THE PROOFREADER

Written by
Pencil of Nature

Short film, opening sequence

INT. EVENING COURIER, NEWSROOM - NIGHT

Forty empty desks. Most have been cleared; a few still have a dead plant. Overhead, every other strip light is off to save money.

At the far end, in the only pool of light, AGNES MARLOW (68) sits very upright at a desk that has not moved since 1983. Half-moon glasses. A green cardigan, buttoned wrong. She holds a pencil that is exactly as long as her thumb.

A proof of a newspaper page lies in front of her. She reads it with the pencil, a millimetre above the paper, moving along each line.

KOFI (24), lanyard, hoodie, carrying two coffees, picks his way between the desks. He puts one down at a respectful distance from the proof.

KOFI
Last one.

AGNES
(not looking up)
Last coffee, or last page?

KOFI
Both, I think. They've turned the machine off upstairs.

She reaches the bottom of the column. The pencil lifts. It has not touched the page.

AGNES
Do you know how many errors I have found in the last eleven weeks?

KOFI
Is this a trick question?

AGNES
Forty-one years I've been in this chair. In my first week I found a man who had been dead since Tuesday, listed as opening a fete on Saturday.

I found "pubic" for "public" in a story about the Mayor. Twice.

She turns the page over. On the back, in very small pencil, a tally: rows and rows of five-bar gates running back through the years. The last row stops short.

AGNES (CONT'D)
Since they put your Copydesk in, none. Not a comma. Not a date. I read every word of every page and it is all correct.

KOFI
(gently)
That's good. Isn't it?

She looks at him for a moment, the way you would look at a nice boy who has asked why the sea is sad.

AGNES
Is the press running?

KOFI
Plates went down ten minutes ago. Bernard's waiting for your signature. It's only a formality.

Agnes picks up the proof. She stands. It takes a while. She takes the pencil.

AGNES
Everything is.

INT. EVENING COURIER, PRESS HALL - NIGHT

A huge old web press, three storeys of black iron, silent, waiting. Paper threads up through it like a long white nerve. It smells of ink and hot dust.

BERNARD (71), ear defenders round his neck, sits on an upturned crate eating a sandwich out of foil. He sees her come down the iron stairs. He has seen this every night for forty-one years. He gets up anyway.

BERNARD
Evening, Miss Marlow.

AGNES
Bernard. After all this time.

BERNARD
Well. Seems a shame to rush it now.

She lays the proof on the steel bench under his lamp. The front page: THE EVENING COURIER, 1871 TO TODAY. A photograph of the building. Underneath, in forty-eight point: WE WERE HERE.

He holds out a pen for her to sign. She doesn't take it. She looks at the page for a very long time.

BERNARD (CONT'D)
Something wrong with it?

AGNES
No.

Silence. The building ticks as it cools.

AGNES (CONT'D)
Not one thing, Bernard.

He looks at the page, then at her. He has known her for forty-one years, and has never once asked her a personal question. He doesn't now. He wipes his hands slowly on a rag.

BERNARD
I can have a plate remade in twelve minutes. If there were a correction.

AGNES
There isn't one.

BERNARD
No.

Beat.

BERNARD (CONT'D)
Twelve minutes, though.

Agnes looks down. She lowers the pencil to the page, and for the first time in eleven weeks, the point touches paper.

CLOSE ON the headline. Between WE WERE and HERE she makes one small, neat, professional mark, and in the margin, in a hand like copperplate, she writes the correction.

She hands the proof to Bernard. He reads it. His face does not change at all. Then, very slightly, it does.

BERNARD
That's an error, that is.

AGNES
Yes.

BERNARD
That'll be on every doorstep in the county.

AGNES
Yes, Bernard. It will.

He folds the proof and puts it inside his overalls. He pulls his ear defenders up.

INT. PRESS HALL - LATER

The press is running: a vast iron roar, the whole floor shaking. Papers race along the overhead conveyor, thousands of them, and we go in close on one as it passes, then closer, the print blurring and resolving.

THE EVENING COURIER. 1871 TO TODAY.

WE WERE, HERE.

A single, tiny, unnecessary comma. On every copy. Going out into the dark.

CUT TO BLACK.