The Report Nobody Wanted (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

When Elena was asked to write the annual report for the city's transport department, she assumed it would take a fortnight. Her manager smiled and said nothing. Within three days she understood the extent of the task, and by the end of the week she had stopped promising anyone a delivery date. The department had never produced a comprehensive document of this kind before; instead, information lay scattered across a dozen offices, old spreadsheets and handwritten notebooks.

She began with the bus network, because it carried the largest proportion of the city's passengers. The figures were surprisingly good. Punctuality had improved significantly since the new timetable was introduced, and complaints had fallen for the first time in six years. Elena wrote a short, cheerful paragraph about it. Then she turned to the tram lines, and her mood changed. Two of the four lines were losing money at a rate that could only be described as massive, and nobody in the building seemed willing to explain why.

Over the following weeks she interviewed drivers, engineers and accountants. Some conversations lasted ten minutes; others filled an entire afternoon. She travelled extensively across the network herself, riding at dawn and at midnight, notebook on her knees. The engineers were helpful and honest. They told her that the repairs carried out last year had been purely cosmetic, and that the real problem was a major fault in the electrical system beneath the eastern depot. Nobody had reported it, because reporting it would have meant admitting that the original contract had been badly written.

Elena hesitated for a long time before including this in the draft. It was, after all, only one paragraph in a document of two hundred pages. Yet she knew its significance perfectly well: once the sentence was printed, the council would have to act. She checked every figure twice. The estimated cost of proper repairs was considerable, though still far lower than the cost of closing the line altogether. Compared with that, the other issues she had found were minor ones, easily solved with a memo and a little goodwill.

The final report was extensive longer than anyone had expected, and her manager complained about the printing bill. The council, however, read it with unusual attention. At the meeting she was given a maximum of fifteen minutes to present her conclusions, and a minimum of none at all, since two councillors had already announced that they would leave early. She spoke for fourteen minutes. She avoided technical language and made a single significant point: that a small, ignored fault had grown, over five years, into a considerably financial risk. When she sat down, the room was quiet. Three weeks later, the eastern depot was closed for a complete overhaul, and Elena was asked to write next year's report as well.

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