A Small Grant, A Large Idea (B2 · English B2)

Tekst / Transcript

Dr Amara Oyelaran had spent four years designing a water filter that cost less than a cup of coffee. The device was simple, almost embarrassingly so, and its only function was to remove bacteria from river water. Universities across the globe had politely refused to fund it, saying the idea was too basic to be interesting. She kept the rejection letters in a drawer and carried on working in a borrowed laboratory.

Her breakthrough came from a student named Théo, who was repeating a year and worried about every grade he received. He noticed that the filter stopped fully working after about two months because of a tiny design fault. Instead of hiding the problem, he wrote a two-page report and left it on her desk. Amara was greatly impressed by his honesty, and she asked him to join the project properly.

Together they rewrote the whole design. It was fundamentally different from the first version: fewer parts, cheaper materials, and a shape that could be produced by any local workshop. Furthermore, the new filter could be cleaned with nothing but boiling water. That change was fundamental, because it meant families would not depend on expensive replacements sent from abroad. Théo drew the instructions as pictures so that nobody would need to read a word.

The following spring, a small charity offered them a grant of thirty thousand euros. It was not a fortune, but it arrived at the perfect moment, and Amara later described it as the golden opportunity of her career. They travelled to three countries, tested the filter in real kitchens, and wrote a set of clear guidelines for anyone who wanted to copy the design. Amara refused to patent it. She simply wanted people to gain access to safe water without paying anyone for the privilege.

At the award ceremony two years later, Amara was asked to speak about her success. She began by making a small gesture towards Théo, who was sitting quietly at the back of the hall, and the audience turned to look at him. "He found the fault that everyone else ignored," she said. The organiser of the event, an older engineer who was openly gay and had spent decades campaigning for fairer science, told the newspapers afterwards that he had rarely seen such generosity. "My goodness," he laughed, "most people would have taken the credit alone." Amara only shrugged, and said that fundamentally nothing important is ever built by one person.

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