

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 4, Episode 55: The Matter of the Children

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

In a vast chamber somewhere beneath the mountains of Pennsylvania, there was a stirring amongst the crowd that had gathered to determine the fate of the man known as Jack. The whispers that passed among them quickly gained volume as the woman at the front of the room fairly preened, clearly pleased with the reaction garnered by her bombshell declaration.

The man leading the questioning furrowed his brow in consternation. “Excuse me, Miss Bettie Jo,” Hiram Cook fairly stammered, “but are you implying that this wolf grease was... was given to children?”

“Oh, no!” Bettie Jo Meaders chuckled airily. “Of course not, silly man! None of us girls had children in the Clutch back then. This was later on.” The amusement faded from Bettie Jo’s voice as her expression grew sad. “Me and Tessa and Frannie and a couple of the others — when we did have our babies — we realized that wolf grease he give us had what you might call some... lasting side-effects. Each of ‘em bears the marks of what he lead us into. Our children deserve justice!”

The whispering in the gallery grew louder, a note of anger creeping into its tone. Hiram Cook’s voice was grim when he posed his next question. “That’s a serious accusation, ma’am. Are these children present to speak for themselves?”

Bettie Jo’s expression brightened, and she smiled with obvious pride. “They certainly are. You young’uns stand up now, so Mr. Hiram can get a look at you!” she called into the gallery.

The assembled crowd turned, craning their necks to watch as the pair of sullen young witches and the boy with the glasses and the banjo rose to their feet.

“The tall girl there? That’s my Clover,” Bettie Jo explained. “T’other two there, Jade and Anthony, are Tessa’s daughter and Frannie’s boy. Y’all come up here!”

The three young folks hesitated, and Hiram Cook turned to the bailiff with a questioning look. The prim woman nodded. “We’ll allow it,” she said, and motioned them forward, adjusting her gold-rimmed spectacles as she peered at them keenly.

The folks assembled in the gallery stood or shuffled aside to allow them to pass, and the trio made their way with apparent reluctance to the front of the room, where they stood awkwardly, facing the representative of the Green, Bettie Jo, and the five councilwomen seated upon the dais presiding over all. None of the three appeared intimidated by the presence of some sort of authority, or by any of the other beings of the Green or Dark gathered in the room. Their faces reflected only the bored expression common to young folks forced to spend the day amongst their elders.

“Go on, Clover baby,” Bettie Jo said encouragingly. “You just tell ‘em what you told me.”

The taller of the two young women rolled her eyes and pressed her lips together. She was a striking figure, with arresting dark eyes and straight brows set over sharp cheekbones, delicate, long-fingered hands and dark hair that fell in soft waves to her shoulders. She wore a black dress with a sharply pointed collar that buttoned up the front and at the cuffs with bright red buttons like holly berries, and a black hat with a wide, round brim.

“Uh... yes, Miss... Miss Clover,” Hiram mumbled, shuffling papers on the table before him again, clearly caught off guard by the unexpected change of witness. Raising his voice officiously, he asked, “Can you please state your name and place of residence for the Rock?”

The young woman lifted her chin and spoke, her tone brusque and matter-of-fact. “I’m Clover Lynn Meaders. I don’t have any particular place of residence at this time. Me and my band here, we travel.”

“Your band?” Hiram prompted.

“Yessir. The Bone Pickin’ String Band.”

“I see,” Hiram said, scribbling something on his notepad. “Can you tell us where you last lived, then?”

Clover Meaders shot a sidelong glance at Bettie Jo, who smiled and nodded in that same encouraging way. The girl rolled her eyes again and continued.

“I was born in Bakers Gap, Tennessee. My mama — well, y’all met her. You see how she is. She told you herself how she lived. When my gift started manifesting... well, you can imagine how well that went over in whatever parlor house we was living in at the time. So she sent me to live with Mamaw Esme back in Bald Creek.”

“Where was your daddy during all this?” Hiram asked.

Clover snorted. “I didn’t know my daddy. Mama never would tell me his name. Mamaw Esme told me, though. He was a banjo player over in Hazard. I went and found him. Made him teach me to play. He’s dead now.”

The young woman delivered this statement without emotion, her tone bored as she met Hiram Cook’s eyes unflinchingly. Her poise clearly unsettled the man as he stammered, “Uh, you mention these... uh, gifts... you say began to manifest, that led your mama to send you away? What kind of, uh... gifts... are we talking about here?”

The corner of Clover’s mouth quirked up in the barest suggestion of a smile. “Well I’d show you, but we can’t do it here.”

Hiram Cook glanced nervously toward the white-cloaked figure sitting silent in the center of the dais. He cleared his throat and addressed the bailiff. “Would the Harbinger permit a, um, demonstration of these young’uns’ so-called gifts?”

The hooded woman crooked two fingers at the bailiff, who nodded and approached the dais, bending her head low to confer privately with the Harbinger. The pair spoke for a few moments,

and finally the bailiff nodded and turned back toward the gallery. She returned to her previous position halfway between the dais and the gallery, and pounded her staff ceremonially upon the stones beneath their feet three times. Then she raised her voice to pronounce, “The Harbinger will permit a brief demonstration.”

The Harbinger lifted one hand toward the trio of young musicians known as the Bone Pickin’ String Band and made a complicated gesture with her fingers. Almost instantly, the three began to change.

Their backs hunched, and they fell to their knees, gasping. Bones snapped. The children of the Clutch cried out in agony as their limbs distorted at unnatural angles, the skin over their muscles stretching impossibly thin in some places and tearing in others. Their jaws lengthened and distorted, sprouting teeth that were long and sharp and fit for no human mouth and tongues that lolled as their moans turned into the high keening of wolves. Hair sprouted from their reconfigured limbs, growing thick and shaggy, covering the horrors of blood and twisted flesh the crowd had witnessed. Eventually, the keening of the two smaller wolves subsided, and they lay panting quietly for a few moments. The larger of the three, though... that was another matter.

A hunched figure now lay whining on the ground in the place that had been formerly occupied by the young man Bettie Jo Meaders had identified as Anthony. Where the two young women had transitioned seamlessly — if horrifically — into a pair of beautiful wolves with thick, glossy coats and unnervingly human eyes, the poor boy seemed trapped in some state in between. His limbs had lengthened, and his hands seemed to have grown extra joints. His feet had grown as well, shredding his boots. His body had sprouted a sparse covering of coarse hair, and his face... oh, his poor face. His nose had lengthened into a snout, and his jaw had grown long. His ears had also grown tall and pointed, flopping gently at the sides of his head, and were covered in thick, soft fur. He lay on the floor of the tribunal chamber, whining pitifully, clearly in pain.

The larger of the two female wolves swung her head, dislodging the black dress with red buttons from her shoulders and shaking out her thick silver coat, then padded over to the boy, nosing at him gently. He reached a shaking hand up to stroke her fur.

For once, the chamber around them was utterly silent. For a long moment, no one spoke a word. Then the woman called the Harbinger lowered the hand she had held raised throughout this demonstration. Before the horrified onlookers, the process of transition began to reverse itself, and before long, the three young people stood at the front of the room again, wiping sweat from their brows and righting their clothes. Behind them, the gallery erupted in mingled whispers and shouts for an immediate guilty verdict.

At the table opposite the representatives of the Green and the Inner Dark, D.L. Walker turned to her client. The man who called himself J.T. Fields of Paradise, but was more commonly known as simply Jack, was eyeing the three witnesses with an expression of bemused curiosity.

Dougie Walker did not like that look. Not one bit. “Tell me truthfully,” she hissed. “Did you know this would happen?”

Jack shook his head. “I can honestly say I had no idea,” he said.

Dougie’s shoulders relaxed. He seemed to speak the truth, though she couldn’t judge with her usual certainty, and yet she knew that lack would not necessarily relieve him of responsibility. She jotted down a couple of thoughts in her notepad and then turned back to the proceedings as the bailiff struck her staff on the stones again, calling for order.

As the crowd quieted, Hiram Cook rose from his seat and addressed Clover Meaders once again. “Well, that was quite the demonstration, Miss Clover,” he said. “So the issue at hand is that this man here, Mr. J.T. Fields, who your mama tells us is responsible for putting this wolf grease into her hands, is to blame for this affliction you and your friends now suffer?”

Clover looked at him in confusion. “Me and my friends? Nossir. Me and Jade are just fine. It’s just Anthony who’s having trouble with his gift. You saw there how he can’t fully change? That’s the problem.” She shook her head. “He can’t control it, and he gets... stuck like that. If it hadn’t been for that, we never would have got mixed up with that sideshow.”

Now it was Mr. Cook’s turn to look confused. “Sideshow? What sideshow?” he asked.

“That’s where we met,” Clover explained. “Erebus Cain’s Traveling Marvels.”

“I think I see,” Hiram nodded. “You met while working for a traveling circus?”

“Weren’t no working to it. He kidnapped us.”

[“The Land Unknown (The Bloody Roots Verses)” by Landon Blood]

*These old roots run
into a ground so bloody
Full of broken dreams and dusty bones
They feed a tree so dark and hungry
where its branches split and new blood flows
And the ghosts of a past you thought long-buried
rise to haunt the young
The shadow falls as judgment comes
Tread soft, my friend, amongst your fellows
Make your bond your word
Lest you get what you deserve*

In the bloodlines coursing through the heart of Appalachia, many are endowed with gifts and talents that seem to pass from generation to generation in the same way eye color, height or physical ailments might. In some cases those gifts are supernatural in nature. The Walkers, for example, are particularly blessed with gifts that defend and protect, whereas the Underwoods are blessed with healing and the ability to communicate with spirits. Why, even our esteemed representative Mr. Cook comes from a line well known for their skill at crafting bindings. But outside of these more uncanny proclivities, there are other natural talents that run like deer in rut through some families. Let us examine, for a moment, the Holbrooks of Jacob County, Kentucky.

If you were a devotee of square dancing or string music in the early part of the century, you probably knew who Charlie “Foxtrot” Holbrook was. If you were a fiddle player looking to learn from the best there was and might ever be, you probably followed Foxtrot and his band from town to town. Nobody packed them in like ol’ Foxtrot, whose fingers moved like lightning over the strings and whose bow seemed to dip and dive like a striking raptor as he raced through all

the popular songs of the day. Everybody who was anybody wanted to share the stage with Charlie Holbrook, from the Stanleys to the Sextons. Nobody had a bad thing to say about his playing, nor him personally.

Foxtrot was a churchgoing man, bought by the blood of his precious lord and savior, as well as a family man with a beautiful wife and two girls. His daughters, Francesca and Contessa, could themselves play the good hell out of a banjo when called upon, and now and again joined their daddy on the stage, to the delight of audiences. Lastly, Foxtrot was a union man, fiercely devoted to the ideals of fair wages for fair work and the rights of laborers. He'd dug coal, hammered steel, and laid track from the far side of Kentucky to east Tennessee and back again, and he'd done it with union pride.

When he was offered a recording contract with the Deluxe Recording Company over in Paradise, Foxtrot could have packed up the family and moved to the city, but instead he stayed in Jacob County. He built a fine house out on Jacob's Branch for his wife Marlena and the girls, and continued to serve as one of the union representatives for the Darby and Sons #5 mine when he wasn't on tour. Foxtrot's life was grand for several years. Money was good, his girls were healthy, and his wife was happy. He felt himself truly blessed.

Then one day he returned from a week's tour up in Ohio to find that Bill Darby and his boys had been bought out by a bigger company from up north. Barrow Mineral Resources had made the Darbys an offer they couldn't refuse, and no one had laid eyes on Bill or his boys since the papers were signed. The Barrows maintained that Darby and Sons had been dissolved, their assets purchased in totality, and thus all agreements with the local union chapter were null and void. If they wished to negotiate a new contract, they were welcome to try.

When the union moved to strike, a lot of folks in leadership positions began to disappear. Houses were burned in the dead of night. Bodies were found scattered in the woods, torn into pieces, as if a bear or a catamount had got to them, but nobody found any animal tracks or scat. Local 48 got real quiet around that part of Kentucky as Barrow pushed to buy up both the local real estate and businesses in smaller communities, rapidly transforming them into company towns. A fog of fear and uncertainty smothered any talk of pushback. Word had spread about what Barrow Mineral Resources had done in other places, and while some had thought it tall

tales — or at the very least exaggerated accounts — they quickly realized how accurate those stories were.

Charlie and Marlena packed their girls away on a train bound for family in Knoxville, with every intention of joining them soon. But when they reached Paradise, where they would catch the connecting train to Knoxville, Frannie and Tessa noticed they were being followed by two strangers in expensive black suits of the sort they had seen on men working for Barrow. So instead, they hastily boarded a train bound for Baker's Gap, where they met a woman named Naisme Jiminez, who offered them refuge in the Clutch. They would never see their parents again.

After the incident with the wolf grease had ended their time in the Clutch, Frannie and Tessa were cast adrift in the world. The Holbrook sisters found themselves struggling to re-adjust to holding on to just one shape. Luckily for the girls, Melvin and Clara Blevins had offered them a place to stay for a while, just until the moon didn't hold such a sway on them. The kindness that little family showed Foxtrot Holbrook's daughters changed their lives.

When they were ready, Clara worked with the younger Miss Walker to help the girls find work up in Esau County. Tessa took secretarial training, which landed her a job in a timber company office in Esserville, while Frannie worked for a laundry service not far away in Prince's Flat. Esau County was good to them, and eventually Tessa and Frannie met their loving husbands, and each gave birth to a single child. Tessa had a little girl she named Jade Louise, and a year or so later Frannie birthed a handsome baby boy she called Anthony Melvin. The children were raised on the banjo and fiddle as well as the guitar and mandolin, and proved to be every bit as gifted as their papaw.

If that's where the story ended, family, you could slap happily ever after on it and be done. But of course, it's not. As Jade's thirteenth birthday approached, her moods shifted, her temper growing short. If that had been all, her mother would have chalked it up to typical adolescent changes and thought no more of it. But when she caught Jade hanging halfway out her second story bedroom window, lips quivering, snarling at the nearly-full silver orb that hung above their house in the night sky, she knew this was more than just teen angst. Tessa knew the look of a body on the verge of changes that would go beyond the ordinary.

So she told her sister, and together, she and Frannie sat their husbands down and told them the story of how the sisters had come to live in Esau County. They explained about their time living in the Clutch, and the sad and terrifying end their ragtag adopted family had met. The two men were understandably horrified, and reluctant to believe the tale, but they had never known their wives to lie. Then Tessa described the signs she had observed in Jade, and confessed her fears about the transformation they expected would come any day for her, and maybe soon after for Anthony as well.

Disturbed, the two men had stepped out onto the porch for a little fresh air to think and discuss the matter amongst themselves. The two women feared their husbands might leave them — or drive them from their homes — or hell, send them off to an asylum somewhere, and they clutched each other's hands and sat in silence for what felt like hours. But eventually the two men returned to the house, and each of them hugged his wife. They weren't yet convinced of this wild tale, but Tessa and Frannie's fear seemed genuine, and Jade *had* been acting mighty peculiar as of late. They had decided it would be best to err on the side of caution — prepare for the worst, but hope for the best. Whatever happened, they would face it together, as a family should.

At first, things were all right. Jade's change came upon her not that full moon but the moon after, and her mama helped her through it. For a time, they kept her locked up in the woodshed on those nights, for both her own safety and that of the neighbors. Once she had learned to find herself in the wolf shape — to control her wolf — young Anthony was allowed to observe her transformation, the better to help prepare him for his own potential change. Jade didn't mind. The things that happened to her body when the moon was high were painful and terrifying, especially at first, but grew easier over time. She and Anthony had always been close, more like siblings than first cousins, and if she could do anything to ease the transition for the boy she loved like a little brother, she would.

But nothing could have prepared them for what came next for Anthony. As his thirteenth year approached, the boy's moods became unpredictable much the way his cousin's had, but Anthony also experienced a massive growth spurt during this time, shooting up a whole four and a half inches in a single season. Full moons came and went, and each time it seemed the change would

come upon the young man, but as the blade of the night sky began to carve into that ivory apple, Anthony's skin remained unchanged. Inside, however... well, that was a whole other matter.

The boy's physical strength surged exponentially. The last moon before his fourteenth birthday found Anthony secured in the shed out back of his aunt's house with the whole family standing by for safety and support. He stood there waiting for his bones to crack and rearrange themselves, for his jaws to lengthen and his new teeth to push their way through his bloody gums, finally freeing him from the itching, agonizing feeling of anticipation that seemed to crawl under his skin like worms. His body screamed to shift, to finally dance to the tune that the moon sang in his bones, but just couldn't seem to find its way. Finally, in a fury of frustration, he yanked the door off its hinges and hurled it a country mile into the trees. Then Anthony had stood panting in the open door, his man-sized hands clutching open and closed as if he could take hold of the moon's light and wrap it around himself like the pelt that refused to emerge from his skin. But he found no relief from the taunting night sky.

His mama assured him it would be alright, patting his arm gently as she led him back to the house, where she drew a cool bath to soothe his feverish skin, and kneaded his shoulders to ease the knots from his muscles. Truth to tell, though, Frannie had begun to fear for her son. She had no experience with how the change might take young men — all the wolves of the Clutch had been women, after all. Her old friend Naisme might have known. It was clear the older woman had held a wealth of knowledge about what wolf grease could do and more. But poor Naisme was years in the ground, and though they still kept in touch with Ellie Walker from time to time, Frannie and her sister remembered all too well that not all of their friends had made it out of the Clutch alive.

They had helped the sisters — or more accurately, Melvin Blevins and his wife Clara had — but that was largely because Tessa and Frannie wished to return to their human lives. If they contacted the Walkers, would they find help from that corner again? Or would their children be viewed as an imminent threat, and dealt with in the same fashion as Naisme and some of the others? The sisters had discussed the matter with their husbands, and they all agreed it was too risky to reach out to the folks back in Bakers Gap. So they repaired the shed door, did their best to reinforce it, and prayed the coming moon would finally free Anthony from his torment.

As that silver orb waned, so did the tension in their homes, the lunar tides relinquishing some of their pull on the two teens. Anthony's birthday fell on the new moon, the sky blessedly free of all but stars. They celebrated the occasion with a pineapple upside down cake — Anthony's favorite and his Aunt Tessa's speciality — along with his mama's chicken 'n dumplings. Anthony's daddy proclaimed he felt the boy and his cousin were now old enough to have a glass of beer with dinner — but only the one, now! — and their mamas allowed it. It was a happy night for the little family, and everyone was feeling hopeful.

As that silver sickle reappeared in the sky and began to grow fat again, however, its pull on Anthony seemed stronger than ever. He was testy and ill-tempered one minute and sweet the next, his moods as changeable as the wind, and he seemed less in control of his own strength than ever. When he attempted to bring his mama her coffee to her in bed on a Sunday morning, he accidentally crushed Frannie's favorite coffee mug in his hand, scalding his fingers in the bargain. Try as he might to overcome the strange new feelings that plagued him, it seemed everything he did somehow turned out wrong, and his mounting frustration only grew.

When night fell on the next full moon, the family gathered again in the shed behind Tessa's house, and hoped this might finally be the night their youngest found his wolf. Jade had changed before the sun even set, in the hopes that her wolf might be some help to the boy and less distraction for the adults. As the moon climbed high over the mountains, Anthony crouched on the bare wood floor of the shed, his skin feverish, sweat pouring down his back. His body ached, from his muscles to gums, down to his bones. His scalp prickled and gooseflesh spread across his arms. And finally — finally! — he felt something *shift* inside. His joints cracked, and his bones began to stretch. He felt his jaw dislocate and the cartilage in his nose break as his very skull began to elongate. His eyes felt like jelly bobbing around their sockets, and Anthony screamed in both pain and triumph, giving himself over completely to the moon's will.

Jade bounced on her paws with excitement, and threw her head back in a howl of encouragement. The four adults clutched each other's hands in mingled excitement and relief.

But the twisting and shifting of Anthony's body slowed and began to settle. Frannie began to realize that something was wrong. Her boy was... not... a wolf. Not quite. Yet certainly he no longer resembled any human man. His limbs had grown longer and slightly hunched, as if

arrested midway in their transition to a more canine shape. And his face was caught somewhere in between as well — wolf-like, but not fully wolf, though the ears were certainly pointed and furry. It seemed to be taking an awfully long time for the pain to recede. He lay on the ground, panting and occasionally keening, but otherwise still.

“Oh my god,” Frannie whispered, and Jade whined anxiously.

Anthony’s daddy dropped to his knees at the boy’s side. “Son?” he whispered, and gently touched the wolf-boy’s misshapen shoulder.

Anthony screamed and exploded into sudden motion. He whipped around, lashing out at his father’s face, and blood splattered as his nose cracked. The boy rose slowly, painfully to his feet, so tall now he had to hunch beneath the shed’s low ceiling, hauling his daddy up by the throat. The man hung limp in his grip, and Anthony shook him like a rag doll. Frannie screamed as she heard bones snap. Jade gave a yip, and snapped at her cousin’s ankle.

The wolf-boy kicked at her, though she avoided his swing with ease, and then looked down at his own hands, the man who’d raised him hanging listless in his clasp, unconscious. He flinched as if startled and let go, his father sagging to the floor at his feet. Anthony moaned and threw back his head as if to howl, but the sound that issued from his throat was low and strangled. Frannie saw tears shining on the fur of her son’s face as he shoved his mother aside and barreled through the door, blasting it from its hinges once again, and set off into the night at a dead run.

Jade let out a low, anguished howl, and loped after him.

[“Atonement” by Jon Charles Dwyer]

Well, hey there, family. We want to thank y’all for joining us again here beneath the mountains of somewhere in Pennsylvania in the name of the Rock as we attempt to sort out the deeds and misdeeds of one Mr. J.T. Fields of Paradise. There’s a lot more to be told about the Bone Pickin’ String Band and their connection to Mr. Fields, but I guess y’all have to come on back to hear the rest of that. I hope you’ll come. I think you will.

Speaking of stories that have a lot more to tell, we hope you'll join us over on patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia for our brand new series *Familiar & Beloved*, four tales centering around the beloved animal familiars and companions you have met and some you have yet to meet here in the world of Old Gods of Appalachia. Band new stories of the fearless and good boy Sam and them other boys down in Baker's Gap, a whole new adventure with Miss Emmaline Underfoot and the Boggs clan following the events of *Black Mouthed Dog*, and then there's a whole lot more after that. For access to those stories and other exclusives, head on over to patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia and make your tithe today, family.

You can also head on over to oldgodsofappalachia.com where you'll find links to all the various altars of social media where you may lay tribute and follow us wherever your heart leads you. Come hang out on the Discord server, post in the Facebook group if you're of a certain age like myself, and just come and be one with us and fellowship and have a good old time.

This is your every dang episode reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's story was written by Cam Collins and Steve Shell. Our intro music is by brother Landon Blood and our outro music, "Atonement," is by brother Jon Charles Dwyer. The voice of D.L. Walker is Cam Collins. Additional werewolf transformation vocals provided by Patchie Deth and Briaunah Phelps. We'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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