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AIDEN TYLER,
QUARANT-EEN

BY REX OGLE

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“Sophia, could you please turn that down?” Aiden moaned. He was sitting on the couch on mom’s laptop, reading something important.

Sophia was sitting on the coffee table, leaning forward toward the TV. “Aiden, whatever you’re reading can’t be as important as the news.”

“I am reading the news!” Aiden said.

“About COVID?”

“No. About comics!” Aiden said. “It’s the end of the world.”

“You’re the king of nerds,” Sophia said.

Aiden threw a couch cushion at her. “They’ve stopped production on all the comic shows and movies. The release dates for Wonder Woman 1984 and Black Widow got pushed out. And for the first time in 80 years, NO new comics will ship to stores.”

His sister rolled her eyes. “Does anyone even read comics anymore?”

“I do!” Aiden shouted.

“No shouting,” Mom shouted from the kitchen. She was cleaning up a sink full of dirty dishes. “Aiden, come take out the trash.”

“I took out the trash yesterday!”

“Well, it’s already full again.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Apparently it is,” Mom said. “No wonder we’re destroying our planet. We make more trash in a single day than people did in a while month a hundred years ago. Now come take out the garbage.”
With a groan, Aiden closed the laptop and got up. As he was hauling the garbage bag out to the dumpster, all he could think about were comics. What if there were no more new comics ever again? “No, that can’t happen,” he told himself. “That’s crazy, right?”

“Hey, champ, you okay?” Mike asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Do you think they’ll stop making comics forever?”

“No way, little dude,” Mike said. “Now that Disney owns Marvel, they’re all about making more content. Movies, TV, books. They’ll keep your superhero hunger fed.”

Aiden felt a wave of relief wash over him. “Is that Chinese food?”

“Heck yeah. Fresh from Mandarin Garden!” Mike said, holding up the two bags. “Hey, what did the apple say to the orange? *Sorry, I don’t speak Mandarin.* Get it? Like a Mandarin orange.”

“Mike, your jokes are so corny.”

“Actually, that was a fruit joke. Corn is a vegetable.”

As Mike carried dinner inside, he said, “Where’s my family? There you are! You make MISO happy. Get it? Miso? Cause I have some miso soup.”

“Dad, stop it,” Sophia said.

Mike shrugged. “You *dim sum*, you lose some.”

Jackson laughed.

“Mike,” Mom said. Her voice had a hard edge to it. “What were you thinking? We can’t afford take-out.”

“And we can’t cook every single meal at home,” Mike said, kissing Mom on the cheek. “Plus, we need to support local business so they’ll stay open.”

“And who will support us?” Mom asked, crossing her arms.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Mike said. “For now, sit down. Let’s enjoy dinner. We’ve got Lemon Chicken, we’ve got Sweet & Sour Pork, we’ve got Beef with Broccoli—”

“Holy moly, look at all these fortune cookies!” Aiden said. “They gave us like fifty.”

“Dinner first, cookies after,” Mom said.

As the family sat down to eat dinner, Aiden took two egg rolls. “Hey!” Sophia snapped. As quick as lightning, Aiden licked both.
“Lickers, keepers,” he said.
“Aiden, please—” Mom moaned.

All through dinner, Mike made more dumb jokes, Jackson talked about dinosaurs, and Sophia shared all the weird facts she was learning on the news. Mom was quiet. Aiden could tell she was tense.

“Fortune cookies!” Jackson squealed. Mike handed one to everyone at the table. Jackson crumbled his in his fist. He handed the fortune to Aiden to read. “Someone looks up to you, don’t let them down.”

Aiden looked under the table.

Sophia read hers next. “I cannot help you. For I am a cookie.” Sophia growled, “That’s not a fortune!”

Aiden broke his cookie in half. His little slip of paper said, “You are about to have an amazing trip.” Aiden glared at Mike. “I think these cookies are broken.”

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“Sophia, get off the computer. Mornings are my turn,” Aiden growled.

“In a minute,” Sophia said. “The CDC is saying everyone should wear facemasks, but the President says he’s not going to.”

Aiden grabbed the laptop and yanked it away from his sister. “Read the news when it’s your turn. I have to get on Zoom for school.”

Aiden placed the laptop on the kitchen table next to his homework. He clicked the link, and entered a virtual classroom with his teacher. He could only see Gavin, Mia, Carol, Ryan, Henry, Leah, Lisa, and his friends, Lily, Bella, and Jacob. “Where’s the rest of the class?” Aiden asked.

Mia answered. “Probably napping.”

“Hey Aiden!” Jacob said. But his mouth didn’t move for a second or two after he spoke. There was a lag.
Mrs. Brenner was talking but no one could hear her. The other students were laughing and making faces. Gavin looked like he was in outer space. Behind him were stars and planets. He was moving real slowly on purpose, as if he was floating in a sci-fi movie. Bella’s background was a pink cartoon world with flying unicorns. “Whoa. Cool, Bella. How’re you doing that?”

“In the bottom right hand corner,” Bella answered, “where it says Stop Video, click the up arrow to the right. It should say Change Virtual Background.”

Aiden followed her instructions. “Mine doesn’t have that option.”

“Bummer for you,” someone said. Aiden wasn’t sure who though cause someone turned on the radio and started blasting Lady Gaga’s Stupid Love.

“—think it’s working,” Mrs. Brenner shouted. “Class, can you hear me?”

“Yes, Mrs. Brenner, but someone is playing their radio,” Lily said.

“Whoever that is, please turn off your radio. Or place your microphone on mute.” A second later, the music disappeared. “Whew. Well, this is a nightmare. Why does technology have to be so complicated?”

“It’s really not,” someone whispered. Everyone laughed.

“Okay, everyone. Calm down. I know you want to just hang out and have a good time, but we’re going to try and learn something today.”

“Boo!” someone said.

Mrs. Brenner ignored them. “Also, I’ve made a decision. Rather than have a long 45 minute class, we’re just going to have a short 15 minute class today.”

Someone shouted, “Yay!”

“Preston, I know that’s you. Do I need to speak to your mother?”

“She’s not home.”

“Everyone is home,” Bella said.

“Settle down,” Mrs. Brenner said. “Today, rather than do the usual Geography lesson, I thought I would shake things up a bit. So we have a guest on the call today. His name is Lukas, and he lives in Billund, Denmark. Everyone say hello to Lukas.”

Lukas appeared on the screen, and waved. “Hello everyone!”

“Hi, Lukas!”
Mrs. Brenner adjusted her glasses as she read from a piece of paper. “Lukas, first, tell our class what time it is there.”

“7:08. At night. We are about to eat dinner.”

“Whoa,” Aiden said. He looked at his laptop’s clock. It was only 10 a.m. here in California.

“That’s a nine hour difference between us here, and you there,” Mrs. Brenner said.

“How are you and your family in Denmark handling COVID?”

“We are fine,” Lukas said. “We are staying home a lot. But we also take family bike rides. I am enjoying lots of video games when my dad is not making me study.”

“Are you safe over there?” Carol asked.

“Very,” Lukas said. “Our prime minister Mette Frederiksen closed our borders two weeks ago to anyone who is not a citizen.”

“What’s a Prime Minister?” Jacob asked.

“It’s like a President,” Bella said. “Now shush.”

“Well, we’re very glad you’re safe, Lukas,” Mrs. Brenner said. “Are there any fun facts you want to share about Denmark?”

Lucas rubbed his chin, thinking. “Let’s see. Our health care and education are free. So that is nice. My mom and dad work for LEGO. That is why we live here in Billund. This is where LEGO bricks were first invented. Um, what else? I guess lots of studies say we Danish are the happiest people in the world. Mom says it’s because we practice hygge.”

“What’s that?” asked Gavin.

“I do not know how to translate it. But it is a kind of feeling of cozy and comfortable. Like when it is cold outside in the winter, but you are inside, under a blanket with your family, next to a fireplace, reading your favorite book.”

“Can we go back to the part about LEGO?” Aiden asked. He had no idea LEGO bricks were made in Denmark. How had he not known that?

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Brenner said. “But that’s all the time we have for now. Say thank you to Lukas, and wave good-bye. Okay, now class, your assignment is to write a 2-page paper on
your idea of what your idea of Hygge (hoo-guh) is. Remember what our guest said. It’s about what makes your feel happy. What’s your happy place?”

After the Zoom call ended, Aiden tapped his pencil on his notepad. He whispered, “What’s my happy place?”

“Not here,” Sophia said. She hit him with a couch cushion and snatched away the laptop.

* * *

The rest of the day flew by. Aiden spent the afternoon and most of the evening working on the LEGO sets from Uncle Josh and thinking about Denmark. Before he knew it, Mom said it was bedtime. He had almost drifted off to sleep, when he remembered he never finished his homework.

So now, while Sophia was snoring in her bed on the other side the room, Aiden sat up in his bed, under his little bed lamp, with his notebook in his hand. He wasn’t sure where to start. So he made a list of things that made him happy. It said:

#1. X-Men Comics
#2. LEGO sets.
#3. My half of the bedroom when Sophia isn’t there.
#4. TV ?

The last one had a question mark after it. He liked TV, but not all TV. Just some stuff. Like Marvel movies and cartoons and scary movies—except for zombie movies, cause he hated zombies. Zombies totally freaked him out. He also didn’t like crime shows, which Mike loved. Mom liked documentaries. Right now, she and Mike wouldn’t stop talking about some King of Tigers show on Netflix. It sounded weird to Aiden. He was going to stick with shows like Locke & Key, Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, and the new one on FreeForm about witches called Motherland: Fort Salem.
Aiden Tyler, Quaran-teen
by Rex Ogle

* Apologies for any and all misspellings and grammar errors!! © *

Aiden couldn’t concentrate on his homework. Instead he was wishing he was a witch so he could have awesome powers, like spells and teleporting and—

That’s when he heard Mom and Mike arguing. They were whispering, but not doing a very good job of it. Cause it was loud whispering.

Slowly, Aiden crept out of bed. He tip-toed over to the door and, ever-so-carefully, cracked it open.

“—what are we going to do? We don’t have any money left in our checking or our savings. We’re broke.”

“We’re going to be fine,” Mike whispered. “I have a new job lead on some part-time work. And I think I might have a royalty check coming for some work I did a few years ago.”

“You think? Maybe?” Mom snapped. “We need something we can rely on, Mike. These are scary times.”

Aiden peeked through his door. Mom slammed her fist on the kitchen counter, her face was bright red. He looked like she couldn’t breathe. “We can’t live like this.”

Mike walked over. He hugged Mom. “I know, Jessica. But you have to remember, we’re not the only ones going through this. The whole country is in trouble. The whole world even.”

“Well, I’m not worried about anyone else!” Mom hissed. “I’m worried about us.”

Mom started crying.

Aiden slowly closed his door. He hated hearing his Mom cry.

When he turned to go back to bed—A GHOST! He almost screamed, before realizing it was only Sophia.

“What are you doing up?” he whispered.

“Same as you,” she said. “Listening to Mom and Dad.”

The brother and sister exchanged a glance in the dark.

“Are you worried too?” Sophia asked.

Aiden shook his head. “Yeah.”

“I wish there was something we could do,” Sophia said. “Maybe I could become a YouTube star. How long do you think that takes?”
“A long time,” Aiden said. But then a smile crept over his face. “But you know what, I know something we can do. Something we can do tonight...”
“What is all this?” Mom asked. “Did you two do this?”

Aiden sat up and rubbed his eyes. He and Sophia had fallen asleep in the living room. They’d been up all night, working on their special project. The whole coffee table was hidden under a layer of construction paper, markers, scissors, stickers, glue, and tape.

Mom was walking around the living room slowly, her eyes wide and brimming with tears. But not the bad kind. She was smiling, her hands clasped over her heart.

“Mike, come see this!”

Mike shuffled out of their bedroom, yawning. His gut was hanging over his sweatpants.

Sophia snorted. “Ew, dad! Go put on a shirt.”

“Whoa. Where are we?” Mike asked, looking around. “Where’s our living room? Are we in Paris?”

Mom asked, “Did you two do this?”

Sophia nodded. She was still half asleep on the couch. “We wanted you to be happy.”

Mom took Mike’s hand, holding it as she gazed around the apartment.

The blue-white-red flag of France hung over the TV. And there were crayon-colored irises cut out and placed all over, some in cups, others on picture frames, some under the TV remotes.

“I made the poster of the café in Paris that you like,” Aiden said. “I modeled it after the framed picture in the hallway that you love. I know you only went to Paris once, before you got married or had us. But we thought—”

Sophia interrupted, “I made all the little pictures of French things. That’s a mime. That one’s a baguette and cheese. That one’s a beret. Those are some little croissants and coffee in
little cups with little handles and little spoons. That one is French toast, and that one is French fries—"

Aiden interrupted. “I don’t think those are actually French.”

“It says so in their name!” Sophia snapped. “Anyway, Aiden drew that picture of the Love Museum—”

Mom giggled. Mike said, “I think it’s pronounced Louvre.”

Sophia shrugged it off. “Whatever. Anyways, I wanted to remake a bunch of famous paintings by French painters like Monet and Cezanne, but that was too much work, so I just wrote down their names on that piece of paper. But I also drew a picture of Notre Dame and the Arc de Triomphe. I also pulled out a bottle of your favorite red wine, the one you hide behind the microwave. I put it on the table next to a picture of a bouquet of flowers.”

“But this is my favorite part,” Aiden said. He stood up proud. “This is the Eiffel Tower. I made it out of LEGO bricks.”

“I wanted to build something too, but Aiden wouldn’t let me touch his bricks,” Sophia interjected.

Mom was still looking at everything. Sophia and Aiden weren’t sure if they were in trouble or what.

“Do you like it?” Aiden finally asked.

Mom’s eyes welled with tears. “I love it.”

“We stayed up all night turning the living room into your favorite place in the whole world,” Sophia said. “Paris.”

Aiden rolled his eyes. “I think she figured it out.”

Sophia threw a couch cushion at Aiden.

“The two of you are so sweet,” Mom said, trying not to cry. She hugged Sophia and Aiden, pulling them in for a tight squeeze.

“I... can’t... breathe...” Sophia said.

“Sorry,” Mom said with a snuffle. “It’s just so... so thoughtful.”
“Oh, and did you see the giant rainbow?” Sophia asked. She pointed to a rainbow almost eight feet long, taped across their living room window. “I made that. I saw it on the internet. Kids all over are doing it, to spread color and happiness and hope.”

“It’s really wonderful,” Mike said, squeezing his daughter’s shoulder.

“It’s not really part of the Paris theme though,” Aiden said.

Sophia threw another pillow at her brother. “They’re doing it all over the world, like England and New York and probably Paris too. And it’s not a competition. And if it was, I definitely won.”

“Not even. Look at my Eiffel Tower. It’s amazing.”

“My rainbow is the biggest thing here.”

“Okay, let’s not argue over a nice thing,” Mike said.

Mom smiled. “You both really outdid yourself.”

“Do you feel better?” Aiden asked.

“Better?” Mom said.

“We know you were sad last night,” Sophia noted. “We heard you crying.”

Mom gazed at the floor. “You weren’t supposed to hear that,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?” Aiden said. “You don’t have to hide stuff from us. We always figure it out anyway. We’re smarter than we look.”

“Luckily for you,” Sophia whispered at her brother.

“It’s a hard time for everyone,” Mom said, “And I’ve been really worried about money. But we’re going to figure it out. Together. As a family.”

Mike hugged Mom. “In the meantime, you two and Jackson need to mind your mom and help around the house during the day. I was also thinking we could make a chores list, so that ya’ll can take on a little more of her workload since you’re home all day.”

“Are you for real?” Sophia asked. “We’re being punished after making Paris?”

“You’re not being punished,” Mike said. “But we all need to step up around here. Mom can’t do everything. She’s not Superman, you know.”

“Yeah, duh,” Sophia said, “cause she’s not a man. She’s more like Super Woman.”
Aiden shook his head. “You mean Wonder Woman.”

“What about you, Dad,” Sophia asked. “What are you doing to help?”

“I got a second job,” Mike said, “delivering pizzas. Turns out people in quarantine still love pizza. Who woulda thought?”

“Does that mean we get free pizza?” Aiden asked.

“If you help your mom,” Mike said.

“Did you say pizza? For breakfast?” Jackson asked, sleepy-eyed, as stumbled into the living room. But when he saw all of the art everywhere, he said, “Whoa. What happened while I was sleeping?”

* * *

When the weekend finally arrived, Aiden was excited to see his friends. Not in person, of course, but over FaceTime. “Whoa! I can see all of you at once,” Aiden said to Jacob, Bella, and Lily.

“It’s called technology,” Jacob said sarcastically. “You’ve never FaceTimed with more than one person at a time?”

Aiden shrugged. “Nope. Never needed to.”

“So how are all of you surviving the quarantine?” Lily asked.

“I’m doing okay,” Jacob said, “except my mom won’t let me sleep and watch TV all day.”

“I wish I could be lazy,” Bella said. “Instead I have all this crazy energy but nothing to do with it. I feel like I’m going to lose my mind if I can’t go outside and just run around.”

“You can still go outside,” Lily said. “You just need to wear a face mask.”

“What if you don’t have any face masks?”

“Just make one,” Aiden said. “I wear some of Mike’s handkerchiefs. I tie them behind my head, like a cowboy from those old Western movies.”

“So you could do this,” Jacob said. He pulled out a pair of white Fruit of the Loom briefs and put them over his face, like a mask.

“Dude!” Aiden moaned, “I hope those are clean!”
“That is so gross!” Bella groaned.

Jacob’s mom suddenly appeared behind him, shouting, “Jacob Adam Montgomery! Grow up!” She snatched the underwear off his head and gave him a smack. Then she waved into the phone. “Hi, Bella, Hi, Lily, Hi, Aiden. I apologize for my son’s rude and crude behavior. He gets that from his father.”

“It’s true,” Jacob said. “Rude, crude, and totally un-appreciated.”

Lily smiled. “I miss cafeteria lunches with all of you.”

“Me too,” Bella added.

“Me three,” Jacob added. “Lunch at home with my mom is Dulls-ville. All she wants to do is watch talk shows or soaps.”

“I heard that!” his mom shouted from somewhere in the background.

“Hey, maybe we should ask our parents if we can do a weekly Facetime lunch,” Lily suggested. “Like every Tuesday, or every Thursday, or both. Then we can just eat and chat and pretend we’re back at school.”

“That’d be cool,” Aiden said. “Especially cause we won’t have Preston or Randy pester us.”

“What do you think they’re up to?” Bella asked.

“Probably hoarding groceries,” Jacob said.

“Or totally annoying their parents,” Aiden said.

“So what are all of you doing for fun this Spring Break?” Bella asked. “I mean, school’s totally out this week. Which I almost forgot, cause it’s technically already been out for weeks.”

“Everything is so weird right now,” Aiden said.

“Seriously weird,” Lily said.

The four friends got quiet for a minute.

Bella shook her head. “Let’s not think about that. Seriously, what are you doing for Spring Break? Any fun plans?”

“Video games,” Jacob said.
“Besides video games,” Bella said. “I’m asking because I’m trying to think of new things to do. Without homework, my days are empty. And all my dad wants to do is play board games and do puzzles every night.”

“Lucky. I love board games,” Aiden thought.

“Oh. Well, my mom is teaching me to bake,” Jacob said. “We made chocolate chip banana bread yesterday. It was delicious.”

“Yesterday I started helping my Ama in our backyard,” Lily said. “We’re repotting all kinds of flowers and cacti and herbs for her garden.”

“I’m gonna re-read my New Mutants and Generation X comics,” Aiden admitted.

“Besides that, maybe watch some TV. But I’ve already seen everything.”

“Oh! I’m watching a bunch of my favorite authors read their books online,” Lily said.

“Some are even doing lessons on how to draw.”

“For real?” Aiden asked. “Draw like comics?”

“Yeah. The guy who did the Spiderwick Chronicles is doing it, and so is the guy who did Lunch Lady. And my favorite, Grace Lin has a video on Youtube that teaches you how to draw Chinese dragons.”

“That’s cool,” Aiden said. “I didn’t realize you could find so much stuff online.”

“That’s because you’re on TikTok all the time,” Jacob said.

Aiden laughed. “I think that’s you. I don’t even have my own phone, so that’s definitely not me.”

“All these museums and parks all over the world have virtual tours,” Bella said. “I did a few of those and they were neat. It reminded me how much I love art. I used to want to be a sculptor.”

“You should be,” Lily said. “You could start by making some play dough. Or finding stuff at home that you can build with.”

“That’s not a half bad idea,” Bella said.

“My sister’s been drawing a lot, and painting too,” Aiden said. “She loves that stuff.”

“I’ve been thinking about doing my own podcast,” Lily admitted. “But I’m not sure what subjects I want to talk about.”
“I just wanna do video game stuff,” Jacob said.
“You should teach yourself coding,” Bella suggested.
“I never thought of that. I could make my own video games. That’d be rad!”
“You totally should,” Bella said. “Heck, if we all start on our projects today, we could be famous before the quarantine is over.”

All four friends laughed. Aiden stopped first. “Do you think the quarantine’s going to last much longer?”
Jacob shrugged.
Lily said, “I hope not.”
Bella said, “According to my dad, our school is definitely shut down until May 1st. But my cousin said his school is officially canceled for the rest of the school year.”
“That’s a total bummer,” Jacob said. “Wait-a-minute... am I actually missing school?”
“I miss school,” Bella said.
“I miss my friends,” Aiden said.
“I miss people being friendly,” Lily said. “The other day I sneezed while walking my dog, and a woman across the street started screaming at me to get away from her.”
“At least you have a dog,” Bella said. “I need a pet.”
“Mr. Fuzzy does make all this a little easier. He definitely loves that I’m home all day with him.”

Bella’s voice was really quiet when she asked, “When is life gonna go back to normal?” There was a long silence on the phone.

Aiden could tell his friends were down. They reminded him of his Mom last night. He wished he could build them a LEGO Eiffel Tower, or do something to make them feel better. He didn’t know what to say. He tried to think of something happy.

“Hey,” Aiden said. “You know why I love the X-Men so much?”
“No,” Jacob whined, “no comic book talk, Aiden.”
“Hold on. Let me explain. I love the X-Men, cause they adapt to survive. That makes them different from the Justice League or the Avengers. They weren’t born rich like Batman, or born super strong like Superman. They didn’t get special powers like Captain America or Spiderman. They have powers cause they’re mutants, they’re born with the X-gene, that grants them special powers. Know why? Cause they’re evolving with the world. As the world changes, they change too. They got their superpowers cause they needed them to like, save the world and stuff. I think right now, we need to be more like the X-Men.”

“Are you saying we need superpowers?” Jacob asked, “Cause if so, I wanna fly.”

“I want to talk to animals and plants,” Lily added.

“I want to be super strong,” Bella noted, “but Aiden, dude, we’re not going to get superpowers. That only happens in comics.”

“I know, I know,” Aiden said. “I mean, yeah, I’d love to teleport, but that’s not what I’m saying. What I mean is, the world is changing right now, and really fast too. Every day there’s something different. Rather than be upset about it, we need to adapt too.

“Remember that kid we talked to on zoom, the one from Denmark. He said that thing, hig-gee or hoo-guh or whatever it was called, about finding your happiness in all this. That’s what we have to do. Maybe all this will be over in a week, or maybe it’ll be another month, or maybe longer. But we have to do what the X-Men do. We have to adapt to survive. That means we can’t wait for the quarantine to be over to be happy. We have to be happy today. We have to find our joy in the world right here, right now.”

“How do we do that?” Lily asked.

“I don’t know exactly...” Aiden said. “My brain hurts from thinking so hard. I’m gonna have to think about it... but if you have any ideas, let me know.”