

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 4, Episode 63: The Ways of the Dead

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

In the light of the old mining lantern, the man who styled himself J.T. Fields of Dorchester looked old. The artificial moon that hung caged in the hand of the boy in the mining cap cast every line etched into the old trickster's face in stark relief. His dark hair was silvered at the temples and it thinned as it crossed the crown of his head. There was a sickly rheuminess that haunted his striking brown eyes and a slight slump to his shoulders like you'd see in a man who'd been on his feet for days, weeks — hell, decades — at the same job. The one thing that light didn't reveal was fear. Jack Fields was not afraid as he stood there facing down a veritable army of the dead. He licked his lips and looked into the coal smudged face of the general of that grim legion.

“We require passage through the ways of the dead, old friend. These poor souls were hoodwinked and bamboozled by a dark touched h'aunt from yon woods. They were strong-armed into a promise for the life of the babe that rests in the young missus' womb. The father's a bit of a dullard, as I understand, and easily tricked. You know about those with power and their tricks, don't you, young feller?”

The thing that wore the shape of a boy snorted. “And what concern is the conduct of fools to such as we? Man's mouth writes checks his ass can't honor? Last I heard, that wasn't my problem, Jack.”

Jack's eyes sparkled in the lantern light. That was no exaggeration — Junie would swear she saw them literally sparkle, as if the boy had said exactly what Jack hoped to hear and he had the perfect response. He spread his arms in a gesture for all the world like a magician performing a trick, and she thought to herself the comparison wasn't far off the mark. Not far at all.

“Ah, but my boy, there is an innocent life at risk here. Isn't that why you and yours walk these lonely paths, avenging, revenging, just... venging in general?” Jack held forth. “What if you could

spare a young'un its life before it ever knowed what a coal mine was? Is it the baby's fault that his daddy is a durn fool who bartered a life that weren't his to trade?"

The Boy considered this for a moment, his form flickering from the young man Jack had been conversing with so cordially to that of a burning hole in a mountainside, then shifting into the shape of the tiniest casket Junie had ever seen, then back to the Boy again. Her eyes pricked with tears, and she dabbed at them with the sleeve of her dress.

"There've been a lot of boys buried due to their daddies' folly and their bosses' greed. You speak true on that point, Jack."

"Aye, that I do, and a boon you do owe me — one of three."

The Boy glared up at the older man, black eyes smoldering under the brim of his cap.

"One of those has been repaid — two lives taken for two lives saved," the Boy almost snarled in his strange, grown man's voice, but with his next words, his voice softened. "The littl'uns the Underwood boy laid hands on and made whole — they still live? I ain't seen neither one of them on this side of the veil."

Jack smiled softly and, in a daring move, rested his hand on the Boy's shoulder. "Those little ones are men grown now, my traveling friend, with sons of their own that they've kept far from the mines. The men who hurt them—"

The Boy shrugged, pulling away from Jack's touch. "Lay buried beneath old Redwine. Never sleeping, never dreaming, an endless winter of dying — but never death — for those who ground young bones to bake their bread. As we agreed."

"As was just," Jack concurred solemnly.

The Boy snorted again derisively. "And the fact that those men opposed you in other dealings was never the real reason you'd bring them to our notice, was it, Jacky-boy?"

“You wound me, son!” Jack placed his hand dramatically upon his surely breaking heart. “To the matter at hand, though. I call in my second debt now — I ask you to get this family at least partly ahead of what pursues them by means of the ways.”

The Boy’s coal colored eyes remained fixed on Jack for a moment longer before he motioned to the truck.

“Bring them forth. I’d see for myself those you would have me ferry through the ways of the dead. It is no small matter for the living to walk our roads without joining our ranks. If they are worthy of such labor, I will honor your request as a valid redress of debt. If they ain’t... well, let’s just hope for all y’alls sake they are.”

Dead hands clamored for the panel truck’s door handles, and Junie started to scream.

“Wait!” cried Jack “My people will present themselves directly. Don’t go getting all grabby, son,” Jack said as he smacked a dead boy’s hand away from the passenger side door. The brutal-eyed little thing with its cracked face and off kilter neck shot the man in the plain brown suit an offended look.

The horde of ghostly children watched as Jack leaned into the truck and spoke quietly to the living folks inside. Here, in this place where the veil between the living and the dead was worn thin as cheesecloth, the living carried a glow and a scent that the dead both craved and feared. An older man stepped from the passenger side of the truck, while a younger man climbed down from the back. He turned to help the woman, who was heavy with child. A murmur ran through the assembled boys. They saw living folks all the time, but to witness life as yet unborn, in all its potential, was far less common. To their eyes, the woman glowed like a torch as she came to stand beside the younger man. They wanted to surge around her, touch her belly, yet at the same time feared the heat of that glow, so they hung back warily, still as statues in the silvery light of the lantern.

“May I present Mr. Kevin Norris of Hazell County, his daughter Miz June Gilbert, and her

husband — the dullard in question — Trevor Gilbert.” Jack gestured to the family as if they were stock brought to market. Trevor scowled at him, but had the good sense to keep his mouth shut.

The Boy scowled disgustedly as it appraised Trevor, black eyes roaming up and down the man’s sturdy form. “I can smell the drink on you from here,” he spat.

“I... I ain’t had a drink in months, pretty near a year, I’ll have you know,” Trevor protested.

The little fella in the cap and overalls shook his head. “Don’t matter. You can try — and you are trying, I can tell — but I can smell it on you all the same. It’s *in* you, boy. Fields is right. You ain’t the brightest, and the drink makes you dumber. I think you know that. So if you’re gonna be any kinda good daddy, you’ll remember that and stay as dry as a bone, Mr. Gilbert. You hear me? As. A. Bone.”

Trevor nodded shakily and looked away.

The Boy squinted at Ol’ Kev next. “You’ve got the smell of the mines on you, old timer. Flat Top, if my nose ain’t lying. Hmm. But not for a long time now. What happened?”

Kevin Norris inclined his head towards the dark shapes that loomed in the near distance. “Bent Laurel blew when I was a boy. I was in the yard and got pinned under a water tank. Broke my leg. My daddy and his brothers died in the fire.” Tears danced in the corners of Ol Kev’s eyes. “Ain’t no way my mama was letting me go back to the mines after that. Took to farming with her people instead. Kept their farm after I married.”

The Boy drew closer to him. “Sounds like your mama had sense at least. There’s more, though.” The Boy drew in a long breath through his nose, as if scenting the man’s grief. “Who was Aggie?”

The dam that had been swelling inside Kevin Norris finally burst, tears soaking his cheeks as he began to weep openly, words failing him.

Anger dousing some of her fear, June glared at the Boy. “Stop it. Whatever you’re doing, stop!” she snapped, stepping up to wrap a protective arm around her father. “Aggie was my mama. She died when I was a girl.”

The Boy ignored her. His eyes remained fixed on Ol’ Kev. “You think the mines had something to do with her dying, don’t you?” he prompted, his shrewd gaze unmoved by the man’s grief.

“They... sorry. They said it was her liver,” Kevin hiccuped through his tears, “but she always thought the water out where she used to... where she used to work smelled and tasted funny. It was too close to where they flushed the slurry out the mines. I always wondered—”

“Well wonder no more, son. They poison everything. They ruin everything. They break everything.” The Boy’s voice rose as the fire in him built. “They killed your wife just as sure as if they’d dropped a mountain on her too.”

“So you’ll help then,” Jack interjected, attempting to regain control of the situation. “This family has been wronged by the very men you seek to stand against. Surely—”

The Boy cut him off. “Not so fast, Mr. Fields. I’ll have a word with Miz June here.”

June Gilbert braced herself as the obvious leader of this legion of dead children drew close to her, coming within a few inches to peer up into her face, drawing in another rattling breath through shriveled, undead lungs, analyzing her scent like some ghastly bloodhound.

“Miz June, I only have two questions for you, and I want you to think real careful on them before you answer.”

Unsettled, June’s head jerked in a nod.

The Boy leaned ever closer, and Junie could smell burning coal and the dying breaths of a thousand dead men, crushed from their bodies like snuffing a candle. At this distance, she could feel the hate radiating from the small figure, rage and lust for vengeance pouring off of him like standing too close to a stove.

“Your mama was a camp girl, June Gilbert, her mother a whoremonger and a witch. Don’t try to deny it — I can smell it in your blood. I don’t think you’re fit to be anybody’s mama. So why should I believe you’d be a good mama? And why should I let you take one more step on my road?”

[ “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*

“Now see here, young feller!” Jack protested, raising a hand to forestall any other questions. “That was just uncalled for!”

In the same moment, Trevor and Ol’ Kev moved to Junie’s side as if by some unspoken accord, her husband pulling her close while her daddy stepped up in front, one arm outstretched as if to bar the Boy from reaching her. “You got no right to speak to my daughter that way!” Kevin thundered. His voice was iron, all trace of his previous tears evaporating in the heat of his rage.

As if sensing a threat in their posture, the army of dead boys began to close ranks around their leader, an angry murmur rising from them. Here and there, the glint of metal began to appear amongst the restless crowd as blades found their way into ghostly hands from whatever pockets had concealed them. Junie thought she might be the only one who noticed, and seeing the danger, she spoke, raising her voice to cut through the growing tension.

“I... I can speak for myself,” she said clearly, willing her words not to falter. Gently, she pulled away from Kevin and laid a hand on her daddy’s arm. His head snapped around to look at her, his eyes full of concern and uncertainty. She nodded, giving him a faint but reassuring smile, and he stepped aside to let her pass.

Her eyes scanned the legion of dead boys, and June Gilbert found their leader. She met his piercing gaze without flinching. Recognizing she was prepared to give her answer, he raised a hand, shushing his compatriots, as he came forward to meet her. He cocked his head to one side as he squinted up at her.

“Well, Miz June?” he said. “What say you?”

June glanced over her shoulder at her father. “Daddy?” she prompted, holding out a hand for support. Ol’ Kev immediately grabbed her hand, placing the other gently on her back. With his assistance, she lowered herself cautiously to her knees, bringing herself face to face with the Boy. She looked into those fathomless black eyes, and imagined she could see pain and rage flickering in their depths like black flames. She could feel the hate again, rolling off him in waves, and she willed herself not to flinch. The ghostly figure was terrifying, and yet... and yet he was still a child, a child who had been wronged, a child who had been failed at every turn by the people who should have cared for him, protected him.

“Little man,” she said, holding the Boy’s gaze, “I can’t give you any easy answers. You said my mamaw was a witch. Yes, she laid the wards around our house, true enough, but my mama didn’t inherit none of those gifts. Maybe if she had, she wouldn’t have left us so soon. You ask why you should believe I’ll be a good mama. The only answer I have for you is that I want nothing more in this world than to have the chance. Y’all have had some mighty harsh words for my man.” June glanced around, her stern look encompassing Jack and her father as well as the Boy before her. “And it’s true my Trevor ain’t perfect. He thought he could pull one over on... well, something like you, to be honest. And he learned the hard way that’s a real bad idea. But he only thought he could get away with it because we’d given up on having a family. We tried and tried, and when it didn’t happen...” Junie shrugged. “We thought it just wasn’t in the Lord’s plan for us. But it’s all we’ve wanted for so long.”

Junie glanced over her shoulder at Trevor, and saw the shine of unshed tears in his eyes. He nodded back at her in agreement. She turned back to the Boy. “I imagine most people think they’re gonna be good parents. I’m sure most of them have the best intentions, though folks fail, for one reason or another. All I can tell you is, when you’ve wanted a child and been denied the way we have? And you finally get the chance to have the family dreamed of? Well, young’un, you’re gonna work extra hard to do right by them. I can promise you that. As to your other question — why should you let me walk your road?” Junie glanced down, one hand going protectively to her belly. “Because if you don’t, this little one may be the one who pays the price for it.”

The Boy opened his mouth to speak, but Junie raised a hand to forestall him. “I know. It’s not your fault our little one is in danger. We have nobody but ourselves to blame.”

“Nobody but *me*, you mean,” Trevor interjected, his voice filled with self-loathing, but both his wife and the Boy she knelt with ignored him.

Junie’s gaze swept over the ragged army of dead boys before returning to meet the Boy’s eyes again. “I can see you and your friends have been through an awful lot, son. Please, if you can find it in your heart, help us. And for the sake of our child, I swear to you we will not fail him the way your mamas and daddies failed you. We will give our lives, if need be, to keep him safe.”

June fell silent. The Boy grunted thoughtfully, chewing his lip for a moment as he pondered her words. Finally, with a sigh, he nodded and turned to Jack. “Passage is granted. This settles our second debt, free and clear?”

“Aye,” Jack confirmed, his right hand lifting to rest on his heart. “One good turn for another. The debt is repaid.”

The Boy jerked his head in the general direction of some children hovering near the back of the legion of dead boys, who had slowly begun to disperse once the matter was settled. A handful of them scurried off into the murky woods behind them.



Kevin and Trevor moved to help Junie to her feet, each of them draping one of her arms around his shoulder to better support her weight as they lifted her up between them. They began to guide her back to the truck, but Jack called out to them.

“Uh uh! End of the line for the truck, I’m afraid.”

Trevor’s brow furrowed as he turned to face the older man. “You expect my wife to walk? In her condition?”

Jack shook his head. “No, of course not. But you saw the way the engine stalled out a bit ago? Where we’re going, we need... alternate means of transportation.”

In the middle of the clearing, the Boy gave a high-pitched, keening whistle. From the shadows of the woods, something answered, an eerie, bugling call splitting the night. Beneath their feet dust began to swirl, old mud tromped up on the boots of long dead boys from the deep places beneath the skin of the world. It rose in whirling eddies as if carried by a steady wind, though the air remained as still as the heart of a corpse on the slab. The dust swarmed like a flock of tiny corvids or iron filings dragged by a magnet, slowly outlining the form of a familiar animal. It was a shape well known to those who lived under the shadow of coal, the other beast of burden condemned to die by the thousands across the long and bloody history of mining. Sweet-faced creatures who followed their masters into the deep night as loyally as any dog, and who were abandoned there to sleep forever just as often as the boys who drove them.

Mules, Junie mused. Only these night-black mules appeared to be made of coal dust. Were they ghosts too? They looked solid enough, their pencil-lead coats gleaming in the dead moonlight of the lantern the Boy had accepted as an offering, but every time they shook their heads, she caught sight of the dust falling from their manes.

The pair of them had come to a halt beside the Boy, who stood stroking their flanks and murmuring to them in tones more gentle than Junie would have imagined hearing from that strange, rough voice. A low rumbling echoed across the clearing, and the dead boys who had run into the trees returned, pulling a wooden cart by ropes in their wake. The wagon had clearly seen better days, its bed cracked and gray with age and damp, the iron spokes of its wheels

peppered with rust. The jockey box listed precariously to the left, and its axles creaked as it rolled to a stop behind the spectral mules.

As the dead children raced around the front of the cart and began working to hitch the night-black creatures to this rickety conveyance, Jack walked a slow circle around it, inspecting the wagon with a critical eye.

Ol' Kev gave a skeptical snort. "Now what in the high-holy hell is this supposed to be? You expect the mother of my grandchildren to travel on this nightmare highway on something that looks like it saw most of its use before Noah ever built his ark?"

"Oh, I know she don't look like much, Mr. Norris, but she's sturdy enough. Tight as a drum," Jack said confidently, giving the wagon's bed a hearty slap. His smile turned to a wince as a three-inch splinter skewered his palm. Chuckling, he conceded, "You might want to grab a couple blankets to sit on from the back of the truck, though."

June waited by the wagon with Jack while Trevor and Kevin fetched their bags and the proffered blankets from the Model T's cargo area. The two men spread the blankets across the wagon bed, and did their best to create a little padded nest out of their clothing-stuffed rucksacks to protect June from the worst of any bumps in the road. The three of them settled into the cart as comfortably as they could, and Jack removed his jacket and draped it over the jockey seat to protect his posterior from suffering the same fate as his hand.

Once he was settled, the Boy gave his mules a final pat, then handed him the reins. "You've got about sixty miles, give or take," the Boy said. "No one will see you pass. Beyond that..." He gave a shrug. "You cross out of our territory. I can offer no more."

"Understood." Jack nodded. "Thank you, old friend."

The Boy turned his haunted gaze upon the three travelers in the back of the wagon, his eyes finding Junie's. He tipped his hat respectfully. "Best of luck to you, Miz June."

She gave an uncertain smile and bobbed her head. "Thank you."

“Don’t forget your promise,” the Boy added darkly. “I don’t want to see you again.”

June was almost certain she was the only one who recognized the implied threat in his words. A shiver crawled up her spine, but she nodded again, the smile frozen to her face. “I won’t. And you won’t.”

Jack clucked his tongue at the pair of mules, and the wagon began to move at a surprisingly jaunty pace. The Boy stood watching them as they rolled out of the clearing, the glowing lantern still resting at his feet, growing dimmer with every pace. Junie kept her eyes on that bright spark until it was only a flicker in the darkness. And then the night swallowed them whole.

[ “Atonement” by Jon Charles Dwyer ]

Well, hey there, family. So off we go into the ways of the dead, a brand new dark corner of our Appalachia for us to experience on our journey with the Gilberts as they attempt to flee the wrath of Mister Poe. For those of you missing ol’ TailyPo, or wanting more of it than your daily allowance of murderous, narcissistic, multi-tailed murder fox-bobcat-death-ferret, well... ya’ll just sit tight. We promise we’re gonna make you sorry for ever thinking him being out of the picture for a minute was a bad thing. Guess it’s gonna be one of them “be careful what you wish for” type situations. ‘Cause y’all done wished, and welp, no backies on wishes. Y’all are in no way shape or form ready for what’s coming next. No sir, no ma’am.

But we’ve got a lot of exciting things coming up in the very near future in the world of Old Gods of Appalachia. Over on Patreon, we have the grand finale of volume two of *Familiar & Beloved* coming at the end of March of 2024. There’s gonna be a very extra special piece of bonus content that connects to y’all’s beloved TailyPo popping up on Patreon in the very near future, and we’ll be announcing that on our social media altars very soon. So if you want to know how TailyPo became Mister Poe, you might want to consider heading on over to [patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia](https://patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia) and becoming a member, even if it’s just for a month.

And this is your “traveling through the ways of the dead is not recommended for the faint of heart or the weak of liver” reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd

Media, distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's story was written by Cam Collins and Steve Shell. Our theme song is by Brother Landon Blood, and our outro music "Atonement" (now available in its full version on all streaming platforms) is by Brother Jon Charles Dwyer. We'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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