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AIDEN TYLER, QUARANTEEN

BY REX OGLE

A Weekly Web “Serial”
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A brand new story about surviving the Coronavirus quarantine when you're trapped at home with your family... a hilarious ongoing middle grade story, filled with laughs, facts, farts, & hearts.

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“Time to wake up,” Mom called.
Aiden pulled the blanket over his head. “Nooooo, it’s the weekend.”
“No, it’s Thursday,” Mom said.
“But we don’t even have school!” Sophia moaned from under her blanket on the other side of the room. “Hey! Give my blanket back, it’s cold!!”
Mom had pulled the blanket and top sheets away from Sophia. Then she did the same to Aiden.
“Yikes! It’s freezing! When did it get so cold in Los Angeles?!?” Aiden whined.
“Global warming,” Mom said. “Now, please, get up. We have a family meeting at the kitchen table in ten minutes.” Mom rolled the sheets and blankets up into a big ball and took it with her as she left.
“Yeah! Ten minutes!” Jackson squealed. He pressed a button on his fire truck toy, and it started flashing red lights and screaming WOO-WOO-WOO-WOO as he ran up and down the hallway.
Sophia blinked at Aiden sleepily from across their room. “Is Mom for real? School is canceled. Just let us sleep in.”
“I’m with you,” Aiden said.
Jackson ran past their open bedroom door again. WOO-WOO-WOO-WOO. Then again. WOO-WOO-WOO-WOO.
Aiden and Sophia both put their heads under their pillows. Mom re-appeared, took the pillows, and said, “Now the meeting starts in five minutes. GET. UP.”
Sophia hit and kicked her mattress—half-playfully, half-angrily. When she sat up, her hair looked like a wild bird’s nest.
Aiden sat up too. He shivered. It really was cold. And it was raining outside. It never rained in LA. Maybe it really was global warming. He put on some gym shorts and grabbed a hoodie from his closet and put it on, then dragged himself to the table.

“Morning, champ,” Mike said. “How’d you sleep?”

“Not enough,” Aiden said with a yawn.

“Only nine hours of sleep? Your life is sooo hard,” Mom moaned sarcastically from the kitchen.

Sophia threw herself into her chair, almost knocking it over. “This had better be good.”

“Awww, there’s that sweet, sweet daughter of mine,” Mike said with a chipper smile. He took a sip of his coffee and added, “Like pure sunshine. Only brighter.”

“Cut it out, Dad. I’m not in the mood,” Sophia said, crossing her arms.

“That’s too bad,” Mike said. He pulled a plastic bag from behind his chair. “Cause I thought you might want these.”

“Are those SK’s Donuts?!” Sophia and Aiden shouted at the same time.

“ES-KAYS!!” Jackson squealed.

“Did you get my raspberry filled?” Sophia begged.

“Or my Nutella bomb?” Aiden asked, his mouth watering.

“Glazed donuts!!” Jackson added.

“Yes, I got all the goods,” Mike said, opening the pink box. “You get one now, and one after the family meeting, okay?”

Aiden said, “You’re the boss, Mike!”

“Actually, that’d be me,” Mom noted. She waited until everyone had a donut and was sitting down. Then she stood up straight. “As you know, school is canceled for the next few weeks. Maybe longer. And it’s my job to make sure you don’t slack off. So I did some internet research and found a schedule. I’ve done some tweaking, but this is what your days are going to look like Monday through Friday.”

Mom placed a sheet of paper on the table. It was handwritten in different color markers. The first line was green, the second was blue, then yellow, orange, red, and purple.

Aiden read aloud:

• 7:00 am: Wake up, make bed, get dressed.
• **8:00 am**: morning walk around the neighborhood.

• **9:00 am – Noon**: Academic Work. *Aiden can use computer for homework ONLY. NO TV.*

• **12 – 1:00 pm**: Chores and lunch.

• **1:00 – 4:00 pm**: Academic Work. *Sophia can use computer for homework ONLY. NO TV.*

• **4:00 – 5:00 pm**: Afternoon walk around the neighborhood.

• **6:00 pm**: Dinner.

• **7:00 pm**: FREE TIME, TV Allowed.

• **8:00 pm** is bedtime for kids who act up.

• **9:00 pm** is bedtime for kids who behave and follow the rules.

“That is... is...” Sophia started.

“Amazing?” Mike asked. “Brilliant? I certainly think so. Your mom is quite the teacher, isn’t she?”

“No, Dad, that’s not what I was going to say, like, at all,” Sophia answered. “This schedule is totally cringey. It’s cuckoo-bananas.”

“Total bananas,” Aiden agreed. “And bananas are for monkeys.”

“Monkeys!” Jackson squealed.

“Yeah, no. Not gonna happen,” Sophia said. She stood up, and tore the colored schedule in half, and then in half again. She threw the schedule into the air. It fluttered down like confetti. “Good first try, Mom. I’ll get back to you with a new schedule. After I finish going back to bed.” Sophia grabbed the wad of blankets, sheets, and pillow, then stomped to her and Aiden’s room.

“Get back here, young lady!” Mom yelled. “That’s it! You’re going to bed at 8!”

“We’ll see,” Sophia shouted back.

Mom narrowed her eyes at Aiden. “Are you going to complain too?”

Aiden shrugged. “I would, but Sophia did a really good job. Can I have my second donut now?”

Mom sighed.
"I thought that went *better* than expected," Mike said. He got up and kissed Mom. "You did great, honey. I better head to work."

Mom looked at Aiden. "I don't know how teachers deal with you two. My children are monsters."

"You think we’re bad?" Aiden laughed. "You should see the rest of the kids I go to school with. They’re real monsters. Sophia and I are the nice ones."

* * *

Aiden was doing his school reading on the couch. Jackson was under the coffee table playing with his toys—dinosaurs versus Ninja Turtles. Mom sat at the table on her laptop. Next to it was her checkbook and a calculator. She kept sighing. "You okay, Mom?" Aiden asked.

"Of course," she said. But her voice sounded hollow, like she wasn’t really paying attention.

When Sophia finally came out of her room, she plopped down on the other end of the couch. She wrote for a few minutes, then tore the page out of her notebook. She handed the paper to her brother. "Tell me what you think."

Aiden read this schedule out loud:

- *Wake up at 10:00.*
- *Breakfast at 11.*
- *Fun at noon.*
- *School junk from 1:00 to 2:30.*
- *Exercise at 3.*
- *Fun at 4.*
- *Video games at 5.*
- *Dinner at 6.*
- *TV and Free time the rest of the night.*
- *Bedtime, whenever we feel like it.*

Aiden nodded. "That sounds pretty good to me."
Mom shook her head. “Never gonna happen.”

Sophia stood up on the couch and shouted, “We live in America! This is a democracy country! I demand a vote!”

“Sit down before you fall and hurt yourself, Georgia Washington.” Mom’s cell phone rang. “Hello? Sure, hold on one second, Jacob. Aiden, it’s for you.”

“Hey Jacob! How’s your first week of home schooling?”

“Awful. I wish I could get some social distancing from my parents. But hey, I just spoke to Lily and Bella and we’re all going to meet at the neighborhood park at noon. Can you meet us?”

Aiden’s heart raced at the thought of seeing his friends. “Absolutely. See you there!”

* * *

Aiden was almost out the door when Mom shouted, “Take Jackson with you!”

“Mom! No, come on. I’m going to see my friends.”

“So?”

“I need some space, okay? I need fresh air.”

“So does Jackson. Take him, or stay home. Up to you.”

Aiden groaned. “Jackson, get your shoes on. We’re going to the park.”

“Yesss!” Jackson hissed.

Aiden left the apartment complex at a quarter ‘til noon so he’d be on time. The park was only a few blocks away, but it’d take a few extra minutes since Jackson had little legs.

Aiden wasn’t a fan of babysitting his brother, but he was pretty much used to it. He had to do it all the time. Honestly, watching Jackson really wasn’t so bad now that he knew how to use the bathroom on his own. When Aiden thought about the days and nights of changing those dirty diapers...

Aiden shivered. “Gross.”

“Why can’t I swing?” Jackson asked.

“You can,” Aiden said.

“Nuh-uh,” Jackson pointed.
A park official in a green uniform was wrapping black and yellow caution tape around the slides, the swing sets, and the merry-go-round. All of the other playground equipment was wrapped up too. Several signs were posted. Aiden read the closest one: “Due to the current health situation, the playground equipment is closed to the public for the foreseeable future.”

“How can a public park close?” Aiden asked. “It’s for the public.”

The park attendant shrugged. “They say COVID lives on the surface of metal and plastic for long periods of time. And sometimes it takes a few weeks for the symptoms to show up. So if someone came and played on here, they might not know, and accidentally leave germs behind. You don’t want your baby brother to get sick, do you?”

“I’m not a baby!” Jackson growled.

“I thought little kids didn’t get sick from it,” Aiden said, thinking of Mr. Moscowitz’s lesson.

“So far, no,” said the park official, “but better safe than sorry, right?”

“Safe sucks,” Aiden thought. But he did not say that out loud.

Jacob waved from the stone picnic tables. “There you are. This whole park is empty. Nobody is here. It’s so weird, especially with this gray overcast weather. It’s like we live in a scary movie.”

“Right?” Aiden agreed. “Where’s Bella and Lily?”

“There’s Bella,” Jacob pointed. Bella was walking toward them, talking to someone on her phone.

“Here, I’ll let you tell them,” Bella said. She held her phone out so the boys could see Lily on Facetime.

“Sorry, I’m not going to be able to make it,” Lily said through the phone. My parents won’t let me leave the house. They decided everyone should stay home and practice actual social distancing.”

“But we can stand six feet apart!” Jacob said.

“That’s what I told them. But noooo. Sorry guys. I have to go help Mom clean out our attic for lunch, then I have homework. So annoying. I’ll call you later.”

Bella slipped her phone into her pocket. She was about to fist-bump Jacob when he shouted, “Hey! Six feet!”
Bella sighed. “I thought school getting canceled was going to be awesome. Instead it’s just...”

“Super weird?” Aiden said.

“Exactly,” Jacob said. “The whole town is like shut down, except for grocery stores which have crazy long lines around the block, and restaurants, but you can only get take out. Last night, my family ordered a pizza and it took four hours to arrive. I didn’t eat dinner til eleven.”

“At least you got to stay up late,” Bella said. “My dad is being super strict about everything. In fact, I only have ten more minutes before I have to head back and start my afternoon homework. He has my whole day planned out for me, minute by minute. Like, every single second of scheduled—and it’s all work work work. I don’t even have time to text or TikTok or go to the bathroom. It's deranged.”

“I thought you liked school?” Jacob asked.

“I do. But this isn’t school,” Bella said. “I don’t get breaks, I don’t have lunch with my friends, I don’t get to pass notes in class. And the only one to compete with is my dad, and he has a college degree, so it’s no contest. I better go before I get in trouble. Call you later. Bye Jacob. Bye, Aiden. Bye, Jackson.”

“Bye-bye,” Jackson waved.

“Then there were three...” Jacob said ominously. “How you doing, little dude?”

Jackson shrugged. “I like Ninja Turtles.”

“Wow. Bella’s dad is super strict,” Aiden said. “And here, I thought it was rough when Mom tried to give us a schedule. Looking back at it now, it wasn’t that bad. She gave us free time and everything.”

“My mom said I’m not allowed to play video games on weekdays anymore,” Jacob said. “Saturday and Sunday only. I can’t live like this!”

“Hey, did you bring my X-Men comics?” Aiden remembered.

“Oh... uh... ooops?” Jacob said.

Aiden shook his head. “Jacob, seriously? I need those after a long day of too-much-family-time. How about I just walk you home, so I can pick them up?”

Jacob kicked at the grass. “Um... I’m not sure if that’s such a great idea.”

“Why not?”

“My mom said no visitors. She’s uh... kinda sick.”
Aiden took a step back. He pushed Jackson behind him. “Jacob, dude! Why are you out here, meeting with us then?!”

“I’m not sick!” Jacob said. “And I was bored.”

“Does your mom have...?” Aiden couldn't even bring himself to say it.

“No. No!” Jacob cried out.

“How do you know? Has she been tested?”

“No, but Mom still; has her sense of smell and taste.”

“So?”

“So that’s like the first big symptoms,” Jacob said. “Mom says it’s just her usual spring allergies. Or maybe a cold. But it’s not COVID. She’s fine. There’s just a lot of sneezing and hacking up loogies.”

Aiden thought of his comics, all covered with sneeze droplets and snot. “When you get home, please make sure my comics are sealed in the plastic sleeves I gave you.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Jacob said with a salute. He went to fist-bump Aiden.

Aiden left him hanging. “I am not touching you.”

* * *

It started raining as Aiden and Jackson walked home. They ran the last block but were already soaked by the time they got home. “No school, no social life, and now it’s raining?”

Aiden moaned. “We're trapped in our apartment.”

“Shhh,” Mom said. Her and Sophia were sitting on the couch leaning towards the TV, which was playing the news.

“What’s happening?” Jackson asked.

“Nearly every state has declared a state of emergency,” Mom said.

“What does that mean?” Aiden asked.

Mom whispered, “This thing is going to last longer than we thought.”
CHAPTER FIVE, Family Hikes

Aiden made himself a bowl of cereal, then joined Sophia and Jackson on the couch. But they weren’t watching their usual morning cartoons.

“I don’t want to watch the news,” Aiden said. “Put on Dragon Prince. Or Teen Titans Go.”

“Don’t be immature,” Sophia said. “We need to watch the news to know what’s happening out there. Look at this giant boat pulling into New York City. It’s filled with hospital beds.”

“It reminds me of all those people who were stuck on cruise ships cause they had Coronavirus,” Mom said from the kitchen table.

Aiden shook his head. “I don’t want to hear about this stuff. My life is already depressing enough.”

“Take that back,” Mom said, “we are very lucky. Some of those people were trapped on that cruise ship for weeks. You can’t imagine.”

“Uh yes, I can,” Aiden said. “It won’t stop raining outside, so I’ve been trapped in this apartment for what feels like months.”

“Being stuck at home isn’t that bad,” Sophia said. “I like it.”

“I don’t!” Aiden said. “It’s like living in a closet. Or under the stairs, like Harry Potter.”

“Does that make Mom Mrs. Dursley?” Sophia giggled. “Or Mr. Dursley?”

“Both,” Aiden said.

Mom shook her head. “It’s hardly that bad.”

“Are you kidding?” Aiden said. “All day long, my life is you, Sophia, and Jackson—on repeat. I miss my friends. I miss my teachers. Heck, I even miss my bullies.”

“What bullies?” Sophia asked.

“Never mind,” Aiden said. “My point is, I need to go outside before I go bonkers.”
“You and me both,” Mom said. “Humans are like plants. We need water, music, and sunshine.”

Aiden looked out the window. “The sun is trying to come out. Come on, sun, you can do it.”

Mom checked the weather app on her phone. “You know what? Everyone get your shoes on. We’re going outside.”

* * *

“This is not what I had in mind!” Aiden moaned. He was dragging himself up the side of a dirt trail.

Mom laughed. “Take a deep breath. Look around. It’s gorgeous up here. Look, you can almost see our apartment complex from here.” Mom pointed.

Jackson squealed. “I see it!”

“Yeah, right,” Aiden said.

“I’m dying!” Sophia cried dramatically. She was thirty feet behind them. “I hate Ruin Canyon.”

“It’s Runyon Canyon,” Mom corrected. “And it’s perfect. The forecast said we only get two hours of sun today, so we have to take advantage. If the weather gets better, I think we should do this every day.”

“Nooooo!” Sophia groaned. “I can’t. This is horrible.”

“Exercise is good for you,” Mom said.

“So is chatting with my friends,” Sophia moaned.

“Come on,” Mom breathed heavily. “We’re half-way at the top.”

“Half-way?!” Aiden and Sophia moaned.

Aiden’s leg muscles were burning and he couldn’t catch his breath. Mom thought it would be fun to take the hardest route up. Aiden didn’t think it would be this hard or he would have said no. But he had to admit, from up here, it was a cool view.

Aiden pointed. “Look, Mom, the sky is so clear, you can see all the way to the ocean.”

“Well, look at that. No smog or pollution anywhere. I guess with the whole city shutting down, no one is driving anywhere. We’re giving mother nature a break.”
A man and woman stopped a few feet away. They were both wearing masks over their faces. “Hello,” Mom said, as she and Jackson passed them. “Having a good afternoon?”

The man and woman with masks stepped back, as though trying to get away from Mom. The woman said, “Social distance means a minimum of six feet.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Mom said. She picked up Jackson and tried to move over. But the trail wasn’t very wide. There was nowhere to go.

The man and woman rushed past Aiden and Sophia.

“Yikes. They were hardcore,” Mom said. “Sophia, are you okay?”

Sophia’s face was turning bright red. Finally, she gasped for air. “I hold... my breath... for as long... as I can... anytime someone... walks past,” Sophia said breathlessly. “Just to be... extra safe.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works, honey,” Mom said.

Sophia shrugged. “I’ve watched more Grey’s Anatomy than you, so I’m practically a doctor.”

“That’s definitely not how that works,” Aiden said. “If it were, I’d be a superhero from all the superhero movies I watch.”

“Okay, less talking, more hiking,” Mom said. “Last one to the top is a rotten egg.”

The hike lasted almost an hour. Before Aiden knew it, they were back in the car and heading home. Almost instantly, he wished they were still on the trail. He hadn’t liked it at first, but now, he felt better. At least he did until he started thinking about heading home to their dark apartment. That made his stomach feel all heavy. Aiden let a little fart squeeze out.

Sophia grabbed her nose. “Aiden! Don’t do that in the car!!”

“I can’t help it,” Aiden said. “I get all gassy when I’m nervous. And lately, I’m nervous all the time.”

* * *

The weekend came and went. Aiden hardly noticed, except that he didn’t have to do homework and Mom let him sleep in. Otherwise Saturday and Sunday felt the exact same as Monday through Friday. He woke up, he ate, he read comics or did homework or watched TV, then he went to bed. He felt like he always in the apartment.
And now, even the weekdays bled together, like the watercolors paints Aiden used for his school art project. Instead of each day standing out, they just melted together until Aiden didn’t know what day it was.

“What’s today?” he asked.

“It’s Friday,” Sophia said.

“No, it’s Thursday,” Mom corrected. But then she thought again, “Or is it Wednesday?” She had to check her phone. “Oh, it is Thursday.”

Aiden felt like he had a ton of energy, but nothing to do with it, like there were ants underneath his skin. “Huh,” he thought to himself. “Is that where the word antsy comes from?”

Aiden went back to his school work. With the quiet of the apartment, his eyes started to get heavy. He had to shake himself to wake up. It felt like he’d been sitting there for hours. But when he looked at the clock, it’d only been twenty minutes.

“Ugh. Is time even moving?” he asked.

Sophia threw her pencil down. “I know, this day is dragging! I’m sick of homework. And Mom’s new schedule.”

“Get used to it,” Mom said, not looking away from the laptop on the kitchen table, next to her checkbook, a calculator, and a pile of bills.

“Get used to it!” Jackson repeated. Then he threw his plastic T-rex at Sophia.

“Jackson, no throwing!” Mom said.

“I hate this!” Sophia shouted. “I wanna go outside! I wanna see my friends! I wanna go back to normal life!”

Mom put her hands over her ears. “Sophia, please—”

“No, this is awful,” Sophia snapped. She stood, grabbed a couch cushion, and started swinging it at the couch again and again. “Everything on the news is scary and we’re stuck inside and I haven’t seen my friends or gone to the stores or to the mall, or to the movies or—”

Aiden added, “And the comic book stores are all closed, and we’re stuck inside all day, and you won’t buy us a Nintendo Switch, or—”

Sophia jumped in, “All my friends have Disney Plus, and I think we should get it so I can watch Frozen 2. They have a bunch of other good stuff too, like National Geographic, Star Wars, all the Marvel movies. Come on, it’s only a few bucks a month, just buy it for us, we’re soooo bored!”
“So bored!” Aiden moaned.

“The bored-est!” Sophia shouted. “We need something fun to do!”

Suddenly, mom screamed, “Shut! Up!”

Sophia froze. Aiden and Jackson did too. Mom never screamed like that. And she never ever said, shut up.

Mom raised her hand to her mouth. “I—I didn’t mean to scream. I didn’t—” She was shaking a little, she looked scared. Aiden felt scared too.

“Mom, are you okay?” he asked.

“No,” Mom said, tears welling in her eyes “I’m not.” She buried her face in her hands and started crying.

Sophia and Aiden looked at each other. They didn’t know what to do.

“Mom—” Aiden started. He got up and sat down at the table next to her. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know!” she yelled. “I don’t know, okay?!"

“Mom, I’m sorry,” Sophia said. She looked like she might cry too. “We don’t need Disney Plus.”

“Good, cause we can’t afford it. We can’t afford anything. We’re broke,” Mom said.

“We’re out of money.”

“But you and Mike have jobs,” Aiden said.

“The restaurant is only open for take-out and deliveries,” Mom said. “I’m a waitress, and there’s no one to wait on. Yesterday, the restaurant told me they didn’t need me anymore. I’m not fired, but I don’t have a job either.”

“But Dad has a job. Two, if you include driving people around,” Sophia said.

“Everyone is staying home. So Mike can’t pick up any Lyft or Uber rides. All he has is his day job. But now both of you are home all day, and we have to feed you morning, noon, and night. At least when you were at school, you got breakfast and lunch for free. But now—”

Mom sobbed into her hands.

Aiden remembered what Bella told him. “Wait, is that what you’re worried about? Mom, the school found a way to deliver food to the students who need it. At nine o clock, our bus driver Mrs. Quinn drives her usual route. Only she doesn’t pick anyone up. She drops off breakfast and lunch to students.”
“She does?” Mom sniffed, looking up. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

Aide shrugged. “I thought you knew. I think they sent an email.”

Mom wiped her face, then scrolled through her emails. “Here it is, it was in my darn SPAM folder.” Mom took a deep breath. “I didn’t mean to yell. I’m just... I’m very stressed out.”

“I think everybody is,” Sophia whispered.

“I know, sweetheart. You’re right. But some people don’t have to worry about money. They can work from home, or they have a lot of money saved up. But our family’s not like that. We have to worry about where our next paycheck is coming from.”

Aiden thought about Randy and Preston. He was sure that neither of them were having this conversation at home. They were probably lounging by a pool side with butlers serving them all kinds of snacks or watching movies in their own personal movie theatre. Some people had everything. And some people didn’t have anything.

“Are we going to be okay?” Sophia asked.

“Yes,” Mom said. “I didn’t mean to worry the two of you. Your job is make good grades. My job is worry about money. So please, don’t think about it.”

“How can we not think about?” Aiden whispered.

“Can we go to the park?” Jackson asked. “I wanna swing.”

“The kid area of the park is closed, remember?” Aiden reminded him.

“But I wanna swing!”

“I’m sorry, Jackie Bear,” Mom said, “but we have to stay safe. And that means staying inside.”

“Can we go on a hike?” Aiden asked.

“Last week, you hated the hikes,” Mom noted. “You and Sophia complained the whole time.”

“We won’t complain this time,” Sophia said.

“I think some fresh air might be nice,” Aiden added.

Mom smiled. “You know what? Let’s go hike.”

Everyone ran around the apartment, got dressed, and hopped in the car. A few minutes later, they were on their way.

“The streets are empty,” Sophia said. “It’s like Los Angeles is a ghost town.”
"I wish there were ghosts," Aiden muttered. "At least then, things would be interesting."

"Usually it would take us half an hour to get to Runyon Canyon because of traffic. But look at that," Mom said, "it only took us ten minutes. And I scored an amazing parking space. We didn't even have to wait. I could get used to this new world."

"Don't say that!" Aiden said. "I miss the old world."

The family got out of the car and started walking up the sidewalk toward the trail. Usually, these sidewalks were packed. But not today. No one was around. Aiden thought it was kinda eerie.

"Horsies!" Jackson squealed. He pointed ahead. The door to Runyon Canyon was closed, and the gates locked shut with chains and padlocks. On the other side, two police officers were on horseback.

"It's closed?" Sophia whined.


The cop pointed to a new sign. It stated, This area is closed to prevent the spread of COVID— "Sorry, ma'am, but over the weekend, the trails were packed with people. It was deemed too dangerous to stay open."

Mom sighed. "I guess, we'll just have to drive to Griffith Park. At least there won't be traffic."

"Actually, Griffith is closed as well," the other cop noted. "The best thing you can do is walk around your neighborhood. Stay local, and stay safe."

"This sucks!" Sophia shouted.

"I know," Mom said. "How about we just walk up and down this neighborhood hill a few times?"

"You can do whatever you want," Sophia said. "I'll be in the car."

Mom gave up. She took Jackson's hand and led her kids back to the car. The drive home was quiet. Not even Dua Lipa's new song on the radio cheered up Aiden. Why did everything have to be like this, Aiden wondered? Couldn't the doctors just kill the virus already? Couldn't things go back to the way they usually were? Aiden was thinking so hard, he didn't realize he'd started to mumble out aloud. "I mean if kids aren't getting sick, then why do we have to stay home too?"
“Kids might not have symptoms, but they can be carriers,” Mom said. “Imagine if you were at school, and someone sneezed, and a little droplet landed on your shirt, and you didn’t know. Then you went to visit Abuela, and she got it. She could get sick. While it wouldn’t be risky for you, it’d be risky for her. It’s easy for people to transmit the virus even if they aren’t sick.”

“Abuela’s sick?” Jackson whined.

“No, no, sweetheart. Abuela is fine. But because she’s older, she’s more at risk.”

“Can we go visit her?” Sophia asked.

“It’s just not a good idea right now,” Mom said. “We need to wait. But we’ll call her when we get home if you want. I know she’d love that.”

Mom parked the car in their apartment complex. As everyone got out, Aiden felt heavier than when he’d left. Like he suddenly weighed a ton. Like the world was on his shoulders, pressing down on him.

“I’m sorry the hike didn’t work out,” Mom said. Aiden could hear the disappointment in her voice.

“It’s okay,” Aiden said. “It’s not your fault.”

They walked past the small garden in the center of their apartments. That’s when Aiden saw them—the boxes piled in front of their door.

“What is that?” Aiden asked.

Mom shrugged. “When I spoke to my brother yesterday, he mentioned he was sending something…”

Sophia and Jackson ran forward. “You’re right. They’re from Uncle Josh! There’s a box for each of us! It’s like Christmas came early! Jackson, here’s yours…”

“For me?!” Jackson squealed. He jumped up and down.

Sophia found hers, shook it, then twirled in a circle.

Aiden found his, it was the biggest of all the boxes. It wasn’t heavy, but it was so big he could barely wrap his arms around it. Sophia laughed as she handed Mom an envelope. “All you got was a letter. Too bad, so sad.”

“No one opens anything until we Facetime with your uncle.” Mom unlocked the door, shooed everyone inside, then pulled out her phone. “I’ll call him now.”
A few rings later, Uncle Josh appeared on the phone screen. “Super Mario Brother’s Racetrack and Pizza Parlor, how may I help you?”

“Uncle Josh!” Jackson squealed, “You’re not Super Mario.”

“You sure?” Josh asked. “I just spent all morning playing Mario Kart.”

“Mario Kart is for babies,” Sophia said.

“Then I guess I’m the biggest baby of them all.” Uncle Josh put his thumb in his mouth. Aiden laughed. Uncle Josh was Mom’s age, but he was basically a big kid. He liked all the same stuff Mason did. Marvel Comics, Star Wars movies, playing video games... “Did you get your boxes yet?”

“They just arrived,” Mom said. “What’d you send?”

“Just some fun stuff to keep the boo-hoo blues away,” he said.

Sophia already managed to rip her box open. “O.M.G. There’s so much Styrofoam peanuts in here... Is this a gag gift? Where’s—O.M.G.! NO WAY!” Sophia pulled out a bag full of paints, paintbrushes, colored pencils, and sketchpads. “I can start my own art studio!”

Jackson tore and fought with his box until he made a hole in the top. His mouth formed a giant “O,” but he was stunned too speechless to talk. He pulled out a case full of every kind of plastic dinosaur you could imagine. There was even a giant volcano. There was also a set of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Jackson started screaming in pure excitement.

Mom asked, “Josh, are those—”

Josh nodded on the phone. “Yup. My set of Ninja Turtle action figures from when I was growing up.”

“Ninja Turtles is my favorite cartoon!” Jackson screamed.

“I know. Take good care of those, buddy. They’re collector’s items,” Josh said. “Aiden, what are you waiting for. Dig into your box.”

Aiden did as he was told. He ripped open his box. Inside were three LEGO boxes. The first was Doctor Strange’s Sanctum Sanctorum, the second was the Hogwarts Great Hall, and the third was—


“It’s not the Ultimate version, cause that one is 800 bucks,” Josh said. “But I thought this would be pretty rad. It has Lando and Chewie and Threepio and Artoo—"

“Uncle Josh, this is amazing!” Aiden whispered. “I love it.”
“You sure?” Josh asked. “I wasn’t sure if you were too old for LEGOs.”

“I’ll never be too old for LEGOs,” Aiden said. Sure, he knew some of the kids at middle school would say that LEGO were for babies, but Aiden thought they were awesome because after you built with the instructions, you could tear it apart and build something completely new. Plus, he never got bored when he was building. They made him feel... happy. Like every time he was building, he was reminded of every birthday and every Christmas when Uncle Josh would send him a new set. “Thanks, Josh.”

“Josh, you shouldn’t have,” Mom said.

“I absolutely should have,” Josh said. “Your kids are my nieces and nephews. We’re family. Plus if this quarantine is gonna be around for a while, you’ll need all the help you can get.”

“But this is too much,” Mom said.

“It’s not,” Josh said. “It’s the same price as my plane ticket. The airline canceled my flight and returned my money. Looks like I won’t be able to come down next month.”


“I know,” Josh said. “And Aiden, trust me, if I could, I would. But it would be irresponsible. Over here in New York City, things are getting pretty tense. A lot of people are sick. Including two of my neighbors. I’m not sick, but if I came to see you, I could accidentally bring it with me. So I need to stay put. But as soon as it’s safe to travel, I’ll be on the next plane to come visit, and make it up to you. Okay?”

Learning Josh wasn’t coming for his birthday felt like a punch in the gut. But Aiden didn’t want his uncle traveling if it was dangerous. If he got sick, Aiden would feel really horrible. “I get it,” Aiden said. “But will you at least Facetime?”

“Definitely. I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Josh said. “I have a work call to hop on, but Facetime me after you’ve built something.”

“I will,” Aiden said.

As soon as he was off the phone, Aiden looked around the apartment for a place to build. He decided on the kitchen table. As soon as he opened his first box of LEGO bricks, the apartment didn’t feel so small anymore. In fact, as he began to build, the whole world felt big and light and fun again. Like anything was possible.