The Boy and the Miniature Horse
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Leo lived at the edge of a green valley, where sunflowers nodded over a wooden fence. He had light brown skin, curly dark hair, and a gap-toothed grin. His red shirt and blue overalls were always dusty from play. One bright morning, a trailer rumbled up the lane, and Leo ran to see what was inside.

A tiny horse stepped out, no taller than Leo's shoulder. Pepper had a creamy palomino coat, a white blaze down his face, and four neat white socks. His thick flaxen mane flopped over gentle dark eyes. Leo gasped. "A horse my size!" he whispered. Pepper snorted softly and nudged Leo's pocket.

Leo thought, "A horse this small needs almost nothing." He imagined Pepper sleeping in a little box and eating crumbs from his hand. "I'll keep him in the garden," Leo declared. His mother smiled. "Pepper is a miniature horse, Leo. He may be small, but he still has big needs." Leo just laughed and skipped away to play.

Pepper wore a small blue halter with a shiny brass buckle. Leo grabbed the short lead rope and tried to lead him around the yard. Pepper planted his little hooves and wouldn't budge. "Come on, Pepper!" Leo tugged. But Pepper only flicked his flaxen tail and stared at the far meadow. Leo frowned. "Why won't he walk?"

Leo's neighbor, Mrs. Green, leaned over the fence. "Miniature horses need exercise, just like big ones," she said. "Pepper needs to trot and stretch his legs every day." Leo looked at the tiny horse. "But he's so small!" he said. "Small legs still need to move," Mrs. Green replied with a wink. "Take him for a walk."

Leo led Pepper to the meadow path. At first Pepper walked slowly, his little hooves clip-clopping on the stones. Then Leo began to jog, and Pepper trotted beside him, ears perked and tail high. A happy whinny burst from Pepper's velvety muzzle. Leo laughed. "You like this!" he cried. They trotted until both were warm and cheerful.

Back home, Leo put Pepper in a small pen alone. Pepper paced back and forth, whinnying loudly. He nudged the gate with his nose. "What's wrong?" Leo asked. Mrs. Green came by again. "Miniature horses need company," she said. "They feel lonely by themselves. Pepper wants to be near you and other animals." Leo nodded slowly.

So Leo brought Pepper to the big field where the goats lived. Pepper trotted right up to them and touched noses. The goats bleated, and Pepper whinnied back. Leo sat on the fence and watched. "You have friends now," he said. Pepper looked at Leo with his big dark eyes and blinked happily. Leo felt warm inside.

The next morning, Leo noticed Pepper's coat was dusty and his mane was tangled. "I should brush you," Leo said. He found a soft brush and began to stroke Pepper's creamy back. Pepper leaned into the brush with a happy sigh. "You like that, don't you?" Leo murmured. He brushed until Pepper's coat shone like sunshine.

Then Leo filled a bucket with fresh water and set it down. Pepper drank and drank, then looked up with a wet muzzle. "Thirsty boy!" Leo laughed. He gave Pepper a handful of hay and watched him munch. "You need food and water every day," Leo said. "I didn't know that before." Pepper crunched happily, and Leo felt proud.

That afternoon, Leo sat on the grass and thought. "I thought a tiny horse needed almost nothing," he said to Pepper. "But you need exercise and friends and brushing and food and water." Pepper nudged Leo's shoulder gently. Leo smiled. "Don't worry, Pepper. I'll take care of you every single day." Pepper whinnied as if he understood.

Leo made a chart with pictures: a brush, a bucket, a hay bundle, and a smiling horse. Each day, he ticked off every job. He walked Pepper, brushed his coat, and brought him to the goats. Even on rainy days, Leo put on his yellow rubber boots and took Pepper for a splashy walk. Pepper never seemed lonely again.

One morning, Pepper didn't trot to the gate. Leo found him lying down, looking tired. "Mrs. Green!" Leo called. She came quickly and checked Pepper's hooves. "He needs more exercise, Leo. His little legs get stiff." Leo nodded. "I'll walk him twice a day," he promised. Pepper blinked and slowly stood up.

Leo kept his promise. Every morning and every afternoon, he led Pepper along the meadow path. They trotted past sunflowers and splashed through puddles. Pepper's steps grew springy again, and his whinny was loud and bright. "You're healthy now!" Leo cheered. Pepper tossed his flaxen mane and pranced beside his friend.

By summer's end, Leo knew every one of Pepper's needs. The miniature horse needed exercise to stay strong, company to feel happy, and daily care to stay healthy. Leo brushed, fed, and watered Pepper each day. He also gave him plenty of love and attention. Pepper followed Leo everywhere, a small horse with a big, happy heart.

Leo learned that small animals still have substantial needs. "You may be little, Pepper," Leo said, patting the soft muzzle, "but you need a lot of love and care." Pepper nuzzled Leo's cheek. They stood together by the fence, watching the sun set over the valley. Leo smiled his gap-toothed smile. He would always take good care of his tiny friend.