The Baker on Market Street (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

Old Mr Ferreira had been selling bread from the same corner stall for thirty-one years. His hands were always covered in flour, and the counter was permanently sticky with honey from the pastries he sold at the end of the day. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew him, although few people knew much about his life before he arrived here. He had a reputation for being strict about quality: bread that was even slightly overbaked went straight to the birds. Customers were told, strictly and politely, that they could take it or leave it.

His rules were famous. No orders after five o'clock, no discounts, and no bread reserved for anyone, whatever their status in the town. The mayor himself had once been sent to the back of the queue. That firm stance had cost him a few customers over the years, but it had won him many more. People said the smell of his ovens alone was enough to stimulate an appetite in someone who had just eaten dinner.

Then, one wet Tuesday in November, Mr Ferreira suffered a stroke while carrying a tray of rolls to the front. He was taken to hospital, and for two days nobody could stand the silence on that corner. The shutters stayed down, and word began to spread through the market that he might never come back. A group of neighbours organised a rota so that his flat would be cleaned and his cat fed. His daughter flew in from Lisbon and admitted she had not spoken to her father since a family argument years earlier.

Recovery came steadily, in small movements rather than sudden improvements. At first his left arm was so stiff that he could not lift a cup, and the doctors warned him against returning to work. He hated the exercises and complained that he was being treated like a child. His daughter reminded him gently that each step forward mattered, however small it seemed. On her advice he agreed to rest properly and to let others handle the heavy stuff in the bakery for a while.

By spring, the shop had reopened, though the daily structure of the business had changed completely. His daughter ran the counter, and two young bakers arrived at four in the morning to light the ovens. Mr Ferreira sat on a chair near the door, advising, tasting and occasionally reaching out to stroke the cat that slept on the flour sacks. When the bus drivers went on strike in June, he insisted on staying open so that people walking home had something to eat. He said, half seriously, that he would rather work than starve in a comfortable armchair. That was the stage of the whole affair: the bakery had survived, and so, in his stubborn way, had he.

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