



NOD

A man desperate to save his dying wife defies all conventional wisdom as he squares off against the supernatural in a battle of will, faith, and knowledge. Will his world be able to survive the encounter - or its shocking consequences?

Early Summer, 1967
Lomar County, Alabama

“David Cole? Is that lil’ David Cole? I can’t believe it!” The woman’s kind blue eyes brightened from across the metal folding table, which was sagging in the middle from the metric ton of food piled atop it.

David nodded his head and grinned, heaping his third dollop of chicken and dumplings onto his plate. “Yes’im, but I’m not quite so little anymore.” He placed the ladle back into the massive pot of chicken-and-flour goodness and patted his non-existent belly. He shot Aunt Lola a wink and shared in her infectious laughter. She wasn’t really his aunt—he actually wasn’t related to anyone at this family reunion—but everyone that met her called her “Aunt”.

“You all done at NYU? That is where you were, right?” Aunt Lola asked expectantly – the food in front of her all but forgotten.

The young man replied. “I was at NYU for my undergrad, an Engineering degree. But now I’m at Union working on a Masters of Divinity-”

“Gonna be an engineer-preacher, are ya?” She twittered at her own joke.

David had heard it before and opened his mouth to reply when an older, refined gentleman in line to his left, dressed in slacks and a long-sleeved, button-down shirt, despite the southern Alabama heat, reached for the discarded ladle. “You mean you’re Old Man Cole’s boy? From down in the bottom at Yeller Creek?” A white and bushy, yet expertly manicured, eyebrow shot up.

David shook his head, spooning several helpings of purple hull peas onto his plate and nabbing a homemade biscuit before they all vanished—they did not serve food like this in the caf at school—and replied, “No sir. That was a cousin, I think. My Gramp’s second-cousin, once removed. I’m the son of Amos Cole and Ruby Walden. They had a place-”

“Sure, sure, I know. Right up past Faulkner Ridge. I knew I knew you,

boy! Amos and I were in the war together. I knew you when you were knee-high to a duck. But what in the world are you doing here? You ain't got no kin here—"

"Oh, Amos! I do tell. You're as dense as th' hardwood you haul! I reckon David's here to check in on Missy Molly Kate..." Aunt Lola let her words trail off into wisps like the curly, silver-blue springs of her hair.

David and Aunt Lola shared a silent, knowing glance while Amos scratched the side of his shining, perfectly combed scalp. "But...she ain't here. She's taken to her bed, sick again, if Doris Dubios is to be believed."

"What?" Aunt Lola cried out like a bird, her bright blue eyes already scanning the room for the country confidant, Doris. If there was a better source for juicy morsels of gossip, it was not to be found. The spry septuagenarian sprang from her place in the food line and scampered over to Doris.

David's mood darkened. While he knew that the food would be unbelievable and the company enjoyable, he had, indeed, left school to attend Molly's family reunion in the hopes to make contact with her. If she was sick, then that was not good at all. Would it look odd to simply show up at her house? Things like that simply weren't done in the country—one had to have a reason for calling on someone—it was not as casual as things were in the big city.

Another piercing bird cry echoed across the crowded church fellowship hall, another of Aunt Lola's, "I do tell's", finding its way into his ears. She was chattering with Doris, all thoughts of her reunion lunch forgotten.

It was then that David got an idea. Maybe he was looking at his excuse to call in on Molly. He knew that if he could not manage a visit to an old, sick friend then he would have to find someone who could. He had to try. There was no way he was getting back on the bus to New York without at least trying.



“I think this is just the sweetest thing, David, your wantin’ to take Miss Molly Kate a plate and check on her.”

The look Aunt Lola shot him reminded him of a phrase his Gramp used to say: *grinnin’ like a mule eatin’ briars*. David gripped a little harder and then peeled his eyes from looking out the passenger window of Aunt Lola’s 1955 Dodge Royal Sierra station wagon. It was the custom edition—with pink trim and corresponding interior accents that perfectly matched the pink tile in Aunt Lola’s bathroom—and she drove it like a horse headed to water: full out. David now knew he could not have found a better partner-in-crime for this little indiscretion of visiting Molly Kate. Aunt Lola would have a front-row seat of the juiciest gossip to hit Sandy Hollow, Alabama for the last three years. David only hoped that he would get there in one piece.

David replied, “Yes’im. Thanks so much for driving me over.” He gulped. “It would have been a mighty long walk from Asbury Church to the Steem’s place.”

‘But I might have made it alive,’ he added, silently.

“It sure would’ve, and in this heat? I do tell, David, you’d’ve been a puddle! How’d’you get from the bus station to your Momma’s anyway?”

“My cousin Andy came and picked me up. I’d hop-”

“Andy Sanders? Ruth and Albert’s youngest?” Aunt Lola queried, taking a curve in the dirt road at sixty and firing scree and dust into the air like a mortar.

David clenched his teeth and nodded. “Yes’im.” He peeped.

“I do tell! That boy had better get his head in gear, or he ain’t never gonna

amount to nothin'. All he does is ride them roads and go'a'fishin'...or that's what I hear, at least," Aunt Lola chattered, as she nearly sideswiped a parked pickup. She glanced over to David, her blue eyes sparkling, adding, "Not like you, David. Up at school in New York City."

David prayed fervently that Aunt Lola would put her eyes back on the road, slow down, or maybe even both. All he said in reply was, "Yes'im."

As they neared the Steem homestead and Aunt Lola's cream-and-pink rocketship slowly came out of orbit, David was able to tell her about his notion to get his father's old pickup running and drive it back up to school. His plan was to sell it and help offset some of the costs; after all, going to Union Theological Seminary had not been cheap. The years had not been kind to the old truck, however, and David, despite his innate mechanical gifts—he'd always been good with fixing and working with machines—had not been able to get it going.

Aunt Lola slammed on the brakes and threw her Dodge into park. At first glance, David thought that she had simply decided to stop somewhere in the middle of the woods. It was then that he saw the outline of the house, the roofline barely peeking out of a tangle of curling and questing wisteria vines. The neatly trimmed grass and lovingly pruned azaleas that David remembered from his youth were gone, replaced with weeds that threatened to overtake long-dead cars, wagons, and tractors. Everything seemed threatened by, or overgrown with, climbing ivy or kudzu. The stately pecans that had stood for years, like stoic sentries, providing food, protection, firewood, and cooling shade, were stooped and withered. The trees looked more like twisted intruders now, their broken and stunted branches clawing for life and vitality.

The years had not been kind to the Steem's place, either.

Aunt Lola clucked her tongue as she slowly shook her head. "I do tell..." she said, low and quiet.

It was an obituary, not an observation.



"Maybe it's abandoned." David's words dropped like heavy stones from his lips. He didn't like thinking it, much less saying it. The young man's quick, brown orbs darted everywhere: surveying, cataloging, classifying. He was straining to find any sign that his childhood sweetheart was present.

Aunt Lola knocked again, this time more forceful than polite Southern society would ever allow. "No," she said, her silver-blue curls wagging, "I'd'a heard about it if so."

Finally, a muffled sound issued from the bowels of the house, and Aunt Lola stepped back. She made a move to preen her hair and her embroidered peter pan collar, but then realized her hands were full with the prepared plate of food. Handing it abruptly to David, she readied herself moments before the door opened with a creak.

David felt his breath catch in his throat. It had been nearly eight years since he'd seen her, and she was obviously not at her best and brightest, but in his eyes, she was still beautiful. Her dark, shoulder-length hair, tousled now despite the lateness of the hour, looked as soft and velvety as ever. Eyes like honey oozing over hardwood were red-rimmed and bloodshot, but for David they had lost none of their allure. Her skin was pale from too many days spent indoors, but his eyes could see hints of the exotic bronze fire that he remembered from summers filled with the flashes of shoulders and calves. She

wore a pale pistachio-colored, worn nightgown under a heavier green robe; despite the sun lowering steadily into the west, it looked as if she had just awoken.

“I do tell, dear. It’s Aunt Lola. Are you well?” Although she tried hard to keep the judgment out of her voice, a bit of it crept in regardless, a by-product of Southern rearing.

David bristled a bit, and it was in that moment that he realized just how long and faithfully he’d carried a torch for this woman. He had never courted anyone but her in high school, and even throughout the tumultuous ’60’s, with all of its “Free Love” and “Open Sexuality”, he’d never had eyes for anyone but Molly Kate Steem — or, at least, the memory of her.

“And...” He false-started and then tried again. “...and David Cole, M.K. We came to bring you some lunch.”

Molly Kate looked at the two people on her disheveled front porch like they were Little Green Men from Mars. Then, her eyes rolled back into her head, and she fainted, dead away.



“The doctor said it’s a brain tumor,” Molly Kate stated matter-of-factly. It was as if she said something as plain and ordinary as liking the taste of coconut cake or what day of the week it was.

David felt like someone had kicked him hard in the gut. “W...what do you mean, M.K.? When? How?”

Aunt Lola just clucked her tongue and managed an “I do tell...”

“I’ve had to sell all of Momma’s fine china, crystal, and most of her silver to pay for it, but this is the third doctor I’ve been to, and none of them can tell

me anything about how or why.” The woman ran her hand through her dark hair—honestly to David she looked fine, perhaps a little overtired—and sighed deeply. “They’ve all been convinced that I seem to be getting worse, though not as quickly as others who’ve gotten this kind of tumor.”

Aunt Lola pounced like a panther that’d been poised for hours. “Where’d you been? Johnson City? Them city doctors don’t know a thing, Molly. They told Gladence Thomas—you know, Ethel’s great aunt from Colomb, that she had three weeks to live—three weeks, mind you—and do you know what? That’s been six and half years to the day. I do tell! She’s as fit as a fiddle now, and I just seen her two weeks ago. You need to go see ol’ Doc Coffee, he’ll fix you right up. Get you as right as rain!”

Molly Kate grinned at the woman’s outburst. David thought it looked good on her. She nodded, “I did, Aunt Lola. I went to Doc Coffee first, as a matter of fact. Back when I thought it was just the dreams.”

David’s concern was slowly transforming into frustration. “M.K., I’m confused. Dreams? What dreams? How long has this been going on, again?”

Aunt Lola rose and headed to the kitchen. A “Hurmph!” she left behind as she busied herself washing and cleaning several weeks of neglect.

Molly Kate looked to David. She was quiet for a long time.

Part of David was perfectly fine, just sitting there, staring into the amber pools of her eyes. He shifted a bit in his seat, and the old wooden chair creaked, shattering the oppressive stillness.

“Why are you here?” she asked.

“I told you-” he began.

Molly Kate cut him off, her words calm but with a deep well of *something*

that was not just beneath. “No one comes from New York to Alabama to bring someone lunch, David.”

And there it was. There was not much left for him to say or do.

“I came for you. I wanted to see you.” David inhaled deeply. Like a pearl diver taking a big breath before plunging beneath the surface, he knew that if he could withstand the pressure, he might get lucky and find a treasure. “I decided to come to your family reunion in the hopes that I would see you and get the chance to talk to you.”

“Why now?” Molly Kate asked.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy, M.K., and I know you don’t believe, but God-”

“How do you know I don’t believe, David?”

“Well, when I left-”

“Precisely, when you *left*.” Like a shark fin slicing the surface of the water, the edge came subtly into her voice without even the smallest of a ripple. “That was eight years ago...lots has changed since then. I’ve been through...” Molly Kate rubbed her forehead, like a headache was building.

She stood. “I’m sorry. This has been a taxing evening. I need to try and rest.”

Aunt Lola appeared at the door as if she’d been summoned—or as if she’d been listening. “You want us to sit up for you?”

David remembered his mother and grandmaw talking like that, offering to sit up for folks and keep watch over them in the night while they were sick, or “were ailin’”. He’d never understood it as a kid, but now, so close to Molly Kate and yet so far away—not to mention with her being sick—the last thing he

wanted was to be apart from her.

Molly Kate slipped into the darkness of her bower as the sun began slipping toward the western horizon. “That’s fine, Aunt Lola. Y’all make yourself at home. Plenty of room.”

Aunt Lola cut her blue eyes over to David and shot him a quick wink. “Better’n’nuttin,” she whispered.