

The Boy and the Little Otter



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Every Saturday morning, the boy pulled on his bright yellow rain boots and packed his red backpack. He loved visiting the river reserve more than anywhere else in the world. Today he carried a notebook and a sharp pencil too. He wanted to study the little otters that lived beside the water. "Ready for another otter day?" his mum asked with a soft smile, and he nodded so fast his short curly dark-brown hair bounced.



At the reserve gate stood the river ranger in his khaki shirt and green cap with a leaf badge. He waved them along the path with a wide, friendly smile. "The otters are out near the old willow today," he said. The boy's large round hazel eyes grew even rounder. He wrote in his notebook with his pencil: Otter Day, sunny. Then he tiptoed toward the riverbank, quiet as a mouse.



On a smooth flat stone sat the little otter, about as long as the boy's arm. Its glossy brown fur shone in the sunlight, and its cream belly looked soft as a bunny. It nibbled a fish with tiny paws and twitched its short whiskers. The boy sat very still and watched, his freckled nose almost touching his notebook. "You are the best thing I have ever seen," he whispered.



Then the boy noticed something floating past the willow tree. A crinkled cup bobbed on the water, and a plastic bag drifted like a sad gray jellyfish. A bottle rolled in the gentle current near the otter's stone. The boy's gap-toothed smile faded away. "Oh no," he said softly. "That trash is in the otter's home." He wrote quickly in his notebook: River not clean. Help needed.



The little otter sniffed the floating cup and sneezed a tiny sneeze. The boy felt a warm, worried feeling in his chest. "Mum," he said, "the water should be clean for the otters." His mum knelt beside him in her olive-green jacket. She looked at the drifting litter and nodded slowly. "You are right, my kind boy," she said. "So what shall we do about it?"



The boy opened his notebook and tapped his pencil on the page. "I could plan a cleanup," he said, and his round hazel eyes lit up like little lamps. "We could pick up the trash along the riverbank." His mum smiled her soft smile and pointed at the ranger's hut. "That sounds like a very good idea. But we must ask the ranger first, because rivers can be tricky places."



The river ranger listened carefully, his bright dark eyes crinkling at the corners. "A riverside cleanup? What a wonderful plan!" he said. "I will guide everyone along the safe paths, and no one goes near the deep water." He gave a little toot on his whistle. "Bring grown-up helpers, strong gloves, and lots of bags. Let us make this river sparkle again!"



That afternoon the boy stood at the reserve gate with his mum and a big hand-drawn sign. The ranger had called his helpers, and soon families arrived with buckets and cheerful faces. The boy handed out bags while his mum gave out gardening gloves from her canvas tote. "Thank you for coming," he said to everyone. "The otters need our help today." His red backpack sat on the bench, safe and sound.



The helpers spread out along the riverbank like a careful line of ants. The ranger led the way with his long litter-picker tool, snip-snap, picking up cups and wrappers. The boy's yellow rain boots squelched in the soft mud as he gathered bottles into his bag. "I found another one!" he called. His mum stayed close, keeping everyone away from the slippery edge.



A little girl found a tangled fishing line and held it up high. "Careful, that can be sharp," said the ranger gently, and he snipped it safely into a bag. The boy filled bag after bag, and his arms grew tired but his heart felt light. "We are making a big difference," said his mum, tying up a full sack. The pile of collected trash grew smaller and smaller as the bags grew fat.



By late afternoon, the riverbank looked fresh and green again. No cups bobbed on the water. No plastic drifted past the willow. The boy looked at the sparkling river and gave a happy sigh. "It looks like a whole new river," he said. The ranger tooted his whistle twice. "Well done, team! The reserve thanks you, and so do the otters!" Everyone clapped and cheered.



Then, with a splash and a wriggle, the little otter popped out of the water. Its glossy brown fur dripped and gleamed, and its long tapering tail flicked happily behind it. Splash! Another otter dived and rolled in the clear, clean water. The boy laughed his gap-toothed laugh. "Look how happy they are!" he said. "Clean rivers help wildlife stay healthy," said the ranger. "That is our lesson for today."



The boy opened his notebook one last time and wrote with his pencil: River clean. Otters happy. He drew a small picture of the little otter with its cream belly and whiskers. His mum put her arm around him. "You saw a problem and you found a kind way to fix it," she said. "I am very proud of you, my organized boy." The sun hat on her head dipped low as she hugged him tight.



On the walk home, the boy's yellow rain boots were muddy and his red backpack was empty of snacks. But his heart was full. "Mum," he said, "can we come back next Saturday?" His mum laughed her soft laugh. "Of course we can," she said. "And maybe we can bring a few friends to help keep it clean." The boy smiled all the way home, thinking of splashing tails and sparkling water.



Back at the river reserve, the little otter played in the cool, clear water. It rolled and dived and chased its own long tail around the willow stone. The boy watched from the bank with his notebook in his hand. He knew that clean rivers help wildlife stay healthy and happy, and that even a small boy with a big idea can make a real difference.



The river ranger put a shiny sticker on the boy's notebook: Junior River Helper. "Come back any time," he said with his friendly wide smile. The boy promised he would. As the sun dipped low, the little otter lifted its whiskery face and seemed to wave goodbye. The boy waved back. He had come to study otters, and he had learned how to care for them too.