The Letter on the Editor's Desk (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

Nadia had been a journalist for eleven years, and she had never received an envelope quite like the one waiting on her desk that Monday. Inside were forty pages of internal documents from a pharmaceutical company, sent by someone who signed only with the initial K. The papers appeared to show that a popular medicine had been sold for years despite worrying test results. Her first reaction was excitement; her second was a heavy sense of obligation towards the readers who trusted her newspaper.

She took the documents to her editor, Bernard, a slow and careful man who had once studied philosophy before deciding that newspapers were more interesting than lecture halls. He read every page twice without speaking. Then he asked the question she had been avoiding: how could they use stolen papers and still call themselves an ethical publication? Nadia argued that the public interest was enormous. Bernard did not disagree, but he reminded her that good intentions do not automatically justify every method.

For three weeks they worked quietly. Nadia verified each document with independent sources, and she refused to engage in any conversation with the company's press office until she was certain of her facts. She met K twice, once in a train station café and once in a park, and each time she came away more convinced that the informant was telling the truth. K was a chemist in her fifties who had tried, again and again, to raise the problem inside the company. Nobody had listened. Eventually she had decided that her ethic as a scientist mattered more than her career, and she had made copies before resigning.

The legal department was nervous, and the newspaper's owner was nervous too, since the company advertised regularly in the weekend supplement. Bernard listened politely to everyone and then made his decision. He told Nadia that they would publish, but only the material that directly concerned patient safety, and nothing that was merely embarrassing for individual managers. It was a principle he had followed all his working life: expose the harm, not the person. Nadia thought about it overnight and agreed that the line was the right one.

The article appeared on a Thursday. Within two days the health ministry had announced a review, and within a month the medicine had been withdrawn from sale in three countries. The company issued a furious statement accusing the newspaper of theft, though it never denied a single fact. Some readers wrote angry letters; far more wrote to say thank you. One retired doctor sent a short note saying that the whole affair was a useful moral lesson for anyone who believed that silence is harmless.

Months later, Nadia was invited to speak to students at the journalism school. She expected questions about sources and deadlines, but almost everything they asked concerned ethics and how far a reporter may go to find the truth. She told them honestly that she still was not sure she had answered every question correctly. What she did know, she said, was that honesty towards the reader had to come before the pleasure of a dramatic headline. The students looked slightly disappointed by such an ordinary answer, and Nadia smiled, because at their age she would have been disappointed too.

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