The Project That Didn't Win



The disaster began with a single drop. Then another fell beside it. Within seconds, water leaked across the judges' table. Nora reached for the bottle while Will tried to reconnect the tube. Their automatic watering system was watering everything except the plant.

They had spent six weeks building the prototype for the school invention competition. It had a sensor, a small pump and a screen that showed the soil's moisture. At home, it had worked. In front of the judges, a loose connection had turned their careful demonstration into a puddle.

They did not win. The prize went to a team that had designed a simple rainwater collector. On the walk home, Will blamed the tube. Nora blamed the extra screen, which had taken their whole final weekend to finish. By the time they reached their street, neither was speaking.

Mrs Bell was watering plants on her balcony. "How was the competition?" she called. Nora lifted the damp cardboard box. "Our invention tried to flood the school." Mrs Bell listened to the explanation, then asked an unexpected question. "Could it water my basil while I'm visiting my sister?"

Will almost laughed. They had just explained that it did not work. But Mrs Bell wasn't asking about a prize. She needed something that would keep one pot

alive for a few days. "I don't need a screen," she added. "I need to know the water will reach the roots."

The next afternoon, the friends met again. They removed the screen and fixed the tube firmly in place. Nora wrote down every test, including the failures. Will measured how much water the pot received. They tested the system for a full week, and Mrs Bell continued watering her basil herself until they were ready.

Before leaving, she tried the controls and read their instructions. One step confused her, so they rewrote it together. While she was away, the device watered the basil. The friends checked it each afternoon with her permission. This time, the only water on the balcony floor came from the rain.

When Mrs Bell returned, she brought them a photograph of her sister's garden and a bag of fresh bread. "For the inventors," she said. Will wanted to enter the competition again next year. Nora did too. But first they made a list of questions for Mrs Bell: Was it easy to refill? Could she read the instructions? What would make it more reliable? The box still had no medal inside. On top of it, however, sat a very healthy pot of basil.



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