

Prologue:

The Strange Old Lady Across the Street

In Compton, whenever anybody's out way late in the night, it can mean only one thing.

Trouble.

I mean serious trouble. Even I knew that. And I was only 12 years old.

The first time I saw the ole Creole lady it must have been 3 o'clock in the morning. A full moon lit up everything outside. The scene looked like one of those weird old black-and-white movies.

I had just gone to the bathroom. I happened to glance out the window and saw a thin hooded shape opening the front wrought-iron gate of the big house across the street. Only by her super-long hair could I tell it was a woman.

Now, my brother and the other kids in the neighborhood used to talk about that big house all the time. It supposedly had “historical significance.” Rumor was that it was more than 100 years old.

And, man, let me tell you something: that house was huge. Unlike other houses in Compton, which had no second floor, the ole Creole lady's house had three floors and big windows with old heavy curtains. Its roof sagged and it needed a paint job real bad. An ivy-covered towering brick wall surrounded the property and hid the front door and much of the house from view.

People in the neighborhood said the house was haunted. They said that the Creole lady acted real strange. That she was really ugly. And that she spoke a strange language. I personally had never heard her speak. For that matter, I had never even seen her before that night, when my eyes caught sight of her creeping around.

At first, I didn't understand what I was looking at. She had what looked like an enormous bag flung over her shoulder. It was hard to believe that a human could carry something that large and bulky.

I could tell that the bag contained a lot of different-shaped things. And there was something else even stranger about that bag.

Whatever was inside was moving around!

Man, what in the world is that!!?? I thought to myself.

Suddenly, she reared her head and glared toward the window where I stood. I thought she saw me. I quickly ducked down beneath the window sill.

When I peered out the window again, I saw her looking up and down the street, as if she were looking out for cops or something. Or hoping no one was watching.

She took the bag and carried it behind a big oak tree. She laid the bag on the ground and untied it.

Just then, I got stupid—I decided to go outside to see what was in that bag.

I crept through the living room and slipped out the front door to get a better look. I hoped Mom and Dad didn't hear the door creak as I snuck out and tiptoed across the dewy lawn.

I ran to the other side of the street to the Creole lady's front lawn and crawled up behind one of her bushes. I watched as she opened the bag. Then I saw something really weird.

Out of the bag came all sorts of animals!

First, a raccoon ran out. Then three birds flew out. Then I saw Mrs. Johnson's cat Crackers scoot out of the bag. Then more cats. And some squirrels. Then Blinky, Bobby Hill's pet rabbit, hopped out.

All kinds of wild animals and neighborhood pets popped out of that bag! The Creole Lady just shooed them away into the night.

How could so many animals come out of that bag? I asked myself.

I couldn't believe what I saw next.

Our rooster, Speck, came strutting out of that bag!

The Creole lady took him and pet him like a child, as if he were her favorite. Then she gently released him. He squawked and scurried across the street and jumped over the fence to our backyard.

What the heck is she doing with all those animals?

I had wondered where Speck had been the last two days. Now I knew. And now I knew where Speck would go when he'd be missing two days at a time. Was the Creole lady luring him away? Or was he going over there on his own?

Just then I accidentally stepped on a twig, and it made a snapping sound.

The Creole lady's head jerked up and looked in my direction. In the glare of the streetlight I made out her face. It was ugly beyond anything I had ever seen. She had no eyebrows. Her thin hair fell like spaghetti way below her shoulders. Her face was as

pale as the moonlight. Her long dress was raggedy and torn.

Her fiery eyes stared at me. She growled as she stood up and quickly headed toward me! She seemed to fly across the yard as she rushed at me!

I jumped up from the bush and took off across the street to my house. I could hear her right behind me! I threw open the front door and ran inside. I stood inside the door, out of breath from running and out of my mind from fright.

I peeked out a crack in the front curtain. The Creole lady stood motionless in the middle of our yard. Then she suddenly burst through the hedge and came up right to the front living room window!

Her face made a shadow through the curtain as she peered inside our house. I swear I could see her eyes glowing! She looked to the left, then to the right. I don't think she saw me, but I couldn't be sure.

Then she opened her mouth wide and breathed

heavily on the window, making a brief fog. She looked slowly through the crack in the curtain where I was watching, and growled at me!

I jumped back from the window and ran into the bathroom. I waited for about ten minutes, afraid to come out, and afraid that Mom or Dad had heard her growl and would come out and be mad at me for being up so late.

I didn't hear any noise, so I slowly made my way back into the living room. I peeped through the window. She was gone, thank God. I didn't see anything across the street at her house either.

Whew, that was close, I thought to myself.

I snuck back into my room and went to bed. I never told anybody about that night. Not even my older brother. I knew he would tell Mom and Dad just to see me get a whuppin'. He was cold blooded like that.

Funny thing is, I never saw the ole Creole lady again until that fateful day...*when all hell broke loose.*