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STARTER STORY • ENGLISH • B2

Letters to the Council

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For thirty-one years, Margaret Hale had corrected other people's sentences for a living. She had worked as a proofreader at a small publishing house, where she hunted down errors the way other people hunt bargains: with patience, method, and quiet delight. When she retired, the errors did not stop. Only the salary did.

Retirement, she discovered, was a house with too many silent rooms. Her husband had died years earlier, her daughter lived abroad, and the days, which had once been too short, now stretched like wet rope. So Margaret did what she had always done when the world felt untidy: she looked for something to correct.

The town provided generously. There was the lamppost on Harbour Lane that had leaned at a drunken angle since February. There was the sign at the entrance to the park that read "WELLCOME". There was the bus timetable that promised a 9:40 bus which, in Margaret's carefully documented experience, had never once existed.

She bought a box of good paper and began to write to the town council. One letter per week: polite, precise, and impossible to ignore. She numbered her complaints, dated her evidence, and signed each letter with her full name and a firm blue line underneath. It was, although she would never have used the word, a hobby.

For two months, the council replied with printed cards that thanked her for her "valued feedback". Margaret pinned them to her kitchen wall the way a general pins up a map of enemy territory. Then, in June, something unusual happened. A real letter arrived, written by a real person.

"Dear Mrs. Hale," it began. "You are right about the lamppost, righter than you know. I have walked past it myself and can report that it now leans a further three degrees. I have reported it twice. I enclose a copy of my report, so that at least two people in this town will know it exists. Yours sincerely, S. Okafor, Junior Clerk."

Margaret read the letter twice, then a third time, and caught herself smiling at the phrase “righter than you know”, which was not, strictly speaking, correct English at all. She took out a sheet of good paper. “Dear Mr. Okafor,” she wrote. “Thank you for your honesty regarding the lamppost. Since we are being honest: your comma before ‘so that’ was unnecessary. The rest of your letter was a pleasure.”

So began the strangest correspondence of Margaret’s life. Officially, she was a persistent complainant, and Sam Okafor was the junior clerk assigned, no doubt as a punishment, to answer her. Unofficially, they wrote to each other about everything: the crooked lamppost, then the crooked mayor, then the books they were reading, then, gradually, their lives.

She learned that Sam was twenty-six, that he had moved to the town knowing nobody, and that he had taken the council job while he decided what he actually wanted to do, a decision he had now been postponing for three years. He learned that Margaret had once found four errors on the front page of a national newspaper and had kept the page as a trophy.

“You should have been a teacher,” he wrote in October. “You should be anything but a clerk,” she replied. “Your sentences are far too alive for the letters you are made to send.” She hesitated before posting that one, wondering whether it said too much. His next letter was twice as long as usual.

Meanwhile, to everyone’s astonishment, things in town began to improve, because a junior clerk kept walking complaints personally from one office to another until somebody dealt with them, just so that he would have good news for his Tuesday letter. The lamppost was straightened in November. The park sign lost its extra L in January. In March, a 9:40 bus actually arrived at 9:40, and Margaret, standing at the stop with her notebook, felt an absurd urge to applaud.

In April, an official envelope arrived. The council, it announced, wished to present Mrs. Margaret Hale with a Certificate of Civic Contribution, in recognition of her role in the improvement of public amenities. Margaret laughed out loud, alone in her kitchen. Thirty years of flawless proofreading had earned her a fountain pen and a handshake. Fourteen months of complaining had made her a model citizen.

But under the laughter, something else stirred, something she needed two days to name. If everything was fixed, what was there to write about? The letters had become the spine of her week: writing on Sunday, posting on Monday, and, from Thursday onward, watching for the postman like a girl of nineteen. The certificate felt less like an honor than like a door being gently closed.

Sam's letters, as if he sensed it too, grew shorter through the spring. There was less to report, and a junior clerk could hardly write to a member of the public about nothing at all. In May, a printed card arrived, thanking her for her valued feedback. Margaret stood in the hall for a long time, holding it.

That Sunday she took out the good paper and wrote her final complaint. "Dear Sirs," it read. "I wish to report the disappearance of a public amenity. For over a year, this town possessed a junior clerk whose letters were of more use to me than the bus, the lamppost, and the park sign together. The service has been discontinued without notice. I request its immediate restoration. I take my tea on Wednesdays at four."

On Wednesday at four exactly, the doorbell rang. Sam Okafor stood on the step, younger than she had imagined and more nervous, holding a bunch of slightly crushed tulips and, because he knew her, a printed card that read: "Thank you for your valued feedback." "Mrs. Hale," he said, "I am here about your complaint." "You are late," said Margaret, opening the door wide. "The tea has been ready for two minutes."

The following autumn, the council newsletter appeared with a new line in small print at the bottom of the back page: "Proofread by M. Hale, volunteer." Readers noticed that the sentences had improved. Only two people in town knew that the proofreader was paid in tea and conversation every Wednesday, and that she still kept, pinned to her kitchen wall, a slightly crooked photograph of a perfectly straight lamppost.

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