

The Girl and the Turtle Pond



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Maya loved the pond behind her school. Every morning, she walked past it on her way to class. The water was green and quiet, and lily pads floated like little plates. Best of all, turtles lived there. Maya had named her favorite one Olive, because of its olive-green shell with yellow markings. Olive always swam close when Maya waved from the shore.



Maya had warm brown skin, black hair in two short puffy buns, and a bright gap-toothed smile. She wore her favorite yellow t-shirt with a small green turtle print. She knew every turtle spot by heart: the flat rock for sunning, the shady corner for napping, and the shallow edge where tiny fish darted. The pond made her feel calm and happy.



One morning, Maya saw a plastic cup bobbing near the reeds. Beside it floated a crumpled wrapper and a juice box. Her big brown eyes grew wide, and her smile disappeared. 'Oh no,' she whispered. 'This is not good.' The turtles swam slower, as if the water felt heavy and sad. Maya's heart felt heavy too.



At school, Maya told her classmate Leo what she had seen. Leo had light tan skin, wavy chestnut hair, and freckles across his nose. He was cheerful and always ready to help. 'Litter can float into the pond from the path,' he said. 'We could clean it up!' They hurried to Ms. Rivera, their teacher, with the idea.



Ms. Rivera listened with a calm, warm smile. She wore glasses and her black curly hair in a low ponytail. 'That is a wonderful idea, Maya,' she said. 'Healthy habitats help wildlife. The turtles need clean water to swim in and safe places to rest in the sun.' She added their plan to her small clipboard. 'Let's do it tomorrow.'



The next morning, everyone met at the pond. Ms. Rivera handed out gloves and bags. Maya pulled on one blue garden glove and felt ready. Leo tied a litter bag to his belt and put on his own blue glove. 'Team turtle!' he cheered. The class spread out along the bank, looking carefully at the water and the grass.



Maya waded near the shallow edge and scooped up the plastic cup. Leo reached for the floating wrapper with a long stick. 'Got it!' he called. Other classmates picked up cans, paper, and bits of plastic from the bank. Ms. Rivera pointed out lids hidden in the reeds. Slowly, the bags filled up, and the water began to look clearer.



Leo paused and asked Ms. Rivera a question. 'Why do turtles need clean water so much?' She smiled and explained. 'Turtles breathe and swim in this water. Litter can make them sick and traps them.' She showed a flat rock at the pond's edge. 'They also need sunny rocks like this to warm up. If it is covered, they cannot rest.'



Maya looked at the flat rock. A plastic bottle lay across it, blocking the sunshine. 'We have to clear this too,' she said. She and Leo lifted the bottle away and smoothed the rock. 'There,' Maya said. 'Now a turtle can sit here and soak up the sun.' She imagined Olive resting there, warm and happy.



The class worked all morning. They pulled out soggy paper and foil and an old shoe. Maya's blue glove grew muddy, and Leo's litter bag grew heavy. But nobody wanted to stop. 'Just a little more,' Maya said, determined. 'We are almost done.' The pile of bags grew bigger and bigger by the path.



At last, Ms. Rivera clapped her hands. 'Look at our pond now!' The water sparkled in the sunlight. The flat rock stood clean and bare. The reeds swayed gently, free of trash. Maya pulled off her glove and looked at the clear water. Her round cheeks glowed. 'It looks like a whole new pond,' she said softly.



Then, near the shore, a little olive-green shell rose to the surface. Olive the turtle paddled forward, its round dark eyes blinking. It swam in a slow, happy circle. Maya gasped. 'Look! Olive is swimming again!' Behind Olive, two more turtles climbed onto the flat rock and stretched their small legs in the sun.



Leo laughed his wide, friendly laugh. 'They look so happy,' he said. Ms. Rivera nodded. 'Clean water and sunny rocks make a healthy habitat,' she said. 'That is what every turtle needs.' Maya watched Olive glide through the clear water. She felt proud of her class and proud of the pond. Her gap-toothed smile came back brighter than ever.



That afternoon, Ms. Rivera gathered the class together. 'You learned something important today,' she said. 'Healthy habitats support wildlife. Small hands can make a big difference.' The children nodded. Leo raised his hand. 'Can we keep checking the pond?' he asked. Ms. Rivera smiled. 'Yes, we can. We can visit every week and keep it tidy.'



Maya asked if they could make a sign. Ms. Rivera found a wooden board, and the class painted it together. 'Please keep our turtle pond clean,' it said in bright letters. Maya drew a small green turtle at the corner. They planted the sign by the path, where everyone could see it. 'Now people will know,' Maya said, standing tall.



Before going home, Maya knelt beside the water. Olive rested on the flat rock, warm and calm. 'I promise to keep the pond clean,' Maya whispered. 'So you always have a healthy home.' She pulled off her muddy blue glove and waved goodbye. The turtles swam and basked in the golden afternoon light. Maya smiled all the way back to school.