

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 4, Season 4, Episode 65: Debt Collections

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

The night was cool and clear, a million stars twinkling brightly overhead against a blanket of moonless, velvety darkness as the old Ford rumbled down the blacktop. The cab was silent, save for the pattering of the engine and the quiet weeping of the young woman in the backseat. June Gilbert, born June Norris, pressed a soft white cotton handkerchief to her face. The man in the driver's seat had offered it to her without comment, and she was grateful for this small mercy. She wasn't ready to hear anyone tell her how sorry they were, how he was "with the angels now," or any of the other empty platitudes she knew would be coming, least of all from the man she had married. At the moment, she couldn't bear to even look at Trevor, whose poor judgment had cost her daddy his life and made her an orphan. The hangdog expression of pity and guilt she had seen in his eyes when her tears began to fall made her want to scream. If she saw it again, she was pretty sure she would punch him in his sad, stupid face, and so she kept her head down, eyes on her lap, lest she cause Mr. Fields to run off the road.

The man in question, riding shotgun next to their benefactor, glanced over his shoulder at his wife again, and chewed his lip anxiously. Trevor had never been this close to a death in his family — his daddy and mama were happy and healthy back home in Hazel County — and while he'd lost his brothers in the war, there had been no caskets to bury, no dead bodies to see. It was almost like they went and moved somewhere else and just never visited, so he didn't know quite what to say to poor Junie, who had already lost so much in her short life. As he watched her tears fall, though, he felt obligated to say something. What was it folks always said at funerals? "He's in a better place"? Something like that. As he opened his mouth to speak, though, Jack caught his eye. The older man frowned and gave a subtle but firm shake of his head, and for once in Trevor Gilbert's life, wisdom prevailed, and he shut his mouth and turned his eyes back to the road ahead.

Wonders never cease, the man who styled himself J.T. Fields thought with a sort of grim relief, his grip on the steering wheel relaxing just a hair. The last look Miz Junie had shot her husband had

been none too friendly, and the last thing he needed was to have the two lovebirds bickering in the cramped confines of the Ford. Something had happened to old Tailypo since the last time Jack had seen him. Something strange. Something bad. He had heard rumors to that effect, rumors that he might have laughed off, had their source been anything but impeccable. He was grateful now for the warning, though clearly he had still underestimated the danger. If he had been taken completely off guard, he might have lost all three of his charges in the confrontation at the barn.

Moving forward, he would exercise more caution. They only had a couple more hours to go, and then he could wash his hands of the whole mess and be rid of his debt to Marcie Walker as well, and wouldn't that be a comfort? Jack was not in the business of incurring debts — other folks owed him, not the other way around — and owing favors to witches was best avoided whenever possible. It just wasn't sound business practice, family.

He steered the Ford down the inky ribbon of highway, heading south toward Tennessee. It was a quiet night. He'd seen only a handful of cars pass, and there were no others behind him. A glance in his rearview mirror told him they were not alone, however: dark shapes flitted through the trees on either side of the road, moving faster than any forest creature had any right to, keeping pace with the truck. They weren't out of the woods yet. Not by a long shot.

Miles behind them, a lean, sinuous creature slinked from the shadows of the weather-worn barn on the outskirts of Copper Ridge. Its eyes flickered with a low, smoldering flame as it licked blood from its narrow mouth. It squinted its unnaturally glowing eyes, peering towards the horizon, where it could sense the pieces of itself that it had sent on in pursuit of the truck. Just keeping eyes on his property. They would do nothing more until he joined them to take what he was owed.

Chittering, furry tails slithered toward him across the grass like sleek-furred lamprey eels swimming through the blood-warm waters of a distant ocean. Twelve tendrils of blood soaked fur and needle teeth arrayed themselves behind the murderous creature that was currently picking Kevin Norris' flesh from between its teeth. The old man had done some damage, but nothing that wouldn't heal with a full belly and a little rest. Nothing at all, no indeed. Mr. Poe's orange eyes flared as the first of his tails, its fur matted and dripping with blood, arced into the

air to land on his rump, reattaching itself with a tiny grunt. Five more followed suit, each transforming from a diminutive horror into a shadowy, bottle brush plume in a single, graceful movement.

Mr. Poe felt the dark power well within him as six of his beautiful tails rejoined his flesh. Drawing on his increased resources, the thing that had been molded into Mr. Poe out of the clay of old TailyPo exerted just a little will, and three new tails blossomed from his backside to replace those the old man had damaged beyond repair. Nine swirling, writhing tails now fanned out behind the tiny monster, and he grinned.

Nine. He could work with nine.

Like an inky streak of lightning across the night-black fields, he raced after his quarry, following the trail left by the servants he had sent on ahead. These nine would carry him forth to put an end to this foolishness, for he was owed a debt, and Mr. Poe never failed to collect. One way or another, Mr. Poe always got his.

[“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*

The pains had begun not long after they left Hazel County. At first, June Gilbert couldn't even quite characterize them as such — it was more a tight feeling, a sense of tension that would eventually lessen and dissipate. But as they bounced along the back roads of Appalachia in one

conveyance or another, the sensations had become increasingly painful, and June had to accept that she was indeed experiencing contractions.

She hadn't been afraid — not yet. Her Aunt Marcie had explained the entire process to her when she had visited last to confirm her pregnancy. June knew what to expect, and based on everything Marcie had told her, she knew she had a ways to go before her labor began in earnest. She had decided it was best not to mention it to Trevor or Mr. Fields. Not yet. Men could not be relied upon to remain calm in these situations at the best of times, and Trevor had been nervous enough even before they left home. Best keep it to herself until the matter became truly pressing.

The shock of losing her daddy had taken her mind off things for a while, but as they raced through the darkness and her tears dried and a numb, empty feeling settled over her heart, the pain lancing through her abdomen returned with a vengeance. June settled into the back seat as comfortably as she could, and focused on breathing, like Aunt Marcie had suggested. She thought back to their visit, and carefully began reviewing all the steps Marcie had explained in her head, as a means of both preparing herself and keeping her mind off the fact that her daddy would never get to meet his grandchild.

As June rocked gently from side to side, resituating herself in the hope of relieving some of the tension in her back, Jack's gaze met hers in the rearview mirror. "You ok, Miz June?" he asked with some concern, and the young woman nodded.

"I'm all right," she answered with a fleeting attempt at a smile, but her voice sounded thin and to Jack's eyes, her face looked as pale as the moon in the starlit darkness. He didn't like it, not one bit, but he let her be, pressing his foot on the gas and coaxing the needle just a little further to the right of the speedometer. The sooner he could get her to Marcie Walker, the better.

It was with relief that, over an hour later, Jack turned the Ford off the main highway and onto a familiar two-lane county road that wound into the trees. It was not his first visit to Big Gap Road, or to the sprawling three-storey structure constructed of native stone and thick logs that lay at its end, though the business he came to conduct had never been the house's usual custom. Jack remembered fondly the days when on any given evening, all the windows would be aglow,

the air filled with the scent of jasmine and the sounds of laughter and music filtering across the yard through the open windows. The convivial atmosphere would carry into the wee hours, when the last drink had been served, the last hand of cards played, and the last customer seen to the door.

The atmosphere tonight was nothing like those halcyon days. As Jack pulled up to the wide space at the end of Big Gap Road where folks who visited the Walker house were accustomed to park their cars, he could see that right away. Tonight his was the only vehicle in evidence, and up the hill, he could see that the house was shuttered, only a single lamp glowing in the front window by the door, though the porch light had been turned on to illuminate their path. There was no music nor laughter, nor even the chirp of crickets or the gentle sigh of the wind. Big Gap Holler was dark and eerily quiet.

“End of the line, folks,” Jack announced as he parked the Ford as close to the well-tended path that led beneath an intricately-worked wrought iron arbor up to the house.

Trevor squinted up at said arbor that arched gracefully over the hedge-lined walkway. “Pleasant Evenings,” he pronounced thoughtfully, reading the elegant script fused between metal leaves and decorative flourishes. He favored Jack with a shrewd look. “What kind of place is this, Mr. Fields?”

Jack glanced back at June, who sighed from the back seat. “My Aunt Marcie used to run a parlor house, Trevor,” she explained. “But it’s been closed for years.”

June wasn’t sure why she’d never told Trevor about Aunt Marcie’s previous profession. It wasn’t that Trevor was the sort of person who would judge *her* for it, or even be particularly scandalized by Marcie herself — though his mama might be another matter. It just hadn’t come up naturally in conversation, and it was an awkward subject to raise. With one thing and another, she had eventually forgotten that he didn’t know. June had known since she was old enough to understand what a brothel was, and while her daddy seemed to hold no ill will toward Marcie, it was obvious at that point why her aunts had always visited *them*, and not the other way around. But it hadn’t been a big deal, and those days were long past anyhow. Now here they were, and if Trevor had a problem with it, she thought, he’d have to make his peace with the idea real quick,

because this was the only place their baby could be delivered safely, and she was pretty sure they didn't have much time left.

"Oh," Trevor said, his eyes wide, his tone one of mild surprise. She could see from his expression that he had no idea how to react to the information, which she reasoned was a damn sight better than how some folks might respond.

Jack took pity on the boy. "That was more than a decade back," he clarified. "These days Miz Walker is the county's most sought after midwife, or so I hear. She's expecting us. C'mon now, let's get your wife up to the house."

The first of those strange, chittering cries they had heard outside the barn reached them the moment Jack opened the driver's side door. They were still distant, but getting louder and closer every second as he turned to help June from the back of the truck. Her feet had no more touched the ground than she suddenly felt a rush of fluid down her thighs, followed by a sharp pain in her abdomen. She gripped Jack's hand, and their eyes met in mutual understanding.

"I got you," he said, one arm sliding behind her waist to support her. "Everything's gonna be just fine, Miz June."

As the next contraction rolled over her on a wave of pain, June couldn't help but cry out, her knees buckling.

"Junie!" Trevor cried, dropping the bags he'd been pulling from the back of the Ford and hurrying to her side. His eyes were wide with terror as he clasped her hand.

"I'm ok," she assured him. "It's just... the baby's coming, is all. It's all perfectly normal. I'll be fine."

"Get the bags, son," Jack said. "I've got her."

To both their relief, Trevor didn't argue. He bobbed his head in a nod, picked up the suitcases he'd dropped, and followed the two of them under the arbor and up the path toward the carved

wooden columns and stout walls of the house once known as Pleasant Evenings. Behind them, the screeching, loon-like cackle of the strange creatures they had seen at the barn rang out again, growing ever closer. Glancing over Jack's shoulder, June saw a lithe shadow moving through the trees.

"They're coming!" she whimpered, and Jack all but lifted her off her feet as he propelled her up the hill toward her aunt's house. He was strong for a man his age, far stronger than he appeared. Trevor jogged alongside them, lugging the suitcases, his breathing heavy.

As they reached the bottom of the stairs, June was seized by another contraction that nearly took her off her feet, and Jack paused for a moment to consider the steep incline ahead of them. "I think it's best if I carry you the rest of the way, Miz June," he said, almost apologetically. Then he hooked an arm behind her knees and hoisted her into his arms.

Beside them, Trevor dropped the bags he'd hauled from the car, his forehead creasing in a frown. "Aw, shoot," he said. "I forgot the one with the stuff for the baby!" He glanced over his shoulder, down the hill where the Ford stood with its doors still open. He saw no sign of the skittering horrors that had assaulted them in Copper Ridge. Looking into his wife's pained face, he thought only of the child who would join them soon, the tiny person they had wanted so long to complete their family. He smiled at her. "I'll be right back, honey," he said, then turned and ran for the truck.

"Son, wait!" Jack said, but it was too late. He was already gone.

"Trevor, no!" June cried.

On the porch above them, the front door swung open, and Marcie Walker stepped outside, her sturdy form bathed in the welcoming glow of the porch light. Her hair was twisted around her head in a neat braid, and she wore her usual uniform of sturdy hunting boots, men's trousers, and a neat button up blouse. She carried her walking stick in her right hand, and her keen eyes took in the situation with a glance. Her gaze swept down the hill just in time to see Trevor Gilbert, the nephew-in-law she had met only a handful of times, reach into the back of the old Ford parked at the foot of her property.

“What is that fool boy doing?” she started to ask.

And then Trevor screamed, and the windows of the Ford were painted in a sudden spray of red.

“Get her in the house!” Marcie ordered, and Jack hauled her wailing niece up the stairs and across the porch. Trevor Gilbert’s screams took on a gurgling sound, before he finally fell silent. His lower body convulsed, blood trickling down his khaki work pants as his legs danced an involuntary jitterbug, and then suddenly went still as his entire lower body fell to the ground, separating from his torso with a wet, tearing sound.

For an awful moment, there was nothing but the sounds of ripping flesh and gnawing teeth. And then the car door swung wide, and a long, weasel-like creature with sleek, inky fur and a fan of writhing, hypnotic tails leapt gracefully from the back of the Ford. As she watched, something long and snake-like yet covered in the same dark fur wriggled from the trees, leaping onto the creature’s back, where it rejoined its writing brethren. The creature made a soft sound, wriggling with evident satisfaction before turning eyes that glowed like hellfire on Marcie Walker. Its narrow face split into a grin filled with needle-sharp teeth. It lowered its head and began to advance on her.

“Aw don’t look at me like that, Aunt Marcie,” the beast crooned mockingly. “Just let Miz Gilbert know that Daddy’s here to pick up what’s his.”

Marcie struck her staff on the ground, and the wards that she and her sister had built and nurtured for almost twenty years flared to life, a cool blue light bathing the front yard in its eerie glow.

The creature hissed in fury, a shade of the wheedling creature he once had been creeping into his voice. “The babe is mine by right! I was promised! And Mr. Poe always gets what’s his.”

Marcie narrowed her eyes. “Your bargain is ended, TailyPo—”

“*Mr. Poe!*”

“Whatever you call yourself these days. I don’t care,” Marcie said. Her voice sounded tired. “Trevor Gilbert promised you his firstborn. He violated that agreement. By the old compacts, his life is forfeit. Fine. You’ve collected on that debt. You have no further claim over the babe, who hasn’t even drawn breath in this world yet. Now take your... whatever those things are... and get the hell off my land.” Marcie’s voice took on a tone of almost reverence. “You are not welcome here, beast. This house is closed to you. I shut my door against thee and set the bar. Begone if you’d leave with your life.” The wards that sprawled across the grounds of the Walker house shimmered and hummed in the night air. “So it is and so shall it be.”

Marcie’s lip curled in disgust, and she shook her head as she turned her back on the vicious little beast. He could throw himself against her wards all night if he wanted; they would hold. He might not. She had more important things to worry about now. The baby was coming. That was all that mattered now. They could worry about the rest tomorrow.

June Gilbert’s delivery was quick and relatively easy, as such things go, and that was at least some small mercy. Kevin Norris Gilbert, named after his grandfather, came squalling into the world with the sunrise, a healthy seven pounds of piss and vinegar, and a joy to his mother’s heart. Junie deserved some measure of happiness, Marcie Walker thought grimly as she sat at her kitchen table with a strong cup of coffee. If she had the power to raise the dead, she’d be tempted to resurrect Trevor Gilbert just to strangle him herself. The damn fool nearly got his wife and child killed, left her a widow, and got her daddy killed in the bargain. What a waste.

Marcie sighed to herself. She was tired. It had been a long night, and her heart was heavy with grief for her niece. Even as she cradled the babe to her breast, June’s eyes had brimmed with tears. The poor girl was exhausted and heartsick, and Marcie could only imagine the war that brewed inside her, joy at the arrival of the child she’d longed for battling with the pain of her losses.

For her own part, Marcie needed to rest, but she still had work to do before she could lay down her head. For one, she needed to make a plan to get June to safety. By the old laws, she and little

Kevin should be safe, but Marcie knew better than to trust that. The old TailyPo would likely have gone about his business, content with his bellyful of Trevor, but something wasn't right about the creature now. He'd been making bargains of his own, she'd wager. Bargains with powers far greater than anything he ought to have ever meddled with. It was best to get the two of them as far away from his reach as possible... his, and who or whatever he served these days.

As Marcie rose to pour herself a second cup, she heard a soft footfall in the kitchen door behind her and a soft rap on the door frame.

"Morning, Miz Walker," the man who called himself Mr. J.T. Fields these days said quietly, his voice low in deference to the new mother and child sleeping just down the hall in the spare bedroom she usually reserved for women who delivered their babies under her care. "Might I trouble you for a cup of that most excellent-smelling joe?"

Marcie nodded and took down another cup from the cabinet. She poured a measure for each of them, and fetched cream and sugar in case her guest preferred his coffee with either. Jack nodded his thanks, and helped himself to a bit of each. They sat in companionable silence for a moment, each lost in his or her thoughts as they enjoyed their morning beverage.

It was Jack who spoke first. "Am I correct in assuming that no one is likely to hear from anyone named June Gilbert again in this life?"

Marcie eyed him warily, but she nodded. "I don't know what happened to that old boy, but I don't trust that TailyPo — or Mr. Poe, or whatever — won't try to come for the two of them, and the old laws be damned. Best to get them far away from here."

"I think that's wise," Jack nodded. He raised an eyebrow. "I might be able to provide some assistance in that area."

Marcie narrowed her eyes. "For a favor owed?" she guessed.

A slow smile spread over the older man's face as he took a sip of coffee. "You know me, Miz Walker."

Marcie rolled her eyes, trying to suppress a grin. The old bastard never changed. “Fine,” she conceded. “For a favor owed.” And then the two of them set to work.

[“Atonement” by Jon Charles Dwyer]

Well, hey there, family. I know, I know, I know: we did it again. Tore a young family to shreds and set a whole bloodline on a different course just for your enrichment and entertainment. On a more serious note, we know that it's hard when the darkness takes a character you might like or identify with, and please know that the death in this episode wasn't a moral condemnation of that character. It was just the raw brutality that comes from a world filled with monsters, not that dissimilar to our own. But you might be asking yourself, what kind of mischief are Mr. J.T. Fields and Marcie Walker gonna get up to? Well never you mind, family. Just trust they got the best interests of that young mama and her little baby in mind.

And if you, like Marcie Walker, are wondering how TailyPo became Mr. Poe and you haven't already, you can find out by becoming a patron over on Patreon. For \$10 a month you can gain access to hours and hours of exclusive stories and programming, including the brand new origin story special “Not Worth The Bloodshed: How TailyPo Became Mr. Poe.” That plus tons of other content are waiting for you over at patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia.

Now this is your “don't ever go back for the suitcase, ain't nothin' in that suitcase worth getting eaten over” reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's story was written by Cam Collins with a little bit of help from Steve Shell. Our themesong is by Brother Landon Blood and our outro music “Atonement” (now available on all streaming platforms) is by Brother Jon Charles Dwyer. We'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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