Rebuilding Marek's Street (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

Marek had lived on the same street in Vesna for sixty-one years, and he had watched it change three times. The first change came with the factory, the second with the war, and the third with the slow, stubborn work of returning. He liked to tell visitors that the street had survived everything except silence. In the evenings he sat outside the bakery with a newspaper he had already read twice.

The war had reached the town in early spring. For weeks people had insisted that no army would invade a country that had never threatened anyone. Then the roads filled with military vehicles, and a tank stopped at the crossroads near the school, its engine running for an entire afternoon. Marek remembered the sound more clearly than the pictures. He remembered too that nobody spoke while it stood there.

Officials on the radio described the fighting as a defence of ancient territory, though the maps had not changed for a hundred years. The invasion was over within a fortnight, and after that came the long occupation. Foreign troops patrolled the market square in pairs, young men who looked bored and frightened at the same time. Armed soldiers checked bags at the bridge every morning. Marek learned which of them would let an old man pass without questions.

Crime grew quickly in those months, as it always does when order breaks down. Two men broke into the pharmacy at night, and the robbery was discovered only when the owner arrived at seven. A week later a group tried to rob the post office in daylight, but a neighbour blocked the door with her car. The police, such as they were, could do very little. Small acts of theft became so common that people stopped locking things away and simply carried everything with them.

What frightened Marek most was not the terror itself but the silence afterwards, when nobody knew who could be trusted. A bomb in the bus station one August morning killed four people, and the government immediately called it terrorism. Nobody was ever arrested, and the word terrorist appeared in every headline for a month. Marek thought that the men who planted the bomb had probably grown up nearby. He never said this out loud.

The soldiers left three years later, almost without ceremony. Trucks loaded with arms rolled north along the river road, and the checkpoints disappeared overnight. That autumn the council announced a plan to rebuild the school, the pharmacy and the roof of the old library. Marek volunteered, although his hands were no longer steady. He carried water to the workers and made a great deal of noise about being useful.

By the following summer, children were playing in the yard again. The bakery reopened with the same sign, repainted in a slightly brighter blue. Marek still sat outside in the evenings with his newspaper, watching people argue about parking and football. He told a young journalist that a street is never really destroyed until the people stop coming back. She wrote the sentence down, and he pretended not to notice how pleased he was.

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