The Girl and the Little Duck

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On a bright Saturday morning, Maya pulled on her red rain boots and buttoned her mustard-yellow overalls. She grabbed her green canvas satchel with the duck patch and ran to the door. Today was special: she was visiting the duck sanctuary with her friend Rosie. Maya's curly black hair bounced in two puffs tied with yellow bands as she hurried down the path, her big dark brown eyes shining with excitement.

The sanctuary was a wide green park with a sparkling pond and tall reeds. Mr. Harris, the keeper, met them at the gate. He wore a green apron and a gentle smile, and his wire-rimmed glasses twinkled in the sun. "Welcome, helpers!" he said. "The ducks are eager to meet you." Maya and Rosie followed him down a soft dirt path, listening to the happy quacks all around.

Near the pond, a tiny duckling waddled up to Maya. It was fluffy and pale yellow, with a bright orange beak and webbed feet. A soft blue ribbon tag hung around its neck. "This is Pip," said Mr. Harris. "Pip is very young and needs extra care." Maya knelt down, and Pip peeked at her with round black eyes. A tiny tuft of feathers stuck up on its head like a little crown.

Rosie raised her small camera and snapped a picture of Pip. "Pip is so cute!" she squealed. Maya opened her satchel and pulled out a bag of bread crumbs. "I brought food for the ducks," she said proudly. She scattered a few crumbs on the ground. Pip waddled over and pecked at them hungrily, but Mr. Harris gently shook his head. "Hold on, Maya," he said. "Bread is not good for ducks."

Maya's round cheeks turned pink. "But ducks eat bread in stories," she said. Mr. Harris knelt beside her and opened his small notebook. "Bread fills their tummies but doesn't give them the right vitamins," he explained. "It can make them sick. Ducks need special food that helps them grow strong." Maya looked at Pip, who was tilting its head. She wanted to help, but she needed to learn how.

Mr. Harris led Maya and Rosie to a small shed. Inside were sacks of duck food and a big water barrel. "Ducks need clean water to drink and to swim in," he said. "And they need the right food every day." Maya listened carefully, her dark brown eyes wide. She reached into her satchel and pulled out a little notebook of her own. "Can I write this down?" she asked. Mr. Harris smiled and nodded.

Maya wrote: Ducks need duck food, not bread. Clean water for drinking. Clean water for swimming. She drew a little picture of Pip beside the words. Rosie leaned over and said, "I didn't know that either." Mr. Harris gave them each a small bucket of duck food. "You can feed Pip and the others," he said. "But first, let's check the water."

They walked to the pond. The water looked a little cloudy, and some old leaves floated on top. "The ducks can't swim in dirty water," said Mr. Harris. "It can make them ill." Maya felt worried. She wanted Pip to be happy and healthy. "What can we do?" she asked. Mr. Harris pointed to a hose and a net. "We can clean it together," he said. "Many hands make light work."

Maya and Rosie grabbed the net and scooped out the leaves. Mr. Harris showed them how to add fresh water from the hose. The pond began to sparkle in the sunshine. Pip paddled over and splashed happily. "Look! Pip likes it!" Rosie laughed. Maya smiled, but she knew they still had to feed the ducks the right food. She picked up her bucket and headed back to the shed.

Back at the shed, Mr. Harris showed them the proper duck food. It looked like little brown pellets. "This has all the vitamins ducks need," he said. Maya scooped some into a bowl. She carried it carefully to Pip. Pip gobbled up the pellets, wiggling its tail. "Pip loves it!" Maya said. She felt proud. She had learned something important, and now she could really help.

Rosie took another photo of Pip eating. "I'm going to tell everyone at school about this," she said. Maya nodded. "Me too," she said. "I didn't know bread was bad for ducks. Now I can teach others." Mr. Harris beamed. "That's the spirit," he said. "Kindness works best when we also learn what animals need." Maya wrote that down in her notebook, too, and drew a little heart next to it.

The sun was warm, and the pond sparkled. Pip swam in circles, dipping its orange beak into the clean water. Maya watched with a happy smile. She felt good inside. She had helped Pip by giving the right food and clean water. And she had learned that caring for animals takes more than just love. It takes knowledge, too.

Mr. Harris gave Maya a small badge with a duck on it. "For your hard work," he said. Maya pinned it to her overalls. "Thank you," she said. "I'll come back and help again." Rosie nodded. "Me too!" she said. Pip quacked loudly, as if to say thank you. Maya giggled. She knew Pip was happy and healthy now, and that made her heart feel full.

On the way home, Maya thought about everything she had learned. She had come to the sanctuary wanting to help, but she didn't know how. Now she knew: ducks need the right food and clean water. She opened her satchel and looked at her notebook. The little drawing of Pip made her smile. She couldn't wait to tell her family all about it.

At dinner, Maya told her parents about Pip and the sanctuary. "Did you know bread is bad for ducks?" she asked. Her parents shook their heads. "Well, it is," Maya said. "They need special food and clean water. That's how we keep them healthy." Her mother smiled. "You learned something important today," she said. Maya nodded. She felt proud of herself and happy for Pip.

That night, Maya drew a picture of Pip swimming in the sparkling pond. She wrote at the bottom: Kindness works best when we learn what animals need. She taped it to her wall. As she climbed into bed, she thought about Pip's little blue ribbon tag and its happy quack. She knew she would visit again soon. And she would always remember: caring for animals means learning how to care for them properly.