

Hard Knocks

Chapter 1

It happened over fifty-five years ago. And still, I hear the booming knocks at my front door. They weren't ordinary knocks, for they set in motion a series of events that dramatically altered the rest of my life.

Before taking my afternoon nap, Mama read a story from my favorite comic book. Her animated delivery of Little Lulu's adventures of finagling her way into the boys-only club or Lulu's imaginary tales of Old Witch Hazel was the best part of my naptime routine. On that particular day, I was awake in bed for a long time, thinking about Lulu and how she'd outfoxed Tubby and Iggy into getting admitted to their exclusive club.

I had just fallen asleep when I heard a hard "knock, knock, knock" at the front door. Knocks so loud, I heard them clearly from the far back bedroom of our newly built bungalow-style home in West Los Angeles. It was November 1947, and though I was only four years of age, I sensed something was wrong. We rarely had visitors. When I heard a second series of knocks, louder than the first, I sat straight up in bed. The knocks echoed through the house like someone was trying to break the door down. After a third round, I ran to the living room in time to see Mama opening the door.

I gasped with fright. Framed in our front door casing was the

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biggest and scariest person I'd ever seen. It was a giant, and she was wearing a dress. Perched on her gigantic head was a pile of coarse, graying black hair tightly braided and twisted round and round, like a coiled snake. A black straw hat, shaped like a hamburger bun, and two long knitting needles held everything in place. Dark brown stern



Dickie sitting on the bed where he first heard Mrs. Edwards' knocks.

eyes bulged from her head, and thick bushy eyebrows arched up and down when she talked. A huge pocked nose was anchored in her pale white face, although her wrinkly cheeks were daubed with two circles of thick pink rouge. She had an enormous mouth, large yellow

teeth, and a thin silver mustache that glimmered in the sun. She wore a long-sleeved black dress stained with perspiration and big pointy black shoes, just like the ones Old Witch Hazel wore. As I remember her now, she could have doubled for the late professional wrestler, André the Giant, in drag, although she didn't have his disarming smile.

When Mama first opened the door, the lady violently thrust her long right shoe one step up, locking it onto the threshold of our front door. Mama couldn't have closed it, even if she had



Mama's house in Los Angeles.

wanted to, with that big doorstopper clamped in place.

“My name is Mrs. Lena Edwards and I’ve come to bring you some good news,” were her first words. With eyes trained on Mama’s, she continued, “We hear so much bad news in the world today that people don’t know where to turn. But there is a book I go to for help, and it tells what God plans to do with the mess we’ve gotten ourselves into.” In a voice that sounded like static screeches from a crystal radio set stuck between channels, she went on to say, “This book tells about a government that God set up in heaven in 1914, and it will soon bring peace and order to our world. But before that can happen, the war to end all wars, Armageddon, must be fought. When it finally ends, the Devil, his demons, and all nonbelievers and evildoers will be destroyed. Only then will the earth be restored to paradise conditions, and no one will ever die again.”

I looked up and saw that the lady had Mama’s undivided attention. While Mama focused on the message, I couldn’t take my eyes off the messenger. Her arms and hands, perpetually in motion, often blurred my vision. Tiny white gobs of spittle formed in pockets of her mouth, and occasionally caught and elongated between her big puffy lips as inky black perspiration stains originating from her armpits moved down the sides of her dress. Intermittent showers of spit fluttered from her mouth as she spoke in her ear-piercing voice. This abuse to my senses was complemented by a heavy dose of cheap perfume, no doubt used to disguise her overactive sweat glands. As she talked, her long bony fingers swiftly found the page she wanted in her black book. For emphasis, she’d thump a finger on the spot from which she was reading. I wondered if this wasn’t a magic book like the one Old Witch Hazel used when casting spells on people. While reading, she slowed down her speech, emphasizing one word at a time, lowering the pitch of her voice as best she could.

She repeated over and over that we were living in the last days, that Armageddon was very near, and that only a select group of people would survive. To conclude, the lady said millions now living will never die. But to be in that number, you had to read the

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Tim, Mama, and Dickie a few months before Mrs. Edwards' first visit.

black book, do what it said, and join with other people who believed that the end of the world was near. I got the feeling that this woman belonged to an exclusive club, like the one Little Lulu and Tubby were in, and she wanted Mama to join.

She even included me in her presentation, asking Mama, "Would

you like that boy of yours to grow up in a world where he wouldn't age after he reached his thirtieth birthday?"

Mama didn't respond, but she was thinking.

"Well, I'm here to tell you, it is possible that you and your boy will never die and could live forever in that *new world*."

The odd lady stayed at our home for thirty minutes, although it wouldn't be her last visit. That half hour, and the strange events that occurred during the next five months, would significantly impact the next sixteen years of my life and have a profound and lasting impact on Mama.