Synopsis of The Mississippi Queen

It was well after dark when Willy Parnell shuffled across a deserted Hiller Park. A sliver of a moon hung in the night sky like a shiny fingernail, doing little to illuminate his path. Large oak and pine trees, dating back to the Civil War, stood sentry as Willy made his way to his apartment.

He was thinking about his two granddaughters. They’d enjoyed a wonderful day at Biloxi Beach making *Muppet* sand castles. The cool Gulf waters proved to be the perfect relief from July’s hot Mississippi sun. The girls kept him busy by constantly running in the surf and washing away their suntan lotion. Cicely was obsessed with Miss Piggy and had her nasal voice down pat. Miriam, on the other hand, was a die-hard Cookie Monster Fan. Whenever the girls came to his apartment, he always made sure there was a plate of chocolate chip cookies available. Willy loved his granddaughters very much.

The only sound in the park were the crickets, no doubt even they, were complaining about the heat. He thought about his younger days working on the docks. *I’d be able to run through the park with a grandchild on each shoulder.* *That was another lifetime.* Willy stopped briefly at a lamppost to catch his breath. He reached down and tapped the pill container in his trouser pocket to reassure himself.

Ever since Ruth, his wife of forty years, passed of throat cancer he had tried his best to fill in his life with his daughter’s children. When playing with the kids, his mind would usually drift back to the early days. *Ruth, you were one wonderful woman. I knows you lookin down at me now.* *I just know you’re proud of our daughter and the kids.*

Thinking of Ruth gave him a touch of sadness. One of his most vivid memories was when their daughter Justyne announced her decision to marry Morgan, one of the whitest men to ever to walk the earth. He knew enough to keep his reservations to himself. You have to let your children chose their own path in life. Ruth for her part hadn’t had a judgmental bone in her body and heartily welcomed the big-eared, redheaded, investment advisor into the family. The girls inherited what Ruth liked to call, the best of both with a smooth coffee color complexion.

Willy’s apartment bordered the park where he often took the kids after meeting them at school. Because he was near, inexpensive, and loved the kids so much, Willy had become the before and after school caregiver, along with his other duties of cookie baker, grade two art aficionado, and number one storyteller. Normally he liked to walk home before nightfall, but Justyne had insisted that he stay for the fresh catfish meal. After putting the twins to bed with yet another story, he thanked his daughter and son-in-law and headed across the park to his apartment.

He looked up at the lamppost and saw that the light was burned out. *What’s the point of having street lights when they don’t bother to replace them? They could spend some of our tax dollars so an old guy could see where he’s going.* His musings were interrupted by the sound of a twig snapping behind him. He turned around only to find an empty path. When he turned back, he was startled by two men who appeared out of the shadows and blocked his path. They were tough looking, punks.

“Help you men with something?” asked Willy, his face breaking into an uneasy smile.

“Maybe we help you old man, you having hard time? Eh? Don’t it look like he having struggle?,” said one thug to the other in a heavy Eastern European accent. Willy thought they sounded like guys he used to work with on the docks.

“Struggling….yeah,” replied the second thug.

Willy looked from one man to another. In the dark, it was hard to make out their features. They appeared to be in their late twenties and were dressed in jeans and dark t-shirts. Both were white with hard features, including muscular, drawn-back shoulders, and strong jawlines. They both had short hair like the fuzz on a tennis ball. One of them moved closer.

*Stay calm, they probably just want my wallet.* He could smell last night’s dinner off the one who was now a few inches from his face. *Something with garlic.* Willy turned away and looked at the guy’s partner, a slack-jawed punk who seemed to have a permanent sneer wallpapered across his face.

“Thank you, but I’ll be fine, I don’t live far.”

“Yeah?” asked the one with the breath. *The leader.* “Maybe you want help. I think Nigger Man needs help.”

“Yeah. Help,” came the reply from the punk with a sneer. Willy felt hands on his back shoving him forward towards the trees. He stumbled briefly before catching himself by grasping onto an oak tree. *No point in trying to outrun these two, so I’m gonna have to teach them not to mess with...,* his thought was interrupted by sneering man pushing him again towards a small clump of trees.

“Why don’t we show him shortcut?” said the guy with the breath.

“Shortcut, yeah.”

“Listen I don’t want any trouble. Do you want money?” Willy pulled his billfold from his pant pocket, but the leader slapped it out of his hands and pushed him further towards the trees. They took turns pushing Willy until the old man tripped over a tree root and fell over backward.

“Help!” Willy yelled out weakly.

As he was struggling to get to his feet, garlic breath kicked him in the face, knocking him back to the ground, causing a searing pain in between his eyes. His nose began to bleed.

“Shut up, Nigger.”

“Yeah, shut up Coon,” added his partner.

Willy absorbed the trauma, swallowing the pain, then kicked his way slowly back to the surface. “If you don’t want money, what do you want?” Willy was conscious of his heavy breathing and the pleading sound of his voice.

The response was another kick, this time to the kidneys. Since talking wasn’t working, Willy just lay down and suffered through their repetitive kicks to most of his body. Ten seconds passed, then twenty and thirty. Every blow sent ripples of pain throughout his whole body. He felt his chest tightening. He struggled to sit up and reach for the pills in his pocket. The thugs laughed as he fell back to the ground. All he could manage were the words, “Please.”

On another day, he could have taught these punks a lesson. Willy didn’t last long. His last thoughts were of Miss Piggie and the Cookie Monster.