

## **OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA**

### Season 1 Episode 4.5: The Bad Death and Resurrection of Annie Messer

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

#### The Bad Death and Resurrection of Annie Messer: An Interlude

The flies on Carol Anne Avery's face shifted and waved like a mourner's veil. The wind had set her to turning. Cletus and Annie Messer arrived at the Avery place to find it ravaged by violence and unspeakable darkness. The only sound outside the flies was the creaking of the branch as Carol Anne started unseeingly down at the pair of them.

Annie Messer was stunned into blessed silence for a moment before tears filled her eyes as she babbled and cried.

[Annie's voice, distraught:] "Oh my Lord, Cletus, I've never seen anything like this. This poor family... Oh my Lord, where's Sarah? We gotta find Sarah. Oh my God. You reckon we should cut her down? I mean, we have to cut her down, right? It's the right thing to do. We can't just leave her up there."

The ride from Barlo to Goshun Creek should have taken a couple of hours in a slow cart at best, but Annie Messer insisted on stopping once for prayer beside a particularly

pretty waterfall and again to make water herself, and she was never a woman for travelling in a straight line to begin with, but then... she started to swear they were being watched, which of course required them to stop for even more prayer.

But she wasn't wrong though. Cletus would have sworn they were being followed. But not followed, Cletus thought – tracked. Hunted. He picked up on the sounds shortly as they left Barlo proper. The first few times he turned his head he expected to see men on horseback, or a cart like theirs, emerging from the wood as the ground spoke and thick branches bent and groaned as something massive pushed through them. Every time they stopped and looked, or even took cover in a bunch of trees to see if who or whatever it was would pass – there was nothing. No one.

[Whispering voices, now clearly breathing Cletus's name.]

As they grew closer to Goshun Creek, Cletus went cold. The voices had begun to speak. They told Cletus not to worry – that this was all part of their vision. Bringing them the Avery Girl would absolutely guarantee his family's safety. Just bring her.

Bring her.

Bring.

Her.

The voices almost howled with ecstasy. Now that they stood here, on the far side of the creek, in the shadow of Pinky Avery's late wife, the air was barely breathable. Where Carol Anne had emptied herself after departing her body, a dark stain marked the ground and from that stain a cancerous black sludge spread. It grew and spread like a fungus – pungent and ripe with the smell of spoilt meat. It climbed the trunks of nearby trees and had begun to creep up the steps of the Avery cabin.

The yard itself was a different sort of horror. The ground was gouged and slashed. In places it looked like things with great clawed feet had pushed off from the soft earth leaving ragged craters filled with a putrid, bile-colored ichor. What's worse, tiny things swam in those pus-clouded depths and the thought of what might live in there made Cletus want to scream until his heart gave out.

The door to the cabin was in splinters. The glass of the window panes lay in a thousand broken whimpers on the desecrated front room floor. Piles of some sort of animal scat littered the floor and were smeared across the bare walls. Blind white things too large to be called maggots moved among that nightmare of filth and stench. What furniture had been in the front room was kindling now. The down of pillows and blankets stuck matted with the foul waste to the walls and floor. Something or someone had torn through this house and befouled it. Someone or something had been looking for Sarah

Avery. Sarah Avery, who made the voices practically salivate. Sarah Avery, who he wouldn't know if he saw her because her family never came to church and had never got saved nor baptised. Sarah Avery, who was just a little girl and thankfully Sarah Avery, who was not here. Between the voices' rapturous approval of his presence here at the Avery homestead and the yammering of Annie Messer, who honestly could not shut up if you paid her good money, Cletus's head was about to bust.

Suddenly, Annie Messer's voice fell silent along with the voices that had been rattling the inside of Cletus's thoughts. The change was jarring and Cletus spun to see what was going on. Annie was staring at a spot just beyond the corner of the cabin, where something massive and nothing at all seemed to compete to occupy the same space at the same time.

Cletus squinted hard at it. It was like his eyes wanted to see whatever it was that Annie was staring at but his mind wouldn't let him. Light bent and shimmered and refused to show the shape of whatever was staring Annie Messer down. From behind him, the ground squelched and thrummed as something heavy dropped from the branches of a nearby tree. Cletus turned as quick as he could to see what was there. To see what had followed them over a too-long wagon ride for most of a day without ever once being seen. But before he truly understood what was happening the voices in his head... no... a singular voice this time... *the* Voice in his head had growled a word louder than any

whisper it had ever used to speak to him and it felt like his head was indeed split open as he screamed and he clenched his eyes and fell back to the ground.

When he opened them, he wished he'd been born blind. What had dropped from the tree, what had followed and stalked them all day, and what had apparently just charged him with the might and weight of a draft horse lay sprawled on the ground fully visible and Cletus saw it. He wished to God he hadn't, but what can you do?

If he had to compare it to anything he would have called it a dog, or maybe a wolf – except that its hide was hairless, its skin a pale blue and visibly soft like that of a drowned child. It had at least six legs in the tangle of limbs on its lower half, each one ending thick black claws that seemed to retract like a cat's – well they'd have to, he thought, there's no way it could walk otherwise, and then he looked closer at its legs. Each limb was covered in eyes. Brown with bloodshot whites, green with scarlet blobs floating around the iris, milky white and sightless orbs that seemed to pant like open mouths, and a pair scarlet that smoldered and throbbed a sick blood clot brown. Its body was thick and broad like a boar. Its head was that of a hairless wolf or something wolflike but with nightmarishly wrong tusks growing from the underside of its jaws. Its ears were wide and batlike. Its brow held three eyes. Two that looked black and empty and one like a burning golden sun at the center of its forehead. Its maw was an endless valley of blades and spires some that looked like teeth and others like cruelly sharpened stones. Its tongue hung from its limp jaws – long and black and forked – smoke or

steam rising from where the viscous rope met the cooling, rotten air. Its breathing was ragged but was beginning to steady.

Before Cletus could react, the Thing was on its feet, tongue retracted behind that cave-in of a mouth and it was staring at him, the tip of that tongue now scenting the air like a snake – that center eye locked on his face. And again. The solitary voice in Cletus's head spoke a word he did not understand but was clearly a command. The Low Thing in front of him cowered.

*It is a dog, he thought. It's one of their dogs, and I think it just got told.* Without warning the thing leapt past Cletus and into the woods, its body vanishing back into that shimmer of unsight that seemed to be its natural state.

He turned to see if Annie Messer had seen it too, and remembered she had been staring in the opposite direction. She stood rooted in the same spot where he'd left her so he called her name, but she didn't answer. He called again and began to walk towards her and realized that she was shaking, twitching, seizing as if she was having a fit but she did not fall over and as Cletus got a little closer he saw why. From a blur at the edge of the cabin an impossibly long, black tongue issued forth from seemingly nowhere and had latched onto Annie Messer's eyes and face. Its tongue was in fact forked and each point was lodged deep and working deeper into Annie Messer's eye sockets.

There was a sound like frying eggs. If Annie was screaming, Cletus could not hear her. Her hair began to smolder and her body began to wilt, the smell of rot and sickness growing thicker. And suddenly without warning, this second Thing flickered into being – it was twice the size in thickness and height of its kin – this one stood on its four back legs and it held up the other two as if in prayer, and then it roared and snapped its head and all six of its legs to the earth pulling and retracting its tongue in the same movement, whiplashing Annie face first into the swamp of the yard, her neck and spine audibly shattering with the sound of a tree fall in winter.

The Thing lowered its head and leaned in to tear into Annie's corpse when Cletus yelled. The word that came from his mouth was not a word he understood or that his mouth even knew how to properly shape, but the message was communicated. He stood between the monster and its meal and held out a single hand and the word came again – lower, more threatening this time. The larger thing considered him, deadly tongue tentatively slithering forward, then retracting as if sensing something foul, and in the distance its companion's cry gave notice. It gave Cletus one last look up and down and then leapt into the woods beneath a cloak of bending light.

Cletus went to Annie's body then and turned her over – her face was ruined, ripped from forehead to cheekbone, her eye sockets had been cooked dry and cauterized by the digging tips of the Thing's tongue, her neck and spine had been shattered into a bag of bloody gravel. Cletus had had enough. If those things were their dogs, what was he?

Was he anything better or more than a monster leadin' innocent men and women... and good lord... now children to death and damnation? What had he become? Well he was *done*, that's what he'd become. With effort he loaded Annie's shattered body onto the cart, shocked to find that their mule standing idly there as if nothing had happened and saddled everything up and headed back along the road to Barlo saying a prayer for Sarah Avery that those Things never found her and that their paths would never, ever cross.

When Cletus made it back to the schoolhouse it was late afternoon. The sun came dazzling through the leaves of the trees and it was peaceful and quiet and gentle. Cletus almost took an easy breath but then saw the tracks in the school yard. His heart jumped thinking he was looking at six legged tracks with unnatural claw marks – but he looked closer he counted only four – and until today he woulda said these were the most terrifying tracks he'd ever seen, because they would mean that the largest bear ever to walk these hills had walked right into the yard of the schoolhouse. He saw no sign of a bear, though, and proceeded to unload Annie's corpse into the one place she'd ever known happiness, where it could await the same fate destined for the rest of Barlo: a baptism of vengeance and fire and dust.

As Cletus settled Annie in the back of the room the Voices – who had been constant at a steady hum since he saw the tracks outside kept repeating the same phrase over and over: “First you rise, then you clean her, prepare her for the fire. First you rise, then you clean her, prepare her for the fire.”



[Whispering Voices.]

Cletus laughed. For the first time in years, he laughed a real, hard, belly laugh that shook him to the bones.

“Your dog killed her, clean her yourself you goddamned haints.”

He winced – expecting punishment – expecting the black lung to rise and choke him, to undo the seven years given him – but nothing came. The Voices repeated the phrase one more time until they faded from Cletus’s mind. Cletus shrugged it off and set to closing up the school and heading off to find his wife and family to finally get them the Hell out of Barlo. And in his rush he never noticed the sleeping form of a young girl in the far corner, completely exhausted and covered by shadows and a picnic blanket taken from Miss Annie’s desk.

An hour later Annie Messer rose. She’d heard the instructions given her before the Messenger had left, taking the Voices with him. She led herself – by sound and sight now, for blessed darkness be her eyes now, praise – and she found the bucket of water she’d brought in from the well that morning along with a clean rag beside it.

[Annie gently hums Amazing Grace.]

She made her way over to Sarah Avery's sleeping body – she'd need to be cleaned up, she'd need to be comforted. She needed to be ready. Annie hummed as she worked, washing the mud and dirt from between Sarah's toes and off her feet and legs and arms and shoulders, and from her lovely young face, picking out briars and bits of weeds from her hair, humming and humming until she felt the girl stir and start to rouse, and she knew that it wouldn't be long now.

[Annie hums the last line of *Amazing Grace*.]

How are we, family? It's good to see y'all. Looks like we're learning some things after all. Found out how those boys got up and done what they did, found out how Cletus Garvin got there, and now we found out what happened to poor Miss Annie. Only a few more things to learn before our time in Barlo comes to an end, but don't you worry, we got a little bit to go. We're not ready to go home just yet.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Today's interlude was written and performed by Steve Shell. The voice of Miss Annie was Allison Mullins. Today's outro music is by Those Poor Bastards.

Family, have you truly found your way home yet? Are you following us through the darkness on Facebook and Instagram as Old Gods of Appalachia? Are you tweeting into the void to us on Twitter @OldGodsPod? Are you following us, family, are you following us truly and closely and family let me ask you a question: have you been to the fellowship hall? Have you found the coffee by the window that's not really a window and the food that's by the alternate wall that's neither alternate nor a wall? We even installed extra seating on the patio. We just don't suggest sitting out there after the sun's gone down. I am, of course, talking about the Fellowship Hall group for Old Gods of Appalachia on Facebook; I know that's old person social media yeah but hey, things move a little bit slowly in the mountains, what can we say? If you're a Facebook user, please come find us; our numbers swelled to over 400 members just this past week and it grows by the day. We have discussions, we answer questions, sometimes there are contests and some fun offers thrown up in there first before anybody else sees 'em. That's the Old Gods of Appalachia Fellowship Hall group, over on Facebook.

And family, if you would truly like a closer walk with the old gods that sleep beneath, consider forsaking some of your own worldly wealth and becoming a patron on our Patreon, where we can unlock the secrets of the universe and provide you with apparel and treasures and gifts and exclusive, exclusive bonus – sometimes personalized – material. Consider joining us, family. [www.Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia](http://www.Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia) There's more exciting stuff coming up on Patreon very soon. We're almost set to announce our exclusive patrons-only storyline, episodes of a special subset of the show that will be

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