

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

### Finishing School

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

Esserville, VA: 1901. Pretty Polly Barrow. Just the mention of that beautiful creature's name is enough to chill the blood of any man, woman or child beholden to the empire of mining interests held by the august bloodline of the Barrow family. A ruthless enforcer capable of dismembering entire corporations within the confines of a board room and even more eager to do the same to the earthly bodies of the men who ran them should they get in her way, Polly was E.P. Barrow's only daughter. Conceived in an unholy union betwixt a once-mortal man and something unseen and unnamed that carried the babe to term in the cold darkness of the underneath, she had roamed the territories controlled by Barrow Mineral Resources for as long as most folks could remember, dotting I's and crossing T's according to her daddy's wishes.

Despite having two older, somewhat more human brothers, a lot of folks thought it would one day be Miss Polly sitting at the head of the table. Her rise to power seemed inevitable to those paying attention. This was not always the case however. To say that a force as lovely and deadly as Polly Barrow was in her ascendancy also implies that she had to start at the bottom. She might not be human, but she was reared and raised as any human child would be. The child's mother was, of course, not a suitable being to exist in the world of men. With her father off at the helm of a blossoming empire of coal and blood, Polly was left to be raised by a full staff of nannies and housekeepers, human servants who were completely out of their depth when it came to managing the needs and whims of a child of her unnatural lineage. Attempting to sooth a normal child mid-tantrum might get your shin kicked or your hair pulled. Trying to calm a young Polly Barrow when she was hungry or tired might get your neck snapped, or the flesh raked off your face by the dagger-point claws that would erupt through the tips of those tiny fingers when she didn't get her way.

Weary of paying wergild to the families of those unfortunate souls, her father consulted with his allies under the mountain. They sent nannies more suited to the task of rearing this very special little girl. From the shadow of an ancient and bloodied tree came a woodsman who was more ax

than man who taught Polly about the blades and armor that slept beneath her soft skin and how to both conceal and utilize them with deadly efficiency. She was tutored in etiquette and manners by three sisters who came like shadows cast by the light of a glowing amber crown. Their lessons ranged from how to conduct oneself at luncheon to how to turn your adversaries *into* luncheon once polite conversation had exhausted its usefulness. As she grew older and her grasp on her own inner darkness improved, E.P. Barrow plumbed the depths of his own company and called up the darkest souls he had on hand: the legal affairs department. Those black-hearted ghouls taught the young woman all they knew of the laws of men and the subtle art of subverting it in ways that human litigators could only dream of.

Polly Barrow was well on her way to becoming the sharpest knife her father could ever hope to wield, but there was something missing. She was a good and obedient soldier who would do whatever her daddy asked of her and do it remarkably well, but in that respect, was she any different than E.P.'s legion of Hollow Men? He had soldiers aplenty. He needed a general. Nay, he needed a warrior queen to rule over the corporeal part of his kingdom. He had her forged with the hands of the most capable servants of the dark, and now it was time to temper her in the darkness itself. Letters were written, terms were agreed to and fees settled upon, and thus Pretty Polly Barrow traveled to a place known as the White Property, in the tiny backwater of Esserville, VA, for finishing school.

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Polly Barrow was not accustomed to waiting. She had arrived at this godforsaken farm in the late morning and had been waiting in this suffocating little parlor alone for god knew how long. Several of the strange, pale folk that had shepherded her into the main house had come and gone, offering her tea or coffee throughout the day, but she had refused. Polly was seldom sent anywhere on her own, but she reminded herself that her daddy had sent her here to learn and to be made stronger, and she would not let him down.

Creepy as the old farmhouse was, and as unsettling as the pale and silent inhabitants of the White Property were with their shuffling movements and obsequious bows, Polly Barrow was not easily impressed nor intimidated. She had just risen from her chair to stretch her legs when the main doors to the parlor swung open and a tall, hairless man eased into the room. He moved

carefully, assisting the gait of an elderly woman whose alabaster skin made his ashen form look the perfect picture of health. Her hair was pulled back into a prim and proper bun, and she wore a long dress with a pin-tucked bodice in a print of dainty pink roses. As the tall man eased her into a chair, and the dress settled about her middle, she was struck by the fact that the old woman appeared pregnant.

GRANNY WHITE: Thank you, Bryson. Thank you, boy.

The tall man called Bryson met Polly's eyes and did not blink.

BRYSON: Yes, Granny. I'll be just outside if you need anything.

GRANNY WHITE: You can leave us now. That's a good boy.

The room seemed to grow somewhat dimmer as the matriarch of the White family turned her gaze on Polly Barrow.

GRANNY WHITE: Now, now, what have we here? Oh my. Come closer. Let me look at you, girl.

Without thinking, Polly did as she was told, moving closer and allowing herself to be spun about so that the old woman could take in her curves and her designer dress.

GRANNY WHITE: Old Elias didn't exaggerate a bit, did he? You are lovely as a lily and just as finely made. Yes, you are. You been waiting long?

POLLY: Well I'm not one to complain, but—

GRANNY WHITE: Oh yes you are. But I don't care how long you've been waiting, girl. You're on my time here. Not that time matters all that much 'round these parts. We don't hold with your city ways of hustling and bustling and carrying on. No. No no no, we do not. 'Round here we bide our time, let folks come to us when they need something or want something or think they can get something from us for nothing.

POLLY: I beg your pardon, Miss White. I assure you, my father will make any time you spend helping me well worth your—

GRANNY WHITE: You think your old daddy has anything Granny White wants, girl? Man thinks he can just offer himself up to us, disincorporate himself from the world of men, and that makes him someone who might have something to tempt the likes of me?

Polly Barrow had had just about enough of this old biddy and her condescending tone. But when she raised her face in challenge, preparing to say that no one spoke about her daddy that way, and glared into the old woman's strange little ruby-lensed glasses, the world fell away. In that moment, Polly Barrow truly saw Granny White for the first time. She had often wondered what it was like for her father as he hung in his casket, basking in the glory of his masters, his body stripped away, his mind an open conduit to receive their overwhelming will, their unadulterated power. Seeing what lay behind the guise of the ancient crone who sat before her, Polly thought she might have the tiniest fraction of an idea. Her breath stopped in her chest. What sat before her was not another minion, another tutor, nor even another handmaid of Those Who Slept Beneath, but a direct representative of those her father served.

POLLY: I... I've seen you... in my dreams, I think.

GRANNY WHITE: Likely you have, girl. Many have been watching you since your daddy brought you forth. Most times trying to put a child in one of y'all is no end of trouble — abominations runnin' about underfoot making all sorts of mess — but your daddy planting his seed in one of us? That was a new idea, something nobody'd thought to try. Yes, it was. Yes yes yes, it was indeed.

POLLY: You... you are the Hungry Mother... She of All the Mouths, the Aching Void, the—

GRANNY WHITE: You can call me Granny, sweetheart. Granny White will do just fine. Now get yourself together, child. We have much to talk about.

Polly pulled an embroidered handkerchief from her clutch and dabbed at her eyes. The fine

cloth came away slightly bloody as Polly did her best to compose herself in the presence of her betters.

GRANNY WHITE: I have been apprised of your comings and goings, and while E.P. has you on the right track, more or less... hmhhh. I feel like maybe the mortal side of your blood might be holding you back a mite. Tell me about the moonshiners that refused to give up their land at Eagle Creek.

POLLY: Oh. Well, um... that was a simple matter, really. I had my man slip a little something extra into their last batch of corn whiskey. A little whisper of power and the spark off an old corn cob, and all that shine — including the cups sloshing around in their bellies — just caught fire and burned up in a... what do they call it... yes, a “blaze of glory”! It was quite a spectacle. Daddy was very pleased.

GRANNY WHITE: Mmmhmm. Well, why not just “have your man” pour turpentine or some other form of poison into that batch, hmm? Weren’t but fifteen or so men. None of them lived to see your little spectacle.

POLLY: I believe they were a little busy burning alive to see much of anything, Ms. White.

GRANNY WHITE: No, but they would have died slower and in more pain. If it had been me... yes, if it had been me, I’d have put strychnine in their hooch and watched them twitching and spasming and screaming for hours. The gasping of them dying fools as they smothered to death would have been... oh, just scrumptious. And you wouldn’t have had the law up there looking to see what almost started a goldurned forest fire!

POLLY: Mr. Crain handled the authorities just fine, and there were no complications. Daddy was very pleased—

GRANNY WHITE: Honey, lord knows my children here have become my right and left hands in all my doings, but you can’t always rely on the help. Now tell me about the homesteaders out in Olinger — the first time your daddy turned you loose to handle something on the company’s behalf.

POLLY: Oh, that? There were a bunch of bible thumpers squatting on valuable land. We just waited til the menfolk went out hunting, and then tore the women and the old folks to pieces by hand. Mr. Crain mounted the old Pastor's head on a pike, and it was—

GRANNY WHITE: Again. Again with the showing off. What happened when the menfolk came back from hunting, pray tell?

POLLY: Well, some of them thought their god had abandoned them. Others thought that a local tribe had gotten revenge for them taking the land in the first place. But it didn't matter, because Mr. Crain and Mr. Churchman just swept in like beautiful dark angels and—

GRANNY WHITE: And did your damn job for you! You have no patience. No ambition. No hunger. That's what you lack, little girl. You ain't hungry enough. No, you ain't *hungry* enough. Your daddy's done spoiled you rotten, giving you Hollow Men and fancy cars and all the pretty shiny things you can get your hands on. You think that's gonna take you far, sugar? Mm? Do ye? You think letting a man give you what *he* wants you to have is going to ever make you truly great? Truly *feared*? You wanna be daddy's lapdog, or do you wanna be his successor? Oh, your daddy has done some remarkable things, given his monkey-brain limitations. Yes, he has. He has. But don't get too full of yourself, little bird. Just because your daddy gave you a sharp beak and good talons to go with them purty feathers, well... It don't make you fly like one of us. What I'm saying is you ain't one of us, but you can be more than the men of this world will let you be. You can be better and mightier than any of them.

POLLY: With all due respect, Granny, what I've been doing thus far makes my daddy very happy. Why should I do anything different?

GRANNY WHITE: Oh, child. I know you're young, but you ain't stupid. What do you think is gonna be worth more to you — making your daddy happy, or proving yourself useful to the things that he skinned himself alive just to get a glimpse of? While he's down there in the dark trying to get somebody to tell him a secret or two, you're up here with the potential to shake this world down to its bones and see what comes next. You can sit on your daddy's lap your whole

life, or you can build a throne out of his precious casket one day. You think about that, little girl. You think long and you think hard.

Granny White let the moment hang in the air like pipe smoke as she watched the wheels turn inside young Polly Barrow's head.

GRANNY WHITE: Shew! All this gum-flapping has chewed up our evening, and lord, it's plum dark outside! Bryson! It's suppertime. Set a place for Miss Polly too if she wants to stay a while. Whatcha say, girl? Are you hungry?

POLLY: Very.

*[ "Build Mama a Coffin" by Blood on the Harp ]*

Today's story was written by Cam Collins and Steve Shell, and was originally intended to appear on select dates of the 2024 Unhallowed Grounds Tour. The voice of Granny White was Betsy Puckett. The voice of Pretty Polly Barrow was Tracey Johnston-Crum. Our outro music is by Blood on the Harp. Talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.