



It's a small world after all!

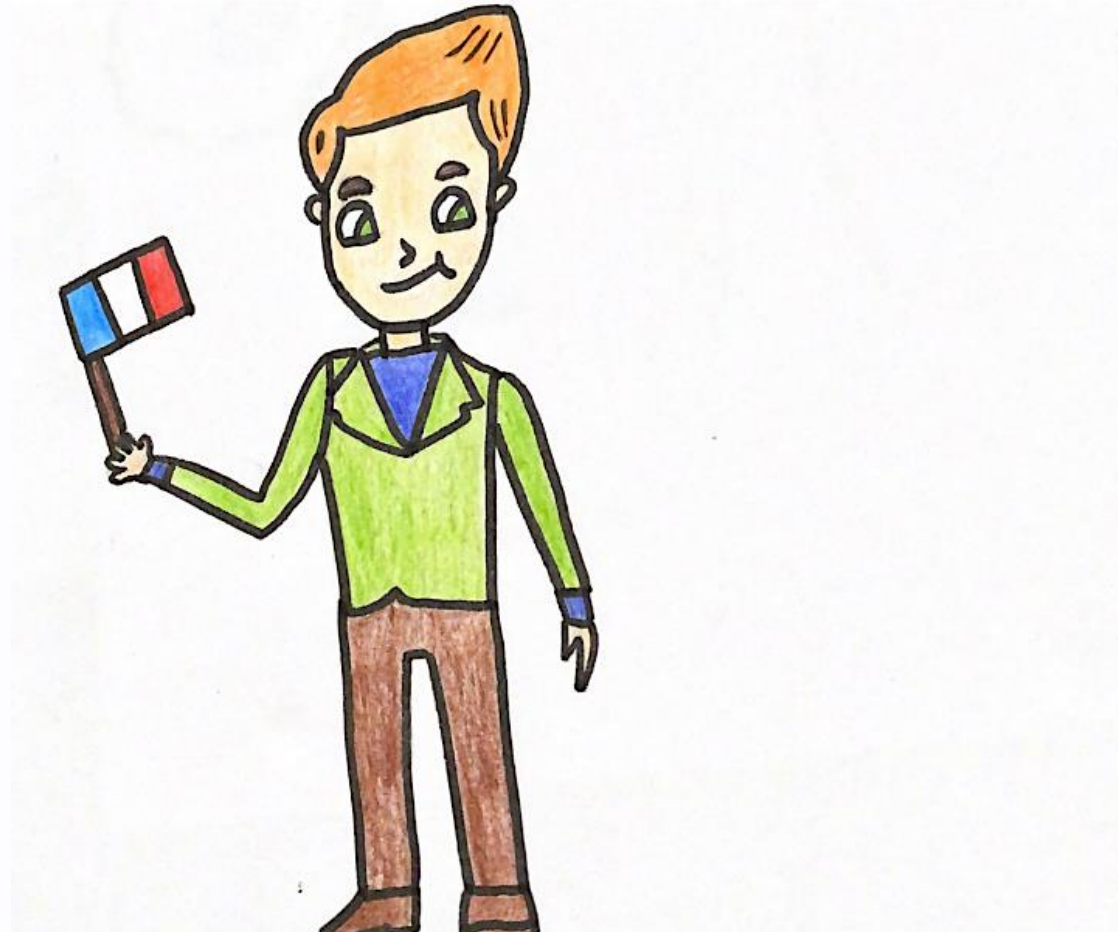
Written and illustrated by Reina Homsí

It's a Saturday morning in July, but you wouldn't think so. High clouds scudding in from the west and plenty of sunshine. The last shreds of summer and never mind the falling leaves. This amazing weather calls for a Road trip to the mountains house to celebrate Samir's birthday on Sunday and this is exactly what Samir and his parents decided to do which turned out to be a unique yet magical experience.

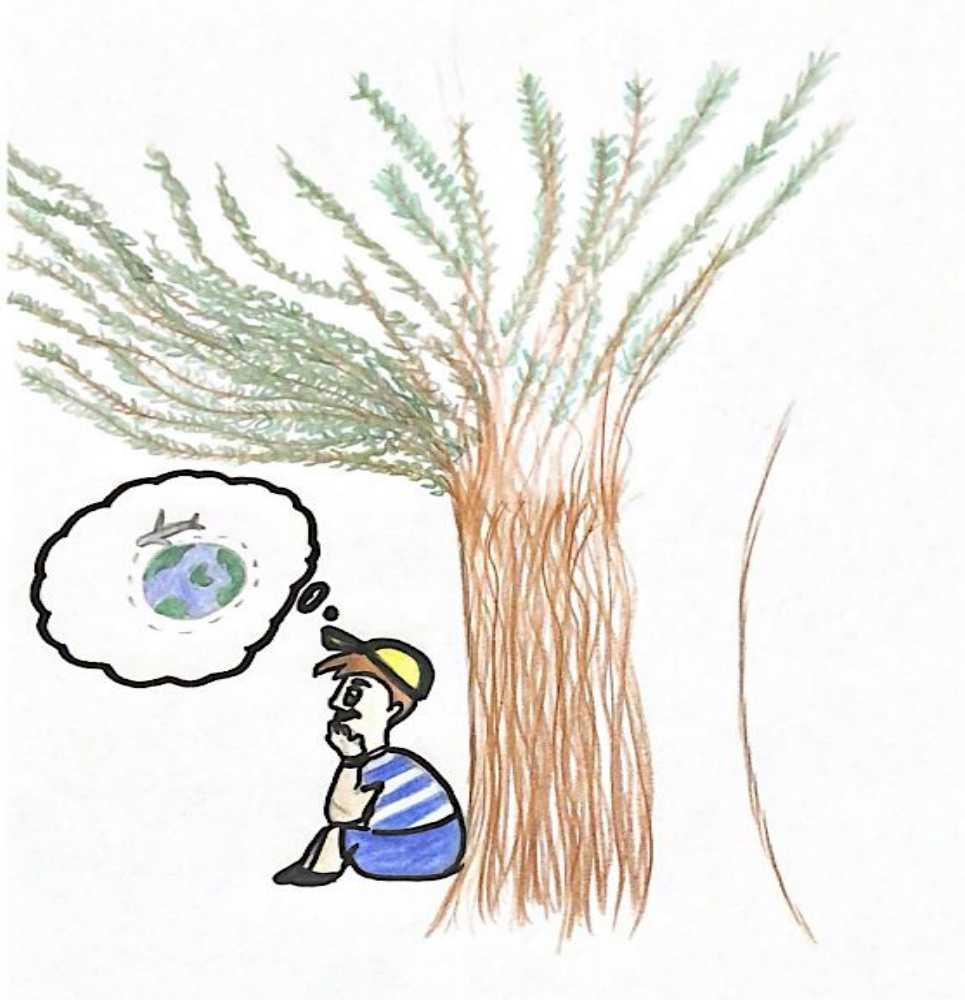
On this clear and sunny morning, a six-year-old boy named Samir, known by everyone for being an adventurous yet very cultural kid, stood in the sunshine on the terrace while cuddling his favorite teddy bear Mr. Cuddles, enjoying the beauty of his hometown: Mount Sanine.



Taking a stroll with his parents, along the way, Samir eavesdropped on his parents' conversation which revolved around one of his cousins Zein; A guy in his early 20s who decided to leave Lebanon for a better life due to the difficult circumstances that this country is going through and hence, he moved to France where he is living his life to the fullest by traveling all around Europe.

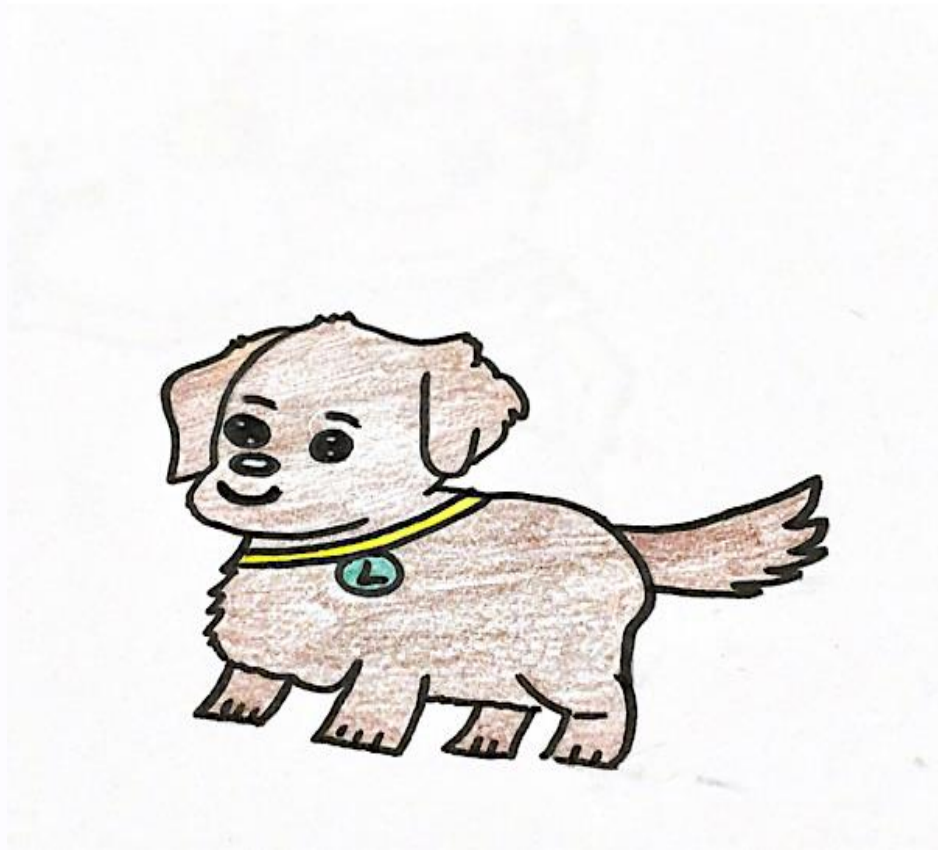


However, because of Samir's curiosity and love for discovering new towns and cultures, he started wondering what it is like to travel, keeping in mind that he has never been on a plane. Since he was born, the whole of his world is the circle of his parents' arms. But, as Samir grows, the world grows too. It expands outward from his family to his friends, to the city, and as it expands, so does Samir's wonder in the underlying countries and various cultures. Hence, Samir got very sad about not having a chance to broaden his horizons, after eavesdropping on his parents' conversation, which has led to a gloomy feeling during the weekend, even with this cloudless weather.



Because of his anger, Samir decided to continue the promenade all alone. Suddenly, a cute little puppy walked by him, and he could not resist but follow him. Little did we know; the puppy was leading Samir to a magical place that will transform his dream to a reality.

Leo, named by Samir, was a chocolate lab puppy. Lab is short for Labrador retriever, which is a kind of dog breed. Being a chocolate lab means that he was a beautiful brown color, kind of like a bar of chocolate! Leo was a really happy dog and loved going for walks, runs and playing fetch with Samir. However, Samir started questioning where they were going while wondering if it was the right choice to follow Leo.



After endless walking, Samir found himself in front of a cave. As an adventurous kid, he could not resist but enter this mysterious place. As soon as he entered, it was dark. He did not stop but instead kept on following Leo that led him to a special room inside the cave where he found a shining key that lit the whole room.

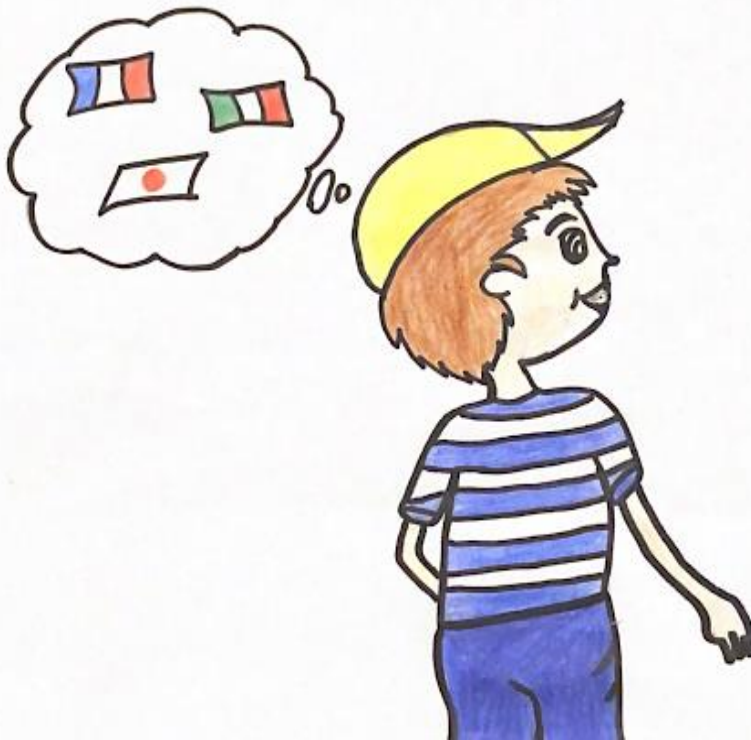


Samir instantly realized that this was no ordinary key because of the way it is placed. It was a unique, never seen before key with random symbols carved on it. Samir was curious to know the reason why this key exists. But as Leo was standing right behind Samir, he suddenly disappeared. His fellow looked for him everywhere, but Leo was nowhere to be found. As if Leo's mission was to change the soon to be birthday boy's mood, by leading him to this magical place where he finds the greatest gift ever: A magical key that will transform his deepest wishes to a reality.

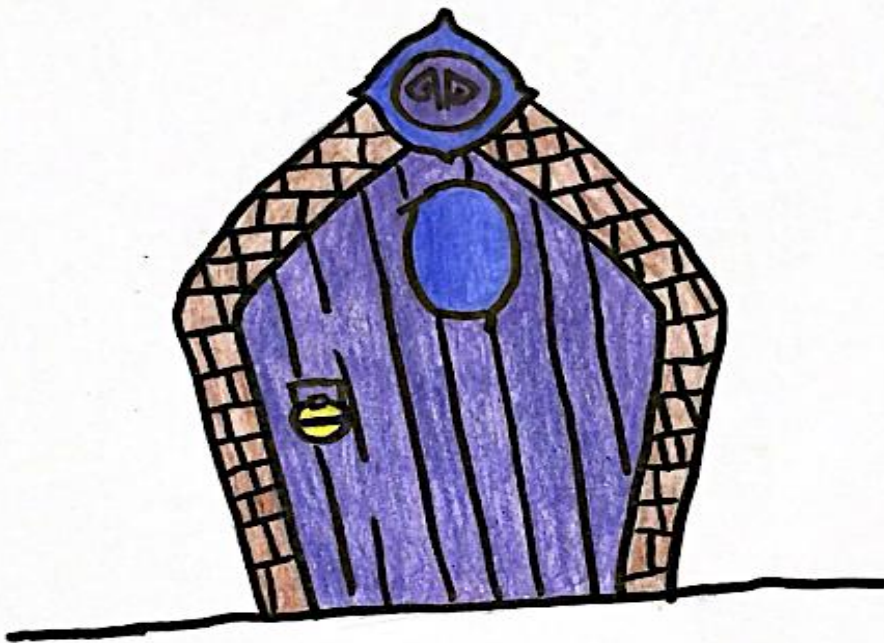
This little boy's attention focused only on the mysterious key. He could not wait to get home, he was excited to show this mysterious key to his truest best friend Mr. Cuddles, who Samir spends every night talking to before going to bed.



As he arrived home, he went immediately to his room and brought Mr. Cuddles with him to examine this mysterious object, however after hours of examination, it was already 10 pm and Samir started giving up, thinking that it was an ordinary key with zero significance. Suddenly, for the first time, Mr. Cuddles replied with a sudden and powerful voice filling the room: “Samir! You found the key to the magical portal. Now it is time to believe so that the portal shows up”. Samir replied shockingly: “You can speak?! What portal?” and Mr. Cuddles answered: “The portal that will help you achieve your dreams, my dear friend.” Excited about what he just heard, Samir started imagining all the places and cultures that he will get the chance to learn about if this portal succeeds in showing up.



And because of his belief, with his eyes closed trying to imagine this beautiful adventure, he opens his eyes to find himself in front of a portal. A shaky and a slow smile was built as the surprise sinks in. Samir could not believe what was happening, his eyes started shining while looking at the portal.





He asked Mr. Cuddles with his shaky, soft -voice, whilst still being in denial:” And now what? Should I enter? What do I do? I do not understand! Can you explain to me what is happening please? Am I losing my mind?” Mr. Cuddles decided to interrupt Samir and he answered:”

Samir, you need to relax. You are not losing your mind! Come on my dear friend, I know you are excited about this magical adventure. But you should know that you only have access to 3 different countries in 3 days and we must take a picture in front of a famous site for the portal to appear. Choose wisely, do not stop believing and let the adventure begin!”.

Samir, more excited than ever, held Mr. Cuddles and decided to enter this phenomenal portal. His hand slowly reached towards the shimmering, silver handle, his heart thumping in his chest. Samir grasped the silver handle and pulled and suddenly the world went black. He opened the magical door and saw the reflection of himself: standing, searching, staring, questioning how this was possible. However, he was a strong little boy who overcame his fear and went on with this adventure. Samir squeezed his eyes shut during the whole trip, and when the light appeared, slowly opened them. What he saw shook him to the very core.

Our little boy found himself in France, known as the country of love. He was super excited, happy, and enthusiastic about discovering France’s gems. He held Mr. Cuddles close and told him:” Look we made it to Paris! I cannot believe it; I have always dreamed of visiting Disneyland!” On this fun and friendly tour, everybody says “Bonjour!” Whether at a soccer stadium, a crêpe stand, or strolling the Champs d’ Elysee, Samir and Mr. Cuddles are welcomed everywhere with the signature French greeting. They see its famous buildings,

gardens, the museums, the sidewalk cafes, and the people who live there - artists, the concierges, the flower girls, and even thousands of cats.

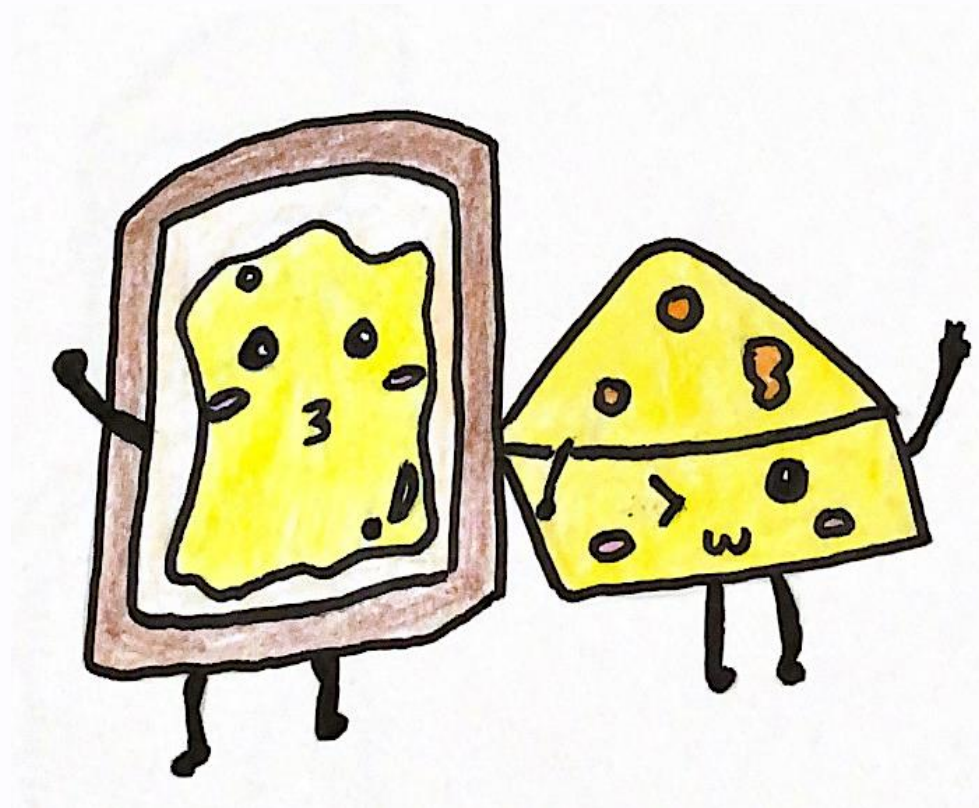
It is ultra easy to get to Disneyland Paris from central Paris. Samir decided to get on a train that runs straight to the park. On their way, the little guy befriended a young French boy named Michel who was also going to Disneyland with his cute little teddy bear called Fuzzy, and who happened to speak in English, thanks to his mother who was born in USA. And they briefly discussed about the magical places in Disneyland. Arriving to Disneyland, Samir spent much of his time with Michel in Fantasyland and let us not forget Mr. Cuddles and Fuzzy.



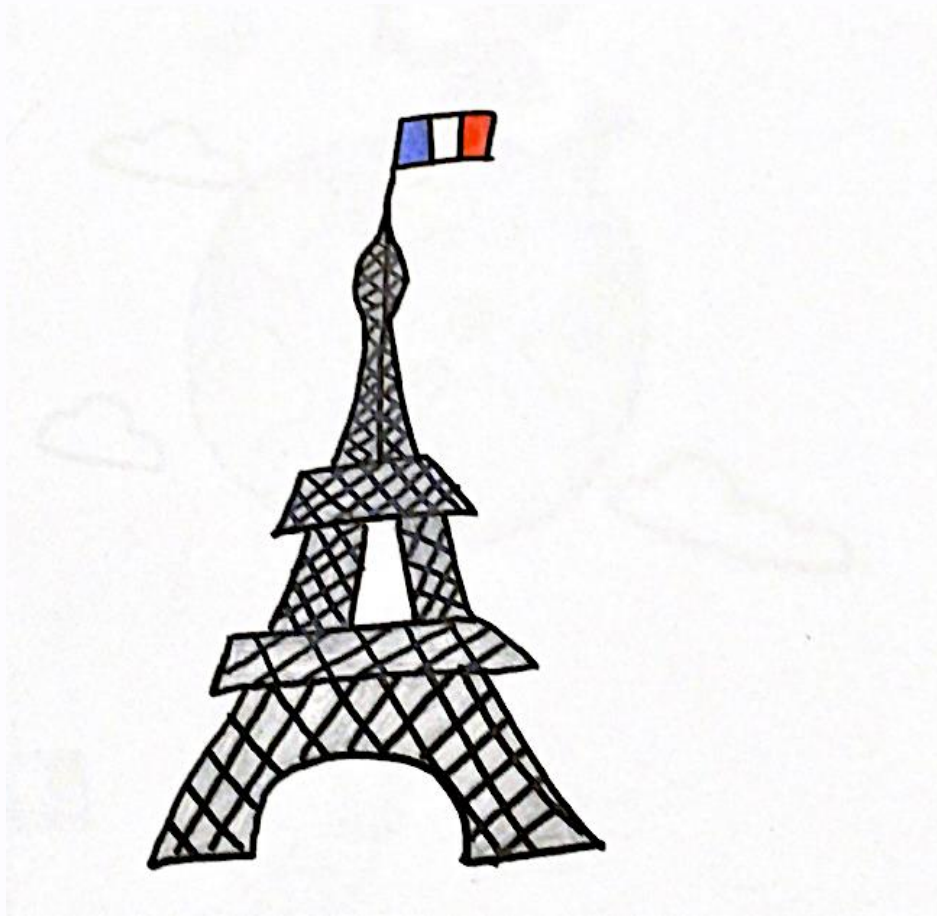
They visited Sleeping Beauty’s castle, went on Snow White’s adventure, saw Pinocchio’s story come to life, went on teacups and a carousel. They also made it to the haunted mansion and one of their favourite rides, the Buzz Lightyear Laser Blast, Samir said:” the latter was so much fun although I became quite competitive trying to shoot as many things as possible!”. After a long day in Disneyland, while walking in the streets of Paris, Samir said:” French cuisine is always a highlight to visitors, and I can’t wait to taste it!” and Michel replied:” I will take you to my parent’s bakery, you should taste our cheese bread!”.



One of the most enduring activities that Samir wanted to try is lining up in a good artisan bakery early in the morning with the locals and participate in the daily life of the biggest city. He experienced the smell of fresh cooked bread, the sound of the crust cracking softly as the baguettes cool down, the pride of an artisan baker as he stacks the bread high and watches the customers' eyes light up. Samir looks at all the available and yummy options and decided to try some cheese bread and after finishing his food, he grabbed Mr. Cuddles and he said:” I am living the dream, I fell in love with this experience! The taste for sure but it is more than that, the charming bakeries, baguettes, baskets, packaging, they are all part of the social fabric of France.” It was sunset and the day was about to be over. Samir said goodbye to Michel and decided to continue his adventure with Mr. Cuddles.



The Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, Arc de Triomphe and the Palace of Versailles are just a few of the main attractions where Samir can truly see the French art, décor and culture. So, he could not leave France without visiting Tour Eiffel. He could not believe his eyes. There were people from all around the world, from different nationalities, gift shops, cafes, restaurants, singers, and musicians. One of the most magical ways to experience the Eiffel Tower doesn't require a ticket; Samir simply watched the nightly illuminations , when the landmark sparkles for five minutes every hour, on the hour. It was truly a magical yet unforgettable night.





He stopped for a second and asked a random photographer to take a picture of him and Mr. Cuddles to keep it as a memory. Suddenly, the portal appears and Samir's adventure in France was finished. Back in his room, while his parents are still asleep, he said: "I cannot wait for our second adventure" and for the first time, Samir was excited to go to sleep.

It is a Sunday morning however, not an ordinary morning. It was Samir's 7th birthday! He woke up on the smell of his favorite breakfast: waffles with a candle on top and his room was filled with dozens of colorful balloons, and his parents were waiting for him downstairs.

At the kitchen table, the family decided to have a breakfast together and suddenly Wafaa, Samir's mother, asked: "Did you sleep well yesterday birthday boy? Were you tired? Because your room was so quiet yesterday as if you were not even there!". Samir was shocked. You probably know the feeling: You're in a tense situation and you suddenly feel an insanely powerful urge to laugh. And this is exactly what happened with Samir. He tried to control his laugh by looking at Mr. Cuddles who secretly winked at him. The little guy replied: "I had a weird dream! A crazy, exciting, and an amazing dream. It was a visit to France, and it was so vivid that I did not want to wake up." His parents looked at each other and smiled.

Samir, back in his room, was only thinking about tonight's trip, to a point where he did not even realize the mysterious wrapped gift that was placed on the floor outside his bedroom. According to him, nothing can beat the key; it was the greatest gift.

During the whole day, Samir was impatient. His heart was throbbing with excitement. After finishing his HomeWorks, taking several naps and playing PS4, the moon finally shows up. 14



already 10 pm. The parents are asleep. He looked at Mr. Cuddles and said:” I cannot wait anymore! I have always wanted to visit a European capital city for my birthday, and when it comes to deciding where to go, I knew instantly it has to be Rome” and the teddy bear answered:” Your wish is my command”.

Samir closed his eyes and started imagining getting lost in the beauty of Italy. He opened his eyes, the portal showed up and without any hesitation, he entered.

Known as the Eternal City, Samir, and Mr. Cuddles found themselves in the winding streets of Rome, known as Italy's capital city which is a wonderful place to learn about the Romans and ancient history. They were astonished by the beauty of the city, captivated by numerous historical monuments, beautiful squares, and hidden alleyways. The weather for licking sweet melting scoops of gelato from morning till night has come! There is one big reason why many people visit Rome. It’s not the history, the art or the architecture but it’s the food. Aside from the mouth-watering pasta and the incredible pizza, gelato takes centre stage as one of the essential Rome taste sensations. When in Rome, people spoil themselves in delicious gelato whenever they like. Gelato for breakfast? Go ahead! Gelato for lunch? Why not?! and so, Samir could not miss the opportunity to taste some ice cream. He decided to stop at a gelato shop. An elegant and carefully-designed interior was the perfect surrounding for this unique gelato experience. The ice cream is always fresh, the wafer handmade and the chocolate drizzled on top makes for a delicious decoration. Hardly a day goes by without long queues of tourists and locals alike Samir waiting for their sweets.

But eating a gelato in Rome can be an overwhelming experience at first– he said:” there are so many flavours to choose from and all of them look just as tempting.” In the end, he chose strawberry, peach and fig which turned out to be the most famous flavors.





Samir almost couldn't believe he was there. He got a glimpse of the Colosseum, it felt almost too good to be true. Being an incredibly old city, it felt like everywhere he turned he'd find something even older to look at. Walking the same streets that once upon a time slaves, emperors and armies once walked was almost too much to believe. But as he was about to ask for a random person to take a picture of him with Mr. Cuddles next to the Colosseum, he noticed that something is missing. What could it be? Samir looks around and realized that Mr. Cuddles is nowhere to be found! He cannot go back home without his best friend.

Samir started shouting in the middle of the street:” Mr. Cuddles where are you?”” Did anyone see a teddy bear?” “Can you hear me?”. He tried to speak but Samir was choked with tears. He felt helpless, disappointed, and devastated because he lost something that brought him comfort. However, he did not give up and he decided to revisit every place he went to, hoping that he will find his best friend. Luckily for him, the gelato shop was near the Colosseum. Once he arrived, he asked the owner with a shaking voice:” Hello sir, did you see a teddy bear?” and, thankfully the two best friends reunited together. But how? The owner realized the presence of a missing teddy bear after Samir left and decided to keep it, until a child returns to ask about it. It usually happens a lot. It was not the first time. We might assume that people forget their stuffs in the shop due to how much they were amazed by the gelato flavors. It really makes you lose your mind! Walking back to Colosseum, the sun was about to set. It was time to go back home. Samir held Mr. Cuddles and hugged him very tightly, as an apology for leaving him in the shop and



finally got to take a picture near this famous historical place. The portal showed up, Samir arrived at his room safely and of course, let us not forget Mr. Cuddles (again).

Sleeping peacefully in his bed, Samir was cradling a pillow to his chest. The sun was beaming through him . Usually, waking up was a simple task for Samir; he was a morning person after all. However, it was the 3rd and last day of this magical adventure. His access to the portal was about to end. He groaned when the first beam of sunlight hit his face. Samir did not want to get out of bed because of his wave of sadness.

But is feeling sad necessary? Samir will not ruin his day; he is forever grateful for this experience, and he could not wait to visit the last country! Hmmm, but where could it be?

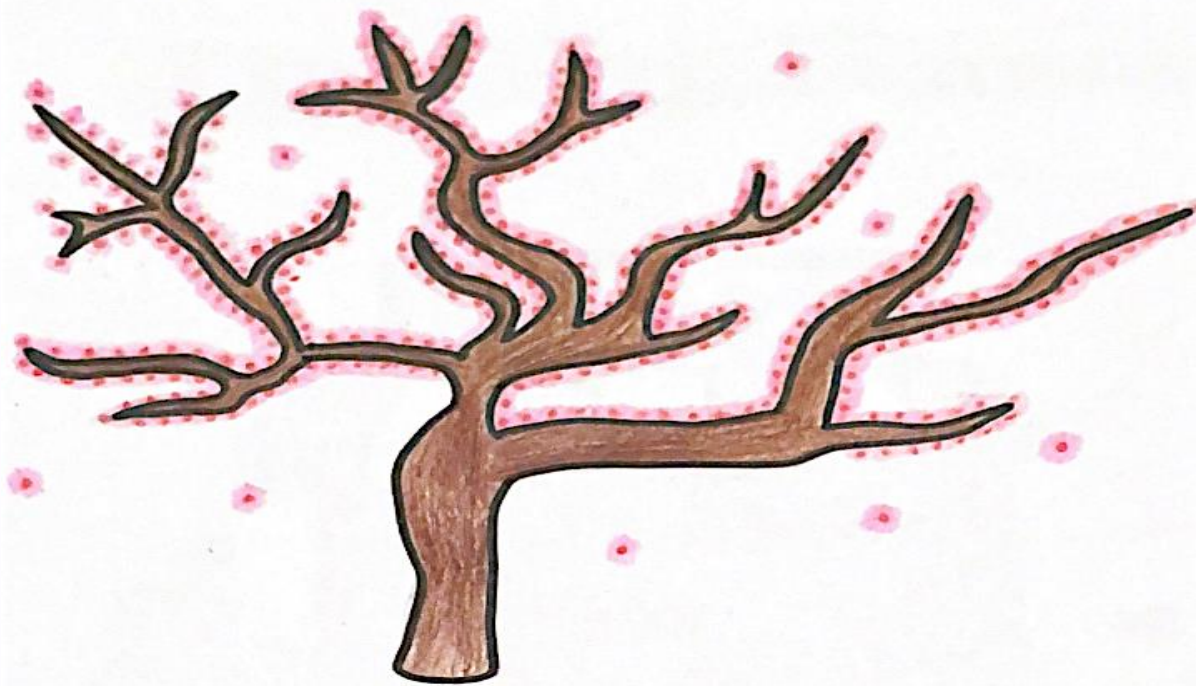
We cannot know where Samir could go next, but we do know that it will be an unforgettable experience.

These two last days were far away from the people he loves. So, Samir decided to spend his day with his parents. It was relaxing yet cozy. He helped his mother with the cooking, they played some board games. And finally, it was time to sit in front of the television and embrace their inner couch potato, and they came across the main Olympics channels. The Olympics took place in Tokyo, and it was one of Samir's favorite countries. It was already 10:30 pm. His parents decided to call it a night. He rushed back to his room and grabbed Mr. Cuddles and said:" Ughh, I wish we can go tonight to Tokyo! I was watching the Olympics with dad, and I could not believe my eyes." And the teddy bear replied:" Because it is your last adventure, we will go to

Tokyo. Now, you should close your eyes and believe that it will come true. Hurry up Samir, I am more excited than ever!”.

The portal was there, in front of Samir’s eyes. He strode through the shadow world with Mr. Cuddles to find themselves in Tokyo, known as the capital of Japan. A vibrant city where the past meets present in a mix of traditional history and modern trends. Moreover, it is known for its sightseeing spots, delicious gourmet food, and a lot of interesting experiences from the olden to the modern!

With so many things to do and so little time, Samir was super excited to discover the beauty of Tokyo. While walking in the streets of Tokyo Samir, and Mr. Cuddles were admiring the beautifully landscaped gardens, the streets lined with cherry blossoms, buddhist shrines and people dressing in the traditional kimono. The Japanese people represents sincerity in showing hospitality to visitors. They were polite, kind, clean, and respectful.



According to Samir, travel is always incomplete without food. And what is the most famous Japanese dish? Of course, it is Sushi! There are a lot of local sushi restaurants throughout the streets and Samir was thrilled about eating his favorite dish in his favorite country. He discovered a small hidden gem at the end of the street. It was a small sushi bar. The friendly staff knew that Samir was a foreigner and hence explained each item served while trying their best in English. They were always smiling. Samir decided to order a 10-piece sushi and from his facial expressions, there is no doubt he was the happiest person. He said:” That was really a food experience: every piece was unique and with an incredible taste. Definitely the best sushi I have ever had in my life!”



Samir did not want this day to end. He was happy while taking a stroll in the famous streets of Tokyo. But unfortunately, everything must come to an end. The sun already disappeared and so, a little time is left until the portal shows up. But Samir did not know any famous places in Tokyo, and hence he could not go back home without a picture. As he turns around to ask for help, he noticed a red temple.

On another note, it wouldn't be a trip to Tokyo without visiting Senso-ji, one of the city's most significant and famous temples. During the day, Senso-ji Temple is buzzing with activity and energy where locals go about their daily rituals while at night the mood is far more relaxed, with illuminated buildings shining warm light over the quiet grounds. Moreover, Samir watched coverage of the Tokyo Summer Olympics during the day with his father and noticed shots featuring an eye-catching red temple, now he knows that it was certainly Sensoji temple.





He said:” I cannot believe my eyes! I saw this temple on TV and started wondering when I will get the chance to visit it. And today here I am! Dreams do come true, Mr. Cuddles.” He held Mr. Cuddles and took their ritual selfie next to a famous site and he said while his eyes are tearing up:” Here it is, our last picture. But I am happy that I got the chance to travel with my best friend.” And Mr. Cuddles answered:” Don’t be sad Samir! It is surely not our last adventure. Life is full of surprises, my friend.”

They hugged each other tightly and our famous portal appeared for the last time. Samir looked back at the streets of Tokyo and smiled while walking away. He arrived at his room and watched the portal close. He knew at this moment that this magical experience has come to an end. But our little guy will always be grateful for this experience with Mr. Cuddles and was happy about going back to his normal life and spending the nights with his parents.

He looked at the 3 pictures before going to sleep with a big smile and said:” Next time, it will be us Mr. Cuddles but also let us not forget my parents.” And he went to sleep while hugging his truest best friend and adventure buddy.



The End

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