

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 4, Episode 62: Small Favors

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

June Gilbert was furious. She took a deep breath and counted to ten as she settled the handset of the telephone back into place on the table by the old sofa they'd inherited from Trevor's pa when they'd taken over the farm. While telephones had been prevalent in Hazel County for a good number of years now, this was a new addition to the Gilbert home. When the bun in her oven had been confirmed, Trevor had insisted they be able to contact family or the doctor at a moment's notice and paid the relatively handsome fee to have them connected to the Hazele County exchange. She was touched by her husband's newfound sense of responsibility, had found it sweet how often he tested the line to make sure they were still able to reach the outside world from the end of their little dirt road.

Her heart had swelled with pride as Trevor had begun making improvements around their humble little domicile. He built new steps for the front porch with a sturdy railing that gave her something to hold onto as she made her way in and out of the house in her current state. Shortly thereafter he added a new screen door with a turning lock at the rear of the house so she could allow the cool breeze to blow through on hot days. A tall white picket fence sprung up around the yard, setting it apart from the working part of the small but thriving farm. A heavy iron gate with a thick sliding bar provided the only entry point to the property.

June's pride turned to concern when Trevor began purchasing more guns than he would ever need to hunt. A brand new revolver made its way into his nightstand drawer, and a shotgun that looked like it could stop a charging elk now hung beside the broom and dustpan inside a closet that had previously held only household cleaning products. Other new weapons were tucked out of sight in places she had yet to discover. This small arsenal joined the seven deadbolts he'd added to the front and back doors and the fancy new windows with heavy duty latches he and a friend had installed in the bedroom and the parlor.

June had asked him, half joking, if he was expecting an invading army when he presented her the three separate new keys it now took to lock the back door. The terror that had flashed in her husband's eyes had only been there for a moment, but she had seen it and could not forget it. As her delivery day approached, Trevor slept less and less. She'd wake to him screaming, leaping from bed and scrambling to put himself between her and the bedroom door. Other times she'd find him pacing, rifle in hand, watching the treeline from the back porch.

It was the lack of sleep that had done it, she thought. He was testing all the locks on the front door for what seemed the fiftieth time that week when she hugged him and asked what in the world he thought was going to get in the house. Did he think the devil himself was trying to sneak in and steal their souls? Trevor was stretched thin, nearly delirious. He looked at her as though his heart had been dipped in the blackest sins and deep-fried. June expected him to say what he always said: that you can't be too careful when you have a new baby. It was his job to keep them safe as the man of the house, and so on and so forth. But this time... this time, he just broke.

Trevor fell to his knees, weeping, and the whole sordid tale came pouring out: how the hunting trip had gone wrong, how he got lost on a ridge he knew like the back of his hand, the deal he'd made with a thing with glowing orange eyes and what seemed like a hundred tails. He'd sobbed and wailed as he confessed that he'd promised the babe in her belly to some h'aunt out in the woods. He would do whatever he could to stop it, he promised, but they had to be ready.

Most wives married to men with a history of loving little brown jugs more than the lord might have thought he'd simply fallen off the wagon. But June Gilbert, who'd been born June Norris, knew better. Her mama had warned her of the dangers to be found in the deep woods, of the perils of entertaining the honeyed words of creatures offering deals that seemed too good to be true. After Mama passed, her sisters and June's cousin Belle had taught her even more during her visits to them down in Tennessee. June truly loved her husband, but right now she would just as soon go upside his head with a shovel for being such a fool.

How in the world had he come face to face with a genuine monster and kept the truth from her until now? She was so angry and scared, she felt like screaming and throwing up all at once. The baby chose that moment to shift and kick and she almost did both, which was getting to be the

natural state of her life as her due date drew closer. She took a deep, steadying breath. She was going to fix this. She'd called her aunt in Tennessee, who had expected she was calling for her to come to Hazel County to help bring the newest member of the Gilbert clan into the world. Her aunt didn't panic — didn't even sound too worried when Junie explained the situation — and she only cussed Trevor's name a little.

"Now you just sit tight. I'm gonna call in a favor or two and send somebody down there to get you, your daddy and your dumbass husband."

Junie was puzzled.

"Aunt Marcie, you don't need to do all that, we can just take the train. We got time before the baby—"

"No! No, don't you dare," snapped Marcie Walker's voice from the other end of the line. "If this is the kind of thing I think it is, you won't get far on your own. Running breaks the compact. You're gonna need somebody who knows how to handle this kind of situation, and I think I know just the feller."

Junie could hear the resignation in her aunt's voice. She had the feeling this wasn't a marker Marcie would call in for anyone but family.

"Y'all just be packed up and ready to go, you hear me?"

"Yes'm," Junie replied automatically.

"You'll know my man when he comes. I'm betting he can get there by tomorrow evening. I'll need to go and speak to him now. Y'all just stay put. I'll call if anything changes. Love you, girl."

"Love you too, Aunt Marcie."

June had packed in a silent fury. Trevor knew better than to try to talk to her now. She told him he could make it up to her later — and by later she meant he'd be working on that project the

rest of their lives — and sent him to fetch her daddy. When Trevor had objected on the basis of Kevin Norris' well known stubborn streak, she told him to say that this was something Mamaw Sheila would have dealt with if she were still with them. Trevor didn't understand what that meant, but Junie told him just do it and slammed the door in his face. Her daddy would understand the urgency of the situation at the mention of her mamaw's name.

At precisely sundown the following day, the sound of an approaching truck engine wound its way up the narrow road to the Gilbert homestead. Trevor and his father-in-law stepped out onto the porch to greet their visitor, Trevor with a shotgun over his shoulder and old Kev bearing a pistol in a hip holster. Junie expected to find the beat-up old pick up of Melvin Blevins — the hired man who had become part of the Walkers' extended family — in her front yard, but instead saw a brand new Ford Model T panel truck when she peeked outside. It was painted a flat black and bore no company logos or other identifying marks. Trevor stepped into the path of the slowing vehicle and held up a hand, doing his best to project an air of confidence and authority but failing pretty miserably. He was exhausted and terrified, and it showed.

The truck's engine fell silent and the driver's side door opened. The man who emerged into the fading golden light of early evening was not Melvin Blevins, but instead an older gentleman of heavy carriage who groaned a bit as he straightened his back and stretched. He was dressed in a simple brown suit but wore a fashionable hat that hinted at more wealth than the suit implied. His build was average — not especially physically imposing — but he carried himself with a swagger that bespoke a life of seeing and doing things that most people had better sense than to attempt. There was a twinkle in his eye as he surveyed Trevor and Kev and their respective firearms.

“Gentlemen, I'm assuming you are Mr. Gilbert and Mr. Norris, respectively.” The charm that oozed from the stranger's voice was like a shot of whiskey.

Trevor felt himself relax as he met the man's eyes. He almost offered his hand to shake, but caught himself, thinking better of it. He nodded stiffly. “Yessir. And you are?”

Their guest ignored Trevor, stepping past him to greet Junie, who had come out onto the porch. “That would make you Miss Juniper Rebecca Gilbert, would it not?”

Junie smiled dryly. She could feel the man's charm reach for her, but she knew better than to trust that. She shook her head. "Ain't nobody called me Juniper since they wrote it on my birth certificate, sir," she said sweetly. Miz Gilbert will do just fine — or June, if you insist on being familiar."

With a wolf's grin, he bounded up the steps of the porch in a blink. He had taken her hand and kissed it before Junie quite knew what was happening. "I'm afraid I never had the pleasure of meeting your mother, but your aunts Marcia-Lynn and Heloise are old acquaintances of mine." He met her eyes and she felt that charm radiate out from his smiling face again. "They send their regards and eagerly await your arrival."

"Mister, my son-in-law asked your name," Kev interrupted, pushing his coat aside to show his hand resting on the butt of his sidearm. "We ain't going nowhere til we at least know who we're dealing with." Something about this fella wasn't quite right. Kevin Norris could feel it in his bones. The man in the plain brown suit spun on his heel with remarkable speed, and suddenly Kev found the hand he'd rested on his old revolver being shaken. The stranger's grip was warm and unbreakable.

"My name is J.T. Fields of Dorchester. My friends call me Jack. I am here at the behest of your late wife's family, Mr. Norris, to safely deliver you, your daughter, her husband, and your currently unborn grandchild to their hearth and home. Now y'all can stay here and face what's comin' on your own. But if you like breathing, I'd suggest you get in the truck and come with me."

["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*

They drove west as night came on, the delivery truck moving through the night like an inky shadow cast against the moon as the venerable Mr. Fields piloted the panel truck like a captain at the helm of his ship.

“I usually have folks drive for me,” the older man said to no one in particular. “My eyes aren’t what they used to be at night, but we’ll get by just fine.”

“I can take a turn at the wheel, Mr. Fields, sir. If you get tired,” Trevor offered.

“Call me Jack, son,” Fields said with a grin over his shoulder as they came to a convergence of three roads. Inexplicably, Jack turned down the one headed north. “I appreciate the offer — truly I do — but the route we’re taking ain’t the easiest and this particular vehicle requires a steady hand.”

Old Kev scowled in the passenger seat. “I’ve driven from Flat Top out to Tipton a hundred times. Baker’s Gap ain’t far from there, and that road ain’t too bad. Especially with all the work the government’s been putting in around the state line.” Kev looked around to get his bearings, his scowl deepening “But this ain’t the road towards Tipton neither. We’re going in the opposite direction.”

The man who called himself J.T. Fields of Dorchester laughed softly. “Oh, we aren’t taking any roads the government built, Mr. Norris, but we’ll get there all the same. We gotta swing up by Bent Laurel to get where we’re going, and that means heading north for a little bit. Y’all just gonna have to trust me on this.”

“Bent Laurel?” Trevor piped up doubtfully. “Out near Pocahontas? Is there even anything out there anymore?”

“No,” his father-in-law said sourly. There was a note of trepidation in his voice that Trevor Gilbert had never heard before. “Whole town dried up and withered like a weed after the East

Mine blew out on Flat Top Mountain more than forty years ago. Lost my daddy and both my uncles in that blast. Horrible business. Gas explosion so big it... it—”

“Cracked the mountain wide open,” finished Jack. “Worst mining disaster in the Commonwealth of Virginia to date, yes sir. One hundred and twelve men lost in a hail of fire and darkness. Lucky the bodycount didn’t get no higher. Wasn’t no government regulation back then at all. They trusted the mine operators to keep the men safe, and I think we all know how that turned out. You had wheel carts launched five hundred feet from the mouth of the mine, houses shook off their foundations, and then there was the fire. I can’t say I’ve ever seen fire do what it did to that mine,” he added distractedly as he pulled the truck around a tight bend in the road and began to climb a steep incline, his eyes never leaving the road.

“You were there? You had to be a young’un back then. You can’t be much older than me,” Kevin Norris mused, regarding the weathered skin of the man who called himself J.T. Fields rather critically.

“I’m older than I have any right to be,” Jack chuckled. “Right now, I’m as old as I’ve ever been in this old sack of meat and bones. But that is not a discussion for tonight.” His final words carried the weight of a vault door slamming shut. “Trust me when I say I know what there is and what there ain’t in Bent Laurel, and what is there will help us get ahead of your little problem before the little lady back there pops like a tick. Let’s all be quiet for a bit, alright? I can explain more later, but this next leg requires a little concentration.”

Junie watched through the back window as they rolled past some of the other coal camps on the north end of Hazel County — Bossevain, Jenkins-Jones, Big Run. Men shuffled through streets illuminated by electric street lamps, their skin darkened by time spent smothered in the embrace of the mountain, joints aching as they made their way home, passing the next incoming shift, sure and steady as conveyor belts carrying waste to an incinerator. She saw what she assumed was a father with his small son lined up to clock in at the front gate of one mine or another. Little feller couldn’t have been more than eight years old. Junie rested a hand protectively over her belly. She couldn’t imagine sending her child to work in that darkness. She knew boys even younger often worked as door and shovel boys — and even more dangerous

positions — and prayed she and Trevor never fell on times so hard they had to make a choice like that.

Soon enough they came to the turn for Pocahontas, indicated by a battered company sign reading:

WELCOME TO POCAHONTAS
HOME OF GENUINE FLAT TOP COAL/COKE
GUARANTEED SMOKELESS

They rolled through the small town in silence. Neat, identical houses lined the streets. The roads to and from the mines outside town were clearly marked and well kept. Yet there was an unsettling sense of despair — even dread — that hung over the place.

The Model T bore east for another ten minutes past the town before they came to a faded, nearly illegible piece of signage mounted on a rotting wood post.

BENT LAUREL (EAST MINE) CLOSED
PRIVATE PROPERTY — KEEP OUT
TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT ON SIGHT

There was no gate nor any sort of barricade blocking the road, so without hesitation, Jack pulled onto the neglected old dirt track that led down a slight incline towards the corpse of the biggest mining disaster these mountains had ever known.

The truck had rolled about a hundred yards past the sign when its engine rattled itself to a dead stop. Its headlights flickered and died. The night was moonless and overcast, not a single star in the sky above to light their way. The darkness was absolute. Jack glanced down at the steering wheel, snatching his hands away as though it had suddenly grown hot beneath his fingers. Outside, the wind stirred through trees they could not see and the night pressed hungrily against the windows as if daring them to come out and see what might be moving within it.

“Ah. I should have expected that,” Jack said, bemused. “Well y’all, we have reached our first destination. Just sit tight and stay in the vehicle, please. I need to arrange for our passage.”

He opened his door and stepped out, gravel crunching underfoot as he made his way around the back of the delivery truck and opened its panel doors. He rummaged around for a few moments, clearly searching for something, before exclaiming triumphantly, “Ah! Here we are.”

The man known as J.T. Fields closed up the panel doors and walked back around to the front of the truck. There was a soft clank as he placed something metal on the ground. The driver’s side door opened again and Jack stuck his head in. “Alright, folks, things are about to get a little... interesting. I need y’all to sit tight now, and no matter what you see or what you *think* you see, just stay in the truck. You hear me? I would suggest you close your eyes, but that might be even worse. Just... trust me, and be brave. You all right, Miz June?”

Junie nodded.

“Alright then. Here we go.”

Jack slammed the door and disappeared into the darkness. The wind picked up, blowing through the leaves on the trees like rattling bones.

“Hail to the travelers!” Jack called in an oddly formal voice. “I stand upon your threshold to call upon one who owes me thrice over. One boon you have repaid, and I come here now to seek repayment for the second. I have come to this place of deepest night and sundered veil bearing gifts of flint, steel and fire. I seek an audience with those who would seek redress for the wrongly slain, who would give names to the nameless dead left buried beneath these hills in pursuit of other men’s money. I make this offering and beg an audience with thee. Pray come forth!” With this dramatic pronouncement, Jack struck flint to stone, and an old miner’s lantern flared to life. He held it aloft, its flame glowing pale and cold, like a tiny full moon in the pitch black night.

Junie immediately wished he would put it back out, because its sickly silver light fell not just on the road, or the trees that lined it, but upon dozens — if not hundreds — of dirty, dead eyed boys who surrounded the truck. Boys who were missing eyes or limbs, or parts of their faces. Boys who were dead and had been dead for a long time. Yet there they stood, eyes black as coal dust

fixed upon the man in the plain brown suit who held that lantern high. Her eyes filled with tears, her arms wrapping protectively over her belly. Old Kev's hands trembled as he covered his eyes and began muttering a prayer under his breath. Trevor simply stared out at them in wordless, frozen terror. He thought his heart might have stopped. The legion of dead boys did not move towards Jack, the lamplight seeming to hold them all fascinated, their hungry faces leaning in like terrible flowers seeking some strange, cold sun.

"I know you're here, son, and you owe me. So why don't you come on out so we can talk?" Jack called out.

For a long moment there was no response, the dead children merely watching him in that hungry silence. Then the sea of boys began to shift, parting to allow a lone figure to make his way to the front of the pack. June clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a scream as he drew near. The boy at first appeared tall, but in the next moment he was not. He had the smooth cheeks of a boy, then the haggard visage of a man grown old before his time. He was bleeding with a crushed face, then he was some horrific, shambling thing made of bones and fire. Finally, his features settled into those of a boy again. Just a boy, maybe twelve or thirteen. A boy dressed for the mines, with a cap pulled down low over his eyes. Old enough to work. Old enough to get into trouble. Old enough to die in the endless darkness under the mountain beside his daddy and his brothers.

The boy stepped into the light of the lantern, extending his open hand. To June's surprise, Jack handed him the lantern.

When the boy spoke, it was the voice of a man. "I find this offering to be satisfactory and in accord with the old compacts." He held the lantern high. "So say I."

"SO SAY WE ALL," answered the dull chorus of dead children.

The boy turned back to the one who had called him and his cohort forth. "Well, hey there, Jack. It's been a while," he said with a knowing grin. "What can we do for you this time?"

["Atonement" by Jon Charles Dwyer]

Well, hey there, family. My, my, my look at all those pieces in play on the board. We got our man Jack of course, the Walker Sisters have officially entered the chat, and now the Boy and his legion of soot-faced saints have made their presence known. What will this mean for Mr. Poe and his quest for the Gilberts' firstborn? He even know who he's messing with? I guess y'all have to come back and find out next time. I hope you join us, but I'm betting you will.

I want to take just a second to thank all of y'all that reached out after last episode's little thank you segment regarding the charitable efforts you've helped us make possible. We appreciate y'all and your kind words. So from the bottom of our blackened and never beating hearts, thank you. Thank you kindly, family.

Now if y'all don't mind I'd like to take another moment just to let y'all know the newest installment of Familiar & Beloved, our series focused on the animal companions in the world of Old Gods of Appalachia has dropped over on Patreon. Miss Emmaline Underfoot's story is rolling right along, and there's more good fur baby based goodness to come. If you head on over to patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia and make the appropriate tithe, you too can catch up on Familiar & Beloved, Build Mama a Coffin, Black Mouthed Dog, Door Under the Floor and even more.

And now it's time for your "hey did you know Jon Charles Dwyer and Jacob Daneilesen-Moore both dropped new EPs on Spotify and other streaming services as well as their respective bandcamps" reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's story was written by Steve Shell and Cam Collins. Our theme song is by Brother Landon Blood, and our outro music is "Atonement" by Brother Jon Charles Dwyer. We'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.