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# THE RED NOTEBOOK

*Inspired by a dog attack of a letter carrier in the 1980s.*

*By DogsBite.org and Claude AI*

## DRAGON TEETH

I am 74 years old. My hands are spotted now but they still work. I sit at my kitchen table every morning at seven. This is what I do with my time.

The red notebook sits in front of me. Forty years I have been writing in it. Mostly since I stopped carrying mail in 2014. All those years I carried other people's words in bags. Now I carry my own words in this book.

The cover is soft from handling. Like old leather. Like the mail satchels I carried for thirty years. The corners are worn down to the cardboard underneath. This is what happens when you touch something every day for years.

I open to the first page. My handwriting was steadier then. The letters stood up straight. Now they lean to the right like they are tired.

Entry: March 15, 1984

*"Substitute route on Elmwood Street. Sunny day. Dog warning card for 'Monster.' Did not see dog. Went up steps anyway. This was a mistake."*

Under the words, I drew teeth. Many teeth. Sharp as broken glass. They fill up the rest of the page. I do not remember drawing so many. But there they are.

I flip pages. More entries. More teeth.

Entry: March 16, 1984

*"Could not sleep. Drew more teeth. They look bigger on paper than they did in his mouth. This makes no sense."*

The teeth on this page are different. Longer. Sharper. Like dragon teeth. Like the monsters from the stories my mother told me when I was small.

Entry: March 20, 1984.

*"Requested different route. Supervisor said okay. Did not ask why. Good."*

No teeth on this page. Just words. I was trying to stop drawing them. But on the next page, there they are again. Filling up the margins.

I turn more pages. Different handwriting now. Older. In pencil, not pen. The letters are smaller. More careful.

Entry: 1943 (copied from my mother's telling)

*"Mamma Rosa heard tanks coming down Via Garibaldi. Metal scraping stone. Like giant claws. She said the sound split her chest open."*

My mother told me this story when I was small. She told it many times. About the war. About the tanks that came through her village. About the sound they made on the cobblestones. I wrote it down years later because I understood why she told it. Some sounds break you. Some sounds you carry forever.

The tanks made a sound like crashing. Like breaking. Like the sound Monster made when he came through the glass door.

I close the notebook. The kitchen is quiet. The coffee has gone cold. Outside, the mail truck drives by. I do not look up. I have not looked at mail trucks for ten years.

Today I will walk to Elmwood Street. The house is for sale. I saw it in yesterday's paper. The advertisement was small. Just an address and a price. But I know that address. I have known it for forty years.

After forty years, I will finish what I started. I will walk up those steps again. I will look at that door. I will see what is real and what is not.

Some things you carry until you choose to put them down. Today I choose.

The red notebook goes in my coat pocket. I can feel its weight against my ribs. Like carrying mail. Like carrying something important that needs to be delivered.

I am 74 years old. My legs are not what they were. But they still carry me where I need to go.

## **YELLOW WARNING CARD**

I walk to Elmwood Street. I have walked many miles in forty years. Mail routes. Grocery stores. To the bank. To the doctor. Walking is what you do when you are still alive.

The red notebook is in my coat pocket. I can feel its weight. Like carrying a stone. Like carrying something that needs to be put down.

The sidewalk cracks are the same. The mailboxes are newer. Some houses have different colors. But the street remembers me. I remember it too.

I stop at the corner. This is where I stood forty years ago, reading the route sheet. Substitute carrier. New neighborhood. I was 34 then. I thought I knew what I was doing.

The morning was bright. March 15, 1984. I had my satchel full of mail. Other people's letters. Other people's lives. I was carrying them where they needed to go.

I pulled the yellow warning card from my satchel. The regular carrier had left it for me.

"Monster. Very big dog. German shepherd. Caution."

I looked at the house. Quiet porch. No dog visible. The warning card was old, soft from handling. Maybe the dog was gone. Maybe the regular carrier forgot to remove it.

I climbed the steps. One. Two. Three.

The storm door reflected the morning sky. Clean glass. Nothing behind it.

But in the glass, I saw movement. A shadow. Large. Behind me.

I turned around. Nothing there.

I looked back at the glass. The shadow was still there. Low to the ground. Waiting.

My mother's voice came to me then. She used to tell me about Nonna Rosa. How before the *nazista* tanks came, she always saw their shadows first. In windows. In puddles. She said danger casts shadows before it arrives.

I turned around again. Still nothing behind me.

I let out my breath. Maybe I was seeing things. Maybe there was no danger.

I turned to leave the porch.

Monster exploded through the storm door behind me. Glass flew everywhere. He had run from the backyard, through the house, and burst through the front door just as I turned away.

The shadow in the glass had been right. The danger was real. It just came from where I wasn't looking.

He knocked me down the steps. Backward. My body hit the concrete. Letters flew everywhere. White envelopes scattered like scared birds.

He was on top of me. Heavy. His face right above mine. His teeth were so big. Bigger than any dog's teeth should be. Like teeth from a story. Like teeth from a nightmare.

I could not move. I could not breathe. All I could see was his mouth. All I could hear was his breathing. Hot and loud.

Then I heard laughing. A man's voice. "Monster, get off that lady!"

But he was laughing. Like it was funny. Like seeing a woman pinned under a dog was something to laugh about.

"Monster, you broke through two storm doors this time!"

The man was not sorry. He was proud. His dog had broken through glass to get to me. This was what Monster did. This was what he was made for.

I was shaking. Even after Monster got off me. Even after I collected the letters. Even after I finished my route. I shook for the rest of the day.

I shook remembering Monster's eyes, black and unblinking. Like the dogs my mother described, guarding the gates of prisons where people disappeared.



I stand on the same sidewalk now. The same corner. I am not 34 anymore. I am 74. I have delivered mail for thirty years after that day. I finished routes even when my hands shook. I delivered mail in rain, snow, heat. I did my job.

But I never forgot Monster's teeth. I never forgot the sound of glass breaking. I never forgot how the man laughed.

Some things you carry because you have to. Some things you carry because you choose to.

Today I choose.



*Monster explodes through the glass storm door and pins the letter carrier down.*

## THE STORM DOOR

The house sits quiet. A "For Sale" sign leans against the mailbox. The storm door is new. Clean glass. No cracks.

I climb the steps. Same steps. Same porch. But I am not the same person.

My reflection looks back at me from the glass. Gray hair. Lined face. But steady eyes. I am 74 years old. I have lived forty years since Monster knocked me down these steps. I have survived everything that came after.

I see the shadow again. Behind me in the reflection. Large. Waiting.

I do not turn around this time.

"I see you," I say to the glass.

The shadow grows larger. Darker. It fills up the reflection behind me. Like it is trying to swallow me whole.

I reach into my coat pocket. Pull out the red notebook. The pages are soft from handling. I open it to the page with the teeth I drew forty years ago. Dragon teeth. Monster teeth. Teeth that were too big for any real dog.

"This is what I thought you were," I tell the shadow.

The teeth on the page look small now. Like drawings a child would make. Like scribbles from someone who was scared and did not know what else to do.

I tear out the page. The drawing of teeth that I made when I was 34 and shaking. The paper comes away clean. No ripping. Like it was ready to go.

"But you are not real anymore."

I fold the paper. Put it in my pocket.

The shadow in the glass disappears.

My reflection looks back at me. Just me. An old woman on a porch. Alone but not afraid.

I have carried mail through neighborhoods full of dogs. I have faced barking, growling, jumping dogs. Big dogs. Small dogs. Dogs that wanted to bite. Dogs that just wanted to scare. I learned to read their warnings. I learned to protect myself.

Monster was different. Monster was the shadow I could not see coming. The danger that came from behind me. The fear that knocked me down when I was not looking.

But shadows are not real. They are just the shape that fear makes. They are just the dark that light leaves behind.

I look at the storm door. New glass. Clean. No cracks. No teeth marks. No sign that Monster ever lived here.

The house is quiet. Empty. Whatever lived here is gone now. Whatever happened here is over.

I am still here. I am 74 years old. I have gray hair and lined face and spotted hands. But I am still here. I am still walking. I am still carrying things where they need to go.

Today I carried my fear to this porch. Today I looked at it in the glass. Today I tore out the page with the teeth.

Some things you carry until you choose to put them down. Today I choose to put this down.

The shadow is gone. The teeth are folded in my pocket. The glass shows only my reflection.

I am ready to go home.

## MOTHER TO CHILD

I sit on the porch steps. The same steps where I fell forty years ago.

The wood is gray now. Weathered. Like my hands. Like everything that has lived long enough to show its age.

I open the red notebook to a blank page. My pen feels heavy. But my hand is steady.

Entry: October 15, 2024

*"I am 74 years old. Monster is dead. The war ended before I was born. I have carried mail for thirty years. I have lived through worse than a dog attack. I am still here."*

I look at what I wrote. Simple words. True words.

The pen moves again.

Entry: October 15, 2024 (continued)

*"Fear is not the same as danger. I confused them for forty years. Today I know the difference."*

A car door slams down the street. My body tenses. Then relaxes.

Some sounds will always startle me. This is how I am made. My mother was the same way. The war sounds never left her. Tank treads on cobblestones. Glass breaking. Metal scraping stone.

She passed these sounds to me. Not on purpose. But fear travels from mother to child like eye color. Like the shape of hands.

I understand now. The dog attack woke up the fear my mother carried. The suddenness. The crashing. The feeling of being small and helpless while something large and destructive came for me.

But I am not my mother. I did not live through a war. I lived through a dog attack. I survived it. I went back to work. I delivered mail for thirty more years.

My pen moves across the page. The letters are small but clear.

Entry: October 15, 2024 (continued)

*"I have carried this notebook for forty years. I have drawn teeth and written about fear. Today I carried it to the place where I was afraid. Now I can carry it home."*

I close the notebook. The cover is soft in my hands. Worn smooth. Like everything I have touched for years.

The afternoon sun warms my face. I am sitting on a porch in Oregon. Not running from tanks in Italy. Not hiding from monsters in my dreams.

I am just a woman on some steps. Writing in a book. Remembering things that happened. Letting them be what they were.

Monster was a dog. A big dog. A mean dog. But just a dog.

The war was my mother's war. Not mine.

The fear was real. But the danger is over.

I have carried mail through rain and snow. I have lived alone and paid my bills. I have buried my mother and kept going.

I am still here.

This is what time does. It shows you the difference between what happened and what you thought happened. Between what you carry and what carries you.

I stand up. My legs are stiff but they work.

The red notebook goes back in my coat pocket. Light as a letter. Ready to be delivered home.

## **ELMWOOD STREET**

A woman comes out of the house. About my age. Carrying a box of old things.

She has gray hair like mine. Pulled back in a ponytail. She wears jeans and a sweater with paint stains. Her hands are spotted too.

"Are you interested in the house?" she asks.

Her voice is friendly. The voice of someone who talks to strangers at grocery stores. Who waves at neighbors.

"I used to deliver mail here," I say.

She sets down the box. I can see what is inside. Old dishes. A lamp with a broken shade. Things that belonged to someone who is gone.

"I'm helping my son clean it out. The old owner passed last year."

I nod. People die. This is what happens. We all carry mail until we stop. We all live in houses until we don't.

"There was a dog," I say. "German shepherd named Monster."

Her face changes. She smiles the way people smile when they remember something nice.



"Oh yes. My son told me about him. He said the dog was very gentle. Just protective."

I have heard these words before. Many times. Thirty years of delivering mail. Thirty years of dog owners saying the same thing after their dogs bite, chase, or attack postal workers.

"He broke through two glass doors to get to me," I say.

The woman looks uncomfortable now. She shifts her weight. Looks at the box. Looks at me.

"Well, I'm sure he was just—"

"Scared," I finish. "They always are."

She does not know what to say to this. People never do when you tell them the truth instead of the story they want to hear.

I pick up my purse. The red notebook shifts in my pocket.

"Mail delivery stopped on Elmwood Street after that. I changed routes too. The Postal Service doesn't negotiate with dangerous dogs."

This is the truth. Not the comfortable truth. The real truth.

The woman watches me walk away. Her mouth is open a little. Like she wants to say something but doesn't know what.

She understands now that some stories do not have happy endings. Some stories just end.

I walk to the sidewalk. Turn back once.

She is still standing there. Still holding the box of old things. Still trying to understand how the gentle dog in her son's story became the monster in mine.

Both stories are true. This is what she will learn. Dogs can be gentle with their families and dangerous to strangers. People can remember the same animal in different ways.

I do not need her to understand. I do not need her to believe me.

I know what happened. I wrote it down. I carried it for forty years.

Now I am walking away from it.

This is enough.

## **REFLECTIONS AND SHADOWS**

I walk home. The same route I walked forty years ago. But today I am not shaking.

My legs are steady. My hands are steady. The red notebook sits quiet in my pocket.

The street looks different in the afternoon light. Softer. The shadows are just shadows. The reflections in car windows are just reflections.

I stop at the corner where the bus stops. Pull out the red notebook one more time. I write:

Entry: October 15, 2024 (final)

*"I faced the house today. I saw the shadow in the glass. I told it what I know now. Shadows are not real. They are just the shape that fear makes. I am real. I am 74 years old. I have delivered mail, paid bills, buried my mother, lived alone, and survived everything that came for me. This is enough."*

I close the notebook. The cover is warm from my hands.

Some things you carry because you have to. Some things you carry because you choose to. Some things you carry until you choose to put them down.

I will keep the red notebook. But I will not carry it like a weapon anymore. I will carry it like what it is: the record of a woman who survived.

A dog barks somewhere behind me. My shoulders tense. Then relax.

This is how I am made. Some sounds will always startle me. But startling is not the same as breaking. Being afraid is not the same as being in danger.

The shadows on the sidewalk are just shadows. The reflections in windows are just reflections. The sounds that startle me are just sounds.

And I am just a woman walking home. A woman who knows the difference between fear and danger. A woman who has faced both and is still here.

The mail truck drives past. I look up this time. Wave at the driver. She waves back.

Thirty years I carried other people's words. Now I carry my own.

This is what I know now. This is what I carry forward.

I am 74 years old. My legs still work. My hands still work. My heart still works.

I am still here.

This is enough.