

The Girl and the River Birds



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Maya pulled on her yellow rain boots and grinned. Today was river day. She loved river day more than any other day of the week. Her green nature club vest had a leaf badge that wiggled when she walked. She grabbed her red backpack, her binoculars, and her small notebook. The river was waiting for her.



The river ran along the edge of town, wide and slow and shiny. Maya knew every bend and every stone. She knew where the ducks liked to nap and where the tall grey birds stood still as statues. Every morning she came here to watch and to count. Every morning the river had something new to show her.



Mr Okafor waited by the old wooden bridge in his blue club polo shirt. His canvas satchel was full of field guides, and his round glasses caught the sunlight. "Ready, river watcher?" he asked. Maya nodded so fast her curly puffs bounced. The nature club had big news today, and Maya could hardly wait to hear it.



"We want to make a riverside wildlife guide," Mr Okafor said. "A book for everyone in town. Where the birds live, what they eat, how to watch them kindly." The children gasped and clapped. Maya hugged her notebook to her chest. She already knew so much about the birds beside the river. Now she could share it with everybody.



Maya started with the ducks. They paddled in the calm water near the reeds, bobbing their heads and quacking softly. "Ducks live where the water is slow," she wrote in her notebook. "They eat water plants and little seeds." Two ducklings zipped past their mother, flapping their tiny wings. Maya giggled and drew a small duck in the corner.



Next she found the heron. It stood in the shallows on long yellow legs, grey and white feathers smooth as silk. It did not move at all. Maya held her breath. Then, quick as a wink, its sharp yellow beak dipped down and caught a silver fish. "Heron hunt in clean, shallow water," she whispered, writing it down.



Then came the flash of blue. Maya's favorite bird swooped low over the river. The kingfisher was small, but its feathers were bright orange and electric blue. It perched on a low branch, watching the water with tiny dark eyes. Splash! It dove and rose with a fish. "Kingfishers need clear water to see their fish," Maya wrote.



At club time, Maya shared her notes. "Every bird needs clean water," she told the group. "Ducks, herons, kingfishers, all of them." Mr Okafor nodded slowly. "That is the most important part of our guide," he said. "Healthy water means healthy birds." The children decided to add a page about caring for the river.



But the next morning, something looked wrong. Near the bend, the water was cloudy and brown. A plastic bag floated past the reeds. Maya frowned and pulled on her boots. The ducks paddled away from the murky patch. The heron stood farther downstream, watching. "The birds don't like it," Maya said softly.



She found Mr Okafor by the bridge and showed him her notebook. "Look," she said. "The water is dirty here. The birds moved away." Mr Okafor knelt down and studied the cloudy water. "You noticed something important," he said. "Clean water helps all these birds stay healthy and happy. When it gets dirty, they suffer."



Maya had an idea. "Let's put it in the guide!" she said. "A page that shows how to keep the river clean." Mr Okafor smiled. "Brilliant," he said. "And let's add a wildlife guide section, too, so people know what to look for." The club got to work. They drew pictures of the birds and wrote simple rules for caring for the water.



On Saturday, the nature club stood by the river with bags and gloves. Other families came to help. They picked up litter along the bank and cleared the reeds. Maya's little brother found a bottle and held it high like a treasure. "Got one!" he shouted. Everyone laughed and kept working together.



Slowly, the river began to sparkle again. The ducks drifted back to the calm water near the reeds. The heron returned to its shallow spot, still and watchful. And at noon, the kingfisher flashed over the river, bright as a jewel. Maya cheered. "They came back!" she cried. "They came back because the water is clean!"



The guide was finished at last. Maya held up the first copy, full of drawings and facts. There was a page about where each bird lives and what each bird eats. There was a page about clean water, too. "This guide teaches people to care for the river and its wildlife," Mr Okafor said proudly. The children clapped and cheered.



Now more families visit the river to watch the birds. They carry the guide and follow Maya's notes. They point at the heron and gasp at the kingfisher. And they remember to keep the water clean. Maya sits on the old wooden bridge with her notebook and her binoculars. The river shines, and the birds sing, and she smiles.



Maya learned something big beside the river. When people care for the water, the birds come back. When the birds come back, the whole river feels happy. She writes one last line in her notebook: "Clean water helps everyone, birds and people too." Then she puts down her pencil and watches the kingfisher flash by, bright as a little blue star.