

CONJURE WOMAN'S CAT



by

Malcolm R. Campbell

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Published by: Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC
ThomasJacobPublishing@gmail.com

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Cover Illustration: Original art by Jack Stollery.

Title Pages Typeface (Title): Quadrata Font, by Mouser Fonts, available from <http://www.fontspace.com/mouser-fonts/quadrata> under a Freeware License.

Symbol Typeface (last page): Nymphette Font, created by Nymphont. Available from <http://www.fontspace.com/nymphont/nymphette> under a Commercial Use Freeware License.

ISBN: 0-9895729-7-8

ISBN-13: 978-0-9895729-7-2

First Edition

First Printing: March 2015

Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

This book is for my wife, Lesa, hawk whisperer, first reader, guardian of cats and other small critters.

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Chapter 1

So Eulalie slept.

The mid-summer afternoon was hot and clear. We lay on the back porch beneath the bright sky because we needed clouds for our work. The *sleeping* sign hung on a rusty nail over the front door. Everyone who knew what was what hurried past our front gate and brick walk when the black scrap of wood, scrawled with the blood-red word “sleeping,” hung above the threshold.

After we hung the sign, Eulalie curled up on the back porch between baskets overflowing with pot marigolds and fell asleep before I settled down low on my sleeping spot beneath the old sofa where folks sit and speak of sorrows, troubles, and the blues. The marigolds’ sunshine-yellow flowers drooped into sweet dreams, because they can’t steal a fever or find lucky numbers without a dab of wind or rain.

While the porch planking was grey, worn soft by the calloused soles of many feet and easy on sleepers, I did not sleep. I watched, because I knew fire was coming. The creek separating the well-kept yard of longleaf pines from the overgrown piney woods of trees faced by turpentiners, and half-strangled by trespassing shrubs, did not sleep.

There was the Coowahchobee River, fierce and swift like her namesake, the panther. She licked the forest clean, protected the house and yard from spirits, and carried away the remains of spent spells westward across sanctified Florida soil into the Apalachicola River. Low fire she could stop; a forest canopy fire borne on the wind was out of Coowahchobee’s reach.

Joe Moore lived in the forest. I couldn’t see him through the saw-palmetto, gallberry, and deep Sunday afternoon shadows, though if he were looking he could see me. Eulalie and I trusted devils, gods, and the Holy Ghost from the Sanctified Church; Joe Moore trusted what he could see. With my second sight, I knew Joe Moore’s eyes were open. His ears were attentive, too. Though not as sensitive as my ears, they knew friends pronounced his name *Jomo* and foes pronounced his name *Jomoonur*.

That morning while the last scattered clouds moved eastward toward the Ochlockonee River, we threw possum bones into a hastily drawn circle. They saw fire, but not today. No friend of possums, dead or alive, Joe Moore trusted his living bones above all else. He watched with the indigo snake, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, and gopher tortoise from the woods. I watched from the back porch where the pot marigolds and Eulalie slept.

If fire jumped the creek and the bones while Eulalie slept, I would hear Joe Moore calling my name, “Lena! Lena!” long before the flames reached the three-plank bridge.

The warm afternoon drew me away from my concerns, drew me toward sleep and dreamtime travels. My spirit-self could go anywhere; that’s the one talent I had that Eulalie didn’t. One time, when the possum bones were blind, I found a lost child on Alum Bluff overlooking the river close by the woods where that white preacher said Adam and Eve once lived. I’ve been south to Tate’s Hell where legends say a rattlesnake killed old man Tate while he was hunting Coowahchobee with a shotgun and a Barlow knife. I knew where rivers came up out of the ground, where the Bogot

people danced with ribbons, where the gopher tortoise shared her burrow with snakes, and where Deacon Smith lost his Bible.

I had a mind to visit “Stiff and Ugly,” where the river writhed like a snake, and find that haint-infested field where folks said Jimmy Ivy and his brothers, “Little Poison” and “English,” burnt crosses in all seasons, but a wisp of smoke from our dinner’s dying cook fire tickled my nose, and sleep fled like a frightened rabbit. My nose always twitched in the presence of a trick, just as surely as Eulalie felt a cold shiver near crossed paths and other goofered places.

I watched the smoke for signs while Eulalie slept.

Eulalie said she needed her beauty sleep because she was old. When Eulalie told me she was older than dirt, I thought there was always dirt so there was always Eulalie, who remembered all her years. She remembered when the good Lord twitched His nose as though the wind blew pepper into it and created dirt. She remembered when the Bogot people—beloved family—hid from the U. S. soldiers, when that writer Zora asked her to share rootwork and other secret things, when the original old man Tate was still a child in Sumatra, when Moses wrote his secret hoodoo books, when Coowahchobee stepped out of the Creator’s birthing shell and first saw the wonders of the world.

She deserved her sleep.

Even though I saw no sign the smoke that stole out from beneath the cook pot was calling its own, I kept my eyes open and only half slept. I half saw folks passing the gate, sometimes more than once, hoping we’d take down the *sleeping* sign. Some brought money; most brought overflowing baskets to trade for herbs, oils, and hands. The pot marigolds woke up moments ago, so Eulalie would wake soon to those needing our skills.

Her hair turned grey sometime between the arrival of the Bogot people and the departure of the last panther from Tate’s Hell Forest. More recently, her once-vibrant orange dress paled into peach. Even now, her skin was coffee colored, though some have called her chocolate to the bone. As I watched her sleep, skewed at a clumsy angle up against the grey siding, I thought she looked like a bear cub. The color of roots, she always said.

A woman trading okra at Walker’s Mercantile when we were trading eggs looked at me when I was young and said, “Lena, I do believe you are blacker than the ace of spades.” I didn’t know what she meant, so I ran outside until the trading was done. On the way home, Eulalie told me the ace of spades was a powerful gambling card. Spades meant other things, too, some good and some bad, so I preferred being the color of coal, night, and the coral snake’s eyes.

My eyes were the color of pot marigolds and Eulalie’s were the color of forget-me-nots. When we communicated eye-to-eye our looks were knowing looks, because the light flowed white between us, from blue to yellow and from yellow to blue mixing our pure words together in a manner that was silent, invisible and well outside the imagination of other eyes and hearts.

So Eulalie slept that afternoon that was hot and clear. Eulalie slept because a sign that looked like a dead crow dressed the front door. Eulalie slept because she had worked hard and was older than dirt. I kept watch beneath the sofa because it was in my nature to keep watch as the Conjure Woman’s cat.