

The Empty Chair

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“Matheo got the highest score again.” The room burst into applause. Mrs. Santos held up the examination paper, its red-inked 100 clearly visible at the top. A few students laughed in disbelief while others shook their heads. “Again?” someone whispered. “Of course,” another student replied. “It’s Matheo.” But there was one problem.

Matheo wasn’t there to hear it. His chair near the window was empty. It had been empty many times before. Matheo was a Grade 11 student known for two things: being exceptionally intelligent and being frequently absent. While most students struggled to keep up with their lessons, he seemed to understand them almost effortlessly. He consistently topped examinations, quizzes, and activities—even when he had missed the lessons being tested.

To his classmates, it was a mystery. To Mrs. Santos, it was becoming a concern. “How does he keep getting the highest score when he is hardly here?” one student asked. No one knew the answer. They did not know that while they were sitting in classrooms, Matheo was sometimes carrying boxes at a grocery store. They did not know that while they were reviewing for examinations together, he was working late to help his family make ends meet. And they certainly did not know that every time his chair was empty, Matheo was fighting a battle far beyond the walls of their classroom.

He was not running away from school. He was trying to stay in it. Matheo’s family had always struggled financially. His mother worked as a laundry helper, while his father had no stable source of income. Their earnings were barely enough for food, bills, and daily necessities. So Matheo worked. Every afternoon after school, he went to a small grocery store near the public market. He carried boxes, arranged merchandise, cleaned shelves, and helped customers. Sometimes, his employer asked him to stay longer when another worker was absent.

There were nights when he came home exhausted. Yet before sleeping, he would open his notebook. He studied the lessons he had missed, borrowed notes from classmates, and read his textbooks until his eyes became heavy. That was how he remained at the top. Not because he had more time than everyone else. Because he had learned how to make use of every minute he had. One morning, Matheo finally came to class after being absent for two days.

Mrs. Santos waited until the lesson was over.

“Matheo, can we talk?”

He nodded nervously.

“I noticed that you’ve been absent quite often.”

“I’m sorry, Ma’am.”

“You don’t need to apologize yet. I want to understand why.”

Matheo hesitated.

Then he finally told her the truth.

He explained about his job, his family, and the reason he sometimes had no choice but to miss school.

Mrs. Santos listened quietly.

When he finished, she looked at him with concern.

"You're working after school and still getting the highest scores?"

Matheo smiled shyly.

"I try my best, Ma'am."

"I know you do."

She paused.

"But you shouldn't have to choose between helping your family and finishing your education."

Matheo looked up.

The following week, Mrs. Santos returned with an opportunity.

"I spoke with the administration," she said. "The faculty office needs a student assistant."

Matheo looked surprised.

"You mean... I can work here?"

"Yes. You can assist the faculty during your vacant periods and after your classes. You'll receive an allowance for your work."

Matheo could hardly believe it.

"But what about the students who need tutoring?" Mrs. Santos continued. "I heard you're very good at mathematics."

Matheo smiled.

"I guess I am."

"There are younger students who are struggling with the subject. You can tutor them after class and earn additional money." For the first time, Matheo saw a way forward that did not require him to choose between his education and his family's needs. He left the grocery store and became a student assistant in the faculty office. He organized documents, prepared classroom materials, assisted teachers, and helped with simple office tasks. After classes, he tutored younger students in mathematics and science. He was still working. He was still earning.

But now, his work was connected to the education he was fighting so hard to complete. Most importantly, he could attend his classes regularly. His chair near the window was no longer empty every week. And despite everything he had been through, Matheo remained at the top. Quiz after quiz. Examination after examination. His name continued to appear first.

One day, Mrs. Santos returned their final examination results.

"There is one student who has consistently ranked first throughout the school year."

The class immediately looked at Matheo.

"Congratulations, Matheo."

The room filled with applause.

This time, Matheo was there to hear it.

He smiled as he looked at his paper.

Another perfect score.

But instead of looking at the number, he looked at his chair.

He remembered all the days it had been empty.

He remembered the grocery store, the late nights, the exhaustion, and the fear that he might someday have to stop studying. Then he remembered Mrs. Santos. She had not asked him to work harder. She had simply helped him find another way. On graduation day, the classroom was filled with proud parents, teachers, and students. Every chair was occupied. Including Matheo's.

As he waited for his name to be called, Mrs. Santos approached him.

"You made it," she said.

Matheo smiled.

"Because you gave me a chance, Ma'am."

She shook her head.

"You earned it. I only opened the door."

Matheo looked toward the chair where he had spent countless hours learning. For months, it had been known as the empty chair. But now, it represented something else. It represented perseverance. It represented sacrifice. And most of all, it represented a student who refused to let poverty decide his future. When his name was called, Matheo stood and walked toward the stage. The applause grew louder. He held his certificate tightly and smiled. His journey had not been easy. But he had learned something more important than anything written in a textbook: Sometimes, success does not come from having an easier life. It comes from finding the courage to keep learning despite a difficult one. And the chair that was once empty was finally filled—not just by a student, but by a young man ready to build a better future.

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