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AIDEN TYLER, QUARANTINE

BY REX OGLE

A Weekly Web “Serial”
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“Aiden!” Mom called from the kitchen. “Come grab the phone. Uncle Josh is on Facetime. He wants to talk to you.”

Aiden dropped his X-Men comics, and bounded into the kitchen to grab Mom’s phone.

“Hey Josh! How are you? How’s NYC? You staying safe?”

“I am,” Uncle Josh said. “Though honestly, I wish I were still living in Los Angeles. I’ve never missed all that space more than I do now. Plus, then we could hang out in person.”

“We could quarantine together. That would be awesome. You still have your Nintendo Switch?”

“I do. I play MarioKart almost every day. Helps me wind down after work. Would be better if you were here so I would have someone to beat.”

“Not even!” Aiden laughed.

“So how are you doing with everything?”

Aiden went into his bedroom and closed the door. He sat on his bed. “I’m okay.”

“I hope you don’t mind, but your Mom told me you’ve been having some issues with anxiety lately. How is that?”

“When it happens, it’s awful,” Aiden said. “Luckily, it’s not all the time. It kinda comes and goes.”

“I hope you know if you’re ever anxious or feel a panic attack coming on, you can _always_ call me. I know how horrible they are—firsthand.”

“You have them too?”

“Guess it runs in the family. I go to a therapist sometimes, and he gives me tools to help.

Have you heard of the Five Senses Exercise? For me, when I’m really anxious, it’s usually because I’m thinking about something stressful in the future. So to help ground myself in the
present, I do the Five Senses Exercise. I look around, and I acknowledge five things that I can see. One at a time. Then I note four things I can hear. Then three things I can touch, two things I can smell, and one thing I can taste. It sounds silly, but it helps.”

“How did I never know you had anxiety too?” Aiden asked, shocked to hear this news.

“You seem so... so... cool all the time.”

Uncle Josh grinned. “I mean I am totally cool. But lots of people have anxiety. Even the most incredible people can have mental health issues—actors, models, musicians, politicians, police, adults, kids, everyone. Did you know May is Mental Health Awareness Month? Which is awesome because Mental Health is still a relatively new concept in our culture. For hundreds of years, people have suffered in silence. But people know now that these ailments are very real, and can be very painful. Talking about it, openly, like this, and being honest with one another—it really does help.”

“Thanks, Uncle Josh. Wanna hear something funny? Last night, I was watching TV, and there was this commercial, talking about being upset or freaked out by all this stuff going on in the world, and it talked about exactly how I’m feeling, like it was what I needed to hear in that moment. Then it turned out to be a car commercial...”

Uncle Josh laughed. “Yeah, there are a lot of companies out there, trying to help people and sell their products at the same time. But what they’re saying is true. It’s okay to be not okay. Now more than ever. Just remember. If you need to talk to someone, I’m always here for you.”

“I’m lucky to have you, Uncle Josh.”

“Yeah, you are! Now show me the progress you’ve made on your LEGO pirates set.”

“I just finished!” Aiden said. “Here, I’ll show you...”
The week flew by. Only a few more hours until the weekend. Although, if the last few months had been any indication, Saturday and Sunday would feel just like Monday through Friday—being stuck at home with the same stuff to do.

Aiden logged in to zoom with his class. Almost immediately his chat alert went off.

Randy wrote: “Aiden Tyler = A dumb loser.”

Aiden didn’t bother to reply. He wrote to Bella, Jacob, and Lily. “How are all of you doing? Are all of you friends again?”

“Yes, I apologized,” Jacob wrote.

Bella wrote, “And he left flowers on our doorsteps.”

“My mom made me do that!” Jacob wrote.

“Good,” Aiden wrote. “I can’t stand when my friends fight. Especially not right now. The world is just too weird when I don’t get to talk to all of you.”

“The world will be less weird in a few weeks when school’s over!” Jacob wrote. “Every day will be TV and video games and naps.”

“I’m gonna be so bored,” Bella wrote. “Summers are all about swimming and hanging out with friends and going to the movies on really hot days. And we can’t do any of that stuff.”

“There’s plenty of things to do,” Lily said. “Me and my Ama started a list of things we want to do this summer. Every morning we’re going to do yoga classes online, then we’ll make lunch every day and do an afternoon walk. And each night, we watch every Disney movie ever made in chronological order.”

Jacob wrote, “We were supposed to go to a family reunion, but now we have to do it online. Which sucks. I love my cousins. There’s a twenty of us. Asher, Delaney, Wesley, Michael, Belle, Gavin, Yvonne, Otis, Lucas, Ben, Claire, James, Haley, Sheila, Chet, Taylor, Jayden, Ryleigh, and Aida (Eye-da). We out-number the adults two to one.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing this summer yet. I haven’t really thought about it,” Aiden admitted.

“Summer’s what you make it,” Lily said.

Another chat popped up on Aiden’s screen. It was from Randy. He ignored it.
“LA County is starting to open up trails and a few botanical gardens,” Lily said. “Maybe we can all go later this summer.”

“My dad is taking me to a drive-in movie theater,” Bella said. “It’s an old-timey one, like they did a long time ago. You stay in your parked car and watch the movie on a huge screen.”

“I’ve been watching magicians go magic tricks online. I’m practicing too,” Jacob said. “I’ve already got this one magic card trick down. Okay, maybe not down, but I’m working on it.”

“Okay, Mr. Moscowwitz is teaching. We should pay attention,” Lily wrote. “Chat you later.”

Aiden’s other chat was still flashing. There were several messages from Randy. He readied himself to read a bunch of nasty comments. But the first thing Randy wrote was, “Can you give me a call? I haven’t talked to another person in days.” Aiden didn’t understand. Why would Randy want Aiden to call him. He kept reading.

“Mom left last month. My parents have been fighting for years, but I never thought she would leave. And she left me here, said she’s staying with a friend and there’s not enough room. Ever since, Dad avoids me. He’s working all the time, gone like 14 hours a day. When he comes home, he’s drunk and yells at me. Tells me to leave him alone, or else... I’m by myself all day, every day, and every night too. Preston, I think I’m going to lose my mind. What should I do?”

That explains it, Aiden thought. Randy thought he was writing Preston. Aiden didn’t know what he should do.

Should he respond?

Should he ignore him?

Aiden’s stomach tightened and he felt all the air go out of his lungs. Randy was going to kill Aiden once he realized...

If the situation were reversed, Randy would totally laugh at Aiden. Or take a screenshot and send it to everyone. But Aiden wasn’t Randy. And for the first time... he actually felt bad for him.

Aiden remembered at the beginning of quarantine, how his own family drove him nuts, how he felt like he had no space cause the apartment was so small, how he felt they were so annoying. Sometimes all that was still true. But more often, he was happy to have them
around, to help him through the strange times. He couldn’t imagine what would it be like to be all alone. Or to have a parent who was absent or cruel.

Aiden started typing.

“*I’m sorry about your dad. And I’m sorry you’re alone.*”

Aiden didn’t know what else to say. So he typed, “*It’s okay, to feel not okay.*”

His finger hesitated over the button to send the message.

His forehead and hands started sweating.

He pressed send.

Immediately his stomach flipped. He felt like Randy might reach through the computer and punch him. But that couldn’t happen. In fact, with quarantine in effect, there was no chance of Randy even seeing Aiden. Not anytime soon. Aiden let out a heavy sigh. He was safe.

Randy wrote back, “*Please don’t tell anyone.*”

Aiden wrote. “*I won’t. Promise.*”

At four o’clock, after school was done for the day, Aiden and Sophia dragged two plastic lawn chairs out of the garage and set them up in the apartment complex courtyard. There was a gentle breeze and the sun was starting to go down. The temperature was perfect.

Sophia settled in with her library copy of *The Land of Stories* by Chris Colfer. Aiden was reading *Nathan Hale’s Hazardous Tales: One Dead Spy*. Stormy slept between his legs. Jackson came out to join with some *Ninja Turtles* comic books that Aiden had found for him at the thrift store. Jackson was too young to read, but he turned the pages quietly and pretended as he stared at the artwork.

“Well, look at you three quiet little angels,” Mom said. She carried three glasses of ice water. “No one would know that you’re total monsters when you’re inside.”
"I’m not," Sophia said. "I’m nice all the time."

"HAH!" Aiden laughed.

"I can’t believe we’re half-way through May already. School’s almost over for the year. Are you three ready to graduate?" Mom asked.

Aiden shrugged. "Sure. I guess. I mean, right now, it doesn’t feel like anything real since we’re not actually in school... but it’s fine. Going from seventh grade to eighth grade is no big deal anyway."

"Finishing fifth grade is a huge deal," Sophia said. "Next year I’ll be at a whole new school."

Aiden’s eyes went wide. "We’re gonna be at the same school again!"

Sophia stuck out her tongue. "Don’t worry. I will not be talking to you in the hallways."

"Good," Aiden said. But him and Sophia both smirked at each other.

Jackson asked, "So no party?"

"No party," Sophia said. "I’m still really bummed I don’t get a ceremony. I was looking forward to walking across the stage."

"I know," Mom said, giving her daughter a hug.

"I’m wanna graduate," Jackson noted.

"You will one day," Mom said. "Next year, if the world goes back to normal, you’ll be in Pre-Kindergarten."

"And what if the world doesn’t go back to normal?" Sophia asked.

"One day at a time," Mom reminded her.

Aiden pretended to melt in his chair. "But it’s soooo hard. I mean, Georgia and Texas are letting up on their quarantines, but California just extended ours through July. When can we get back to normal? Or close to normal?"

"I don’t think there’s a 100% black or white answer for that," Mom said. "Some businesses are starting to open, same with some parks and beaches. And maybe in a month, we can start having some play dates. As long as you’re outdoors, wearing a mask, staying six feet apart, and washing your hands after."

"Is that safe?" Sophia asked.
“That’s what the CDC recommends. Those are all the precautions we can take, but there aren’t any guarantees in life. No matter how safe you try to be,” Mom said. “I think it’s important that we give ourselves a mental health break whenever we can. We can’t worry about COVID all the time. Part of taking care of ourselves is taking a break from reality.”

“Like watching Some Good News with John Krasinski,” Sophia said. “That show’s funny, but it’s over now. Episode 8 was the last one.”

“But was it he kept saying?” Mom asked.

Sophia repeated: “No matter how hard things get, there is always good in the world.”

“Exactly, so hold on to that.”

“I’m trying,” Sophia admitted, “but sometimes it’s really hard.”

“So what are some good things we can look forward to?” Mom asked.

Sophia thought about it. “I like how every night at 8 o clock, everyone in the city starts cheering and hooting and banging pans for first responders.”

“What else?”

“School’s out soon, and I can make more time for art. I want to learn to crochet this summer.”

Aiden chimed in. “Avatar the Last Airbender is out on Netflix! As soon as I have more time, I plan on binge-watching the whole series. You can watch it with me. I promise it’s really good.”

“Maybe,” Sophia said. “Can the family could go somewhere? Like a visit to Abuela, or the beach?”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Mom said. “Actually, Mike and I spoke the other day and decided to take a family trip this Sunday.”

“To Disney Land?! Jackson squealed.

“Sorry, baby boy. Disney Land is closed,” Mom said. “But your daddy knows a hiking trail with a waterfall. It’s way out in the middle of nowhere, about a 90 minute drive each way. We figure while the big crowds travel closer, we can get out of the city and get some fresh air without running into too many people. We’ll wear face masks of course, but it’ll be nice to get out of the city and reconnect with nature.”
Yerba Buena Road turned and twisted as Mike drove the family through the Malibu hills. Aiden’s stomach clenched as he looked over the side of the road and saw that the drop went on farther than he could see. This high in the hills, Aiden’s ears popped as they drove up towards giant rocks and beautiful views of the ocean.

Mike parked, and the family got out and stretched. As soon as Aiden let him out of the car, Stormy pulled at his leash, trying to sniff everything all at once, his tail wagging non-stop. Mike and Mom picked up their backpacks, each filled with water, snacks, and picnic blankets. They trekked up and down a path filled with flowers and trees, while bees buzzed all around them.

“It’s gorgeous out here,” Mom said.

“It’s like an alien planet out here,” Aiden pointed. “Look at all the trees. They’re burned black, dead and withered, yet their surrounded by tons of green grass and flowers and living plants.”

“Last year’s Malibu fires charred this whole place,” Mike noted.

“How did so many plants grow back so fast?”

Mom turned toward Aiden with a big smile on her face. “No matter how bad things get, living things figure out a way to bounce back.”

Aiden narrowed his eyes. “Are you talking about the fires and the plants, or are you talking about us and COVID?”

“Maybe I’m talking about both. Life finds a way.”

Aiden has heard that somewhere before... it took him ten minutes before he remembered it was from Jurassic Park.

Meanwhile, the family passed a small creek, then went up hill, then down again, until they could hear a creek trickling over rocks. They passed one couple. Everyone put on their
masks as they walked past and say hello politely. Otherwise, Aiden and his family didn’t see anyone else, except one other family having a picnic on a rock.

Mike led their family farther down, so everyone could have their own space. They climbed around trees and over boulders until they came to a waterfall. The sun was peeking through the leaves overhead, and a cool breeze stirred. The family took off their shoes and socks and wandered into the pool of fresh mountain water. Stormy waded in after, but didn’t go too far. “It’s cold!” Aiden giggled.

“No way, it’s just right,” Sophia said.

“Jackson, get in there between your brother and sister,” Mom said. “I want to get a picture for Uncle Josh and Abuela.”

“Mom, you’re embarrassing me,” Sophia said, noticing a group of twenty-somethings passing, twenty feet off to the right.

“That’s my job,” Mom said. “Now smile.”

After pictures, the family set up a small picnic. They ate and laughed while Jackson had a staring contest with a lizard. Neither moved while the other watched, until Stormy chased away the little reptile. Aiden and Sophia shared a plate of crackers and cheese and grapes, while Mom and Mike snacked on carrots and nuts. Stormy got a few bites too.

After another hour, they began the hike back. By the time they were back in the car, everyone was spent, but happy. “The perfect amount of sun, fresh air, and nature,” Mom said. “And everyone on the trail was so polite, and wore masks, and gave everyone room to pass. We should do this more often. Maybe once a week?”

“And blow off work?” Mike asked.

“We have to live a little, honey,” Mom said. “We can’t work every day and expect not to get burnt-out or get sick. Days like this are what we work for, isn’t it? Plus, gas is super cheap right now.”

Mike nodded. “I like your way of thinking, sugar-mama.”

“Ew. Don’t call her sugar-mama,” Aiden groaned from the backseat.

Stormy barked in agreement.
As the car wound its way through the windy hills, Aiden watched the landscape slowly morph from one of nature, back into one of buildings and cars and highways. He liked the city, but somehow he felt more relaxed when he was out of it. As they passed cars, he saw people in their own vehicles, the lower half of their faces covered in masks. And it reminded him of the state of the world.

Aiden tried not to think about the coronavirus, about all those big heavy things that made him anxious. With the wind blowing in through his open window, he reminded himself the exercise Uncle Josh had told him about using the five senses. Five things he saw: a flock of birds, a red light, a Starbucks across the street from another Starbucks, a hot pink Porsche, and a tree that looked like Godzilla. Four things he could hear were distant police sirens, Taylor Swift on the radio, the wind blowing, and someone’s car backfiring on the other side of the highway. Three things he could touch were the seatbelt, his t-shirt, and the car door. Two things he could smell, Sophia’s shampoo, and his own fart. Luckily, no one else smelled it. As far what he could taste, the peppermint gum in his mouth felt cool and refreshing.

When he was done, Aiden thought how strange such a little exercise could make him feel so much better.

But when he looked over at Sophia, she was holding her stomach in agony. “Sophia? You okay?”

She shook her head. “Are we almost home, Mom? It’s happening again.”

Mom reached into the backseat, taking Sophia’s hand. “Squeeze as much as you need until we get home. We’re almost there, and then I’ll draw you up a nice warm bath.”

“What is it?” Aiden asked.

Sophia looked down at her feet.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want. But if I know, maybe I can help?”

Sophia looked at Mom, who looked back. “It’s up to you, sweetie.”

Sophia whispered, “I might have endometriosis.”
Once Sophia was in a warm bath, Mom came out of the bathroom and closed the door. She sat down on the couch next to Aiden and hugged him and Stormy. “I know that look on your face. You have questions.”

“Lots of them,” Aiden said. “But I didn’t want to ask in the car, in front of Jackson.”

“Why not?” Jackson asked.

“You know what?” Mike said. “I think Jackson and I are going to take Stormy for a walk. See yall in a few.”

After they were gone, Aiden asked his Mom. “Is Sophia sick?”

“She is, but she’s not going to die from endometriosis.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a disorder in which tissue that normally lines the uterus, grows outside the uterus. It is chronic, and sometimes agonizing, but pain relievers and hot compresses help.”

“Why did Sophia say she might have it?”

“Because it’s hard to diagnose in someone her age. But it is genetic. Given that all the symptoms are the same, and I started having mine at her age, well, the doctor agrees with us that it’s very likely she has it too…”

“You have it?” Aiden ask, surprised. “Why did you never tell me?”

Mom shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m the mom. Moms are supposed to be strong and tough-as-nails. Mama bears who take care of their kids. I don’t want you worrying about me.”

“Moms are people too, you know,” Aiden said. “It’s okay to not be okay, right? I wish I’d known. Are you in pain all the time?”

“Not all the time. And it’s not as bad as it used to be. But I know firsthand how bad your sister is suffering. She has some rough years ahead of her. But she’s a fighter. Like me. She’ll be okay.”

Aiden looked at his hands. “Do you think I have it?”
Mom laughed, then covered her mouth. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh. But no, you definitely don’t have it.”

“How do you know? You said it’s genetic.”

“Because you don’t have a uterus. Only females do. What are they teaching you in school?”

Aiden felt bad, because he felt a huge wave of relief. He thought of Sophia and his mom.

“Why is life like this? Scary and painful and never easy?”

“Life is a lesson in extremes,” Mom said. “It’s part of the package. Life is never just one thing. It’s a lot of things. It’s like a rainbow—but instead of being made up of all the different colors of the light spectrum, it’s made up of easy and hard, happy and sad, anger and pain, excitement and rest. Life is made up of good times and bad times, and a lot of boring times in between.”

“And the bad stuff reminds you to appreciate the good stuff,” Aiden added.

“You’re one smart cookie, Aiden Tyler,” Mom noted.

“I’m sorry you’re in pain sometimes,” Aiden added.

Mom hugged him. “Everyone is in pain sometimes. But the good thing about pain—it doesn’t last.”