

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 3, Episode 45: Hollowed Be Thy Name

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

“Forgive me for disturbing you, my friend, but my name is Henricus Cronin. I work for Barrow Mineral Resources, and I’m afraid I need your help.”

Milton Kinsman narrowed his eyes at the name. Cronin. He looked back at the man, who seemed to expect that the name — or the fact that he worked for Barrow coal — to mean something. They did not. The man’s face, though... that was another matter. The lines and shape of his jaw and forehead tickled something in Milt’s memory. There was an eerie familiarity about this man, like looking at the grandson of a long passed friend and seeing the ghost of their features staring back at you through time.

“What can I do for you, sir? You alright? You look like you might be sick. If you are, I’ll have to ask you to step back. I’m an old man, and I can’t be around sickness. I pick it up too easy. But I’ll help you as best I can. What happened? Are you hurt?”

“No, no. It is my supervisor,” Mr. Cronin said, turning to gesture back at their sedan. “He has... had an accident. A fall. We were surveying some land not far from here and he slipped. He’s hit his head. Yours was the first house we came to. I thought this property belonged to someone I knew, but I see now that I was wrong. Forgive me, Mister...?”

“Kinsman,” Milton said flatly, his eyes measuring the man. He was stout but compact, younger than Milt by a decade or so. His eyes were dark and at the moment carried a sense of desperation. He was quite clearly at sea. He had expected to find someone else here, someone who would defer to him, or at least know him.

“Mr. Kinsman, then. It is nice to meet you, though I wish it were under better circumstances.” He turned and gestured imperiously over his shoulder for Milton to follow. Again that twinge of

familiarity tugged at Milton's mind, and with it rose a red flag of warning. Senses honed in his old life crept out of their coffins and told him that he'd best take care.

"Let me get my coat on," he called. "I'm an old man. I catch cold a lot easier than I used to." Milton went to the front closet and took out his worn but warm work coat. He pulled it on, and then he discreetly retrieved the .38 Detective Special revolver from the top shelf, checked that it was loaded, and tucked it into his jacket pocket. If this was a scam or a robbery — out of town hoodlums out trying to hustle an old man — well, they'd get more than they bargained for. But Milton had a sinking feeling that something much worse had come to his door.

He stepped onto the porch and tried not to wince. The waves of pain that had torn through him earlier that evening had left him tender, though he knew the ache would be gone by morning. The man in the dark suit stood at the foot of the steps and again motioned impatiently for Milton to follow him.

"Uh... I ain't no doctor," Milton warned as he maneuvered his way cautiously down the steps, the stiff legged gait of an old timer who hates being out in the cold. "The closest one of them is Doc Mabrey over towards Duffield. If your man can make it til morning, you could get him there easy enough, but he's older than me, so you won't get him out of bed tonight." Milton moved with that same careful limp towards the opposite side of the vehicle. He could see through the window that another man lay still across the backseat.

"Is he conscious?" Milton called to his new companion.

Mr. Cronin, as he'd called himself, opened the door on his side. "No, he is not. Please, Mr. Kinsman, if you could, come get his feet. If you would be so kind as to let us into your home tonight, so we don't have to sleep out in the cold, my employer would be in your debt. We can reward you handsomely for your trouble."

Milton let his fingers wrap around the gun in his pocket for a long moment, thinking about the kinds of rewards he'd been offered for helping men in dark suits move bodies in the night. Then he came around to help Henricus Cronin pull the body of his supervisor from the back of the car. Milton took hold of the man's feet as they emerged. They stood there in the yard of the

house that he shared with his Audrey, the unconscious man slung between them, when the feeling overtook him. Milton had been in this exact position before — not on a near-freezing October night in his golden years, but in the warm twilight of a summer’s day in the prime of his life, the side of a mountain falling around him, fire and death and torn earth raining down. Beings with power he’d never seen before had slaughtered the men he’d brought to that place, and Milton had helped haul a man who had been *his* boss out of the danger. It had been just like this. It had been the day that Milton Stapelton died and Milton Kinsman was born.

[“The Land Unknown (The Pound of Flesh Verses)” by Landon Blood]

*These old hills call
For the blood of my body
A pound of flesh for a ton of coal
So down I go
Into a dark hell waiting
Where lungs turn black and hearts grow cold*

*And I’ll take to the hills and run from the devil
Into the dying sun
Something wicked my way comes
And tread soft, my friend, into these shadows
Where the old ones roam
For in these hills we die alone*

“Mr. Kinsman?” came the voice of the stranger in the dark overcoat, who was waiting for him to start moving from the car into the house.

“What? Oh. I’m sorry. I’m... my mind wanders. Let’s get your man inside before we all freeze to death. Damn cold for this time of year.”

It took them a minute to get the weight distributed properly, and another to get up the steps, but before long, they had the unconscious man — who was also dressed in a dark business suit, his a deep emerald green — inside, and settled onto the couch near the fire in the front room of the

farmhouse. The man was breathing, so that was good. Milton couldn't see any evidence of the head wound Cronin had mentioned, however.

"So, uh, what happened to him?" Milton asked. His age allowed him a certain level of bluntness that most folks would overlook, and he liked that. Cut through all the bullshit and the small talk and answer an old man's question, would you?

"As I was saying outside, we were surveying some land and my supervisor lost his footing and f—"

"Where 'bouts?"

"Excuse me?"

"The surveying you was doing. Where were you? Barrow ain't mined coal around here in fifteen years. Southern Appalachian's been handling the local mining long as I can remember. As far as I know there ain't no other coal to be found out this way."

Milton made his way into the small kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot on the stove, and poured a cup for his guest as well.

Mr. Cronin narrowed his eyes at the older man as he followed him to the kitchen door. "Did you work in the mines, Mr. Kinsman?"

"Aye sir, I did. Twenty years up and down Kentucky and up West Virginnie way. Done with it now, 'course. These bones are too old, and I don't care for the noise. Bought this little farm and settled down with my missus. Quiet out here. Nobody bothers you."

Milton handed the man the steaming mug of coffee and leaned against the door frame.

"Then you should know that coal is not the only thing that Barrow has interests in 'round these parts.' There are many other minerals found here that can be quite useful." The expression sounded foreign coming from this stout man with his clipped accent.

“Uh huh,” Milton said, which, in the secret language of old men, is a polite way of saying ‘horse shit, but tell me more.’

“There were tin mines, iron mines, even zinc mines over on—”

Milton cut him off. “Not nowhere close enough to my house, not these days. Why, if I’m the first house you come to, then... you boys must’ve been over Copper Ridge way. You out there looking for ghosts, Mr. Cronin?”

“Ghosts, sir? I don’t know what you mean.” Henricus Cronin stiffened a bit at the mention of ghosts, or maybe it was the mention of Copper Ridge. More instincts from his former life somersaulted their way out of long settled graves, waving even more red flags. It was a got-dang parade in Milton’s head now.

“Limestone, Henricus — you mind if I call you Henry? Henricus is a mouthful. There are huge deposits of limestone over on Copper Ridge, Henry. Way out there where nobody can’t seem to keep a house or stand to live. Their, uh... their heads don’t stay right. They get sick. People say they see ghosts walking the ridges out there, and maybe they do, maybe they don’t. Or maybe it’s just the vapors rising off that much limestone.”

“Please Mr. Kinsman, do not call me Henry. I do not care for it. My name is Henricus, sir. Limestone is a valuable resource as well, but I am not at liberty to discuss company business in such detail.”

“Uh huh,” Milton said again and sipped his coffee.

The two men stood in comfortable silence for a bit. Henricus was half-way through his cooling mug before he said, “I should check on my supervisor, see if his condition has changed.”

Milton watched as his new houseguest fussed over the man on the couch for a few moments, checking his breathing, straightening the blanket they’d covered him with, fluffing the pillow that Milton had fetched from the linen closet. The man in the emerald suit did not stir.

“So,” Milton began in that tone that elder folk use to let you know they’re about to ask something uncomfortable or invasive. “Cronin. That’s a name we don’t hear ‘round these parts much.”

“I am from Pennsylvania. My mothers people came from—”

“Worked with some Cronin boys once, up in West Virginia. Round Tourniquet. Irish Catholic down to their bones. But your accent... that’s not Irish, is it Mr. Cronin?

“I grew up with my mother’s—”

“No you didn’t. See, I thought you were familiar when I first saw you. Then you said you was with Barrow and... well, nothing good ever came out of Barrow & Locke. Then it turns out you been up here poking around Copper Ridge, and... there ain’t no call to be out there. You and me both know that.”

“Excuse me,” Cronin stammered. “Do I know you, sir?”

“Oh, I believe you do, Henry. At least that’s what I always called you. I believe you and I go way back. Only I’m supposed to be dead, and you? You were supposed to run, Henry *Crane*. You were supposed to run and not go through with the Hollowing. You had a family. I gave you a chance to get out, and what? You threw it away to become one of Barrow’s lap dogs? Is that your minder in there on my sofa? Which one is it? Dalton? Abner? Amos? They change faces and bodies often enough I can’t even be sure which one it is. Hell, that could be Miss Polly herself inside of that shell for all I know. What in hell are you doing away from company land tonight, of all nights? Good lord, boy, did you not get any smarter in all this time?”

Henricus Crane — for that was in fact his true name, no one had called him Henry in years — looked stunned. He looked hard at the old man, straining to recognize him.

“Milton... Mister... Stapleton?”

“Shut your mouth, boy. Unless you want that thing in the parlor there to hear you.”

Mr. Crane shook his head, unable to make his mind accept what he was seeing.

“But you... but you *did* die. You burned. There was nothing left of you to retrieve to take back to Barrow. You... you—”

Shadows flared in the corner of the room like dark water seeping in through the walls, the lights of the lamps dimmed.

“You left me. You left me behind, and... and—”

“Henry, stop it,” Milton growled. His eyes surged with violet fire. “You put a lid on that right now. You know what tonight is and—”

A wave of pain shot through both men, driving them to their knees. Crane fell to his belly, gasping. Milton grunted against the blow, but managed to right himself and stand.

“If you reach for your hollowing, it’ll reach back, and it hurts even more.”

The tension in the air gradually abated, and the lights returned to their usual cheery glow. The tenebrous masses that had risen in the corners of the room melted back into the shadows. Milton’s eyes were once again their warm chocolate brown behind his glasses.

“Why are you even out on the road at all this week? We always got called in for *Zeit der Buße*, so they could strengthen our ties to the company... fill up our tanks, so to speak.”

Mr. Crane panted as he pulled himself back to his feet. “We were on our way back to Barrow House from a site in Tennessee to begin the rites and observations when my supervisor — that’s Amos in there, by the way — decided that it was worth a detour to Copper Ridge to assess its... protections. He and Dalton still haven’t regained Mr. Barrow’s trust after their failure years ago, and they will jump at any opportunity that might help them to do so.”

Milton snorted a bitter laugh.

“I should think not. The destruction of valuable resources, humiliation at the hand of a bunch of rock worshippers who don’t seem to be affected by our usual gifts, and not least of all the loss of his chief field general in a horrifying fire... no, ole Mr. B wouldn’t forgive that easily. The only survivors being two worthless minders who aren’t even Barrows by blood and a couple of unHollowed recruits on their final probationary assignment? Well that would only rub salt in the wound. He’d have preferred them dead, and they’d probably be better off.” Milton’s eyes creased with sadness and frustration. “Why did you stay, Henry? Why?”

Henricus Crane, Hollow Man and right hand to Miss Polly Barrow herself, shook his head sadly. “What recourse did I have, Milton? I don’t know how you managed to survive what happened on Copper Ridge, or how you’ve managed to survive this way, but I could not return to my family in disgrace — with no job, no way to provide for my mother and sisters. No. I stayed and, yes, I accepted the Hollowing. You speak as though I was some fresh-faced boy with his whole life ahead of him. *Pfah*. I’d nearly as much blood on my hands at that age as you did. The innocent are never chosen to be Hollowed, Milton. You know that.”

Henricus dabbed at his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Amos wanted to go back to Copper Ridge, so we did. Or we tried. The old paths we have marked on our maps are gone — the men who defied us that day saw to that. So we stumbled around for two days searching. I tried to get him in the car. I told him that *Zeit der Buße* was starting and we could not be in the open when it did. He ignored me, told me it was my problem, that the Time of Penance was a vacation for the minders. They go out to one of the company estates in Ohio and drink themselves silly. He said they ‘barely remember that week at all.’”

Milton smiled grimly. “They still pick winners for middle management, eh?”

“Arrogance, pride and will — those are the cornerstones of a good minder, according to Mr. Conrad. The fool doesn’t realize they let them stay drunk because if they didn’t the process would tear their minds to shreds. Their bonds to us are forged in that week of sorrows, but some of them are just too prideful and need to believe that it’s their superior will that keeps us in

line.” Mr. Crane rolled his eyes and grimaced as if he had tasted something foul. “So we’re out in the weeds near the backside of Wildcat, looking for a path, when the first waves of the Breaking Moon begin. I am used to the pain and the first night is not so bad, but Amos wailed like someone had torn off his *schwanz*. Fell down the hill and passed out, frothing at the mouth. I dragged him to the car and rode out the rest of the pain. Then I started driving. I saw the lights of your place, and... well, here we are.”

“Henry, you can’t stay here — not for the whole of the week. You know what will happen by the end. I manage to not be around anyone when the full turn comes, but if you and I are together, and Amos comes into his fullness... I’ll either kill you both, or he’ll take control of me. I’d rather the former not happen, but the latter *cannot* happen. I will not go back. I have a life here. I’ve filled that hollowed place with something else.”

“What do you expect me to do, Milton? We’ve little choice—”

“We’re all three limited in what we can do right now. Hell, I bet he’s too weak to even command you. Kill him, Henry. Kill him and you can go home, or go back to Barrow, or... I can’t care, but I will not be their weapon again, you understand me?”

“Kill him? I cannot kill my minder anymore than you could have — the home office would tear me to pieces, feed me to Mr. Barrow himself and hang up my scraps as a warning to the others. You would ask me to end my own life to spare yours?”

Milton snorted. “Of course you could. Do you really believe it doesn’t happen? Minders are killed during the Breaking all the time, everybody knows it. It’s a dangerous job. They all know the risks.”

Mr. Crane smiled ruefully and shook his head. “No. And in any case, you really think you can take me, old boy? It’s been a long time, and I haven’t aged in twenty years.”

Milton chuffed out a laugh. “Maybe, maybe not. Last time I really lost control, I tore down half a grove of pine trees and boiled a pond to vapor. They’ve not gotten anything to grow back out

there since, and that was three years ago. So I like my chances. But I'd like it better if it didn't have to come to that, Henry."

"Yeah *Henry*. I'd hate to see you and your old buddy here have to go at it," sneered a voice from the couch.

Amos Nunley-Barrow rose from the couch, apparently recovered from his head injury or *schwans* injury, or whatever had been ailing him.

"Well lookee here. It's Mr. Stapleton, the fabled one-man army. You look like shit, son. Done got old, have you? Back in the day, we'd set you loose on a town and it was like a plague of locusts would just shred the place. Like something out of Revelations. People, livestock, buildings — didn't matter — ole Stapleton here would go right through 'em, wouldn't you? Didn't they call you Locust? Something like that, something biblical?"

"Mr. Amos," Henricus Crane began. "Let me explain..."

Amos Nunley-Barrow wasn't about to let anyone explain anything.

"Shut it, Crane. Boy, are you just screwed. Miss Polly's pet kraut over here plannin' the murder of his betters with a traitor to the family. I knew we couldn't trust you. Trying to talk me out of coming out here to find Copper Ridge again. I bet you knew where your old mentor here was hiding out all along. You probably put some sort of secret Hollow hoodoo on me, brought me out here so he could kill me for you. Since you ain't got the stones to try it yourself."

"Mr. Amos, don't be ridiculous. I told you the *Zeit der Buße*—"

"Shut up about your Zytey Boosey, boy. That nonsense might keep you in line, but it don't have anything to do with us powerful folks. You are right, though. You can't kill your minder. It's like Mr. Conrad says, 'There must be an order. The Family must control the beasts and the beasts must herd the—'"

"Oh, shut up Amos," Milton's voice cut across the room like a slap.

“What did you say to me, you hollowed-out old fart?”

“I said, shut up. You’re not even really a Barrow, you mealy-mouthed little shit.”

Amos Nunley-Barrow was a pale blonde man who took great pride in the power the second part of his hyphenated last name granted him. At Milton’s taunt, his face flushed a shade of apoplectic purple.

“You take that back! I am too a Barrow!”

“By marriage,” Milton laughed. “One of E.P’s step-sons did the hokey pokey with your mama, then married her so they could take your family’s land when you were ten years old. You only got the job because you had a sliver of a gift and a rotten enough heart to do it.”

Amos was shaking with rage. “Well, if I’m not a Barrow, how come I can do this?”

He closed his eyes and reached for the power to compel his beast to do his bidding, muttering, “Crane, kill him.”

Or at least he tried. But within the days of *Zeit der Buße*, any use of power gleaned from the Hollow resulted in a burst of agonizing pain meant to condition the Hollow Men and remind them who owned them. Amos got about halfway through the words before he found himself on the floor, his head ringing like he’d been struck with a frying pan. His vision swam and the room grew dark.

“No, Mr. Amos, I don’t think I will.” The voice of Henricus Crain seemed almost to echo from somewhere in the gathering dark.

“Crane... Crane, what are you doing? If you... if you’re right about this, it’ll get you too...”

“Oh, we beasts of burden can handle a little suffering. Can we not, Milton?”

The room went dark and silent, save for the whimpering of the thin blonde man on the floor. The seconds ticked by as Amos trembled in this void, still hurting and tensed for a blow. He nearly screamed when he heard Milton Stapleton's voice. With it a set of glowing violet eyes appeared, floating in the darkness. "You were almost right, Amos. They did give me a nickname from the good book. But it wasn't Locust."

Somewhere across the room, Henricus Crane laughed as another set of eyes appeared before the first, and then another and another and another and another, until there were enough of them to illuminate the horde of creatures that crowded the small living room, looming over the angry little man on the ground.

"They called me Legion. For we are many."

Amos Nunley-Barrow never even had time to scream.

A week later Milton Kinsman occupied his usual early evening spot on the back porch of his house, reading the local paper, which had nothing terribly exciting to report. The electric company finally planned to run electricity back to Hoot Owl Holler and a couple of other places in between Prince's Flat and Mineral City, much to the relief of residents, who'd spent months lobbying the county's board of supervisors to be connected to the power grid. The previous evening's baseball game between Derby and Mendota had gone to extra innings before Mendota finally pulled it out. Just another week come and gone in the far reaches of Grant County. Just the way Milton liked it.

The sound of a car turning into the drive pulled his attention away from the paper and set him hurrying through the house and out the front door. He stepped onto the opposite porch just in time to see his beloved Audrey climb out of her sister's car. When her eyes fell on Milton, she ran quick as she could, up the steps into his arms. And all was right again with Milton Kinsman's world.

If there were in fact pearly gates lit by the light of God and his angels, Milton knew he'd probably never see them. And that was just fine. He had his own heaven right here.

[I Cannot Escape the Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

*There is a curse upon my every waking breath,
And I cannot escape the darkness...*

Well, hey there, family. And thus we come to the end of Act III of Season 3 of Old Gods of Appalachia. I hope you enjoyed your little trip into a whole new county of our Southwestern Virginia, and hope you made some new friends and family while you were there.

Now I want to take a second to thank everybody who's come out to see our live shows in Asheville, NC and Wise County, VA. Good lord, y'all. We had three back to back to back sell outs, and we couldn't be happier. Seven hundred people in an auditorium in Big Stone Gap, VA. I'm still not quite processing that. But a special shout out to all of our family who pulled together to make these shows happen and to our all star cast and crew that walked the Unknown Roads with us. The weekend after this episode goes live here in October of 2022, we will be in Radford, VA, for the final sold out show of the Unknown Roads theatrical experience.

If you wanna see pictures from all the shows, make sure you've headed on over to oldgodsofappalachia.com and completed your social media ritual by following us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. And if you want to help keep our lights on and keep making those live shows possible, head on over to patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia. Make your pledge of \$10 or more a month and access over thirty episodes of exclusive storylines and special programming, including *Build Mama a Coffin*, *Black Mouthed Dog*, "Door Under The Floor," and so much more to come.

Family, we cannot appreciate all of y'all enough who came to the live shows, who pledged on Patreon, who offer us kind words on the Discord server and everywhere else. Thank you. Thank you so much.

This is your ever so often reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell. Our intro music is by our brother Brother Landon Blood, and our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. We'll to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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