

Eulalie and Washerwoman

Florida Folk Magic Stories, Book 2



A novel

by

Malcolm R. Campbell

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One

SO EULALIE WOKE precariously from the blues of her dreams into the jaundiced light of the kerosene lantern when a frightful pre-dawn bedlam was visited upon our back porch by a man named William Ochlockonee Tate, a blue-nosed hinny named Minnie, and a Florida water moccasin named Nagaina. I'm Lena, the cat. Before my conjure woman was awoken by Minnie's flailing hooves, I dozed blamelessly behind the pot marigolds until they were kicked into the yard.

Willie was in a hurry; as it turned out, the twelfth and thirteenth missing men gave him cause. Minnie had carried him out of the longleaf pine forest behind the house at a fast gallop. Nagaina, who patrolled the grounds between Coowahchobee Creek and the front gate, perceived the quickly rising heat of hinny and human as a threat, coiled her 5.8 cat-lengths of darkness around a porch post and showed Minnie her wide open white mouth.

Minnie spooked, but Willie held on as Minnie's rear hooves dragged through the ashes of the cook fire knocking over the cast iron pot. The remaining embers spun outward like the spent wishes of dying stars. Since Willie's urgent profanity was ineffective, Minnie's front hooves carried both hinny and rider onto the porch where there were collisions with water bowls, the sofa, an open bottle of shine and the pot marigolds. While the porch and its awning were well made, they weren't meant for such frantic abuse and shook like the world was ending until Eulalie grabbed the teetering lantern, stepped back into her altar room and shouted, "In Solomon's name, desist."

In the resulting hush, I heard the sweet voice of the creek singing a song about Joe Moore and the silver dimes.

"Gently, gently," whispered Willie as Minnie backed off the porch.

He dismounted, smiling cautiously. Nagaina slid beneath the porch and I didn't twitch a whisker.

"Willie Tate, what Beelutherhatchee nonsense are you up to?" She held up a blue sachet. "In all that ruckus, your right ear tangled in the string and pulled my protective bag of basil off the lintel while Minnie's left ear knocked the Morton's Salt thermometer off its post."

Willie was breathing hard, looking more and more like a plant withering away for lack of water in those late autumn days when death and winter waited on doorsteps, and when he sat down on the far end of the sofa out of Eulalie's reach, he was slow about it and took time to light a Kool and create a smoky cloud as ashen as his skin.

"CW, two more men gone missing from the Thirteenth Street neighborhood."

"Who?"

"The Alexander brothers," said Willie. "We were going out for turkey this mornin'. Martin wanted to try out his new wing bone call and his new truck. Robert wanted to try out his new shotgun. I got there early and found the house as empty as Jesus' tomb."

"Lord have mercy, Willie, they're probably down to the River District Sing this weekend." She took an extra breath before saying what I expect she didn't want to say. "Or, they forgot."

"They wouldn't forget. The sing isn't until next weekend," he said with an authoritative blast of mentholated smoke. "I knocked on the door and got no answer. I lifted up the bird bath where they hide the front door key and found this page torn out of the *Cooper Book of Sacred Harp Songs*."

Willie unfolded a wide page that looked like it had been hastily torn out of the hymn book.

"The Weary Souls," she read. "A fitting song, perhaps. Willie, this scribbling at the top of the page. Do you recognize the handwriting?"

"Martin's," he said. "When he writes, 'we're not yet resting in the Lord's everlasting arms,' he's talking about all the missing men. They got bad troubles. As the song says, they're sayin' goodbye. He left this clue for me because he knew I'd look for the key."

My conjure woman walked into the center of the yard with the page between two hands pressed together in prayer. She closed her eyes and sang, and while she sang she turned around and around slowly like the hour hand on an old clock.

*“Ye weary, heavy-laden souls,
Who are opprest and sore,
Ye trav’lers thro’ the wilderness
To Canaan’s peaceful shore.
Thro’ chilling winds and beating rains,
And waters deep and cold,
And enemies surrounding us
Take courage and be bold.”*

Eulalie paused. She was facing the rising sun now, soaking in the fire, as she always told me. “She’s still an angel singin’, Lena. Still knows the words by heart.”
“Hush up, Willie, I’m turnin’ around by His guidance.”

*“Farewell, my brethren in the Lord,
Who are for Canaan bound,
And should we never meet again
Till Gabriel’s trump shall sound.
I hope that I shall meet you there”*

She was facing slightly off south when she opened up her hands, the song sheet flying back to Willie in the breeze, and pointed toward Willie’s corn field across the road. But when her eyes opened, she wasn’t looking at the remains left after the corn harvest, but farther away past the tall pines and over the horizon. And her voice rose up with angels and fire when she sang the last three lines.

*“On that delightful shore,
In mansions of eternal bliss,
Where parting is no more.”*

“If you’re going to look for them, go south by southeast,” said Eulalie.
“The Sacred Harp singers need you, CW,” said Willie. He was crying and not trying to hide it.
“Don’t go on about that,” she said. Eulalie sank deep into the couch, smaller now, still shining though, and I wondered if Willie could see it, poor man.
“The turpentine camp?”
“Near the coast.”
“I’m not ready to go back there.”
“I know, Willie.”
“Adelaide’s house is still fine.”
“I’m glad you been seein’ to it ’cause Lena can’t find no trace of the men. Says my daughter’s house ain’t long for this world.”

“I don’t know how Lena sees what she sees. You told me if she can’t see it, it’s dead or hidden behind hexes.” Willie took an apple out of one of the large pockets in his khaki trousers and threw it to Minnie. “Don’t reckon what links the men together. Gabriel disappeared first in July on a night

with no moon. Then it was Levester. No moon that night either. Last night was blacker than your cat and the ace of spades.”

“All of them men knew me, Willie. There’s your link. They came out here regular for good luck charms and such. After the Liberty Improvement Club burnt a cross in my woods last year, folks thought my luck run out.”

“You think the club’s killin’ them?”

“No, Willie, I don’t. Matilda told me in a dream these men are flies getting advice from a spider.”

“Your mother is just as mysterious on the other side as she was before she passed,” said Willie.

Eulalie laughed. “People say I’m just like her. What did the police tell you?”

“Law done sold their souls down the alley years ago. Waste of time.”

“I know.” Eulalie shoved a healthy pinch of Havana Blossom in her mouth and started chewing like she couldn’t spit soon enough to suit herself.

“They said Robert and Martin probably got drunk at the jook and never made it home like all darkies out in the arms of the moon.”

“What else?”

“Sergeant told me they’d study on it after they get the crime wave under control.”

Eulalie spat a shower of juice against the busted marigold pot. “Crime wave? I hadn’t heard.”

“It’s so scary, you won’t sleep on this lumpy old sofa on the back porch no more. Officer Moe, he claims the Bellamy Bridge haint came to town to hex us up one side and down the other. Officer Larry took a posse and rode south to apprehend a swamp booger pissin’ in front of that new white people’s church on the Estiffanulga Road. Preacher man was damn well pissed off.” Willie couldn’t help but grin at that. “Sergeant Curly’s been on the trail of Two-Toed Tom for a month of Sundays; says if he don’t close in for the kill soon, he’ll jump Jim Crow.”

“Bless their shiny badges and pea-pickin’ hearts,” said Eulalie as matter-of-factly as one could make such a tongue-in-cheek pronouncement with a good chew in the way.

“So, what do we do first? Gather herbs. Light candles. Boil water?”

“We ain’t midwifin’, old man.”

Willie blew cigarette smoke from a fresh Kool in my conjure woman’s face and then held hands up in front of his face in case she returned the favor with tobacco juice. I’ve never known her to waste a good spit.

“We need a plan, Shug.”

“You reckon we’re Wonder Woman and Superman?” asked Eulalie. “If you got a plan, spit it out.”

“Sure enough, the stooges at the station ain’t got one.”

Eulalie picked me up because she could tell I was upset about the cops looking for Two-Toed Tom. I can’t see haints, so I don’t fret about them. Nobody with an ounce of sanity thinks the swamp booger is real. But an alligator large enough to eat cows and wreck cars, that’s another matter entirely.

“Here’s my plan, Willie. First, I’m going to clean my house. All my days start that way except when some fool rides their hiney on a hinny up on my back porch and tears hell out of the morning. Second, I’m going to clean and purify myself. You think you want to see me in a tiara and a skimpy Wonder Woman costume, but you won’t want to see me wearing the birthday suit the good Lord saw fit to clothe me in. Then I’m eating breakfast.”

“I’ve seen you wearing that birthday suit. Talk about a classy chassis.”

“There was a war on.”

“Korea’s all wrapped up for better or worse, but there’s a civil war in China,” said Willie.

A stream of Havana Blossom juice wiped the smirk off Willie Tate’s face.

“Get your mind out from ’tween your legs. Maybe this’ll smooth your frazzle.”

She handed Willie the Mason jar of amber colored shine. One swallow and his eyes shone like the moon.

“This ain’t your usual,” he said.

“I had an extra bushel of Dorsett Goldens and made apple pie for sippin’,” she said.

“Brings to mind Lauren Bacall.”

“What?”

“Sweet doll-baby with the kick of a mule.” He stole another kiss from the jar. “Good Lord, CW, this is better than sex.”

Eulalie scowled the way she does when she wants no more of the kind of talk she’s hearing. She shoved the jar beneath the couch.

“Go home. Get some sleep. Track down Robert and Martin’s friends and see what they know. Then Lena will find the clues you missed.”

Willie shrugged. “Might help.” He leaned out over the end of the porch. “No sign of Nagaina.”

“She’s hiding in the titi next to the outhouse,” said Eulalie.

“Good. Maybe she’ll bite your ass next time you dump a load and that’ll teach you not to trust snakes.”

“Go home, Willie. You need more beauty rest than I do.”

Willie rode out slower than he rode in.

“Saints preserve us, Lena, next time that man storms up on my porch, I’m tying a small craft warning pennant to Minnie’s tail.” Eulalie retrieved the pot marigold, held it up into the remains of the dawn’s early light. “This little one’s okay. He’s seen worse, fire and rain, if you know what I’m sayin’.”

I ate half a can of that mermaid’s tuna while Eulalie restored the cast iron pans to their accustomed locations, did her business in the outhouse and looked for Nagaina.

“She’s in the creek,” said Eulalie, “mighty proud of herself for savin’ us from that maraudin’ beast. As for you, I hope that oil and tuna made you fat, happy and sleepy because I want you to take a dreamtime look at the Alexander’s house.”

I looked into Eulalie’s haint blue eyes with my amber eyes because that allowed us to talk mind to mind.

“Lena, I didn’t want to vex Willie more than he was vexed, but the idea of Robert buyin’ a new shotgun raises two red pennants over this revolting development. He’s always complainin’ about bad luck so I wonder where he got the money.”

“The brothers have never been known to spend both sides of a dollar as soon as it falls in their hands,” I said.

“So people say. The brothers’ wives, may they rest in peace, taught them not to spend nothin’. Knowin’ Betty and Carol like I do, they’re still close enough to hand for watchin’ the men’s budget.”

“If they are, I won’t see them.”

“No, but you’ll see if Robert had to pawn the Frigidaire to buy the gun. Now, leave me be so I can sweep the house.”

She tickled that good scratching place on the side of my head because she knew I didn’t like being anywhere near fast-moving brooms and mops. I went to the sunny spot next to Eulalie’s pansies in the front yard and fell asleep listening to my conjure woman singing her feeling-troubled version of “Take My Hand, Precious Lord.”

So, I slept.

Pure spirit, I followed a rocking and rolling blue-green path past the railroad tracks, the Gulf Station, Walker’s Mercantile, the saw mill and Eulalie’s daughter Adelaide’s house to 13th Street. Her house on 12th Street sat empty because her fool husband carried her off to Texas after last year’s

trouble with the Klan; I checked the place for two-legged snakes, but stirred up nothing but crows who pretended they could see me.

The road was the present moment, separating a past on the left side that was the color of the dawn's early light from a future on the right side that was the color of the twilight's last gleaming. Eulalie maintained that people and time trekked across the universe from left to right and I maintained, based on my spirit travels, that trekking was more of an every which way hopscotch affair. I feared we would never see eye to eye on this issue.

We also didn't see eye to eye on the matter of omens. Robert and Martin lived in the thirteenth house on 13th Street, freshly painted I noticed, and this location was where it was and had no special significance. My conjure woman said that 13th Street was bad luck waiting to happen, citing as evidence the fact that two months after Martin and Betty and Robert and Carol moved onto adjoining lots on the street, the two women were killed when the 1935 Labor Day Hurricane hit Cedar Key where they were attending the funeral of their first grade teacher. The brothers had "a bad feeling" about the funeral and stayed home, but a year later when they decided the most frugal thing they could do as widowers was to share the larger of the two houses built by Martin, neither one of them had a bad feeling about the street. When I first heard this story, I told Eulalie that the street didn't coax Betty and Carol into the path of the hurricane and she said it did. To this day, my conjure woman hasn't clearly forgiven me for saying that from a black cat's perspective, omen nonsense started most wars and many religions.

Presently, the house at high noon was freshly swept. The place, both now and in the dawn's light, was neat as a pin, as Adelaide would say, so neat, there wasn't a stick of anything inside. Everything, including the fridge, the shotgun, the dishes and the underwear was gone. The curtains were still there hiding an emptiness that went down into the earth.

My left eye, the eye of the moon, saw Martin and Robert run out the front door and careen down the middle of 13th Street in a red 1954 model 3100 pickup truck so new that it still carried the Alford Chevrolet sticker on the window. Fifteen minutes later, as humans figure the Earth's turning, a grey box truck backed up to the front door making it easy for the five well-muscled men inside to put everything at the brothers' house including the welcome mat into the cargo area.

The Ivy brothers, English and Little Poison, pounded a white sign into the front yard of the empty house with blood-red words:

LIBERTY IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATES

Lender Foreclosure Sale

Jumping Jim Crow Since The War

Liberty Improvement's signs, trucks and advertisements featured a drawing of an old plantation house in white enclosed within a blue circle. To the left of the circle, was a sword, and to the right, was a cross, both the color of blood.

When they leaned over to straighten the sign, their black coats flapped up in the morning breeze and I saw they were both carrying Smith & Wesson M&P .38 Specials either because real estate is a dangerous business or they were scared of their own shadows.

My right eye, the eye of the sun, found the Alexander's and the Ivy's routes away from the house obscured by black clouds that sucked the very life out of the world beneath shriveled Spanish moss clinging to the live oak at the crossing of Woods Road and Eden Highway. The clouds stank of devils who spoke my name while feeding off blood, old copper, the innocent petals of night-blooming flowers torn away from the earth beneath a dark moon and spells woven from the warp of shadows and the woof of ancient words. No folk medicine herbalist or young genius with a Gilbert

chemistry set can hide a world and summon a devil. That magic was older than Moses. The legendary Aunt Caroline Dye and Marie Laveau knew it, but they're long passed to glory.

Only two living people between the Apalachicola and Ochlockonee rivers in the now of nineteen hundred and fifty-four, as humans calculate the myth of time, could lay down such a trick. I turned away from the goofered cross roads and woke into the clean sunshine of Eulalie's front yard just as Bill Carver was going out the front gate with a Mason jar of cloudy liquid.

The air was heavy with wood smoke, turpentine and melancholy. The large, split-oak basket of possum bones lay on its side with feet, ribs and leg bones scattered across a circle drawn in the sandy clay next to the cook fire. Smoke was rising from the charred wood. Steam was rising from a pan, going to the sky and the good Lord with Eulalie's song while she studied those bones and sang "The Turpentine Blues" about making no money, shooting dice, and being out of work.

"Don't drink nothin' out of that pan, Lena," she said. "That's the leavings of blackberry root, alum and turpentine, not a cure for anything you got. You saw ol' Bill Carver walkin' home with the cure because he rolled too many hot biscuits at the jook and got a personal disease"—she clapped her hands twice and glared at me like this was a warning—"one that makes it hurt to pee."

I growled, indicating I wouldn't get what Bill Carver got.

My conjure woman swept the leavings of the possum back into the same round, thirty-three-rib basket her mother used before her.

"Them bones been talkin', Lena, talkin' about how the turpentine camp done been closed. The pullers and rakes have gone to rust, the box axes and hacks have gone dull, the dippers and cups have gone dry, the noisy gum patch has gone quiet, and the woods riders have gone south. The bones say the missing men go there but they don't stay there, then the men are gone, too, but not yet into the good Lord's everlasting arms."

Our eyes met over the top of the white oak basket.

"Where?" I asked, using our secret thought-speech.

"The camp's a waystation on the road to hell."

"The devil's hell?"

"Closer, I think," she said. "The shame of it is, we got so many hells to choose from. Right here in my woods and all through Torreya, and nearby to Quincy and Marianna, and farther away in Rosewood, Ocoee and now Live Oak. That old camp was a hell unto itself and now it's a rest stop to another hell. You didn't see any of these hells, did you?"

"Martin and Robert are gone. The red truck is gone. Everything inside the house is gone. Martin and Robert drove off in the truck before Willie knocked on their door. They disappeared into conjured storm clouds. English and Little Poison came by with a bigger truck and took everything the Alexander's didn't take. Took the key, too, and pounded a foreclosure sign in the front yard."

"Did the sign say LIBERTY IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATES?"

"Yes."

"Good Lord, somebody took their money and then somebody took their house. They're brazen about it, too, cause everybody knows the KKK and the Liberty Improvement Club are the same thing in Torreya."

"I never heard about the Klan doing conjure," I said.

"They're in bed with somebody who knows conjure inside and out."

"Washerwoman," I said.

"That man's the devil's brother—began sleepin' with the enemy on the first day he came to town. He rolls more than biscuits. He runs rigged numbers and rolls everybody."

"I hope he hurts when he pees."

Eulalie laughed loud enough to chase the melancholy out of the yard.