**What If… Chapter 21- New Beginnings**

**(An Extra Chapter from Norton Juster’s *The Phantom Tollbooth*)**

Milo grabbed his brown fluffy teddy bear with one hand and his circular alarm clock with the other. Then, he took a piece of twine hidden inside a drawer of his bedside table and carefully tied the clock onto the abdomen of the bear.

“I suppose you are no Tock… but you will do for now. I shall name you Bing.”

Milo felt somewhat better. Even with his soft fur, Bing did not have the comfort that Tock did, but at least he could fit underneath his arm.

“Bing! Do you know where colors come from? They are made in the most magnificent way! I must show you!” he exclaimed as he ran through his bedroom door, down the hall, through the living area, and out the front door. Milo held Bing out to the world like a newborn baby.

“Look Bing! Isn’t it just wonderful?”

Bing’s black button eyes peered out into the world.

“My friend…his name is Chroma the Great, he is the one who is in charge of all of the beautiful colors. I tried to...” but Milo was cut off.

Seemingly out of the air, someone huffed, “Stupid.”

Milo jumped back in shock, almost dropping Bing. Behind him stood a little girl about his age, but most definitely younger. Her hair framed her face, dull and brown. It wasn’t a pretty frame - though not ugly, just unbecoming.

She looked as if Chroma had conducted the colors away from her, and she was looking for a fight.

“Excuse me?” said Milo.

“I said “stupid.” Colors are stupid. Everything is stupid,” she said while crossing both arms across her chest.

Milo understood what she was feeling. Somehow, without asking or without asking, or even without even saying, he understood how she felt. Before the Tollbooth, he too believed everything to have no importance also.

“What’s your name?” Milo asked the little girl. “The name is Sammy.”

“I used to think everything was stupid too Sammy. Then, I went on a trip and met some friends.” He sat down and crossed his legs. He placed Bing in his lap. He looked at the ground next to him and back at Sammy, an invitation to sit. Sammy rolled a rock around with the bottom of her sandaled foot with her arms still crossed, looking down.

“I guess I have nothing else better to do” she huffed as she dragged her feet to stand in front of Milo. She flopped down as if her body weighed 400 pounds. Milo knew he had some work to do. He had a project! Milo knew he could not recreate the Tollbooth, and he could not read the signature on the card identifying who sent him the Tollbooth, so he could not ask to borrow it.

“This is Bing,” said Milo, handing the bushy brown bear to Sammy.

“Why does your dirty stuffed animal have a clock tied around his waist?” Sammy asked, holding Bing by his left toe, upside down, with her arm extended out in front of her as if Bing was infected with a contagious deadly disease.

“He reminds me of my friend,” said Milo, placing Bing upright and into both of Sammy’s hands.

“Your friend had a clock around their waist?” questioned Sammy. “A clock was around my friend’s waist” laughed Milo.

“His name was Tock. He made sure not to waste any time. He was part dog part clock,” he said

“You’re lying. Dogs cannot talk, or tell time, or have a clock as a part of themself. Anyways,” scuffed Sammy, “I don’t even like dogs. Dogs stink. Stuffed animals stink. So are you going to tell me a real story?”

Milo rolled his eyes. He knew Sammy would be a challenge, but he was beginning to realize just how tough changing Sammy’s perception of life was going to be. It was easy to dig deep into his memories of himself before the Tollbooth. Thinking of us previous seff, he asked himself, “What would have had to happen to make me, in my old self, believe?”

“I know!” he said, as a smile quickly spread across his face like a glass of orange juice spilled on a kitchen counter. He ran to the garage, grabbed the biggest, squarest box he could find, and tottered back to where Sammy was still sitting.

“This is a Tollbooth,” he said.

“That’s a box” replied Sammy, a little more annoyed than before.

Milo took out a Plum Purple marker from his back pocket and wrote the words “SAMMY’S TOLLBOOTH” in large uppercase letters.

“There! Now it’s not a plain ole’ Tollbooth, but it’s your Tollbooth,” said Milo proudly.

“I still see a box. It’s just a box with my name on it now,” said Sammy.

“No, no, no Sammy. It is only a box because you want it to be a box. It is just a box until you make it something else!” Milo exclaimed.

“Okay… I think I understand.” Sammy was slowly intrigued. Milo could see her face changing, curious.

“What does the Tollbooth do?” she asked.

“Where do you want to go? It can go anywhere you want. Whether you know the place or not, whether it is real or it isn’t.” said Milo. “Just think, imagine, dream,” Milo encouraged her. He leaned in, encouraging her to dream big!

Sammy’s eyes were wide now. Her arms were no longer crossed, and she was now hunched over inspecting the box around all sides.

“How can I go somewhere that isn’t real Milo?” said Sammy. She was becoming skeptical.

“Just like the box, you make it real. You decide what is real and what is not. If you want to go somewhere, then think really hard and go! Plus, how do you know what isn’t real if you don’t know everything that is real” Milo smiled. He thought of his odd floating friend Alec who had taught him to float as well and the cities of Illusions and Reality.

“I did not know letters could be so tasty, or telescopes could see the real you, or numbers could make you hungry, or time could fly, or sounds could be stolen.” Milo giggled to himself.

“But they do! It’s all true!” he said, now just four inches from Sammy’s face.

“Well… I’ve always wanted to go to the moon. Nobody believes me that it’s made out of Manchego cheese. I wanna take a big ole bite out of it.” Sammy said.

She poked the box and flew back like it was going to bite her.

“The moon it is!” Milo said. He rushed back inside his house and into his bedroom where he grabbed three crisp white sheets of paper. He hopped into his car, and sped outside with a screeching halt where the passenger door was placed perfectly in front of Sammy who was now clutching Bing. Milo leaped out of the car.

“First, we need signs,” Milo said. Sammy grabbed the Petunia Pink marker from

Milo.

“How do you spell ‘entering’?” Sammy asked almost shyly.

Milo channelled his inner Spelling Bee from Dictionopolis. He closed his eyes. “E-N-T-E-R-I-N-G, entering!” Milo replied.

Sammy carefully, clumsily wrote the phrase “ENTERING TOLLBOOTH.” Milo smiled and wrote “PREPARE FOR MANCHEGO” on one sheet of paper and “CAUTION, FUN AHEAD” on another. He sat back and smiled at his work.

They broke off three limbs of the tree in Milo’s front yard that were all different sizes, but they decided they would do fine. They taped the signs to the top of the tree limbs and pushed them into the ground just enough to where they would stand up. Milo climbed into the driver's seat of the car, and Sammy joined him on the passenger's side.

Just as Milo was about to turn the key to start the engine, he was interrupted. “Miloooooo! Time for dinner!” yelled Milo’s mom from the front porch.

Sammy looked to Milo with sad, questioning eyes that would put Tock’s sad eyes to shame.

“How about this?” Milo started.

“Tomorrow after school, meet me here, and I promise we can go on our trip!” said Milo, doing anything to make Sammy stop looking at him like he had just torched her favorite stuffed animal.

“Promise?” Sammy said, cracking a smile for the first time.

“Pinky promise” said Milo as he wrapped his pinky around her smaller, softer

one.

The two jumped out of the car, and started walking back to their houses. Milo could smell the scent of the meatloaf floating out of the front door. It was his favorite meal, and he could taste the deliciousness.

Sammy began walking home, kicking the same rock that she had been rolling with the bottom of her shoe earlier. She felt sick. No. What was that she was feeling? Anxious? No, no, it wasn’t that. She searched her mind for the word she needed.

She turned back one last time to see Milo about to close the big wooden door, just in time for him to peak his head out, grin, and sneak a quick wave.

Sammy felt a smile emerge - a big smile. It was her first smile in as long as she could remember. She quickly threw her arm up to wave back which was accompanied by her feet lifting off the ground, resulting into a little hop.

As she turned back around she paused for a moment. She then realized she was not sick or anxious. She remembered the word she was looking for, excited. She was excited!

She was excited for the first time about what the next day would bring with her first friend.