The Storyteller of Harbour Street (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

Marta had been a novelist for twenty-two years, and she still had no idea where her ideas came from. She wrote in a small flat above a bakery on Harbour Street, where the smell of bread arrived every morning at half past four. Her neighbours thought she was mysterious. In truth she was mostly tired.

Her eighth book was giving her trouble. She had built it around an old local legend about a fisherman who fell in love with a woman from the sea and lost her again. Everyone in the town knew the story, and everyone told it differently. Some versions were romantic, some were cruel, and the oldest version was hardly a tale of love at all but a warning to young men who drank too much. Marta wanted to keep all three versions alive at once, which turned out to be far harder than she expected.

The real difficulty was the tone of the book. Some mornings she wrote with gentle humour; other mornings the pages came out dark and bitter. Her editor, a skilled reader who had worked with her since the beginning, told her honestly that the middle chapters felt like two different novels stitched together. Marta was annoyed for a week and then admitted he was right. She also could not decide which genre the book belonged to, since booksellers wanted to know whether to shelve it under history, romance or crime.

Help arrived from an unexpected direction. A young musician moved into the flat below and began writing songs late at night. At first Marta found the noise unbearable, but slowly she began to listen. He would repeat one line for an hour, changing a single word each time, until the rhythm of the sentence finally satisfied him. One evening he knocked on her door and asked whether she thought a particular lyric was too sentimental. She read it twice, said yes, and then apologised for being so blunt. He laughed and rewrote it.

After that they worked in a kind of loose partnership. He explained that a song must breathe, that silence matters as much as sound. She began reading her chapters aloud, cutting anything that sounded clumsy, until her prose became noticeably more elegant. The book was finished in March. On the last page she quietly rejected the myth that writers work alone, because she no longer believed a word of it. When the novel appeared that autumn, several reviewers described the old sea story as a modern myth, which amused her enormously, since she had simply been trying to tell the truth about her town.

Try our 6-step method for free and make these words stick.

Listen to this episode online: https://course.interactivelessons.nl/local/podcast/episode.php?id=24921

Start this course for free: https://course.interactivelessons.nl/mod/quiz/view.php?id=1694