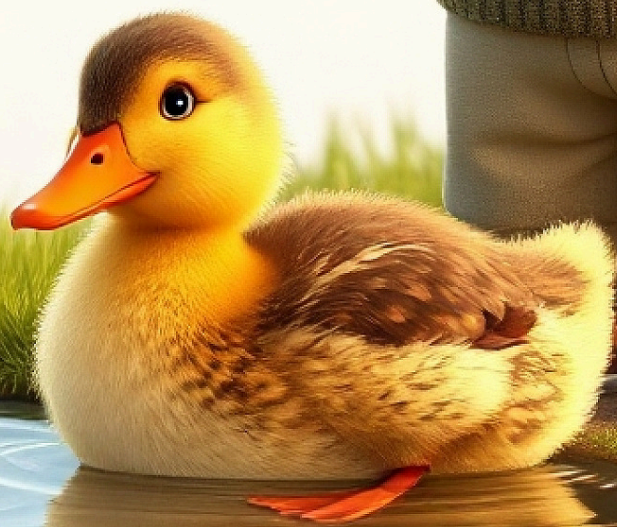


The Girl and the Little Duckling



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On a bright sunny morning, a girl named Mia skipped down the path to her favorite pond. She wore her yellow shirt, blue overalls, and red sneakers. A small green satchel bounced at her side. Mia loved this pond. She loved the tall grasses, the dragonflies, and the quiet water. Today, she hoped to see something new.



As Mia reached the pond's edge, she heard a tiny sound. Peep! Peep! She looked down and saw a little duckling. It was small and fluffy, with soft yellow down, a tiny orange beak, and round dark eyes. It wobbled on its little orange feet. Mia knelt down slowly, not wanting to scare it. 'Hello, little one,' she whispered.



The duckling looked up at Mia and blinked. Then it turned and waddled toward the water. A larger duck with a glossy green head and brown speckled feathers waited nearby. It was the mother duck. Mia watched as the duckling plopped into the pond and paddled to its mother. 'You're safe with your family,' Mia said softly.



Just then, an old man with a brown flat cap and round glasses came down the path. He leaned on a walking cane and smiled at Mia. 'I see you've met our new duckling,' he said. 'I'm Mr. Chen. I come here every day to watch the ducks.' Mia smiled back. 'I'm Mia. I love ducks!' Mr. Chen nodded. 'They need our care.'



Mr. Chen pointed to the duckling. 'See how it stays close to its mother? That's how ducklings learn. They watch and copy. In a few weeks, it will be bigger and stronger.' Mia watched the duckling paddle in circles. Its tiny wings flapped. 'It's so little now,' she said. 'But it will grow,' said Mr. Chen. 'With care.'



Mia came back to the pond every day after that. Each time, she brought her green satchel. She picked up bits of trash that people left behind—a plastic wrapper, a paper cup, a shiny bottle cap. 'Ducks can't live in a dirty pond,' she told the duckling. 'I'll help keep it clean.' The duckling peeped as if it understood.



One afternoon, Mia saw a group of children throwing bread crumbs into the pond. The ducklings gobbled them up, but Mia remembered Mr. Chen's words: bread is not good for ducks. She ran over politely. 'Excuse me,' she said. 'Bread can make ducks sick. Let's not feed them, okay?' The children looked surprised but nodded and stopped.



Mia walked along the pond edge, checking for litter. She found a tangled piece of fishing line near the water. Carefully, she picked it up and put it in her satchel. 'That could hurt a duck's feet,' she said. The mother duck swam by with her ducklings. She seemed to watch Mia with calm, watchful eyes. Mia felt proud to help.



Days passed, and the little duckling began to change. Its yellow down grew thicker, and its wings grew longer. It no longer wobbled when it walked. It paddled faster and stronger across the pond. Mia cheered from the shore. 'Look at you go!' she called. The duckling lifted its head and peeped loudly, as if to say, 'Watch me!'



Mr. Chen came by with his walking cane and a happy smile. 'You've been taking good care of the pond,' he said. 'The ducks are lucky to have you.' Mia blushed. 'I just want them to be safe,' she said. Mr. Chen nodded. 'That's exactly what they need—someone who cares.' They sat together on a bench and watched the ducks swim.



That evening, a strong wind blew across the pond. The next morning, Mia found a plastic bag stuck in the reeds near the shore. The mother duck and her ducklings swam nearby. Mia knew she had to act. She waded carefully into the shallow water and pulled the bag free. 'Got it!' she said. The ducklings paddled away safely.



Mia decided to make a sign. With her mom's help, she painted a colorful poster: 'Please keep our pond clean and safe for the ducks!' She hung it on a tree near the water. Mr. Chen saw it and smiled. 'Wonderful idea,' he said. 'People will read it and remember to be careful.' Mia felt happy that others would help too.



The little duckling was not so little anymore. Its feathers were growing in, and it swam with strong, steady strokes. It still stayed close to its family, but now it led the way sometimes. Mia watched with pride. 'You're growing up,' she said. The duckling quacked and splashed its wings. It was bigger and stronger, just as Mr. Chen had promised.



One sunny afternoon, Mia sat on the grass with her green satchel beside her. The mother duck and her ducklings swam in a neat line. The little duckling—now not so little—paddled at the front. Mia smiled. She knew that animal families need care and protection. And she was glad to be part of that care. 'I'll always keep you safe,' she whispered.



Mr. Chen joined Mia on the bench. 'You've learned something important,' he said. 'Ducks need clean water, quiet spaces, and kind people.' Mia nodded. 'And they need their families,' she added. Mr. Chen smiled. 'Yes. Just like we do.' They watched the ducks glide across the pond. The water sparkled in the sun. Everything felt peaceful and right.



From that day on, Mia kept visiting the pond. She checked for trash and reminded visitors to be gentle. The duckling grew into a beautiful duck, but it never forgot Mia. Sometimes it swam close to the shore when she arrived. Mia felt happy. She knew that with care and kindness, the pond would always be a safe home for the ducks—and for all the families who visited.