hell.

TailyPo hugged the ground, his belly flat in the dead leaves and dust of the wood. He barely dared breathe for fear of what might come next. Then he heard it: footsteps. A man's footsteps. Only two legs. Average size, average height. TailyPo's stomach growled and his mouth watered. He could still feel the call, beckoning him to find out what was up on the ridge at the end of that path, but as with all creatures like TailyPo, hunger trumps all, even common sense. He scurried behind the trunk of a poplar tree, quiet as the proverbial mouse, and waited. As the footsteps drew closer, he could smell the sweat and stink of a hard day's work mixed with that odor of burning that had permeated the air moments before. He could hear the man talking to himself as he walked.

"I swear to god, the very nerve of that shit-hoofed sumbitch, calling in a debt trying to get me to help him bring something like that into this world. 'Stand right there Jack, you'll be my good luck charm of sorts, hur hur hur.' Brother, I got your charm right here. Lady Luck might be a little sweet on me, but I can't help it if the date I bring to your dance might burn the whole damn barn down. I'll tell you what. Thinking he can use me like I'm a goddamned rabbit's foot! Durn fool just about set the whole damn mountain on fire trying to appease his masters."

TailyPo had no idea what any of this was about. Nor did he care as he leapt, surefooted as ever, at the man's back as he stomped past the aging poplar. Surefooted is not how a casual observer might have described the attempt TailyPo made to bring down this particular prey, however. As he pushed off the ground, a loose stone shifted under his back foot, causing it to slip, thus turning his graceful predatory pounce into more of a badly timed lunge. His head collided with a

low-hanging branch of the very tree that had been his hiding place, knocking the little predator ass-over-teakettle into a pile of dead leaves a full yard short of his intended target. Undeterred, TailyPo scrambled to right himself, claws bared, ready to go again.

“Just stop right there, son,” the man said in a tired voice. He didn’t so much as turn around, but TailyPo could see that he was stockily built — a far fitter meal than the wretch he had dined upon earlier. He wore a plain brown suit that was singed around the shoulders and the hem of his jacket. “I’ve had about enough of mysterious creatures of the woods today, and I swear on my own name that if one more of y’all tries me, my next business venture will be a speciality taxidermy shop.”

TailyPo blinked. Who did this pitiful human think he was, to speak to one such as he this way? “Big words for a soft skinned, weak little thing,” he hissed. He was being quite honest. He didn’t know what “taxidermy” meant, but he could guess from the man’s tone it was unpleasant and insulting, and that he would not abide. “I prefer to eat my dinner in silence, so I’ll start with your tongue,” the diminutive menace growled as he leapt toward the man in the brown suit’s shoulder, planning to wrap his claws around the tender neck and sink his fangs into the man’s throat. The next thing he knew, he found himself sprawled against the base of the ancient poplar as yet another branch came crashing down, nearly crushing him as its weight pinned him to the dirt.

The man — or at least something that wore the shape of a man — turned on TailyPo. “On a better day, I might be a bit more gracious toward vermin like you. I like animals. Hell, I even yell at my hired help for playing target practice with the rats down on Guest River, but rats don’t talk back, and they usually have sense enough to know when they’re in the presence of their betters.”

The air around TailyPo grew warmer by degrees, and the odor of rotten cucumbers, overgrown beetleweed, and the choking stench of a rhododendron thicket gone wild rose on the air, filling his sinus cavity until he could smell nothing else.

“Allow me to introduce myself, little beast. My name is Jack. I have walked these hills and countless others longer than men have had written language. Fortune bends herself to aid my endeavors, the trees lean in close to keep the rain off me, and the sun rises and sets just to tell

me good morning and good night. The moon has twelve different secret names, and I know them all. And when the waters rise for the final time, I'll be here to..."

The man trailed off, losing his steam as he beheld TailyPo's trembling form, trapped and cowering in wide-eyed terror before him. The heat and scent of the deep woods in high summer faded away. Jack rubbed at the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut in exhaustion. "Ah shit, son. I'm sorry. I've had a day. I don't know why I'm taking it out on a pitiful little thing like you, TailyPo." He reached down and hefted the tree branch that had pinned the tiny monster, tossing it into the trees.

TailyPo blinked, startled by the kindness almost as much as the recognition. "You know my name?"

The man who had introduced himself as just Jack chuckled. "I know the name of about every h'aint, booger, or critter up and down this whole range. 'Where's my taiiiilypooooo?'" His words were a bit mocking, but it wasn't a bad impression. "That's you, right? Not a bad hustle, if you ask me. Just as long as it keeps you fed and gets the heart pumping from time to time, who am I to judge?" Jack cast his eyes back up the path and then back on ol' Taily. "But what's going on around here tonight is way above your paygrade, my friend. There's real power at work. Little feller like you is apt to get stepped on if he ain't careful."

TailyPo scowled up at Jack. "Them that try to step on the likes of me often come up missing a foot," he growled, baring his claws menacingly. "Come closer, Jack. I'll show you whose woods these are."

Jack laughed. "All right, all right. You can have these woods, Mr. Poe. I'll be on my way." Jack cast a concerned glance back up the path. "You wanna see real power though, head on up that trail and stick your head in that cave. It's about collapsed, and there's only a shadow of what could have come through in there now, but I bet it could teach you a thing or two. Leastways if you don't mind trading most of what makes you who you are for it. Rotten luck that old Horny tried to summon it right over a fault line. Ground shifts a little bit, all those carefully drawn sigils and runes get knocked off kilter, and the door to this world slams shut like a bank vault."

Whatever was coming only got a fraction of itself through to this side, and now it's real pissed off. But if fortune favors us, that cave should keep it for a while."

TailyPo followed Jack's gaze up the path and then turned back to ask, "What exactly is in yon cave?" But Jack had done just as he said, and was already gone. TailyPo sat alone at the foot of the mountain. Well, that was downright rude, just stepping out mid-confrontation like that. Taily felt like he had the old man on the ropes. He'd tricked this Jack into freeing him, and in just another moment, he would have—

"TaaaaaiiiiilyPoooooo. TaaaaaiiiiilyPoooooo."

The voice slithered into TailyPo's mind, unbidden and unexpected, and he spun around, thinking Jack had snuck back up on him, but there was no one. The calling sensation he'd felt before tugged at the back of his mind, and he felt his eyes pulled once again to the path that led up the ridge.

"TaaaaaiiiiilyPoooooo. Come, mighty hunter. Come see. Come find."

"Who's there?" TailyPo almost squeaked. "Who calls upon ol' TailyPo on this strange and trying day?"

There were no more words, only that insistent lure that pulled on him, somewhere deep in his belly, slowly becoming a need, and soon enough TailyPo found his paws trotting up the path around the bent and scorched trees, the withered fauna and blasted earth, as if by their own accord. He suddenly realized his tail was lashing behind him in anticipation as he walked, and he looked back over his shoulder to regard it, freshly regrown. It was still a ratty, thin thing, but there was none of the pain he had felt earlier.

When he reached the cave's entrance, he could see what the man called Jack had meant. What appeared to have once been a broad opening into the hidden depths of a mountain that straddled the line between Virginia and Kentucky had been reduced to a sliver of space between two rocks that would take an average size man a fair bit of angling and squeezing to pass through. TailyPo's keen eyes could see that the inside of the chamber was littered with fallen

rocks and crushed stone. Here and there, he could make out strange, indecipherable sigils etched into the floor. The air inside felt heavy and charged with power. TailyPo's tail twitched and his stomach twisted, sensing danger. He was just about to turn and skedaddle back down the path when the voice came again.

“TaaaaaiiiiiilyPoooooo.”

Reluctantly, TailyPo crouched down to peer more closely into the narrow crevice, the suffocating darkness beyond hanging like a widow's veil. Slowly, within the velveteen shadows, a flickering glow sprang to life, illuminating the scene, as smoldering orange eyes opened and gazed down upon the quivering TailyPo. Not just a pair of eyes, but many eyes. Eyes of many shapes and sizes arranged in ways that suggested that in spite of their number and variation, they all resided in the same face. TailyPo jerked back in shock and revulsion, but a long, skinny arm that ended in a massive hand adorned with more than the average number of fingers snaked out of the mouth of the cave and snatched him from the spot where he stood. With a startled yelp, the bane of lost hunters disappeared into the darkness.

Deep within the shadowy maw of the mountain, many things were asked of TailyPo: his greatest fear, his deepest desire, his most shameful lusts, the name of the first he ever killed, and the names of those who had wronged him throughout the course of his life. His body was disassembled and recreated anew. He was fed night-black blood and burning coals. He was told secrets that none such as he — nor anyone else in our world — should ever know. He was given a crack in his mind made of mirrors that reflected his own importance back to him over and over and over again until he was not just ol' TailyPo any more. When those dead tree branch hands reached for him again, they pulled him deeper into that flickering orange gaze and did things to him that are indescribable in our tongue.

There are ways a thing can be changed that will make no sense to the human mind, but know that what stepped into the next evening's moon-kissed night was no longer TailyPo. The beast that returned to fill the TailyPo-shaped hole left in the world was no petty scavenger or pitiful mutt of a h'aint living off the bones of the half dead. No. This was Mr. Poe, a keeper of secrets whose lush obsidian fur could never be mistaken for the pockmarked and flea bitten coat that

had adorned the back of the thing that cried for its missing tail, sad weasel-like creature that it was.

That ragged appendage was gone forever, and its place waved a plethora of lush black tails, not unlike a fox, but not quite like a fox either. Tails that writhed and danced in the night like a dire-peacock's plumage. His eyes burned in with the same flickering orange glow as the the eyes of the one who had destroyed him and reforged him. The creature known as TailyPo went down under the mountain as scrap-iron, and emerged as stainless steel, honed razor sharp to draw blood from the heart of this world. He was still not the biggest beast to walk these woods, but as wise folk often say, it's not the size of the dog in the fight — it's the size of the fight in the dog. Mr. Poe was filled with enough bitterness and rage for a thousand fights, and enough hatred to consume the world.

And thus concludes this special presentation of “Not Worth the Bloodshed: How TailyPo Became Mr. Poe.” Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell and edited by Cam Collins. Our intro and outro music is by Brother Landon Blood.

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