The Bookshop on Mill Street (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

The building on Mill Street had formerly been a bicycle factory, and the old iron beams were still visible above the shelves. Its owner, Clara, had bought it for almost nothing twenty years earlier, when nobody else wanted a ruin with a leaking roof. She often said she had been fortunate rather than clever, because the neighbourhood had improved beyond anyone's expectations since then. The bookshop now filled two floors and smelled permanently of coffee and dust.

Clara had founded the shop with her sister, using the money their grandmother left them. Their first task had been to repair the foundations, which had cracked badly during the years the building stood empty. Only when the ground was solid did they start thinking about books at all. That order of work became a kind of framework for everything Clara did afterwards: fix what holds the weight, then decorate.

On Thursday evenings the shop hosted a reading group, and admission was free. People came from three or four districts, some of them regularly, some only once. Clara enjoyed those evenings because visitors talked freely about books they loved, without worrying whether their opinions sounded intelligent. A retired teacher usually read a short fragment aloud from whatever he had been carrying in his coat pocket, and the discussion grew from there.

One autumn evening, a young man asked whether Clara was the founder of the shop. He had written an article about small independent businesses and wanted an interview. Clara agreed, though she warned him that her story was less dramatic than he probably hoped. They sat by the window for nearly two hours. She told him about the leaking roof, about her former partner who had moved to Portugal, and about the winter when only nine customers came in a week.

What surprised the journalist most was how little Clara talked about money. She spoke instead about the freedom that owning the place had given her: the right to close early on a bright afternoon, or to keep a book on the shelf simply because she admired it. When he asked about her plans, she looked forward to the following spring and mentioned a small garden behind the building. "That is the next project," she said. "Nothing complicated. Just somewhere to sit."

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