

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 4, Episode 61: Mixed Blessings

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 assembled body of onlookers were on the edge of their seats as the thing sitting upon the witness chair closed its eyes, smiling luridly as it relived the memory of striking its deal with Trevor Gilbert and unleashing its minions upon the man as he ran for his life through the place that was not Burke's Ridge. "Such a lovely day it was," Mr. Poe purred in his infected wound of a voice. "It's always a lovely day when you can do a bit of business and make a new friend in the bargain. Yes, it is."

There was such salacious joy in the thing's words that even some of the beings of the Dark flinched, while the black stag bobbed his head from side to side as if to say, "Well, yes, naturally."

Mr. Poe seemed lost in his recollection until the representative of the Dark, Miss Gray, cleared her throat, smiling politely until she had regained his full attention.

"So this man, Trevor Gilbert — did you allow him to make it home on that day, Mr. Poe?"

"Oh, yes. Oh yes, my dear," Mr. Poe answered in a patronizing tone.

Miss Gray lifted one immaculately shaped eyebrow, favoring Mr. Poe with the look a raptor gives a small woodland creature before it swoops down and invites it to dinner.

Mr. Poe stumbled, an expression of abject terror briefly dimming the orange of his eyes. "Oh, I mean, Miss Gray. Yes, I did." The beast's tails wove themselves into a handsome braid as he worked to regain his swagger. "A dead man can't produce a firstborn, now can he? Hmm? Well, not one that's worth anything. My tailypos just gave him the proper motivation to hurry back to that little homestead, lead us right to the place he and his blushing bride laid their little heads. He did that all on his own."

One of the tails in question rose up to rest under the creature's chin.

Mr. Poe nuzzled it affectionately and returned to his story. "I left this one right here behind to watch him, to make sure he'd keep his word. For wherever my tailypoos are, there I am also." He groomed the lush night-black fur of his chosen tail with a few quick licks of a long and forked tongue. "My babies help me keep an eye on my business and the many who owe me. Y'all think you's tricky," Mr. Poe crooned as he cast blazing eyes about the chamber, coming to rest upon the place where Marcie Walker sat in the gallery. " 'Specially you nasty old witches. Think you can outwit Mr. Poe. Think you can keep from Mr. Poe what he done haggled and traded for. You're dumb as stumps if that's what you be thinking. Dumb as rotten stumps fulla pollywogs. Nobody bloodies me no more. No, no, no, no. It might have took me from then till today, but one way or the other, Mr. Poe always gets—"

"You're gonna get yours sure enough, you jumped-up gristle-tongued polecat!" Marcie Walker snapped as she leapt to her feet, her eyes cold and flat despite the heat in her words.

The bailiff banged her staff twice. "Order! There will be order in this chamber, Miss Walker! If your sister cannot control herself, she will be removed." The bailiff's eyes flicked over to one of the white sashed attendants lining the far wall who took half a step forward, preparing to intervene.

Dougie Walker reached back and tugged at her sister's sleeve. "Marce, please," she whispered urgently.

Marcie jerked her arm away. Dougie could feel the tension and power in that motion and knew that if not for the binding in the room, Mr. Poe would not dare to speak to her sister that way. Hell, he might not speak ever again. He might just as easily be a burnt and greasy spot on the stone chamber's polished floor.

"Apologies, Harbinger," Marcie said stiffly, turning to face the hooded woman on the dais, and raising a hand gently, but firmly, to forestall the attendant from coming any closer. "I'll let this murdering little wretch tell you what it did, and I'll settle my grievances with it far from this

place. You have my word on that.” Marcie turned her thundering gaze back to Mr. Poe. “As do you, you mangy-ass, bottom-feeding vermin. By my mother’s name, I will have your hide.”

A murmur swept through the crowd. There may have been a prohibition on the use of gifts in the chamber, but no one could deny the power of a promise made by the proprietor of the Walker House as pure hatred poured off the tall woman in waves.

The bailiff called for order with three strokes of her staff this time. “Miss Walker! This is your final warning!”

Without a further word, Marcie Walker dipped her head in apology and sank back into her seat. Dougie spun around to face her sister and ask her what the hell was going on, but Marcie cut her off with a raised hand as she lifted her chin back in the direction of the witness chair. Her meaning was clear: “Just listen. You’ll see.”

“Miss Gray, you may resume,” the bailiff intoned, nodding to the elegant woman, who had not acknowledged the witch from Baker’s Gap’s diatribe.

Miss Gray had stood absolutely motionless until silence fell over the room once more, her head bowed over a notebook on the desk she shared with the representative of the Green, as if the only interruption in Mr. Poe’s testimony were due to her own momentary pause to consult her notes. Her expression was impassive when she raised her gaze to the witness, who if shaken by the other Miss Walker’s words, was doing its dead level best not to show it, its orange eyes smoldering.

She snapped her fingers to draw Mr. Poe’s attention back to the matter at hand. “Mr. Poe? Mr. Poe!”

The witness turned its furious gaze from Marcie Walker to the pewter eyes of Miss Gray, and the snarl that had risen unbidden to its muzzle faded as the woman’s unspoken guidance reminded him of their purpose. “I apologize for that most distasteful interruption, Mr. Poe,” she said, her voice soothing, helping the creature find its mental footing once more. “Please, do continue.”

[“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*

Trevor Gilbert made it safely home to the little farm he shared with his missus, but he could not have told you how. He had run hell bent for cornbread through the misty woods that were not Burke’s Ridge or the Devil’s Divide or any other place he might recognize, the awful chittering and skittering servitors of the thing to which he had promised his firstborn child surrounding him on every side. They nipped at his heels, swung down to scream in his face from tree branches overhanging his path, but they never did him any serious injury.

He’d come around the far side of a stand of pines when one of the slithery, snake-like creatures shot in front of him, crossing his ankles like a tightrope, and down he went. He closed his eyes tight, waiting for the claws and teeth of these unnatural horrors to pick him apart like turkey buzzards on roadkill, but they did no such thing. Instead, when Trevor opened his eyes, he found himself at the edge of his own property line. The skinny creek that bounded his pitiful north field lay a few paces ahead. He stood, dusted himself off, and watched the trees for a long moment. There was no chittering, no slithering — nothing but the usual sounds of the southwestern Virginia woods on a cool autumn evening.

“Trev?” called a half worried, half irritated voice from the other side of the creek.

Trevor Gilbert spun around to find his wife June picking her way gingerly across the thick log that served them as a bridge across the narrow little stream to join him.

“Trevor Dwayne Gilbert, where have you been? I’ve been worried sick about you! You can’t do that to me, honey. I expected you back yesterday. I was about to get a search party together to go out looking for you, but here you are. Did you get anything?”

Trevor Gilbert shook his head, full of shame now, realizing that he’d forgotten the reason he’d gone and got himself lost in the woods in the first place. He glanced back the way he’d come, tears touching the corners of his eyes as he realized he’d lost his gun, his pack, and all the supplies he’d carried out with him — possessions he lacked the money to replace. Despair welled inside him. He opened his mouth to stammer an explanation, but suddenly June cried out in delight.

“Well, lookee here!” She strode back towards the treeline, where his pack lay at the edge of the property, looking suddenly and unaccountably heavier than the last time he’d seen it.

Trevor followed her, peering over her shoulder as she opened the bag. Inside were a half dozen field dressed squirrels, a couple of rabbits, and a fat grouse. Trevor squinted at the bird, a tasty bit of game known around these parts as the “chicken of the woods.” He hadn’t so much as laid eyes on a grouse the whole season. What’s more, you typically needed a shotgun to hunt grouse, not the .22 that he owned. It appeared Trevor had managed to bag a veritable smorgasbord of small game without firing a single shot.

“Trevor, sweetheart, get your gun out of the grass before it gets all wet,” his wife admonished. Sure enough, there was the rifle he’d dropped on the ground this morning, somehow transported here alongside the pack he knew he’d left behind when he made camp the night before. Trevor stared at it in dumb silence, and she frowned up at him with concern. “Are you feeling all right, honey? You look a little peaked.”

In Trevor’s mind, he could hear the creature’s wheedling voice. *You will prosper, but your firstborn will be mine.*

He evaded June’s questions about the hunt, instead admitting shame-facedly to getting drunk on ‘shine. He was still feeling the weight of his hangover, he assured her, and she quieted with a frown that was far less disapproving than it might otherwise have been, had he not returned

with such a bounty to stock their pantry. Trevor had never raised a hand to her, nor offered her much trouble at all when he climbed down a bottle, but she was no fool. She'd seen the struggles writ clear on the faces of other women at church when excessive love of spirits took hold of a man. Still, her Trevor had come home sober this morning, if a touch hungover, and they had meat to eat and put up in the smokehouse for winter. You take your blessings where you find them, and the Gilberts were about to find more than their fair share.

Over the course of the next two seasons, the fortunes of the young people improved by leaps and bounds. Before the first snow fell, they received a letter from a lawyer in Roanoke informing Trevor that a great uncle he never knew existed had passed, leaving him a tidy sum of money along with a barnful of milking cows that were already under contract to a dairy over in Bradford. The sale of their milk would bring in enough money for Junie to stop taking in washing if she wanted to and cover the repairs their roof desperately needed besides. Trevor wouldn't even have to tend the cows. His great-uncle had left behind a trust that would continue to pay the wages of the men he'd hired to care for them. The lawyer told Trevor to thank the lord and cash the checks, and he'd write to them if anything needed their attention.

Winter was mild by Hazel County standards, and Christmas had come and gone with a festive gathering of Trevor's family and Juney's Paw. Ol' Kev had become cranky in his later years, but he liked Trevor well enough. June didn't have any other family close by. Her mama had come from West Virginia, and she had some people down in Tennessee, but nobody that wrote or visited regularly. Come spring, they did their usual planting, which usually amounted to diddle and squat, the soil of the Gilbert place being a rocky wasteland filled with weeds and bugs that chewed the leaves of anything green and growing to tattered ribbons.

This year, however, it was as if someone had snuck in when the ground was blanketed with snow and laid down a whole new field of sod. Their crops rose up full and rich from the ground and remained untouched by insects, deer, and even rabbits. They had plenty to eat and a solid roof over their heads that didn't leak when summer's inevitable thunderstorms soaked the mountains around them. Life was good. Trevor's time spent lost in the woods and the bargain he'd made with the many-tailed creature seemed little more than a bad dream that faded more with each passing day. Trevor came to forget about it most days, and on the days when the thing's strange

eyes and awful voice rose in his mind, he would laugh to himself and shake his head at how clever he'd been, promising the strange beast a child that would never come.

As the food they put in their bellies and the quality of the place they laid their heads steadily improved, so did the morale in the Gilbert home. It was a place of laughter and warmth. Trevor had not taken nor wanted a drink in months. Uncle Keeby had visited at Christmas and left him several healthy jugs of his newest distillations, but they'd been gathering dust on the top shelf of the pantry since winter. Trevor and June worked hard and raised good crops and fine livestock. He would come home at the end of a long day working the fields to find his wife had whipped up a supper that would satisfy the most finicky of palates. He'd wash the dishes and the two of them would retire to the brand new feather bed they had purchased to express their thorough and mutual appreciation for one another long into the night.

After one such night of sweet talking and lovemaking, Trevor stepped out onto the back porch to smoke a roll-up and drink a glass of sweet tea before he closed his eyes for the night. He was taking in the beauty of their little patch of land in all its evening glory when a sound reached his ears, coming from over by the creek. A sort of chittering. There was rustling in the bushes, and something skittered up the trunk of the stately oak that marked the western corner of the property line. A raccoon maybe? Or a possum?

Trevor squinted hard into the darkness, and something peered back with unblinking orange eyes that smoldered like twin candles. Trevor hurried inside to snatch his new rifle from the gun cabinet Ol' Kev had given them for Christmas. When he returned to the porch, he raised it to his shoulder, sighting down the barrel in the direction of the oak tree. There was nothing there. A branch swayed gently in the breeze, and for a moment all was quiet. Then he heard the sound of an animal running low to the ground through the brush. Trevor fired in that direction, his heart hammering, but the little scurrying footsteps continued until they faded into the distance.

"Trev, honey, is everything all right?" Juney called from the bedroom.

"It's fine. Just a groundhog, I think, out in the near field. I think I scared him off."

"Oh, that's good. Come back to bed, sugar. It's late."

Trevor stepped inside, put his rifle back in the cabinet, and made certain the door was latched firmly behind him before crawling back into bed. As his wife slept warm and content by his side, he drifted in and out of sleep, nightmares chasing him back to wakefulness. Visions of the foggy clearing and the thing's burning eyes haunted him. The monsters chased him home again. Trevor had almost convinced himself that the whole thing never happened, but now... What had been out there in the old oak tree? Was that... it? Or one of the creatures it had set upon him? Trevor shuddered and rolled onto his side. He didn't know what they thought they'd claim if they came looking to call in his debt. There were no babies to be found on the Gilbert farm, and as far as Trevor knew, there never would be.

As the good year drew near to a close and the days grew shorter, June Gilbert announced one morning that she would like to pay her kin down in Tennessee a brief visit. While they had other obligations that kept them from visiting at Christmastime, she wanted to share their good fortune with her mama's people, perhaps take them a small gift. Trevor had smiled fondly and kissed her cheek, and told her he thought that was a fine idea, though the harvest would keep him busy at home. June assured him that she would be fine on her own, and took the train south from Mineral City to visit her auntie in Tennessee.

Though she hadn't shared the information with her husband — not yet, anyway — there was more to June Gilbert's desire to visit her mother's sister than simple familial affection. June had missed her monthlies the past couple of moons, and had begun feeling a bit poorly in the mornings of late. The truth was, she suspected she might at long last be carrying the child she and Trevor had longed for. That suspicion brought with it a heady mix of elation and fear. She had found it so hard to conceive. What if she was wrong? What if, instead of a baby, something more sinister lurked within her womb? She had heard of tumors that could cause similar symptoms, and the last thing she wanted was to get Trevor's hopes up, only to learn later that she was wrong, or worse, sick.

Before she made any mention of her condition to her husband, she thought it best to consult an expert. There were closer nurses she might call upon, but her aunt was well known to be a

skilled midwife and a talented healer, and there was no one June trusted more with such matters. She turned up unannounced on the older woman's porch, where she received a warm welcome. Over a cup of tea clutched in trembling hands, she confessed her fears, and her auntie squeezed her hand. All would be well, she promised. She had come to the right place.

The next morning, June's aunt put her on the train with a fierce hug and tears of joy in her eyes. June wasn't sick. She was in fact in the prime of health, and the seed growing in her belly was not the specter of death but the new life they had longed to bring into the world. She told herself the shock she saw on Trevor's face when she told him was nothing more than surprise and wonder at this latest bit of good fortune, that the fear in his eyes was only the expected jitters any new father might feel. When he hugged her, tears ran down his cheeks, and she thought they must be tears of joy.

Trevor *was* happy. How could he not be? He told himself his encounter with the strange creature in the woods when he'd been lost was just a bad dream, the residual effects of a night of drinking strong 'shine. Perhaps his guardian angel warning him off the stuff. And yet as June's pregnancy wore on, the dreams of his lost time in that place of mist and burning eyes came to him more and more frequently. In his waking hours, he'd see those orange eyes — sometimes multiple sets of them — peering at him from the woods on the far side of the creek. In the first couple of months, he'd poured enough buckshot into those trees trying to run off whatever was out there that June became worried he was drinking again. But he'd shown her the jugs and jars of shine his uncle had left him, untouched on their high shelf. The stress of the coming harvest was getting to him, he told her. Between that and the baby coming, he'd never been stretched so thin.

He wanted to tell her what was really going on, but he wasn't sure if the things he felt and saw were even real, or merely the result of an overactive imagination under pressure. In all honesty, he thought she might think he was losing his mind. June had come up in a family that kept to a lot of the old granny ways and traditions. She'd told him some stories that would keep a grown man up at night. And yet... how do you tell your eight-months-pregnant wife that you've promised the baby she carries to a monster out in the deep woods? It sounded crazy. It *was* crazy, he told himself. June would be fine. The *baby* would be fine.

It was the final nightmare that broke him. Trevor could not have said how he knew it was the *final* nightmare, but it was. He had woken in the light of breaking dawn — which is to say he'd overslept. But that was all right, as it was Sunday, and even the lord took one day out of seven to rest. The light through the window was touched with pink, the sort of a rose-golden sunrise that you only see a few times in your life if you're lucky, and the bed was soft and warm. Trevor felt Juney shift beside him, and he rolled over to see that her shift had ridden up in the night. He could see the curve of her belly in that golden glow. He had always thought she was the most beautiful woman to ever walk god's green earth, but seeing her carrying the child they made, he thought her a literal angel sent from heaven.

He propped himself up on one elbow to watch her sleep, and the movement caused her to stir. June rolled onto her back, bringing her full belly into view, and there, perched atop its round and lovely peak, was the thing to which he had promised his firstborn child. It was curled around itself like a cat, its thick coat gleaming in the sun. It seemed to be sleeping, its many tails curled beneath it like a cushion. A single paw clutched gently at his wife's skin, the razor sharp claws flexed possessively. Scratched into her flesh, blood beginning to bead along the surface, was a single word: *Mine*.

Trevor woke up screaming.

["Atonement" by Jon Charles Dwyer]

Well, hey there, family. Things are getting dark over at the Gilbert place, ain't they? They're only gonna get darker as the tale of Mr. Poe and this unborn baby plays out. I hope you'll come back and join us to find out. I truly hope you will. Family, we are about to take us a little break. In seasons two and three we took a break every five episodes, and this time around we've pushed ourselves to the midpoint. So we know we need to take a breather so we can bring you a solid second half of season four. We will return on February 8th, 2024, with Episode 62 to wrap up this bit of testimony in the trial of Mr. J.T. Fields of Paradise.

Y'all, I wanna take a second now that we've made that announcement to thank all of y'all — from those of you who listen on platforms like Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and so on, to our family tossing coins in the collection plate over on Patreon — for your support and your help in making

this show what it's become. This was supposed to be a fun little project between two old friends from the middle of nowhere and has turned into more than we could have ever dreamed. When we started out, it was as the pandemic raised up, and y'all literally kept the lights on and bought groceries for us and our extended family when jobs were lost and folks were sick. Now that the show has grown to the size it is now, you've not only changed our lives, but I wonder if you know you've changed the lives of a lot of folks around the world, especially in Appalachia. Your support — be it listening to those damn advertisements or tithing on Patreon — it not only enables us to keep making the show as a full time job, you enable us to give a whole bunch of that money away. In the past year, we were able to give tens of thousands of dollars to things like the Trevor Project, the Eastern KY Mutual Aid fund, and other groups dedicated to getting charitable aid to people who get overlooked by bigger organizations, and a lot of times we just passed some of those funds to folks in mutual aid groups like Eastern KY Mutual Aid. We encourage you to seek out mutual aid groups in your own area and help your people, because only us is gonna take care of us. For example, not long ago Eastern KY was ravaged by floods that erased entire communities from the map, and there are folks out there recovering from that. The fact that y'all have been so generous with us lets us pass some of those blessings on to folks who need help with groceries and light bills and medication, just like y'all did with us in the early days of the show. You've enabled us to donate money to tons of fundraising efforts benefiting people's furbabies, helping people who just don't have the resources to get by, and help them get by. Y'all helped us get on our feet when the world turned upside down, and y'all are still doing that for folks all over the place hether you realize it or not. We appreciate each and every one of you that's listening, and we can't say thank you enough.

So we'll see y'all on February 8th for the second half of season four. Familiar & Beloved will return to Patreon on January 30th, 2024, as well. And this is your go check on your elders, it's getting cold outside reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's story was written by Steve Shell and Cam Collins. Our intro music is by Brother Landon Blood. Our outro music, "Atonement" is by Brother Jon Charles Dwyer. The Voice of D.L. Walker is Cam Collins. We'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.