

The Boy and the Little Otter



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On a warm Saturday morning, a boy named Eli pulled on his bright yellow t-shirt and his red canvas sneakers. He packed a snack and a water bottle into his small green backpack. His short messy black hair bounced as he ran down the path behind his house. Today he was going to the river, and he could hardly wait to see what he might find there.



The river curled like a silver ribbon between green banks. Eli sat on a smooth flat rock and wiggled off his sneakers so his toes could touch the cool water. Dragonflies zipped over the shallows, and small fish flashed like coins in the sun. Everything smelled fresh and green and alive. Eli took a deep breath and smiled his gap-toothed smile.



Suddenly, a sleek brown shape slid off the far bank and slipped into the water with barely a splash. Eli froze. Two small round eyes peeked above the surface, then a whiskery little face popped up. It was an otter, a young one, about the length of Eli's arm. Its glossy brown fur shone wet in the sunlight.



The little otter rolled and twisted in the water like a happy dancer. Its lighter cream belly flashed every time it turned over. It dove down deep, then shot back up with a tiny silver fish wiggling in its paws. Eli laughed out loud. "You're so fast!" he called, and the otter chirped back at him, almost like it was answering.



Down the bank, the otter climbed onto a log and shook itself dry. Its long tapered tail flicked from side to side. Eli watched it nibble its fish, holding it neatly in small webbed paws. The otter seemed to trust him completely. It kept glancing over as if to say, "Are you watching? Watch this!"



Then a plastic bag drifted past the log, and the little otter darted away, startled. Eli frowned. Farther down the bank he could see more litter caught in the reeds, and something that looked like an old tin can. The water around it looked cloudy and dull. "That's not good," Eli whispered to himself.



A tall helper in a green conservation vest came along the path, carrying a litter-picking stick. She had kind warm brown eyes and short braids, and she smiled when she saw Eli. "Hello! I'm looking after this stretch of river today," she said. "Did you spot one of our otters? They love this bend of the water."



Eli nodded quickly. "I saw a little one! But a plastic bag scared it away." The helper nodded. "Otters need clean water to hunt and swim and raise their pups," she explained gently. "Litter and dirty water make it hard for them to find food and stay healthy. That's why we pick it up and keep the river clean."



Eli looked at the otter, now peeking warily from behind a rock. Its whiskers twitched. He thought about how happy it had looked, dancing in the water. He did not want it to be scared or hungry. "Can I help?" he asked. "I'm small, but I'm good at picking things up. I do it at home all the time."



The helper handed him a pair of work gloves and a small bag for litter. "Supervised help is the best kind," she said warmly. "We stay on the bank, we never reach into the water, and we leave the wildlife alone. Ready?" Eli pulled on the gloves and nodded. Together, they started along the river path, picking up every bit of litter they found.



Eli worked carefully. He picked up crumpled wrappers, an old paper cup, and a tangled piece of fishing line. The helper used her long stick to fish a plastic bottle out of the reeds. "Every piece we take out is one less danger for the animals," she said. Eli's little bag grew heavier, and so did his proud smile.



After a while, the riverbank looked bright and tidy again. The water moved clear and sparkling over the stones. And then, as if to say thank you, the little otter came back! It slid into the water and dove and spun, its glossy fur sleek and shiny. It splashed its tail and chirped, and Eli clapped his gloved hands.



"Look! It's happy again!" Eli cried. The helper smiled. "Clean water supports wildlife," she said. "When the river is healthy, otters thrive, and so do the fish and the birds and everything that lives here." Eli watched the otter dive and rise, dive and rise, and he felt warm and proud all the way down to his toes.



Before they left, the helper gave Eli a pair of gloves to take home. "You're a real river friend now," she said. Eli promised to come back and help again, and to tell his friends at school how litter hurts rivers. "I'll keep my part of the river clean," he said, standing tall in his red sneakers.



At home, Eli drew a picture of the little otter swimming in clear blue water. He hung it on the wall beside his bed. Every night before sleep, he looked at it and remembered the whiskery face and the happy splash of the long tapered tail. Clean rivers keep wildlife safe, he thought. And I can help.



The next weekend, Eli visited the river again with his green backpack full of snacks and a litter bag. The water sparkled, and the little otter was waiting near the smooth flat rock. It dove and rolled and chirped hello. Eli smiled his gap-toothed smile. He knew that caring for rivers, one little piece at a time, helps the otter and all the animals that call it home.