

The Girl and the Water Vole



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Maya loved the riverbank more than any place in the world. Every day after school, she pulled on her yellow rain boots and ran down the path. She carried her green satchel with her nature notebook inside. The river bubbled and sparkled in the afternoon sun. Maya sat very still on a flat stone and watched the water slide by.



Maya had a secret friend. A small water vole lived in a burrow near the water's edge. She named him Pip. Pip had soft chestnut-brown fur and tiny black bead eyes. His blunt snout twitched as he nibbled grass. Maya wrote in her notebook: Pip eats grass. Pip swims fast. Pip hides when he hears a loud noise. She drew a careful picture of his whiskers.



One morning, Pip did not come out of his burrow. Maya waited and waited. She saw only muddy water and a few wilted plants. The river looked grey and tired. Maya frowned and hugged her notebook. "Where did you go, Pip?" she whispered. She decided to find out what water voles need to be happy.



Maya marched to the little wooden hut where Bernard the river warden worked. Bernard was tall and stooped, with a grey moustache and kind blue eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. He wore a flat cap and an olive-green cardigan. "Bernard," Maya said, "Pip the water vole has disappeared. What does he need?" Bernard smiled and put down his teacup.



"Water voles need two important things," Bernard said, pointing at the river. "They need native plants to eat and hide in. And they need clean water to swim in." He showed Maya a patch of bare mud where plants used to grow. "When the plants disappear, the voles have no food and no safe place to live. Then they move away." Maya wrote everything down.



Maya looked at the riverbank with new eyes. She saw bare spots where grass should be. She saw litter tangled in the reeds. She saw muddy water that should be clear. "I want to help," she said. "I want to bring Pip back." Bernard nodded. "That is a wonderful idea. But it will take patience and hard work. Are you ready?" Maya nodded firmly.



The next day, Maya started her project. Bernard lent her a small spade and a bag of native seeds. He showed her which grasses and flowers water voles love best. Maya planted tufts of sedge and marsh marigold. She patted the soil down gently. Her yellow rain boots got muddy and her green satchel held her notebook. She wrote: Day one. Planted sedge. No Pip yet.



Maya did not work alone. She told her neighbours about the water voles. "They need native plants and clean water," she explained. Her friend Sam helped pick up litter. Mrs. Patel brought trays of seedlings. Even little children came to drop seeds into small holes. Bernard watched from his hut and smiled. "One caring girl can start something big," he said.



Every day after school, Maya visited the riverbank. She watered the new plants. She pulled out weeds that did not belong. She checked the water for rubbish. Her green satchel was full of notebooks and seed packets. Sometimes she felt tired, but she kept going. "Pip is waiting," she told herself. "I have to be patient."



Weeks passed. Tiny green shoots pushed through the mud. The sedge grew tall and wavy. The marsh marigold opened bright yellow flowers. Maya saw dragonflies and butterflies return. The water looked clearer and cleaner. But there was still no sign of Pip. Maya tried not to feel sad. "Maybe he will come back soon," she whispered.



One sunny morning, Maya heard a soft splash. She froze and held her breath. A small brown shape darted through the water. It had rounded ears and a blunt snout. It was Pip! He climbed onto the bank and nibbled a fresh blade of sedge. Maya saw a tiny silver ring on his ear. Her heart jumped. "Pip! You came back!" she breathed.



Pip was not alone. Another water vole popped out of the burrow. Then another. They nibbled the native grasses and splashed in the clean water. Bernard came over with his mud-caked wellington boots. "You did it, Maya," he said. "Healthy waterways support wildlife. You made this happen." Maya smiled so wide her gap-toothed grin showed. She felt proud and happy.



Maya wrote in her notebook: Pip is back. Water voles need native plants and clean water. Then she drew a picture of three voles playing by the river. She showed it to Bernard. He nodded and said, "Your project has made a real difference. The riverbank is green and busy again. The water voles have a safe home." Maya hugged her notebook.



Soon the whole neighbourhood came to see. Children pointed at the water voles. Mrs. Patel brought lemonade. Sam helped Bernard put up a little wooden sign that said: Please keep our river clean for wildlife. Maya stood on her flat stone and watched Pip swim. His whiskers twitched. He looked very happy. The river sparkled in the sun.



Maya learned that even small hands can do big things. She kept visiting the riverbank every day. She kept pulling out litter and watering the plants. Pip became her cheerful sign that the river was healthy again. Bernard called her his little river warden. Maya's yellow rain boots were always muddy, and she liked it that way.



One evening, Maya sat by the river with her green satchel on her lap. The sun set behind the trees. Pip swam past and gave a little splash. Maya smiled and whispered, "Thank you, Pip." She knew that clean water and native plants gave the water voles a safe home. And she knew that one caring girl could make a real difference for nature.