



The Boy and the Barn Swallows

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Daniel lived on a farm with a red barn and a wide green field. He was eight years old, small and wiry, with tousled sandy-brown hair that always stuck up in one stubborn cowlick. Every morning after breakfast, he pulled on his faded blue overalls over his red-and-white striped shirt, jammed his frayed straw hat onto his head, and ran outside to see what was new.



That spring, something wonderful happened. A pair of barn swallows came swooping over the field with long forked tails and glossy steel-blue backs. Their rusty-orange throats glowed in the sun. They landed under the barn eaves and began patting little balls of mud into a cup-shaped nest. Daniel watched from below, freckles crinkling as he grinned.



Day after day, Daniel visited the barn to watch the swallows. He was patient and quiet, so the birds soon trusted him. They darted past his straw hat to gather grass and feathers for their nest. 'You picked a good spot,' Daniel whispered. The mom swallow chirped as if she agreed, and Daniel's hazel-green eyes went wide with delight.



One evening at supper, Dad set down his fork and said, 'The barn needs fixing. The roof leaks, and some boards are loose.' He wiped his strong hands on his plaid flannel shirt. Daniel's stomach flipped. The repairs were right where the swallows were nesting. 'But the nests are up there!' Daniel said. 'What will happen to the baby birds?'



The next morning, Daniel showed Mom the nests. She wore her green work apron and listened carefully. 'Four nests,' she said, counting. 'And look, there are eggs in this one.' Daniel's gap-toothed grin faded. 'If we bang on the roof, will the birds leave?' he asked. Mom squeezed his shoulder gently with her leather work glove.



Daniel had an idea. He found a pencil and drew the barn on a piece of paper. 'If we start on the far side,' he said, 'the birds won't be scared.' He marked the nests with little circles. Mom leaned over his shoulder, her curly bun slipping sideways. 'That's smart thinking,' she said. 'Let's show your father.'



Dad studied the drawing and nodded slowly. 'All right,' he said. 'We'll fix the far side first and save this eave for last. And we'll work quietly near the nests.' Daniel felt proud and a little nervous. He put on his scuffed work boots and his straw hat. 'I'll be the bird watcher,' he said, 'and tell you if they get upset.'



All week, the family worked together. Dad hammered and measured with his tool belt jingling. Mom carried boards up the ladder. Daniel sat on a hay bale and called out, 'The swallows are calm! Keep going!' The birds flew in and out of the barn, feeding their tiny chicks. The chicks' little voices peeped from the mud cup nests.



One afternoon, Dad wiped his forehead. 'Why do these birds come back every year?' he asked. Daniel didn't know, so they asked Mom. She said, 'Barn swallows migrate. They fly thousands of miles to warmer places in winter, then travel all the way back here in spring.' Daniel's eyes grew round. 'Thousands of miles?' he whispered.



Daniel learned more at the library. The barn swallows flew across oceans and mountains, following the sun and rivers. 'They fly farther than any car could drive,' he told his family at supper. 'And they come back to this very barn.' Dad set down his hammer and listened. 'Then this old barn must feel like home to them,' he said softly.



At last, the repairs reached the last eave. Daniel stood below and held his breath. The mom swallow sat on her nest, watching. 'Please don't bang,' Daniel whispered. Dad set the hammer down and used quiet screws instead. Mom held the ladder steady. The swallows stayed perfectly still. And the chicks kept sleeping safely in their warm, muddy nest.



When Dad climbed down, he put a hand on Daniel's shoulder. 'You protected them,' he said. 'Your careful thinking saved those little birds.' The mom swallow swooped over their heads and chirped. Daniel tipped his frayed straw hat. His gap-toothed grin stretched wide across his freckled face, and his heart felt light as a feather.



Summer turned golden, and the chicks grew strong. Then one morning, the swallows lined up on the wire fence. 'They're leaving for migration,' Daniel said. 'Fly safe,' he called, waving his hat. The forked tails and blue backs rose into the sky. Daniel watched until the tiny birds were gone, feeling both proud and a little lonely.



All winter, Daniel thought about the swallows. He drew pictures of them and told his friends about the little birds that flew thousands of miles. Sometimes, on windy days, he stood by the barn and looked up. 'Come back,' he whispered. 'Your nests are still here, waiting for you.' And he kept his straw hat pulled low against the cold.



Then one warm spring morning, Daniel heard a cheerful chirp. He ran outside in his overalls and striped shirt. There they were, three barn swallows swooping over the green field, their rusty-orange throats bright. They landed under the barn eaves and hopped into their old nests. 'You came back!' Daniel shouted, jumping so high his hat nearly flew off.



Mom and Dad came outside to see. The swallows swooped low and chirped, and Mom laughed, her silver earring shining. 'They remember the way home,' she said. Dad nodded. 'And we remember how to share it.' Daniel grinned. The farm was big enough for people and birds, and his family proved it, spring after spring. The end.