

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

Old Gods of Appalachia presents
School Spirit: A Tale for the Season
Deep Springs, VA
1983

The wind had grown teeth as Bonnie Culbertson's late model Chevette crept up Bobcat Drive toward the looming three-storey edifice of Deep Springs High School. The roads weren't too slick just yet, but the air carried that particular smell of ice-water and freedom that promised the coming holiday break would last longer than its scheduled week and half. Hell, last year the kids had gotten out on December 18th and didn't set foot on school grounds again until the end of January. The snow in central Appalachia knows neither kindness nor mercy and is no respecter of persons. In Esau, Issac and Grant Counties in the highlands of Virginia, the 1983 holiday season arrived with low-hanging clouds that dropped their dazzling burden on the haves and have-nots alike until everything slept beneath a frost-kissed crust of blinding white. The folk of the mountains could shovel and plow all they wanted, and the bounty of the winter sky would still loiter in dirty piles in the corner of shopping center parking lots for weeks after the skies cleared.

Bonnie pulled to a stop just off the front steps of the school and peered up through her grimy windshield at the heavy gray clouds. She winced as the first flakes began to fall, swirling lazily in the icy gale. She turned in her seat to face the two young men currently stinking up her backseat with a roughly a gallon of cheap cologne between the two of them that was failing to mask the smell of the Marlboro Reds they'd sucked down before she'd picked them up that morning.

"All right, boys, here we are. I swear on your mamaw's life, Tyler, if I wreck my car trying to get back home, I'll take it out of both your hides."

Tyler Culbertson shrugged helplessly back at his mom. He'd told her they'd bum a ride from one of his friends. He'd woken up extra early so he could walk from their single wide in the Parkway Lanes trailer park to his best friend Chris' house down by the edge of Cooley Holler, but his

mom had called Chris' mom and told her not to let them leave with nobody. She'd be there to drive them to the school.

Chris' mom wouldn't let them leave, or use the phone to call Marcus Isenhour to come get them. Chris' mom and her whole group of church friends had been on fire about the devil trying to influence their children with drugs and heavy metal music, and how they had to be vigilant about the company they kept. Marcus Isenhour was the devil in a blue jean jacket, and everybody knew it. He'd been caught selling marijuana cigarettes behind the school by Vice Principal Collins. He was three years older than Tyler and Chris, and there was no way her baby was running around with some dope-dealing drop out on her watch. No sir. Everybody knew that the marijuana was nothing more than a gateway drug that would lead to the cocaine, and that led to sex with girls who didn't want to do nothing but have welfare babies and worship the devil. So, no sir, no ma'am, Chris and Tyler could wait out on the porch for Tyler's mommy to come get them. Yes, they could.

“Mom, I tried to tell you we could get a ride—”

Bonnie Culbertson shot her son a look that conveyed that she wasn't nearly as stupid as he thought she was. It was bad enough they'd landed themselves in out of school suspension for five whole days for fighting. Assigning the boys community service hours on top of that only added insult to injury. It hadn't even really been a fight, and hell, Tyler and Chris hadn't done nothing to nobody. But if you were a “long-hair” who listened to that devil music and smoked cigarettes out by the bus shed, and trouble manifested anywhere on the hallowed campus of Deep Springs High School near your vicinity, then you were probably gonna get blamed for it.

“Now, y'all just go in there and do whatever Mr. Collins asks you to, and you do it with a smile and a spring in your step. Y'hear me?”

Rusty Collins was about as bright and open-minded as the position of vice principal typically called for in rural Virginia in the 1980s. He'd gone to school with pretty much everybody's parents, and would call your folks in a heartbeat if you so much as put a toe out of line. Collins had been a social studies teacher with dreams of ascending to the lofty role of football coach when Coach Renfro retired, but the school board had seen fit to fill that vacancy with an

experienced coach from Tennessee with a slew of state championships under his belt. Becoming a school administrator had been the next best thing. He could still yell at kids and tell them how they weren't living up to their full potential, without the tedious work of educating getting in the way.

“Christopher, your Daddy’s gonna come pick y’all up at five in his four wheel drive, is he not?”

Chris Ramey nodded. Seeing Bonnie’s eyebrow’s raise in the rearview mirror, he mumbled hastily, “Uh, yes ma’am.”

“That’s what I thought. It’s bad enough they got y’all coming out here to serve your time when it’s about to snow deeper than six foot Jesus, but I guess that’s what happens when you whoop the ass of the one linebacker whose Daddy is on the school board, now ain’t it?”

The boys erupted in protest. Tyler had been prepared to defend himself, but he was startled to hear Chris backtalk *his* Mom. Chris Ramey did his best to stay off the radar of every parent in Deep Springs. He had had his share of troubles when he was younger. He got in more fights in the sixth grade than just about anybody else, but when Chris’ older brother Benny got sent to juvie for that thing that happened at the drive-in with them boys from Mineral City, he’d told Chris to cool it. No more fighting. No more getting caught with weed. And if Benny saw him on the inside at juvie, he’d whip his ass six ways to Sunday.

“This ain’t even fair! Me and Tyler didn’t even do anything. We were just witnesses! I swear, Miss C.”

“Now, now. Y’all don’t have to pretend with me. Truth to tell, it was about time somebody shut that little turd’s mouth. That Strouth boy had it coming, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little bit proud of y’all for giving it to him.”

JD Strouth — or Strouth the Mouth, as his coaches called him — was a trash-talking, shoulder punching, mom-joke-making senior linebacker for the Deep Springs Bobcats who spent more time on the bench hollering insults at the other team than he ever did playing football. A big boy, he could buy beer three towns over without a fake ID, easy. JD was a petty-ass bully whose

Daddy was a dentist who happened to occupy a seat on the Grant County School Board. He was also currently in the hospital with a broken arm, four busted ribs, and a concussion with a side of whiplash, which was why Tyler, Chris, and a third boy named Justin Shepherd were about to spend their weekend in the empty halls of Deep Springs High School instead of getting high in the shed out back of Marcus Isenhour's uncle's house. Hell, they might have been on their way to juvenile detention themselves, except JD wouldn't tell anyone what had actually happened. Thus, no charges could be brought, despite Dr. Strouth's best efforts.

"I told you and Daddy that we didn't do nothing, Mama. We were out there smoking, sure, but we didn't lay a finger on JD. He was trying to start something with us, but we didn't—"

"I know, I know. Y'all didn't do it. All right, now get out of the car so I can get turned around."

The boys climbed out of the backseat of the Chevette and stepped onto the sidewalk so that Bonnie could make the awkward three point turn that would allow her to go back down Bobcat Drive without having to pull through the full bus loop. As she completed her turn, she rolled down her window and called to her boy.

"Tyler? Mommy loves you, all right?"

Tyler turned three shades of pink, glancing awkwardly at his best friend, who was politely looking elsewhere.

"Love you too, mama," Tyle muttered. Chris honored their friendship by only laughing a little bit.

As the snow fell and Bonnie Culbertson made her way back to Parkway Lanes, Tyler and Chris stood in the shadow of the building that had been their second home and prison for what felt like an eternity. This weekend, however, would be the last time they set foot through its doors. Following a growing trend in many rural parts of the commonwealth, Grant County had passed a measure to consolidate its high schools. The flight of families to cities in search of better jobs as the crown of the great king coal began to lose its luster was leading more and more folks out of Appalachia. The declining tax base made it harder for small counties to support multiple

schools. Thus, Grant County would bring the St. Charles Crusaders, the Johnstown Bulldogs, the Flat Ridge Eagles, Stone Creek Mountaineers, and the Deep Springs Bobcats together under one roof at the newly established Grant High School, home of the Generals. Deep Springs, like the rest of the schools in the county, was slated to remain open through the rest of the school year, but a water line break in the cafeteria over Halloween weekend had flooded the whole first floor and rendered the cafeteria itself unsanitary and unsafe to occupy. So instead, when Deep Springs students came back from winter break, they would resume classes in trailers set up behind Wallens Elementary just over the hill. Given that the new school building would be ready for use the following August, it had not made good fiscal sense to undertake the costly repairs necessary to make DSH habitable again.

To say that the consolidation initiative had been contentious in Grant County would go well beyond understatement, approaching the territory of euphemism. You see, in the mountains of central Appalachia, high school athletics inspire a level of tribalism rivaled only by church membership and eternal salvation. Hell, if you're Freewill Baptist, you might backslide your way out of the good graces of the Lord, but you're a Bulldog or a Bobcat for life. There's not a man nor god that can take that from you. There were incendiary town hall meetings and there were passionate protests, but in the end, facts were facts. The commonwealth wasn't going to continue funding a school built for seven hundred kids that boasted enrollment wavering around two hundred in most cases. B&L Mineral Resources had offered to endow the new school, practically donating a swath of reclaimed land central to the existing school locations for the building of a new county high school, and the deal was done. A new mascot and school colors were chosen, and construction began with all haste.

Folks were distraught for months after the county announced its decision. One letter to the editor in the local paper asked plaintively, "If I'm not a Johnstown Bulldog anymore, what am I?" Those blocky brick buildings tucked away on mountain back roads had formed the cornerstones of most communities. The closest any town ever felt, outside of a direct union action, was gathering under the floodlights to cheer on their boys in pads and helmets as they knocked heads with their neighbors for annual bragging rights. Another editorial pondered, "Are we even a town anymore if we don't have our own football team to root for?" Consolidating schools might be good for the state's bottom line, and in the end, it might provide a more consistent educational experience for students. But not every teacher would have a job waiting

for them at the shiny new county high school. Arch-rivals would have to learn to coexist and cooperate. You'd essentially be putting your kids on a bus to go to another town and attend school with strangers. It was a blow to the heart of many small communities.

Tyler and Chris weren't thinking about any of this as they walked through the front doors of Deep Springs High School that Saturday. They just wanted to make it through what promised to be a long and tedious day and get on with their lives, such as they were. The front doors of the school opened into a foyer with the main office on its right and twin pairs of double doors opening on the gymnasium to the left. A trophy case spanned the wall between the two entrances to the gym. Until recently, the case had been chock full of polished trophies and medals in bronze, silver and gold, the spoils of victory at the district, regional, and in a few rare cases, state level in various flavors of sport. Those shelves now stood empty, as all the school's laurels had been packed into storage. The plan was to line one of the hallways of Grant County High School with the relics of the consolidated schools' past glories, while reserving the front hallway for new conquests.

The yawning doors of the gym stared into the foyer like the sockets of a freshly stripped skull. All the signage about food and drink in the gym and the massive WELCOME TO THE BOBCAT DEN banner that had hung over the visitor's side entrance were gone. The walls looked too bare, Tyler thought. It was like glimpsing a relative through a bathroom door left unfortunately ajar as they got in the shower. Some things you just weren't meant to see naked. Past the entrance to the gym, the hall narrowed and at the end of it sat a pair of double doors that opened onto the north staircase. The stairs going down led to the freshman hall in the basement, which was bookended by the locker rooms beneath the gym on one end and the ruined cafeteria on the other. The ascending stairs would take one to the eleventh and twelfth grade hall of English and History classrooms, as well as their home for the day, apparently, the library.

Outside, the wind howled and the door they had entered through flew open and hung there in the blast of frigid air, pinned against the outside wall. Chris ran over and grabbed the handle, pulling it shut with a bang. The sound of the latch clicking into place echoed in the empty front hall. The two boys stood there a moment, taking in the hollowed-out corpse of their alma mater. There were no lights on in the front of the office. They couldn't see all the way back to Principal

Watts' office or the tiny closet that served as Mr. Collins' office, but if there was someone in there, you'd imagine the lights would be on, or at least the door left propped open. Tyler walked over and knocked on the door, hoping someone in the back would come out and tell them what to do. They waited a moment, and Tyler knocked again, a bit louder this time, but the office remained dark and deserted.

"Dude, over here," Chris called as he spotted a folding table set up near the empty trophy case. A clipboard on the table held a single sheet of paper with the words "Community Service Sign In" written across the top in block letters. Below this heading was a grid with just three names printed in that same childlike handwriting. Chris read them aloud in a dead-on impression of their not-so beloved Vice-Principal Collins:

"T. Culbertson: Library. C. Ramey: Library. J. Shepherd: Library/Custodial."

He finished with a flourish scratching his signature onto the sign-up sheet on the line with his name and handing it to Tyler, who scribbled something that at least appeared to begin with a T onto the page, then looked closer.

"Aw hell, they got Justin up there with us? I wasn't even paying attention when you read that. Shit, man, I don't wanna be anywhere near that kid."

"Well, it says library *and* custodial, so maybe we won't see much of him," Chris said as he and Tyler headed across the foyer towards the north stairwell.

Two dark flights of stairs later, the boys found themselves on the third floor. Had the school remained open, this would have been where their English and Government classes were held in the mornings. After lunch, they'd take the bus over to the technical school for their trade classes. Tyler was taking sheet metal and masonry, while Chris studied welding and electronics.

The boys felt no shame in being "shop bus kids," anymore than they did being called anything else by the preps and adults in their school. Chris knew the kind of money he could make as a welder, and his plan was to sell just enough of his brother's remaining stash of good weed to fund any additional training he'd need after high school. He could land a good job working

somewhere far from this town and the mines where his daddy worked. Chris' dad did all right, but Chris saw the toll that working his way up to a piddling middle management position had taken on his health, and that wasn't gonna be him.

The third floor hallway yawned before them like an open throat. The exit sign at its north end cast a bloody glow over closed classroom doors and beige lockers. The middle stairwell was dark, its sign having long since given up the ghost. The same was true of the south stairwell, casting the windowless hallway into blackness from about midway to the end. If the classroom doors had been open, the weak gray sunlight of the snowy day would have flooded the hallway, but for some reason all the doors were closed. This struck Tyler as a bit odd. They'd all come out to the school after the flooding to retrieve books and personal belongings from lockers and get their new classroom assignments at the temporary trailers set up at the elementary school. All the doors had been left wide open to air out the damp and the stink. Here on the third floor though, where there had been no flooding, everything was shut up and dark.

Luckily for the boys, they had taken the stairs on the same end of the school as the library, and the poster-covered door advising them that "Reading is FUNdamental!" was propped open. As they stepped inside, Tyler breathed in the smell that can only come from a school library, that distinct aroma that is one part books, one part copier toner, and one part carpet older than god. The Deep Springs High School library was not large, but it had been a refuge for Tyler for the past two years. He didn't talk much in his English class, and he knew a lot of those kids thought he was dumb because he didn't chime in with opinions on *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Great Gatsby* (both were overrated and misunderstood by most folks). He knew for a fact that Mrs. Graham, his English teacher, would not have believed him had he told her the number of books he actually read when left to his own devices. Frank Herbert, Ursula Le Guin, and Ray Bradbury had been his go-tos since eighth grade. Stephen King was his current favorite. He'd kept the hardcover copy of *Different Seasons* out way past its return date, just as he had Bradbury's *Long After Midnight*. Short stories made more sense to him, and he could re-read them over and over again.

Chris wandered over to the check-out counter and peered behind it, looking for the school librarian.

“Hey, Miss D! You here?” he called as he peered into the back office area.

“The light’s out,” Tyler said, joining him at the desk. “Oh wait, look. We got another note. ‘Gone to get more boxes. Please sort books according to their Dewey decimal designation. If there are boxes under the table, go ahead and start packing them. Back soon. Miss D,’” Tyler read, looking over the brightly lit room.

The right hand side of the library was filled with little round tables that seated four or five students and ran from the edge of the bookshelves in the reference section up to the periodicals. Each table had a tented piece of cardstock with a range of Dewey Decimal numbers on it. Outside, snow whipped by the windows and had begun to stick where it landed below.

“Are we the only ones here today?” Chris asked as he approached a table that had empty boxes beneath it.

“What, are we gonna get a memo at 5 from old Flat Top Collins saying we can just go home?” Tyler snorted a laugh and surveyed the partially dismantled room with an almost nostalgic shake of his head. “Jesus, this place is falling apart. C’mon, man, let’s get this over with.”

The boys worked in companionable silence for almost three hours with no sign of Miss D or any other adult. They filled all the available boxes and labeled them to match the other boxes, which they assumed Miss D had packed herself, and had moved on to pulling books from their shelves and placing them on the appropriate tables to be boxed up whenever Miss D returned. The only sounds were the occasional muffled roar from the winter storm outside, and the tinny rattle of Iron Maiden bleeding out from under the foam earpads of Chris’ off-brand WalkMan. Chris pulled reference books from the shelves as a tiny Bruce Dickenson wailed about the Number of the Beast. They’d established a quiet, easy rhythm, and honestly the day hadn’t been that bad, when the ancient intercom above the librarian’s desk blared to life, scaring them both half out of their skins.

“CULBERTSON! RAMEY! IS Y’ALL UP THERE?” came the distorted, but unmistakable voice of Ol Flat Top — the sort of man who assumed he needed to shout into any device intended to carry his voice to anyone out of his line of sight — himself.

“Yeah, Mr. Collins, we’re here.”

“EXCUSE ME?”

Chris took off his headphones and rolled his eyes, “Yes, sir. We’re both here. Is Miss D back with more boxes?”

“I DON’T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THAT. Y’ALL SEEN SHEPHERD UP THERE?”

Tyler looked uneasily at Chris and answered, “No, sir. Just been us up here since this morning.”

“HE WAS SUPPOSED TO CLEAR CLEANING SUPPLIES OUT OF THE JANITORIAL CLOSETS UNTIL 10 . THEN HE’S SUPPOSED TO COME WORK WITH YOU TWO.”

With a smirk to Tyler, Chris parroted back, “We don’t know anything about that, Mr. Collins. Uh, sir.”

“I’VE GOT A LOT OF WORK DOWN HERE CLOSING UP THE OFFICE. I NEED Y’ALL TO GO FIND HIM. CHECK THE JANITOR’S CLOSETS. MAKE SURE THE LITTLE GENIUS HASN’T POISONED HIMSELF OR ANYTHING.”

“But Mr. Collins, we—” began Tyler.

“NO BUTS, BOYS. GO FIND MR. SHEPHERD, THEN Y’ALL COME DOWN BY MY OFFICE. I GOT SACK LUNCHES FOR ALL THREE OF YOU.”

“Can you at least turn the hallway lights on so we can see what we’re doing?” Chris called up at the wooden box with its fabric-mesh grill

No response.

“Mr. Collins? A little light would make this a lot easier.”

The intercom remained silent. The mighty Flat Top had spoken.

Twenty minutes later, Chris and Tyler made their way down the third floor hallway, their eyes adjusting slowly as they eased into the darkness. They took their time, and not just because the school suddenly felt huge and strange and not at all like the place where they'd spent the past two years navigating the ruthless food chain that was high school life. They didn't *want* to find Justin Shepherd. No one would want to find Justin Shepherd if they'd seen what really happened out by the bus shed that day.

Justin wasn't a metal kid or a long-hair like them, but he was just as much an outcast. His family had moved to Grant County from some little town up in Kentucky so his dad could become the pastor of some church off Poor Valley Road. The building — a busted up old cinder block meeting house whose congregation had white-washed it in a failed attempt to lend it greater respectability — had housed a Primitive Baptist congregation that had grown too old and too few and ended up combining with a church over in Ben Hur. This new body of worship was all about hollering in tongues and spewing even more hellfire and brimstone than your average southwest Virginian church, which is saying a lot. The whole family had a sort of intense energy around them that felt... well, scary.

Justin wasn't your average preacher's kid either. He was fifteen and had never rebelled by smoking or drinking or even cussing, as far as Tyler could tell. Justin's rebellion came in the form of an unholy ritual that had mothers and fathers across the nation clutching their pearls and calling for heaven to intervene. He was a practitioner of a foul art that was sure to suck his soul and the souls of all his friends right down to the fiery depths of H E double Russian hockey sticks. Justin Shepherd played Dungeons & Dragons. Correction: Justin *lived* for Dungeons and Dragons. It was all he talked about and all he ever wanted to do.

Tyler and Chris had said what the hell and played a few sessions with him and a couple of other social pariahs from school. They spent three weekends in the basement at Tyler's house, with Justin running them through a seemingly endless series of traps and rooms filled with skeletons and lizard men and slimes. Dear god, so many slimes. When Bonnie Culbertson figured out what game they were playing in her basement, she put a stop to it. She'd heard the rumors. Chris'

mom belonged to a church where the message every Wednesday night and Sunday morning was “the Satanists are after our children and they’re using men in leather pants and role playing games to do it,” so his house would have proved a poor choice for their dungeon-crawling adventures.

That was when Justin got the big idea to use the downstairs Sunday school classroom at his dad’s church. They never even got a chance to play. Justin’s dad — who wasn’t supposed to be anywhere near the church that day, according to Justin — had come down to the basement to fetch some tools he’d forgotten at the church, and found his very own son sitting in the house of god, wearing all black and presiding over a table covered in maps and books of monsters and witchcraft. There were pages in Justin’s own handwriting describing clerics serving gods and a whole other hell’s worth of demons and devils. The night had not gone well for Justin. When the other kids had shown up to sneak into the church, they could hear Bishop Shepherd — as he asked to be called — screaming at his son and calling out to his god to deliver the boy from this dark bondage.

Needless to say, no one stuck around to find out how the evening ended. Justin hadn’t asked them to play after that, but he still hung around. They never asked him what happened that night, or if he was ok. The sounds they heard coming from the basement that night were too scary to talk about, and besides, Justin seemed to be all right. He didn’t have a black eye, or any signs that his dad put hands on him where they could see it. He was weird, sure, but they were all weird.

The incident out by the bus shed had happened on Thursday. They’d been out there smoking, cutting study hall, and Justin had snuck out with them. JD Strouth had pulled into the student parking lot in the brand new Pontiac Firebird his daddy bought him for graduation and spotted them right away. With a quick look around to make sure no one would see him talking to the likes of them, he’d made a bee-line in their direction. He greeted them with his obligatory “sup ladies” and “oh am I interrupting you and your boyfriend’s private time?” jokes, but got around to the point quick enough. He wanted weed. He didn’t want to buy weed from Chris, which a lot of football players did. He wanted Chris to give him weed. More than that, he wanted what was left of Chris’ older brother’s stash. JD said he knew how much weed Ben Ramey dealt before he got sent off, and he told Chris that he wanted the whole lot of it or he would rat him out to his

uncle, who was, of course, a cop. Chris had told him that Benny had gotten rid of his stash before he left and what he was selling was just ragweed he'd gotten from a cousin, but JD was having none of it. He put hands on Chris, slamming him against the wall of the bus shed.

Tyler had looked around for anyone who might see them, but they had chosen their little smoking spot too well, and were well outside the sightlines of any classroom windows.

That was when Justin spoke up. "Let him go, asshole."

At first JD had ignored him, and kept slamming Chris against the shed, making more threats — he'd get him sent to juvie so he could show his brother that being a loser just ran in their family, and so on and so forth.

So Justin raised his voice a notch. "I said, let him go."

And then little Justin Shepherd, all 5 foot 3, buck-fifteen of him, grabbed JD Strouth's big meat slab of an arm and physically spun him around to face him.

JD shot the kid an "are you serious?" look, and threw a casual swing at Justin's head. Justin's head in turn darted to the side, dodging the punch like something out of a Bruce Lee movie, and then he sank his teeth into JD's forearm. What happened next defied physics and reality. Tyler and Jason never moved to help Justin. They never needed to. Justin Shepherd, in that moment, had become someone or something else. Something that nearly killed a boy two times his size with his bare hands.

The first janitor's closet Chris and Tyler came to sat at the end of the third floor hallway, tucked into a small alcove past the last classroom. The door was old, polished oak with a heavy duty brass knob and a thick lock plate. There was an engraved industrial plaque screwed into the wood, the designation JANITOR 1 engraved in block letters. When Tyler tried the knob, he found it locked. Hell, it didn't even jiggle.

"You think he's hiding in there?" Chris asked, taking his glasses off to wipe them on his shirt.

Tyler shook his head. “I don’t think I’ve ever even seen this one open. I think it’s actually a machine room or something.”

“Well, where’s the next one?” asked Chris.

Tyler thought for a second. “I think there’s another one on the second floor, back by the auditorium. But can’t we just tell Flat Top we couldn’t— wait, do you hear that?”

Hear wha—” Chris began, but the answer became suddenly clear. As the boys turned and watched, all along the hallway, door after door flew open as if sucked inward by bellows of some great forge, then slammed shut. The impacts reverberated like artillery in the locker-lined passage, striking like physical blows. Tyler covered his ears and Chris did the same as the cacophony around them grew and their balance faltered. The fluorescents overhead surged into brightness and then winked out again, lightning to accompany the thunder of the doors. There was a hateful buzz of electricity as every fixture lining the third floor hallway blazed to blinding whiteness. Then, just as suddenly as the assault had begun, all the doors slammed shut at once, and everything went black and silent.

For several long moments, both boys crouched on the floor, beaten into submission by sight and sound. Now there was no light at all. Darkness swallowed everything including the exit sign back by the library door that had been their sole illumination when they’d entered the hallway. Then, as they watched, the exit sign mounted by the middle stairway blinked and fritzed, blinked and fritzed, then came to life with a steady hum, its cherry light casting a syrupy glow on the closed classroom door across the hall.

“What... what the hell was that?”

Chris Ramey just shook his head and pointed at the glowing exit sign. “Is that where we need to go?”

“Are you high right now? We need to go back to the library and call the office and get Mr. Collins and—”

A door slammed. Tension filled the air as the lights overhead flickered and doorknobs rattled.

“I don’t think we get a choice,” Chris stammered.

Another door slammed.

“We’re going! We’re going,” Tyler called, raising his hands to placate who or whatever was doing this. Another door swung wide, and the two boys broke into a run, heading down the middle stairwell.

This led them back down to the second floor, where the math and business classrooms had been located. The overhead lights remained cold and silent, but here only some of the classroom doors were shut. Here and there, the snow-smothered sunlight stretched weakly through open doors. If they turned left, they should have been able to see the double doors leading into the auditorium, while on their right they should see the home side entrance to the gym, back down the hall where they’d entered the building.

They saw neither of these things. To their left they did find the sliding metal grating that was used to secure the auditorium doors when it wasn’t open but the gym or other areas inside of the school were. What lay behind those flexible metal bars, however, was not the auditorium. Instead of a set of heavy double doors, there was nothing. Literally nothing. A gaping void occupied the space behind that thin metal cage, and it was *breathing*.

Tyler couldn’t wrap his mind around the fact that there was nothing there, but at the same time that nothing was pushing against the bars, reaching for them. This was more than an absence of the tangible. It was a ravenous, toothless maw that sought to swallow them whole, crush them in its gullet, and pass them on into some infernal stomach to be quietly digested for all eternity. At the same time, there was a sense of... patience about it. It was more than willing to wait for them to come to it, as if that would eventually be the only logical choice.

To the right, the front hall still stood, almost shocking in its normalcy. They could see the gym doors, the corner of the table where they signed in. They could see people. The gym was lit and the unmistakable murmur of a crowd echoed down the hallway. The smell of popcorn and a

concession stand taunted them. The urge to run toward that light and nourishment was almost overwhelming. Tyler was about to bolt for the safety of warmth and light and people, but Chris caught his eye and shook his head in warning.

After a moment Chris nodded, and they slowly moved away from the hole or mouth or whatever it was that had blossomed in the middle of their auditorium. Cautiously, they made their way towards the opposite end of the hall. They tried not to run for fear of attracting the attention of whatever it was or wasn't behind them. The more they walked, though, the longer the hallway seemed to become. The more steps they took towards the light and the people and the mouth-watering aroma of hot dogs and popcorn, the further away that world seemed. If they moved too fast, the lights, the sounds, the smells began to fade. Behind them, the metal grating strained against the encroaching darkness. Chris heard it creak and thought he might have heard a bolt pop loose.

It was Tyler who broke first. He panicked and ran, muscles burning, feet aching from the miles they seemed to have walked already.

The lights in the gym winked out. All signs of people and life faded completely. The end of the hallway grew increasingly darker, until it too was an empty, seeking mouth. Chris bolted after Tyler, catching up to snatch him by the back of his shirt, and both boys went down hard. Chris clambered to his feet and just before the darkness took them, he saw the door. It was set deeper into the wall than a classroom door, and he must have walked by it a hundred times but never noticed it. Without thinking, he seized the heavy brass knob of the wide dutch door bearing a sign that read simply JANITOR 2 ,and dragged Tyler inside.

The heavy door swung shut behind them, and the two boys found themselves in the closest thing the custodians of Deep Springs High had to an office. It was a fairly large, L-shaped room that felt downright homey, all things considered. To the left of the door, on the short side of the L, stood a small wheeled cart with a coffee maker that looked as though it was probably purchased when the school was built in the 1940s and a refrigerator of more recent vintage. Across from those squatted an old, battered leather sofa and a small formica table with three metal folding chairs.

Justin Shepherd sat at the table, his nose buried in a worn softcover book. Its cover featured the classic image of a wizard, complete with robe, pointy hat and glowing staff, waving his hand at a gap in the air — a portal into another world that revealed an even more exciting scene of a heroic warrior-maiden facing down something that looked vaguely like a dragon. A yellow banner in the upper left corner read “EXPERT RULES.” On the table in front of him rested a yellow legal pad on which he had scribbled copious notes and a pile of clear acrylic dice, resting on a faux-velvet drawstring bag.

“My dad thought he threw all my books away, but I’d left my good dice and the expert set here at school.”

“Uh-huh,” Tyler began cautiously. “What’s going on, Justin? What are you doing in here?”

“Hm?” Justin’s eyes never left the book as he jotted a figure down on the yellow legal pad.

“I think what Tyler is trying to ask is what the hell is going on, Shepherd? First you go all Wolverine Berserker Rage on JD and put him in the hospital. Now the whole damn school is doing its best Poltergeist impression, and you’re just sitting here figuring out THAC0 stats or something like everything is normal.”

“You never said thank you, Chris,” Justin muttered quietly, his eyes never leaving the page.

“What?”

“You never said thank you. When someone does you a favor, you usually say thank you. You didn’t.”

“What would I thank you for, Justin? For getting a fight put on my permanent record? Getting me and Tyler suspended for shit we didn’t even do?”

“Yeah,” Justin began distractedly, pausing for a moment to compare a chart in the book to the numbers he’d copied down. “But I doubt JD is going to try to come after your brother’s stash

again. I bet he's too scared to do much of anything these days. Did you hear him cry when I broke his arm? He's not sleeping much either."

"Mmhm. Well uh, what do you mean he ain't sleeping? How can you know that?" Tyler asked warily.

"I'm not explaining anything until Chris says thank you."

"I guess you'll be waiting for a minute because I'm not—"

"SAY THANK YOU."

The words hit the boys like a gutpunch, and all the air fled their lungs. Chris dropped to one knee. It was like the doors on the third floor, a sound you felt more than heard. Justin finally set his book down, leering up at his friends with a smile full of teeth that seemed far too long. The same teeth that had torn chunks out of JD Strouth's arm. Tyler thought at first it might just be the weirdness of the day or the glaring fluorescent light in the room, but no. Justin's whole face was changing. His eyes grew larger and further apart, a second black iris with a smoldering orange center blooming in his left eye like a malignant dandelion. He could see the other boy's bones rearranging themselves beneath the skin. Justin cracked his neck and seemed to grow an inch or two when he straightened up. He rose from his seat, and it was like watching a time lapse film of a tree growing in earth science. He was indeed taller. His neck had lengthened. His shoulders stretched to an unseemly width. He flexed his fingers with a sound like stepping on cockroaches, and when he spoke again, the voice that crawled its way out of Justin Shepherd's mouth was no longer one they fully recognized.

"You've always been a rude little shit, Chris," Justin spat. "Like that night y'all were supposed to come to the church to play but my dad got there first. Y'all never checked on me. Never asked what happened."

The thing that had been Justin Shepherd arched its back and moved side to side. Tyler could see its legs reshaping themselves, the knee joints kicking backward as Justin's shoes were shredded by the oversized talons that pushed through his cheap store-brand sneakers.

“He kept me there all night. Anointed me with oils and prayed over me for hours. He slapped my face — not hard enough to leave a mark — and he struck my body, commanding the demons to leave it. Beat me with his belt like the Romans whipped Christ. When nothing happened, well... he lit candles and dug deep into books that no church around here has ever seen probably. Called out to God in tongues long since forgotten in this place, and still I defied him.”

The thing looked pensive for a moment, and when it spoke again, it sounded more like their friend. “I told him we were just playing a game, but he took all my books and maps and dice and burned them and prayed over the ashes. He poured his whole hateful heart out that night and locked me in the church to ‘think about how I wanted to be seen by God.’ It was cold in there, and dark. I don’t know if y’all know anything about that old building and where it sits, but the people that sold it to my Dad’s church? They knew something wasn’t right. There wasn’t anything in me when I come to the church that night. Y’all know that. Anybody with half a brain knows it’s just a game. These old fools are working themselves up chasing shadows and monsters don’t even realize that they’re making monsters of themselves in the meantime.”

It shook its head almost sadly. “God might not have answered all daddy’s speaking in tongues and candles and oils, but something did. It came to me in the church that night, whispered things that I didn’t want to be true but couldn’t deny. It promised me power and safety. That no one would ever treat me the way my daddy did ever again. No more bullies. No more taking shit from anybody, and Daddy didn’t have nobody else to blame now. He locked me in there with it, and now I can be exactly what he always thought I was.” The thing’s eyes burned with vengeance, the second iris seething with a pale orange light. “Y’all can be part of this too, you know. I’ve told them about you.”

“Justin,” Chris asked carefully, still trying to wrap his head around their sad little tagalong turning into an actual monster. “What did you tell... them... about us?”

“That y’all were sick of putting up with other people too. That y’all had been pushed around and made to feel small.” The second iris in his left eye was moving back and forth between Chris and Justin like a fourth person in the room. “It says y’all would be welcome to join our fellowship. All you have to do is let me show you how.”

Justin's transformation had continued throughout this explanation, and he now stood a good foot taller than both of them, his clothes rotting away. His skin had stretched and torn as this new form was born from within his body. Chris' thoughts flew hysterically to the Incredible Hulk's pants. Bruce Banner would erupt into his mighty green giant form, laying waste to so many pairs of pants that somehow always seemed to be purple. That's what was happening to Justin, but this thing was being born out of his body, rather than just turning him into Lou Ferigno like the TV show. The thing before them extended its long, spindly fingered hand to the two of them, and Tyler could see that the skin of his palm had sloughed off partially. The fresh tissue beneath gleamed a wet and viscous red, the color of organs clotted with bad blood.

"Just take my hand, boys," said a voice that sounded nothing like Justin, a voice that somehow echoed deep inside their heads, rather than in their ears. "Take my hand and never know fear again."

Chris wanted to run, wanted to bolt out of there like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs, but the mind-bending wrongness of this thing that had once been their friend held him spellbound. What would it be like to be able to take revenge on every jock who ever hassled him for weed? To pay back all those parents who told their kids they couldn't be friends with the drug dealer's little brother? How would Pastor Don down at Dawson's Chapel react to him coming to church with his mom at long last, seven foot tall with a burning orange eye, ready to teach him about the *real* power in the blood?

Then he caught sight of Tyler, out of the corner of his eye. Tyler was reaching out to take this thing's hand. Tyler, whose mama still told him she loved him when she dropped him off at school. Tyler, who took the blame for stuff he didn't do and rolled with it, because he knew you could only fight back so much and nobody was listening anyway. Tyler, who deserved better than whatever had gotten a hold of Justin Shepherd's broken heart and turned him into the kind of thing that crawled through the dungeons of their games, waiting to be slain by a band of plucky adventurers. Without a second thought, Chris snatched Tyler around the waist and hauled him backward away from the thing.

"Gonna have to pass on that one, Shepherd. We... gotta get back to work."

The thing riding Justin Shepherd laughed. “I don’t think you understand, Chris. I was only asking to be polite. They’ve already decided y’all are gonna join our little party, and it’s not an invitation you can decline. You’ll play whether you like it or not.”

Tyler looked down at the scene before them and had to suppress a hysterical little laugh as he realized that the monstrous thing that had once been their friend was currently standing behind what was essentially a gaming table, his DM books and notes set out before him along with his prize set of clear, transparent gaming dice. If Justin wasn’t trying to turn them into monsters for real, this would have been the baddest ass game ever. As it was, Tyler thought fast and acted faster, reaching out to snatch the dice off the table with one hand and flipping the table over on the creature with the other.

The thing jumped back, startled, looking down at the mess Tyler had made. “Hey!” The note of offended dismay in its voice was clearly Justin’s, as he surveyed his expert set of D&D rule books and careful notes, now scattered on the dirty floor.

“Well if we gotta play, then consider this my saving throw, asshole!” Tyler Culbertson threw the handful of dice as hard as he could at the monster’s head.

Justin gasped and scrambled to retrieve the pieces of clear acrylic, while Tyler and Chris ran for the door of the second floor hallway. They threw it open and sprinted through, and immediately were swallowed by snow.

“What the fuck?” Chris stared around them in confusion. They should have emerged from the janitor’s room into the second floor hallway, but instead they found themselves outside.

They stood behind the school, on the sidewalk where second run buses loaded in the shadow of the school. The wind howled and snow pelted them with the relentless force of Appalachia in late December. The clouds hung even lower and gray in the sky, spewing an endless deluge of flakes down onto the campus. They could see cars buried under snow drifts in the student lot. In the pickup lane, a bus lay on its side, rear driver’s side tire spinning idly, its stop sign folded up against its side like a broken bird’s wing.

A car that looked an awful lot like Tyler's mom's little Chevette had skidded into the fence surrounding the tennis courts, its front bumper missing and the windshield cracked from one side to the other. But that didn't make any sense, Tyler thought. She'd gone back home after dropping him off this morning. Was she all right? Her car was all kinds of wrecked. He'd watched her drive off. Tyler started walking in that direction, his face and hair blasted by the onslaught of wet snow.

Chris didn't notice his friend walk away. He had turned to look past the overturned bus, where his dad's truck sat idling in the pickup lane, the only running engine in a row of cars buried under feet of falling snow. That wasn't right. Chris' dad wasn't due for another few hours yet. Could it be another truck, just the same model? The windows had fogged over so he couldn't see the driver within. Chris started jogging over to the pickup.

Behind him he heard the sound of a car door opening, followed by Tyler's scream.

Chris pivoted on his heel to see Tyler standing beside what looked like the shell of his mom's car. The door was open, and something that was absolutely not Bonnie Jean Culberton was hoisting itself through the open door. It was huge, easily as big as the thing Justin had become, but thicker through the chest, with two massive, curved horns jutting from its forehead. One glowing orange eye burned through the snowy downpour. It pulled itself free of the car and lurched toward Tyler. In a voice like metal grinding on rock, it croaked, "Mommy loves you Tyler. C'mere. C'mon now." Tyler was backing away, but not nearly quickly enough.

Chris was about to run to him when he heard the engine of his dad's truck rev and he turned back. The driver's side door screeched open, and a beast with a thick belly and a long tattered beard crawled from the truck, unfolding itself to a height that should have been impossible to squeeze into the pickup. It looked as though someone dressed up a monster in a Chris' daddy costume. "Boy, I can't tell you how disappointed I am right now. I ain't mad, just disappointed," the thing groaned. It swept one muscled, tentacular arm in his direction, but Chris stumbled back, just out of reach. He turned and ran toward the tennis courts, meeting Tyler — who'd finally started running — about halfway between the cars that so clearly did not belong to their parents.

Other cars were shaking and rocking now, doors flying open, windshields shattering, as more and more of the rotten-skinned giants cracked the shells of used Toyotas, Chevys and Fords, emerging into the snow drifts of the parking lot. In the distance, a cherry red Pontiac Firebird simply ripped apart. Chris was willing to bet if that one got close enough it would greet them with “hey there, ladies” in JD Strouth’s skoal-lipped drawl. Chris grabbed Tyler by the arm and pulled him back toward the school.

As they took their first step back the way they’d come out, the school bus’ stop sign suddenly flipped up, red lights flashing, its crossing alarm beeping feebly before a thickly veined black tentacle covered in weeping suckers like sores blasted through the opening folding door with a roar. The two boys sprinted for the building, slipping and sliding until they reached the double doors midway down its length.

To their great relief, this time the door led them where they expected — the first floor of Deep Springs High School. This was the freshman hallway, where the journey into their teenage years had truly begun. They found the floor covered in a thick black mush that smelled like human waste and the guts of a field dressed deer. The fungus-like substance crawled up the walls in thick tendrils and dripped from the fluorescent lights. The doors to the south hallway weren’t an option — not because they were locked or chained shut, they just weren’t there. Nor were the stairs that should have ascended right behind them as they stepped through the middle entrance. The doors to the boys and girls locker rooms were overgrown with the black muck from the floor, so the only path open to them was south, where the cafeteria doors stood shut at the end of the hall.

The Deep Springs cafeteria had been cordoned off after the Halloween flood. Tyler and Chris could see the familiar yellow caution tape had come loose at one corner, drooping to the floor. Tyler thought he remembered the double doors being secured with a chain and padlock when they’d come to clean out their lockers, but there was no sign of that now. As they drew closer, he noticed that the sound of their footsteps changed, their sneakers making a wet, squishing sound that slowly changed to a gentle splash. Looking down, he saw a deepening puddle of water beneath their feet, leading right up to the cafeteria doors.

“Aw shit. Really!?” Chris exclaimed as they reached the cafeteria.

Through the glass panels inset in the two doors, they could see that the school lunchroom was flooded yet again. The water rose nearly to the top of the glass. How that much water was even contained by a set of simple school doors was beyond Tyler. It was a hazy, muddy green, its surface slicked with a layer of blackish green algae, like a still pond too often visited by passing geese, and within its murky depths, the boys could see things moving. Not drifting, like floating debris, but moving sinuously, with purpose, through the water.

As they watched, the water rose, pressing against the thin barrier of metal and glass. The doors rattled in their frame, seeming to almost swell.

“I don’t think we’re going to be able to get out this way,” Tyler observed, as the two boys took a step back in unison.

The doors rattled again. Murky, stinking water began to spray through the crack between them. Chris and Tyler turned and bolted down the first floor hallway as the sound of gushing water grew behind them.

“There!” Chris yelled, pointing. At the end of the hall, a door had opened, spilling fluorescent light into the dark corridor. As the first wave of putrid water hit them, the teenagers stumbled across the open threshold and found themselves back in the library.

“Ah! There you are. I wondered where you boys got off to,” a familiar voice called from the back office. Smiling in welcome, Deep Springs High’s librarian, Miss Dooley, emerged from the office carrying a stack of folded boxes. She was the epitome of the middle aged school librarian, dressed for comfort in a baggy sweatshirt, candy cane patterned sweatpants and old tennis shoes. A holiday themed shawl was draped over her shoulders, and atop her head, a headband decorated with two tiny reindeer antlers poked up through her crown of lovely, deep red hair.

Chris Ramey had never imagined he could be so happy to see an adult. The two boys stumbled over to the circulation desk, nearly shaking with relief as they babbled over each other trying to explain the events of that benighted Saturday morning.

“Justin— it’s Justin. I mean it *was* Justin, he—”

“His eye! What the fuck happened to his *eye*?”

“Boys. Boys!” Miss Dooley held up a hand to quiet them, and the two boys lapsed into silence.

Chris felt almost embarrassed, imagining what they must sound like to her. She wouldn’t believe them, of course. Adults never took them seriously, never believed anything—

“I need you to just settle down now, and answer some questions for me. Can you do that? I can handle this, but I have to understand what I’m dealing with, so I need you to think hard, and give me as much detail as you can, all right?”

Led by her gentle questioning, the two boys were able to tell her everything in more coherent fashion, from Justin’s attack on JD to the night they were supposed to play D&D at the church and everything Justin told them had happened that night. It took a few minutes for her to coax the details of Justin’s transformation from them, because who in the world would believe that? But Miss Dooley patiently let them tell it, nodding along thoughtfully, and eventually the whole story had been laid bare before her.

As she listened, Miss Dooley had picked up one of the new boxes she had brought in, snapped it into its functional form and had begun to draw on it with a permanent magic marker as she listened. Strange shapes and symbols covered half the box before she stopped them and asked, “So Justin said something *whispered* these truths to him, did he? He used that word specifically? And you said his eye glowed *orange*, like there was a bit of ember stuck up in there? And they came to him in an old church, when he’d been brought to his lowest by something he loved or the loss of it?”

The boys nodded, confused. Was Miss D taking them seriously? She hadn’t once asked if they were high or drunk.

“And when you’ve tried to run from it, the doors you went through — they led to distorted versions of familiar places? The back of the school by the bus shed, the freshman hall, out by the gym?”

Again, the boys nodded, watching the wheels clearly turning in Miss Dooley’s mind.

“Mm, I think I know what’s going on. I’ve run across things like this before. They have a name, though it’s not one we could ever speak out loud — nor would we want to — but a friend of mine a while back named them after that old television show back in the black and white picture days. Called them the Liars’ Club. They’ll come to people at their lowest, usually in a place that makes them feel vulnerable — in a church, at a loved one’s grave, for instance — places they’ve gone seeking safe harbor and found betrayal instead. They’ll show you all the power they can give you, promise you revenge on those that did you wrong, but at the end of the day? It’s all a lie. There’s no power. There’s no revenge. They talk you into some foolishness that causes pain and death. Then while you’re standing there with blood on your hands, they take you. Tear you apart until all that’s left of you is your own whispering voice, and you become part of their black-tongued chorus, moving on to draw the next poor sucker in. I hear they’ve taken down whole towns with the right tool at their disposal.”

Miss Dooley looked up at the sound of the north stairwell doors banging open. The sound of heavy footsteps echoed in the hallway, and before anyone could react, the library door flew off its hinges as the thing that had been Justin Shepherd ducked its head and squeezed through the library’s single door.

“CHRIS! TYLER! YOU CAN RUN BUT YOU CAN’T—”

Whatever the beast was going to say next was cut short as the small red headed librarian hopped to her feet, and strode across the carpet to face the monster that had just invaded her domain as if she were clad in a suit of armor rather than a Deep Springs Volleyball sweatshirt and a shawl covered in tiny snowmen. With the iron will of a woman who deals with children trying to find their way into places they aren’t supposed to be ten months out of the year, she snapped, “Oi! Mister Shepherd! Do you have a hall pass?”

“Miss D, I don’t want to hurt you, but they belong to us now.” The creature extended a long, slimy finger toward Chris and Tyler.

“I’m afraid they’re within my boundaries now, Justin. This little collection of books has been under my protection for the past six years, and just because today is the last day doesn’t make it any different.”

“We have marked them. They are promised to us by their bosom kin, and by the Rites of the Black Loam, we claim—”

“Oh, you’re *that* old are you? I know that pact, know it well. I was taught it by the thing that wrote it in the deep places where not even moss can grow.”

“What?” The monster’s eyes narrowed, seeming to really see Miss Dooley for the first time. Then they widened, and it stepped back.

“Oh, there’s a clever lad. See me and know my name, as I see and name yours, O Whisperer of Sorrow, O Deacon of Lies. Your true name is a blasphemy to the green, and I will not call it, but what true name can a liar even have? You have sown fear and doubt in these children’s hearts, and you may have taken one, but you will not take another. Not on my watch.”

The thing looking out of Justin Shepherd’s eyes looked confused, but it retreated several steps from the petite woman all the same. “How? How can you be her? How can you be in this place if you are... *her*? I... I beg mercy. I beg mercy in your patron’s name. I too have walked with the Black St—”

The beast bit his tongue as Miss Dooley’s eyes went cold and she picked up the cardboard box she’d been scribbling on from the table. “Oh little shadow, I have no patron now. I walk my own path and my deeds are of my own choosing. Those who try to bind one such as I end up broken and scattered to the wind like so many ashes. So consider this your act of mercy.”

Miss Dooley dropped the box she’d bedecked with symbols and strange shapes at the monster’s feet. To Tyler’s amazement, the symbols begin to glow a shocking green, throbbing like a

heartbeat as they began multiplying. Soon they covered the entire box. The flaps on its top blew open, and that green light poured from within. Justin — or the thing he'd become — began to scream. The air vibrated as though a parade of coal trucks had come speeding through the room. As they watched, the monster that had twisted their friend into something horrible was sucked into the vortex of that eerie green light one piece at a time. First its skin ripped free of muscle and bone with a wet tearing sound. Then whatever passed for its blood, followed by viscous, roopy organs. It was horrific to watch. Finally, its massive skeleton crumbled like the cold remains of a campfire into Miss Dooley's cardboard box, and it snapped shut again.

The strange light faded away, leaving only a plain cardboard box in the middle of the library floor. The figures Miss Dooley had scribed across its surface in plain black Sharpie were gone. The tension in the room ebbed away like air seeping out of a balloon. Deep Springs High was just a school again, or what was left of it — a crumbling brick building filled with water-stained plaster and moldy old carpet that was due to be demolished pretty soon.

Miss Dooley knelt by the box and taped it shut with clear packing tape. “Well, that’s one I’ll have to dispose of myself, I guess. Easily done, I suppose. I’m sorry you had to see that, boys.”

“Miss Dooley, how did you do that? How did you know?”

“There are things in this world that are never going to make sense, boys. I’ve learned in my years here that high school is one of them. It’s a lot of growth, a lot of hurt. It can be a lot of good, can be a lot of bad. But it’s something that at the end of it, you’ll wonder what the hell that was about. That’s where I’d file today, if I were you. There are things in the world that just don’t make sense, and you’d do well not to think too hard on them. Might be easier for you next year. New building, new faces. A fresh start always helps, I find.”

“Will uh... will we see you again? I mean this fall... at the new school?”

“I’m afraid not, boys. The librarian from Stone Creek was offered the position at the new high school. She has more experience than I do, so... I’ll be moving along. I’ve got some family business down in Tennessee that I’ll have to tend to soon enough. But that’s enough excitement for one day, don’t you think? There are three undoubtedly delicious sack lunches back in my

office that Mr. Collins was good enough to drop off for you. I believe I'll help myself to Mr. Shepherd's. I don't think he'd mind."

[God's Dark Heaven by Those Poor Bastards]

Well hey there, family. Happy holidays and happy New Year, y'all. We want to thank y'all for indulging us on bumping this year's holiday special out to New Year's Day so we could wrangle this absolute monster of an episode properly. Hope y'all enjoyed that. It was a whole bunch of work with a whole lot of great people.

We hope everybody is having a wonderful — or at least survivable — holiday season. There are two episodes left in Season 3: *As Above, So Below*, and you'll be getting the first of those in just a few days on January 5th, 2023. Season 3 comes to a close the following week on January 12th, 2023. We have so much exciting stuff coming for y'all in the new year, including a brand new patreon series, exciting news about more live shows, quite possibly in various and diverse locations, and we just want y'all to know how grateful and thankful we are that y'all are still with us and keep bringing in new family members as we wrap up our third season.

And this is your dang its been so freaking cold 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 our brother Landon Blood and our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. The voice of Bonnie Culbertson was Renee Hill, the voice of Tyler Culbertson was Jacob Danielsen-Moore, the voice of Chris Ramey was Matt Evans, and the voice of Vice Principal Rusty "Flat Top" Collins was Brandon Sartain. Happy holidays. We'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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