The Twin in the Back Row (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

Mr Halloran had taught chemistry for twenty-six years, and he was convinced that nothing could surprise him any more. He knew every excuse, every trick and every hidden phone. Then, in September, two new students walked into his laboratory. They were twins, and they were so identical that he genuinely could not tell which one was which, even after a fortnight.

The one who sat by the window was called Nina. She answered questions before he had finished asking them, and her notebook was full of diagrams she had drawn at home for fun. Her brother Lukas sat in the back row and said almost nothing. The other students quickly decided that Nina was the genius of the family and that Lukas was simply along for the ride. Mr Halloran was not so sure. He had learned long ago that quiet students often think the hardest.

One wet Thursday in November, he set the class a difficult problem about reaction rates. He did not really expect anyone to solve it, since it came from an examination two years above their level. Nina worked furiously and produced a long, careful answer. Then Lukas raised his hand and offered a solution in three lines. Mr Halloran was so impressed that he asked him to explain it twice at the board. The class listened in complete silence, which for that group was an ideal situation for teaching.

After the lesson, Lukas admitted that he had never enjoyed competing with his sister. He said he had spent years pretending to be uninterested, because it was easier than losing. His enthusiasm for chemistry, though, had been growing quietly all along, mostly in the form of experiments in the garage. Mr Halloran suggested that the two of them enter the national science competition together rather than separately. Nina agreed at once; Lukas took a week to think about it.

They spent the whole of January building a small device that measured air quality using recycled parts. Nina designed the electronics, and Lukas wrote the software. Neither of them was trying to impress anybody by then; they were simply enjoying the work. On the day of the competition, they explained their project to the judges with such calm confidence that one judge described their presentation as the most memorable he had seen in ten years of judging. They did not win first prize, but they came third, which nobody at their school had ever managed before. Their parents were embarrassingly enthusiastic and photographed everything, including the sandwiches.

Mr Halloran kept a picture of that afternoon on the wall of his laboratory until he retired. Whenever a new class complained that chemistry was boring, he pointed at it and told the story of the silent boy in the back row.

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