The Charity Office on Baker Lane (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

Nobody in the office really expected the winter appeal to succeed. We had tried the same campaign three years in a row, and each time the results had been poor enough to discourage even the most enthusiastic volunteer. Still, Mrs Alvarez, who had run the little charity since the 1990s, refused to give up. She arrived every Monday with a folder under her arm and a plan she had written the night before.

That particular Monday she handed me a thick document full of names, addresses and figures. It was only a first draft, she explained, and she wanted my honest opinion before anything was printed. I read it twice at my desk, trying hard not to let the noise from the street distract me. The plan was ambitious: we would distribute food parcels to almost two hundred families across the eastern side of the city, and we would do it before the schools closed for the holidays. Her handwriting filled the margins, and here and there a small blue dot marked a sentence she still wanted to change.

The practical problems began immediately. Our storage room was tiny, our van was old, and the distribution of the parcels would depend entirely on volunteers who had ordinary jobs during the week. We decided to divide the city into four areas, each with its own team leader. The northern area was by far the most dominant one, since more than half the families lived there, and it soon began to dominate every conversation we had. Mrs Alvarez insisted, however, that no area should be treated as less important than another. She was determined that each division of the team would receive the same support.

Halfway through November something unexpected happened. A local company, whose logo we had seen on billboards for years, offered us a donation large enough to cover the cost of a second van. The news arrived by email on a Friday afternoon, and I remember reading it three times before I believed it. Mrs Alvarez copied the message onto a memory disk so that nothing could be lost, which made everyone laugh, and then she cried a little. Someone printed the letter and put it on display next to the coffee machine, where it stayed until spring.

The last two weeks were exhausting but strangely happy. Volunteers came after work, still in their office clothes, and packed rice, oil and tea into boxes until midnight. There was a distinct smell of cardboard and coffee in the corridor that I still associate with that winter. We tried not to disturb the neighbours upstairs, so we worked in near silence after ten o'clock. Many of the volunteers had domestic responsibilities of their own, yet they kept coming back evening after evening. When the last parcel was delivered on the twenty-first of December, Mrs Alvarez sat down on an empty crate, closed her eyes and said that a warm room and a quiet chair felt like heaven.

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