

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Salt of the Earth

A Tale for the Season

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

[Pretty Polly (Instrumental) performed by John Lee Bullard]

Talk about Appalachia, and coal is the commodity that tends to come most immediately to mind — the black diamond that folks have been killing and dying over since white settlers started digging it up to fuel military operations up at Fort Pitt, across the Monongahela from Pittsburgh, way back in the mid-1700s. But coal is not the only secret these mountains have to give up.

Millions of years ago, part of the land we now call Appalachia was home to a shallow, inland salt water sea. Time passed, continents drifted, mountains rose, and those waters formed veins of sodium chloride like ribbons of snow through the stones of the mountains, and carved deep salt caverns out of the earth below. In part of what we now know as Virginia, some of the remaining waters formed a natural salt marsh, a fertile valley that attracted wildlife of all kinds — living and breeding, bleeding and dying, their bones and blood feeding the marsh and the mountains and nurturing the things that slept beneath those mountains, undisturbed for eons.

With time, humankind found its way to the marshland as well. Before white men brought disease and genocide to these shores, Chisca communities made their homes in this cradle of life and abundance, living in relative peace until Spanish conquistadors found their way to the area in the mid-1500s. When the Chisca rose up to defend their homes from these invaders, the Europeans slaughtered them and burned their villages, and yet more blood seeped through the soil to feed the ever-patient darkness.

It would be nearly two hundred years before still more European settlers discovered the rich salt deposits in the area — and of course, began to lay claim to it because that's what they do. Salt has been a coveted resource for thousands of years, and just like coal, folks have killed to possess

it, waged war to control it. The history of nation-states — of humanity itself — is written in oceans of blood. We are capable of generosity, of kindness and the nobility of sacrifice... in very small groups. Once men begin to organize or develop a hierarchy of any sort, the clock starts ticking, and you can start laying bets on just how long it'll take before the lust for power takes hold. Somebody always gets greedy, and it never ends well.

So it was only a matter of time before the small mining operation the Preston family had established in the picturesque marshland near Palmer, Virginia, in 1894 drew the attention of Barrow Mineral Resources. Elias Pontius Barrow ruled both the Barrow clan and his business ventures with an iron fist. He expected those under him to fall in line — and in E.P.'s estimation, "those under him" included pretty near everyone. So when the Prestons had, at first, refused his generous offer to take the saltworks off their hands, he had dispatched two of his employees to explain its benefits more clearly to them. When both Preston senior and his son suffered an unfortunate accident on the road after meeting with said representatives, E.P. was only too happy to extend that same offer to their grieving widows, who had children to raise, which would leave them little time to see to the running of a sizable mining operation. Family always comes first, after all.

E.P. himself always relied on family first. He trusted no one whose name was not Barrow, and even among his children... well, while some might be trusted, not all could be relied upon. The strict breeding program that E.P. and his children and his children's children had adopted did not always produce... optimal... results. Not everyone was fit for mingling with the Barrows' many business associates. That required skill, finesse, and a level of self control to which not all of his get could aspire. In this, E.P. Barrow considered Polly — pretty Polly — his greatest achievement.

Polly was the youngest child of his body, and by far the most like him in temperament. She was polished, poised, patient... and ruthless in pursuit of her goals. And thus, when E.P. received word of the rumblings about unionization among his workers at Barrow Alkali Works in December of 1924, it was his darling Polly he dispatched to Palmer to convey season's greetings from the family to its employees.

Palmer, Virginia, didn't start out as a company town, but when Barrow Mineral Resources took over the local salt mine to establish Barrow Alkali Works, they wasted no time in buying up the remaining business and real estate. It was a well established practice in the Barrows' coal interests that had proved both profitable and effective at quelling any... troublemaking amongst the locals. Old E.P. Barrow figured it would work just as well for salt as it had for coal, and in this, he was not mistaken.

Lonnie Stout had, like all the men of his family, worked his whole life at Barrow Alkali Works, and at the Preston operation before it. They considered themselves company men, loyal to a fault. If perhaps Lonnie had had a friendly conversation with a couple of men from a certain larger mining operation in which the evening habits of his boss and the boss's son had come up — well! They had asked about the local entertainment to be had, after all, and surely no one knew better — or had more spare cash to spend on such delights — than Mr. Preston and his boy. Whatever local watering hole those two frequented must surely be the finest establishment in Palmer, and from the look of the men's perfectly tailored wool suits and the shiny Buick the taller of the two men drove, they could certainly afford the best. Lonnie was just being helpful to some visitors to their fair town, and if the Prestons happened to have met with some misfortune that very night, that was certainly a shame — I mean, Lord bless the Preston women and their kids — but it had nothing to do with the few dollars and nice bottle of 'shine that had found their way into Lonnie's pockets.

But later, when the money was spent and the haze of his hangover cleared, it had occurred to Lonnie that the new owners of the plant might just view a man who'd had such a conversation with them as... unreliable. Maybe even a little bit untrustworthy. And that just wouldn't do — Lonnie needed this job. It kept him in drink and afforded him the occasional trip up to Switchbend for a little nighttime entertainment of his own, and anyway he didn't know anything but salt mining — there wasn't nothing else for him to do. And so he'd set to proving to the new foreman that Barrow sent down to Palmer that he possessed all the qualities of the best sort of employee — he was punctual, he was reliable, he was loyal, and above all, he did what he was told without question.

And there had been a few things, especially around the time the company changed hands, that might give one pause. Not everyone was happy about the changes the Barrows implemented

when they came to town. There were rumblings of strong-arm tactics used to buy out local businesses, everything from sabotaging shipments of goods to the local general store to bribing members of the constabulary to outright blackmail of public officials. Some of the farmers who were reluctant to sell land that had been in their families for generations said they suspected their livestock had been poisoned. One of the most vocal, Maxine Pauley, had gone missing and turned up dead in her own well.

On one memorable occasion, the foreman had caught Lonnie by the clock at the end of the day, reaching for his time card, and hollered down to him from the office. Lonnie had dutifully headed up the stairs, tired as he was, to find the man was not alone. He was joined by two gentlemen Lonnie recognized — the very ones he had advised on local entertainment venues not so long ago.

Lonnie saw the light of recognition in the man's eyes, but the man simply shook his hand and said, "Good to meet you, Lonnie. My name is Henricus Crain, and this is my associate Johann Churchman." Mr. Crain was a short, heavily muscled man in a gray pinstripe suit with a red tie and a scar that twisted over his left eyebrow to touch the top of his cheekbone. Mr. Churchman towered over his partner, a stooped scarecrow of a man with a long face and solemn gray eyes. His kept his hands folded at the waist of his sober black suit, looking for all the world like an undertaker, Lonnie thought.

"We drove down from the home office today to... check up on things — and things are looking great, fine work you boys are doing here — but we've got to get back on the road, and there's... a bit of a mess... down in the basement, I'm afraid. We hate to keep you — I hope your wife's not got dinner waiting — but if you could run downstairs and mop up a bit before you go...?" Crain lifted his eyebrows, as if this were a question rather than an order, but Lonnie knew better.

So he'd just nodded, tipped his cap, and said, "Yessir, Mr. Crain, I'll get right on it."

Lonnie was not the janitor, and had only a vague idea of where the cleaning supplies were kept, but it didn't take him long to sort out. They were stored, conveniently enough, in the basement, in a closet tucked under the stairwell. Lonnie had filled a bucket with some soap and water and grabbed a mop and went looking for the mess in question. Crain hadn't been real specific, and

the basement was a dark and sprawling affair, but he found soon enough, under a bare, swinging bulb in a back corner of the building. The mess in question was... well, Lonnie couldn't say with certainty what it was — it was mostly dry and tacky — but the brownish-red sludge that coated the cement floor looked an awful lot like blood. That dingy little back corner of the basement looked like the floor of a slaughterhouse, not to put too fine a point on it.

Lonnie wondered nervously if this was meant as a message for him... or a test? Hell, maybe both. If it was the former, well then message received — loud and clear, sir. You can rely on old Lonnie. And if it was a test, then Lonnie most assuredly intended to pass. And it was a damn lucky thing he didn't have a wife waiting at home, because it took him an hour. But when Lonnie was finished, his head swimming and hands raw from bleach, there was no sign of the sticky mess — which was definitely blood, no doubt in his mind about that now. Next morning, Mr. Crain and Mr. Churchman were nowhere to be found, and the foreman never said another word about it.

So Lonnie followed suit. He kept his mouth shut and his ears open, and as the years passed, he would take on other special tasks for Crain and Churchman from time to time when they came to Palmer. Gradually, he began to learn more about these men, old E.P.'s most trusted representatives, piecing together bits and pieces of information gleaned from stray conversations here and there. They were known as E.P.'s personal "hollow men." Now Lonnie didn't know precisely what that meant, and from time to time, he did turn it over in his mind. In what way were they "hollow," exactly? Was it some sort of joke he didn't get? Didn't matter, really. Lonnie just knew that he wanted to be one of them. He wanted to wear nice suits and drive a sleek black Buick and most importantly, he never wanted to have to see the muck dam again.

One of Lonnie's rewards — if you could call it that — for the extra work he took on for Crain and Churchman had been a promotion to superintendent of Barrow Alkali Works' waste mitigation project — known universally, both at the saltworks and throughout the local area, as the muck dam. BAW didn't just mine salt and ship it off to be ground up and packaged in nice blue boxes to stock mamaws' pantry shelves. The operation also produced related alkaline commodities, such as baking soda, soda ash, caustic soda and the like. The byproducts of these chemical processes included slaker waste, fly ash and cinders from the plant's steam boilers;

hydrated lime that formed the starting raw material for the soda ash; and ammonia still waste. The still waste — a viscous, greasy-looking white slurry of solid particles and liquor that everyone referred to as “muck” — was stored in the dam, where the solids would settle out and the liquor could be drained off into the river.

Everybody knew the stuff was dangerous — this was not the sort of dam where locals sent their kids to swim on hot summer afternoons — and there were disturbing rumors about what happened to folks who’d gone fishing or swimming too near where the runoff from the muck dam was dumped into the river. People said it made folks sick, that families who lived too close to the dam couldn’t even keep dogs or cats — they’d drink out of a creek, or some puddle after a hard rain, and get sick and die. Junior Scott said he’d fished up a sickly, puny little carp with two faces — an eye on each side and two separate mouths, as if the fish was trying to split itself in two out of its misery. But nobody knew whether to believe that one — old Junior had been known to embellish his stories just a little bit, especially when he’d been drinking. All that could all be no more than local bullshit, fair enough... but Lonnie’s predecessor at the dam, Roy Jackson, had been feeling pretty poorly for awhile, as he recalled. He remembered seeing Roy around the plant — the sallow cast to his skin, how thin he’d grown, and that rattling cough. Then one day Roy just stopped coming into the plant, and his wife Louella stopped coming to church, and when one of the ladies from the auxiliary had grown concerned and stopped by their house, she’d found it empty. Not a speck of dust in the cupboards, not a stray sock shoved into the corner of a closet. It was as if Roy and Louella had never lived there. Nobody had heard from either of them since.

It wasn’t long after that Lonnie had been tasked with overseeing operations at the dam. The position came with a healthy raise in his pay, but Lonnie had begun to wonder if the extra money offset the cost of working around the disgusting sludge every day. The fumes made his eyes itch and his head hurt, and maybe he was imagining it — growing stingy and grumpy with age — but even his clothes seemed to grow threadbare at an alarming rate these days. In the five years he’d spent on the dam, he’d gone through at least a dozen pairs of coveralls — good quality denim ordered right from the King factory down in Paradise. He didn’t know anybody who got so little wear out of ‘em as he did. His daddy said he needed to take better care of his things, that was all, but it had never been a problem for Lonnie, not before the dam anyway. More and more

these days, he found himself thinking about old Roy, wondering what might have happened to the man.

And so, knowing little else to do, Lonnie had thrown himself into his work with renewed enthusiasm, hoping to earn himself another promotion, up the ranks and hopefully right out of Palmer and the muck dam facility for good. When he heard whispers around town of an impending strike — that the alkali works' employees were pretty near fed up with long hours, paychecks that hadn't increased in years, and dangerous working conditions, and planned to unionize... Well, Lonnie had dutifully passed this information on to Mr. Churchman at the first opportunity. Two days later, he'd received a call in his tiny, cramped office at the dam — which was little more than a closet somebody'd stuffed a desk and chair into.

Mr. Crain and Mr. Churchman were coming back to Palmer. And they were bringing a representative from the Family. They would be there next Wednesday, and while they knew it was Christmas Eve, they still needed to meet with Lonnie that evening. They would see him at the dam at 7 pm.

At first, Lonnie had practically buzzed with excitement at the news. He had never met any of the Barrows in person. If the information he'd relayed up the chain of command was important enough to bring one of them to Palmer, then perhaps he could parlay this into the promotion he'd been hoping for. But as the week wore on, Lonnie began to grow nervous. He hoped he wasn't asked to name names — he didn't want to snitch on anyone, and to be honest, all he'd heard were rumors anyway. He couldn't point to any one person as the troublemaker at the heart of the unionization effort. What if the Barrows felt he'd wasted their time? And what if the word got around he'd been the one to tip the company off? It wasn't unheard of for folks to up and disappear during disputes of this nature.

Lonnie tried to push the troubling doubts from his mind. The die was cast at this point, after all, and all he could do now was play his hand. He would be as helpful as he could to the representative of the Barrow family, and hope to be rewarded. At five thirty on Christmas Eve, he clocked out for the day, and walked the mile-and-some home to eat a hasty meal of soup beans and cornbread that his mother had cooked that afternoon. Lonnie lived in the attic room of his parents' house, having never married nor seen much reason to rent a house of his own

without a wife to install in it. His mama fussed, of course, when he couldn't stay for a proper supper with the family or accompany them to church, but what could he do?

"I got to go, Mama," he told her as he stepped out onto the porch. "These are important folks coming down to inspect the dam tonight—" this being the story he'd told his family about the reason for this evening's meeting. And he'd closed the door and walked back across town to the dam. Stars blanketed the sky, glittering cold and distant overhead, and the chill in the air was dry and bitter. Lonnie wished, not for the first time, that he had a car, and was grateful for the warmth of the stuffy plant when he returned.

He had not been sitting at his cramped little desk for long — fifteen minutes, maybe twenty — when the glare of a car's headlights swept the office. Lonnie leapt to his feet with a start and peered out the window. Some sort of fancy black car was weaving its way up the road to the dam. He ran a quick hand through his hair and brushed at his coveralls nervously — should he have changed? His other pair were in a bit better condition. But he didn't have time to worry about it now. Lonnie hurried outside to meet his visitors, who had parked their car near the base of the dam. As he stepped out a side door and hustled toward them, three people emerged from the car and walked toward the face of the dam, their eyes turned upwards like looky-loos to gaze over its impressive structure.

Two of them, he knew. Mr. Crain wore a gray chalk pinstripe suit tonight, with a green and red plaid tie, threaded with a bit of gold, in a subtle nod to the season. Mr. Churchman was dressed in his customary black, though he too had added a festive touch in the form of a tiny silver snowflake pinned to his lapel. The third member of their party was not at all what Lonnie had anticipated. He wasn't sure exactly what he had expected, but it hadn't been her.

The woman who stood between the two hollow men was tall and statuesque, with thick raven curls pinned back under a red wool cap trimmed in fur. Her skin was pale and her eyes were the color of whiskey, and all Lonnie could think about was Snow White. *She looks like Snow White, just like the fairy stories!* She wore a fancy green party dress, beaded in gold with a swinging skirt, under a sleek black mink coat. She was possibly the prettiest girl Lonnie had ever seen, and he had no idea what to say to her.

“This is Mr. Stout?” she asked, with a subtle tilt of her chin toward Mr. Crain. Her voice was husky and sweet, like she spent her time drinking whiskey just as fine as the color of her eyes.

“Yes, ma’am,” Crain answered hastily, and Lonnie had never heard that tone in his voice. He sounded deferential... almost scared. “This is Lonnie Stout, our dam superintendent here at the plant. Lonnie, this is Miss Barrow.”

She extended a hand gloved in black satin as if bestowing a gift, and Lonnie was quick to shake it, remembering at the last moment to whip off his work cap. “Polly Barrow,” she clarified. “My father sent me to deal with this... union business.” The corner of her mouth quirked in the hint of a smile. She sounded almost amused.

“Yes’m,” Lonnie said, twisting his cap in his hands. His mouth was dry, and he licked his lips. “Whatever I can do to help.”

Polly smiled, and it was such a pretty, infectious expression, Lonnie found himself smiling back. “Excellent. Good man. What I’d like you to do is quite simple. Just open the gate, and we can be on our way.” She gestured to her dress with an almost apologetic smile. “As you can see, we are on our way to a party. They’re holding dinner for us, but we don’t want to keep everyone waiting, so we need to get back to Roanoke as quick as we can.”

Lonnie blinked and shook his head slightly. “I—I’m sorry, ma’am, I don’t think I quite heard you right,” he said, puzzled. “I thought you said—”

“Open. The gate,” Polly said more slowly, her smile never wavering. “Spin the big wheel, or—” she chuckled, gesturing vaguely “— whatever it is you do. Forgive me, I’m no engineer, but you know what I mean. Open the floodgates, as it were.”

Lonnie’s jaw hung open for a moment in confusion before he remembered to shut it and stammered, “B-but, ma’am... what... why? I’m not sure you understand. The river can’t hold it all. There’s enough muck in that dam to flood the whole town.”

“Yes. That is the point, Mr. Stout.”

“What— what... but... why would you....”

“When children misbehave, there must be consequences, Mr. Stout — may I call you Lonnie? I have been sent here to teach a lesson, Lonnie, and I don’t like to waste time. If a lesson is delivered effectively the first time, then I needn’t waste my time repeating it, you see? It’s efficient. Daddy likes things to be efficient.”

Polly Barrow’s smile never wavered, and Lonnie thought to himself that her perfect, blinding white teeth looked sharp. He swallowed, his throat working convulsively. “I-I just... I just can’t do that, Miss Barrow. It’s... it’s dangerous,” he stammered in a very small voice.

“You can and you will, Mr. Stout. That is your job.”

Lonnie clutched his cap to his chest in shaking hands. “Please, Miss Barrow, I’ve lived here my whole life. I know these people. My daddy and my brothers and their wives and litt’uns live here. I just can’t do this. I’m asking— no, I’m begging you. On your gentler nature, can’t you spare them? Isn’t there some other way?”

That polished smile slipped away at last, and Polly nodded thoughtfully, appearing to consider his request. “You appeal to my... gentle... nature, you say?”

“Y-yes, ma’am. As... as a woman, I’m sure you can understand I can’t do this to my family, my friends. I—”

Polly Barrow shrugged out of her fine mink coat, and handed it casually to Mr. Churchman, seeming unfazed by the cold. Lonnie saw that her sleek black gloves extended to the elbow — fancy gloves, fit for the party she planned to attend. Then she turned to face the wall of the dam, hauled her arm back, and before Lonnie’s horrified vision, the appendage seem to grow and change. Bone slicked with some viscous fluid burst from her skin to fuse with her fingers, forming a thick gauntlet around her otherwise delicate hand. With a snarl, she dropped to one knee and drove her fist into the wall near the bottom of the dam with a deafening crunch. There was a moment of utter silence as Lonnie stared in shock at the crater the young woman had

punched in the side of the dam. And then a popping, ripping sound followed as the cracks began to spread, far too fast, up the concrete edifice before them.

Polly — pretty Polly, the youngest and sweetest of old E.P.'s children — pushed herself to her feet, brushing fastidiously at the cement dust that had sprayed onto her dress. Her right hand now looked completely normal, whole and undamaged, though her hand now stuck through the end of her glove, which was shredded and soaked in... whatever it was that passed for blood under her skin. She wrinkled her nose at the offending garment, then reached for the hem and peeled it off, along with its undamaged mate. She held the ruined gloves out to Crain and snapped her fingers at Churchman. The tall, skinny man promptly stepped up behind her, holding the mink out for Polly to slide back into.

“I suggest you gather your things, Mr. Stout,” Polly said, turning back to the dam's superintendent. “That wall isn't going to hold much longer.”

“But... but my family—”

“The only family you know is *Barrow*, Mr. Stout. We have raised you up and filled your pockets, and if — *if* — you are a very good boy, perhaps you may join Mr. Crain and Mr. Churchman here. But your performance tonight makes that by no means certain, which is a shame. Mr. Crain had high hopes for you. So let this serve as a... gentle... reminder of what happens to children who don't do as they are told.”

“Y-y... yes'm. I understand.” And without another word, Lonnie Stout turned and ran for home. If he was fast enough — and very, very lucky — he might reach his family in time.

Polly turned away from the growing destruction, satisfied. The whisper of what happened here would travel amongst the others, from his lips or even from Crain — he liked to talk, whereas Churchman rarely uttered a sound — and Lonnie Stout would not make the mistake of questioning her again. Or would he run? Ooh, wouldn't that be fun? She would enjoy tracking him down with her hunting hounds and adding him to the pack. She would gain a loyal dog either way, and she'd set an example for anyone else who might think to cross her.

Wrapping her coat snugly around herself, she walked briskly back to the car. Crain held the door, and she slipped into the back seat of her daddy's plush Daimler. He hopped in front, and Churchman gunned the engine, and they sped away from the oncoming disaster. Soon, the sound of a growing roar reached her ears, and Polly turned her head to look out the back window. A thick blanket of roiling chemical waste crested the hill behind them in a wave, sweeping through Palmer, filling its streets, bursting through the doors of its houses, smashing windows and sweeping away cars in its wake. Polly's smile returned as she considered, with amusement, that she had, after all, brought them a white Christmas.

[*Pretty Polly*, performed by Landon Blood and John Lee Bullard]

Oh Polly, Pretty Polly, come go along with me

Polly, Pretty Polly, go along with me

Before we get married some pleasures to see...

Well, happy holidays there, Family. Thank y'all for joining us on this Christmas morning. I hope y'all have luxuriated in the shadows we've left you under the tree, and I wouldn't reach too deep into that stocking if you want to draw back all five digits. That's all I'm saying. But Cam Collins, my good people, Cam Collins bringing us "Salt of the Earth." Cam will be handling all the holiday episodes this year and I am terrified by that fact. So give it up for Cam Collins, our mistress of the dark. This is actually our third holiday episode, as last year we had the entry into the "Holiest Days of Bone and Shadow" trilogy. But the year before that, we did a special drive on Patreon that we would release something in the holiday season if we got to X number of Patrons, and we did. And on December 26, 2019, we released "The Witch Queen Chapter II: Doubt," and that was right on the heels of us releasing Episode 5, "The Boy." So the holidays have always been a spooky season for us here at DeepNerd Media. We hope you're enjoying time with those who are near and dear to you, or just curling up with a cat and a good book and calling it a day. All those things are valid. But thank you so much for supporting us this far, and we hope you keep coming back for these lovely fireside chats we have around the varying holidays.

And as always, *Old Gods of Appalachia* is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's intro music was by John Lee Bullard. Our outro music is Landon Blood, accompanied by John Lee Bullard, doing that awesome cover of "Pretty Polly." Today's story was

written by Cam Collins and narrated by Steve Shell. Introducing the voice of Pretty Polly Barrow, Tracey Johnston-Crum. We'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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