The Boy and the Water Vole
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Sam pulled on his bright yellow rain boots and grabbed his canvas satchel. Today he was going to study the riverbank with his mum. He loved the squishy mud, the tall reeds, and the sparkling water. 'Ready for an adventure?' Mum asked, lifting her camera. Sam nodded, his gap-toothed smile wide. 'I want to find something new,' he said.

Down by the river, Mum pointed to a quiet stretch of bank. 'Look closely,' she whispered. 'Every creature here needs clean water and native plants.' Sam knelt down, his dark brown eyes scanning the green stems. He saw tiny footprints in the mud. 'Who made these?' he wondered aloud. Mum smiled. 'Let's find out together.'

Sam parted the tall reeds and gasped. A plump little animal was nibbling a stem. It had glossy chestnut-brown fur, round ears, and a blunt nose. 'A water vole!' Mum whispered. 'That's Pip,' she said softly. 'Water voles are shy, but they love this riverbank.' Sam watched quietly, not wanting to scare the little creature.

Pip scurried along a narrow path and disappeared into a hole in the bank. 'That's a burrow,' Mum explained. 'Water voles dig tunnels to hide and rest.' Sam sketched the burrow in his notebook. He drew the round entrance and the muddy path leading to the water. 'So they need safe places to hide,' he said. Mum nodded. 'And they need the right plants to eat.'

Sam looked around. 'What do water voles eat?' he asked. Mum pointed to the reeds and grasses. 'Native plants like these,' she said. 'They nibble stems and roots. But some plants don't belong here.' She showed him a patch of thick, foreign weeds. 'These crowd out the good plants,' she said. 'Then the voles have less food.'

Sam frowned. 'That's not fair,' he said. 'Pip needs food!' He looked at the river. 'Is the water clean?' Mum dipped her hand in. 'It looks clear here,' she said. 'But litter and dirty water can hurt the voles. They need clean water to drink and to keep their fur healthy.' Sam picked up a stray plastic bottle and put it in his satchel.

Mum took photos of the burrow and the native plants. 'We can help,' she said. 'We can plant more native shrubs along the bank.' Sam's eyes lit up. 'Like a garden for Pip!' he said. They walked to the garden center and chose small green plants. Sam carried them carefully. 'These will give the voles food and cover,' Mum said.

Back at the riverbank, Sam dug small holes with his trowel. He planted the native shrubs one by one. 'Grow big and strong,' he whispered to each plant. Mum watered them gently. 'Native plants belong here,' she said. 'They give water voles food and safe places to hide.' Sam smiled. 'And clean water helps them too,' he added.

Days passed. Sam visited the riverbank every afternoon. He checked the new plants and picked up any litter. 'The shrubs are growing!' he told Mum. 'Look at the new leaves.' Mum smiled. 'You're a good riverbank helper,' she said. Sam felt proud. He kept his notebook full of drawings and notes about Pip and the other creatures.

One sunny morning, Sam heard a rustle in the reeds. Pip popped out! The water vole nibbled a leaf from one of the new shrubs. 'Mum, look!' Sam whispered. 'Pip likes the plants we grew!' Pip's round ears twitched. Then another vole appeared. 'You've made a home for them,' Mum said. Sam's heart felt warm and happy.

Sam noticed more burrows along the bank. 'There are more voles now!' he said. Mum took a photo. 'Healthy waterways protect wildlife,' she said. 'When we plant native plants and keep water clean, voles can thrive.' Sam nodded. 'So every little bit helps,' he said. He picked up another piece of litter and put it in his satchel.

Sam decided to tell his friends at school. He drew a big poster with a picture of Pip. 'Water voles need native plants and clean water,' he wrote. His teacher hung it in the classroom. Sam's friends wanted to help too. They planned a riverbank clean-up day. 'We can all make a difference,' Sam said with a gap-toothed grin.

On clean-up day, Sam's friends came with gloves and bags. They picked up litter and planted more shrubs. Mum brought her camera and took photos. 'This is teamwork,' she said. Sam felt happy. 'Pip will have lots of food and safe places to hide,' he said. The riverbank looked greener and cleaner than before.

That evening, Sam sat by the river with Mum. They watched the water flow gently past. 'You studied the riverbank and made it better,' Mum said. 'You helped the water voles.' Sam smiled. 'I learned that clean water and native plants are important for everyone,' he said. A small brown head popped out of a burrow and nibbled a leaf.

Sam kept visiting the riverbank. He saw Pip often, nibbling stems and swimming in the clear water. 'Hello, Pip,' Sam whispered. The water vole's round ears twitched. Sam drew a picture of Pip for his notebook. 'Wildlife needs healthy waterways,' he wrote. 'And we can help by planting native plants and keeping water clean.'

Sam's gap-toothed smile grew wide. He knew that even a small boy could make a big difference. The riverbank was full of life, with water voles playing among the native plants. 'Healthy waterways protect wildlife,' he said. Mum nodded. 'And you helped make it happen.' Sam felt proud and happy, ready for more riverbank adventures.