The Visiting Scholar (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

When Dr Marisa Vinter arrived at the small northern university, she had been warned that the place was old-fashioned. The corridors smelled of wax and wet coats, and the noticeboards were still covered in paper. She had come to spend one term teaching in the faculty of humanities, which occupied a grey building behind the library. Her contract described her simply as a visiting lecturer, but everyone insisted on calling her a scholar, which she found both flattering and slightly ridiculous.

Her first task was to redesign a course that nobody had touched for eleven years. The old curriculum began with medieval poetry and ended, rather strangely, with a week on advertising. Marisa spent three evenings reading the ancient textbook that students were still expected to buy, and she found whole chapters that were simply wrong. She decided to throw most of it out. Instead of long lectures, she would run one small seminar every Thursday, where fifteen students would argue about a single question. The head of department listened to her plan, raised his eyebrows and told her to try it.

The first session did not go well. Only six students turned up, and four of them stared at their shoes. Marisa asked a question about how history is written, and silence followed. Then a quiet young man at the back said something unexpected. He suggested looking at the problem from the angle of the people who could not read or write at all. The room woke up. By the end of the hour, students were interrupting each other, and Marisa had to send them away twice.

That young man, Tomas, turned out to be the most interesting person in the group. He had grown up in a village where the kindergarten and the primary school shared one small building, and he had not seen a library until he was fourteen. His elementary education had been patchy, he admitted, but he read everything he could find. He had come to the university on a scholarship funded by a local charity, and he worried constantly that he would lose it. Marisa told him that his intellectual curiosity was worth more than any grade, though she also made him rewrite his essays until the arguments were tight.

In March, a research institute in the capital invited Marisa to give a talk, and she asked whether she could bring a student with her. Tomas sat at the back of a hall full of professors and, during the discussion, asked a question so sharp that a well-known analyst of educational policy wrote it down. Afterwards, walking to the station in the rain, Tomas said he had always assumed such places were closed to people like him. Marisa reminded him that a university, like any other institution, is only made of the people who agree to keep it alive. She went home at the end of term, but she left the course, and Tomas, in far better shape than she had found them.

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