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AIDEN TYLER, QUARANT-EEEN

BY REX OGLE

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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.”

**CHAPTER NINTEEN, Roller Coasters**

“Did you hear Rain On me, the new Arianna Grande and Lady Gaga song?!” Lily asked over Facetime. “It’s amazing!”

“Really? I think it sounds like all of Gaga’s songs,” Bella said.
“Not even,” Lily said. “Ari’s vocals take it to the next level.”

Jacob shook his head. “It’s fine—if you’re into that kind of thing. But have you heard Taylor Swift’s song, *Only the Young*? It is heart-wrenching.”

“Did you really just say heart-wrenching?” Aiden asked.

“What? It is!”

“I’m so happy it’s Friday,” Lily said. “What are all of you doing for Memorial Day weekend?”

“When’s that?” Aiden asked.

“Uh... this weekend,” Lily said. “You don’t have any plans?”

“Oh... not really,” Aiden whispered, embarrassed.

Jacob said, “My dad is picking me up. I’m spending the weekend with him and his new wife in Pasadena. I’m not that psyched about it, but at least they have a pool. Plus, my new stepsister is a huge gamer. She has like every single system. So if I’m not swimming, I’ll be gaming. And if I’m not gaming, I’ll be swimming.”

“My dad and I are driving down to Flagstaff, Arizona,” Bella said. “We’re meeting with some friends and going camping. It should be fun. I love nature. Plus, since we’re outside, we can socialize with other people and it won’t be too weird. How about you, Lily?”

“We’re staying here. But my Ama has planned a whole weekend of fun. Saturday we’re making steamed buns, Saturday night, we’re having a Pixar movie marathon. Sunday, we’re going to Malibu. You’re not allowed to sit or hangout, but you can walk along the beach. Sunday night, Mom and Dad and our whole extended family are having a big party on Zoom. Then Monday, my street is closing off for a socially distant street barbeque.”

“That sounds awesome,” Bella said.

“Yeah, it does sound awesome,” Aiden said. But his voice was hollow, because he felt stupid. He didn’t have any cool weekend plans. Heck, he didn’t have *any* plans—period. It’s not like he had planned on seeing his friends, but it felt weird that they were all busy doing fun things, and he didn’t. Aiden had forgotten about the three day weekend, but maybe his parents hadn’t.
When he got off the phone, he handed the phone back to Mom and asked, “Are we doing anything fun this weekend?”

“Of course,” Mom said while folding laundry at the kitchen table. “We got secret VIP passes to Disneyland for Saturday. Then Sunday, we’re going to the movies and a really nice five star dinner.”

Mike added, “And don’t forget Monday we’re going to that fireworks show thrown just for us at our new mansion.”

Aiden groaned. “When did the two of you get so sarcastic?”

“Sarcasm is the most fun you can have when you work seven days a week,” Mike said.

“So we’re not doing anything for Memorial Day?”

“Sorry, Aiden,” Mom said. “But Mike and I both have to work. Since no one’s going anywhere, and people want to celebrate, it’s going to be a busy weekend for delivery.”

“Are you kidding? Everyone is going somewhere,” Aiden muttered. “Everyone except us.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Sophia said, hanging over the edge of the couch. “I’ll be right here. Bored to tears.”

“Watch some TV,” Mike said.

“I am so sick of TV,” Sophia whined.

“What was that?” Mike laughed. “I never thought I’d hear that phrase come out of your mouth!”

“Me either,” Sophia said, “but it’s true. I’ve watched everything. Twice even! I want to do something new. I want to go outside. I want to go swimming. I want to have slumber parties with my friends. I want to go shopping. Or just hang out outside—without a facemask!”

“Same,” Aiden added. “For once, my sister and I are in full agreement.”

“Me too!” Jackson squealed. “I want stuff too.”

“Are you both working all weekend?” Aiden asked.

Mom said, “I’m sorry. I’m afraid we are.”

“Do you have to?”

“We do, yeah,” Mike said.
Aiden saw Mom and Mike exchange a glance. He knew what that meant. He turned around, to make sure Sophia and Jackson were focused on the TV again, before he whispered, “Are we in trouble? With money stuff?”

“Everyone’s in trouble,” Mike said quietly. “We’re just lucky the governor has stayed off evictions during quarantine.”

“But we need to be prepared for what comes after,” Mom whispered.

“After?”

“Once quarantine is over, people can be evicted and held financially responsible for not paying bills. That’s why Mike and I are working so much. So we can stay ahead of things.”

“Or at least stay on top of them,” Mike said. “Even if only barely.”

Aiden’s heart sank. Now he felt bad for complaining about the weekend. But he couldn’t help it. He was a kid. He wanted to do kid things. And since quarantine started, he felt like he’d aged an extra year every day. At the same time, it felt like the reverse—like time was frozen and he wasn’t aging at all. Like everything was... stuck.

Friday night, a box arrived from Josh in the mail. It had three books and a letter. *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* was for Jackson. *Artemis Fowl* was for Sophia. And Aiden got *The Ballads of Songbirds and Snakes*. It was the new Hunger Games prequel that just came out two days earlier. He couldn’t wait to read it. As he tore open the letter, Uncle Josh’s note said:

*If you’re anything like me, you probably forgot Memorial Day so you’ll need some fun things to do... oh wait, it’s quarantine. So here’s some books. AND my username and password for my Hulu account. Go crazy!*"
Aiden Tyler, Quaran-teen
by Rex Ogle
* Apologies for typos, misspellings, and bad grammar! ☺*

Aiden had planned on starting *Avatar the Last Airbender* on Netflix, but Sophia insisted they watch *Rick and Morty* on Hulu—which turned out to be pretty funny—even if it was totally inappropriate.

The kids stayed up late, then slept in on Saturday. After they were up, the day dragged by. They watched cartoons on Hulu, had breakfast, watched more cartoons, took Stormy on a long walk around the neighborhood, and came home to watch more cartoons. Even with the new shows on Hulu, Aiden was getting bored with just sitting around.

Sophia didn’t seem to mind—probably because she was watching TikTok videos. She kept laughing over one with an old man using “Yeet” as a Scrabble word. When the other guy asked what yeet meant, the old man threw the board in his face and shouted, “YEET!”

Then Jackson started running around the house, chasing Stormy and shouting, “Yeet! Yeet! Yeet!”

When Aiden took Stormy for his evening walk, he walked alone. He could hear folks on his block having gatherings in their apartments and houses. There was a big porch with way more than ten people. They were playing music and laughing. Everyone was always so loud when they were having fun, like they wanted Aiden to know he wasn’t. His whole mood sank, like Luke’s X-Wing Fighter into the swamp on Dagobah.

When he got home, he made dinner. Well, he didn’t make it, so much as he heated up vegetarian corn dogs in the toaster oven, then cut up some carrot sticks. After that, he sat on the couch with his siblings. Sophia was watching *Solar Opposites*, from the creators of *Rick & Morty*. Aiden liked it, but for some reason, he felt depressed about the B-plot storyline with all the folks shrunk down and trapped in the wall. Being trapped inside a small space was just way too familiar right now.

After he tucked Jackson into bed, he went to his room, and thumbed through his old comic issues, until he found *Uncanny X-Men #269*, one of his favorites. It’s where Rogue and Ms. Marvel have to battle it out over a shared lifeforce. Aiden could relate. He felt like inside, there were two versions of himself, always battling—the part that wanted to be happy, and the part that wanted to just give up.

Why couldn’t he just be happy all the time?
Sunday morning, Aiden didn’t want to get out of bed. He’d had nightmares all night. The last one was about being trapped in this building with all these people playing virtual reality games on giant TV’s, but he knew they were all being secretly brainwashed and he was trying to escape, but they caught him and they were going to drop him off a balcony, like 400 feet up, but then he got saved by a pterodactyl. Okay, that part was kind of cool, but the rest left him with a crummy feeling.

“Aiden, are you gonna get up?” Mom asked.

“What’s the point?” Aiden said. “There’s nothing to do and nowhere to go.”

Mom sat on the edge of his bed. She patted his hand and asked, “Do you have a case of F.O.M.O.?”

Aiden jumped, grabbing his chest. “Is that a new disease? Did COVID mutate into something new?”

Mom laughed. “No. F.O.M.O. is an acronym—short for Fear Of Missing Out.”

“Oh,” Aiden said. His heart slowly stopped racing. “What does that mean?”

“It means you feel like the rest of the world is having some great amazing time and you’re not. In high school, I had it all the time. I had a part-time job at a movie theater. All my classmates would come in with dates or with friends. They all got to have a good time, while I had to work. I always had F.O.M.O. And now, I think my oldest son has a case of Memorial Day Weekend F.O.M.O.”

“I totally do,” Aiden said. “I just... I don’t know... it feels like my friends and my classmates and celebrities and the whole world has fun stuff to do this weekend—except me.”

“And me and Mike,” Mom reminded him. “We have to work. And Aiden, please know that’s an illusion. Not everyone has exciting things to do. Some people work, some people have
chores, some are sick... At least you can stay at home and do whatever you want. As long as your homework’s done.”

“It’s done,” Aiden said. “But what good is being free when you have nothing to do?”

Mom pressed her lips together. “I want you to think about what you just said.”

“That my homework’s done?”

“The other part—about being free. You are free, Aiden. More free than some in the world. Isn’t that what Memorial Day is about? Honoring the men and the women who died for this country so that we could have certain freedoms? Health care isn’t as affordable as it should be, and capitalism is a beast, and this quarantine puts things into perspective about how easily our system falls apart—but there are good things happening here. We live in a country that lets us speak our mind, lets us worship who and how we want. And democracy wants us to make a better nation for ourselves and our neighbors. Thanks to so many soldiers who fought for our freedom, you are free to do whatever you want—within reason of course. Because I am still in charge of you.”

Mom flicked Aiden’s nose gently.

“That was a big speech for this early in the morning,” Aiden said.

“Actually, it’s almost eleven. And I just want you to have some perspective. There are so many who are doing without, especially right now. I know we don’t have a lot but—”

Aiden cut Mom off. “—we do have a lot. We have a roof over our heads. We have food. We have each other. Plus we have TV and books and comics and LEGOs. And we have our good health, which counts for a lot. Mom, I am grateful. I am. But I can be grateful and still be bored.”

Mom put her hands up in the air. “You know what? That’s totally fair. Oh, and hey! Mike and I finally got our stimulus checks in the mail. So one night later this week, we’re going to do something fun. That’ll give you something to look forward to. I know this weekend isn’t what you hoped for. But we have so many tomorrows to have fun.”

She kissed him on the forehead, then left for work.

Aiden lay back in bed and stared at the ceiling. He looked forward to fun tomorrows. But he couldn’t help wondering how he could have fun today.
Aiden Tyler, Quaran-teen
by Rex Ogle

Apologies for typos, misspellings, and bad grammar! © *

Sunday was just like Saturday. Wake up, dog walk, breakfast, TV, reading in the apartment courtyard, another dog walk, lunch, more TV.... Aiden started to worry this is what every day of summer was going to be like. The thought chilled him to the bone.

That night, Aiden felt like his skin was crawling, and wanted to jump right out of it. Mom referred to this feeling as “stir crazy.” He had to move, but there was nowhere to go. It didn’t help that Sophia was hogging the TV and watching different news clips on YouTube. The first was about COVID case numbers rising in New York City again, which made Aiden worry about Uncle Josh. The second was about Coronavirus affecting kids, which made Aiden worry about Jackson and Sophia and himself. The one after was about AirBnB hosts having to sell their houses because no one was renting, which reminded him that Mom and Mike were struggling with bills. The next was about unemployment and the concern over certain jobs not existing after quarantine was over. The last was about the U.S. death toll approaching 100,000 while President Trump went golfing.

With each piece of news article, Aiden felt his stomach tightening until it was a ball of pain. He wondered if this is what Sophia felt like whenever her endometriosis flared up.

“How long have you been watching the news?” he asked.

Sophia shook her head. “Agh! It’s like I was possessed. I couldn’t stop myself. I went down a rabbit hole of bad news. Here, Jackson, you’re in charge of TV for the rest of the night.” She handed her little brother the remote.

“Really?” he squealed. Within seconds, he found Pokémon Detective Pikachu and started the movie.

Even though the movie was awesome, Aiden couldn’t sit still. He was anxious.

He took a deep breath. Then another. He went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face, then got a big glass of cold water. He went to his room. Stormy joined him
on the bed, licking his toes. That reminded him to do the 5 Senses exercise. He did that, ending it by nuzzling his dog, and kissing Stormy on the bridge of his nose. Aiden felt a little better but not enough. So he got out his Happy List, read through it, then added three more.

#63. Sniffing Stormy’s paws cuz they smell like Fritos.
#64. Playing basketball with Bella, even though I am terrible at it.
#65. The way the rain sounds through my window, especially at night when I’m sleeping.

“Whoa. Sixty-five,” Aiden said. That made him wonder. After cross-checking a calendar in his notebook, he realized today was Day 65 of his being in quarantine. 65 happy things for 65 days stuck at home...

He couldn’t believe it’d been so short. Barely two months. And yet it felt like forever at the same time.

He thought of one of the news clips from earlier, saying that quarantine might taper off in the summer, then start again in the fall. The whole world seemed to spin.

But Aiden took a deep breath, and reminded himself, that the future was unwritten. He knew that from his X-Men comics. Every time they fought some new time travel bad guy, which was like, all the time, their future changed. Nothing was set. Aiden decided his future was the same. It was unwritten. The news couldn’t decide what was going to happen tomorrow. Only tomorrow could do that.

Stormy whimpered. Aiden was trying to sleep. His dog whimpered again, then whined. He scratched at Aiden’s bedroom door. Sophia threw her pillow at Aiden. “Get up and walk your dog! I’m trying to sleep!”

Aiden looked at his clock. “Stormy! It’s 6:07. Come back to bed.”
Stormy whimpered, pawing at the door.

“Aiden!” Sophia shouted.

“I’m going I’m going! Let me get my shoes on!”

Aiden couldn’t recall being up this early in forever. Even when school was in session he didn’t get up until 6:30 or 7. Then he remembered that today was Monday. The weekend had flown by, and he hadn’t done one awesome thing. He felt like his whole life was a bummer.

As he walked outside though, a perfect cool breeze stirred under the morning sun. No one was around. It’s like all of Los Angeles slept while Aiden walked his dog. With the birds chirping, and purple flowers floating down from the trees, the whole world felt... well, peaceful. After ten minutes of not seeing anyone, Aiden took off his face mask and put it in his pocket. He took a deep breath. A smile stretched across his face as he smelled the sweet scent coming from a bush of honeysuckles.

He thought about how he’d been complaining all weekend about being stuck. He needed to get un-stuck. Maybe doing something he wouldn’t usually do was a good start—like getting up before everyone else. He wondered what else he could do. Instead of going around the same two blocks he always did, Aiden decided to let Stormy lead the walk. Stormy walked north, then west, then north again, then west, then south, and then circled around. He pooped twice, peed dozens of times, and almost caught six squirrels. Finally, Aiden’s stomach growled. He decided it was time to head home.

He really enjoyed letting his dog lead the way. It was like leaving the universe in charge, and not stressing about which road or sidewalk to take. Instead, he just got to enjoy the stroll, and see houses and streets he’d never noticed before.

Walking up to his apartment complex, he noticed a huge moving van parked in front. Movers were just starting to wheel down boxes and furniture. Standing on the sidewalk was a woman and her son, who looked about Aiden’s age.
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Aiden was going to walk by without saying anything. But again, he thought about getting un-stuck. To be polite and cautious, Aiden put back on his facemask. He waved. His voice cracked when he said, “Hey. Um... are you moving in?”

The boy bit his lip and didn’t say anything. His mom smiled. “We are. We just moved here from New York City.”

“My Uncle Josh lives there.”

“That’s wonderful,” the mom said. She put her hands on her son’s shoulders. “This is my son, Zambrano.”

“I’m Aiden.” Aiden put his hand out. But as Zambrano put out his, Aiden yanked his back, remembering he shouldn’t touch people and should remain six feet away. “Oh, um, sorry. I’m not sure what the quarantine rules are on shaking hands. I want to be polite, but—”

Zambrano laughed. “There’s too many rules to keep track of. In Brooklyn, me and my friends would just bump elbows.”

“Last time I saw my friend, Jacob, we tapped our shoes together.”

“Cool,” Zambrano said. “What grade are you?”

“Going into eighth after the summer.”

“Me too. At Palm Middle?”

“Yup. You too?”

“Yeah. Rad.”

Both boys kinda laughed then looked at the sidewalk. Aiden didn’t know what else to say—not until he saw the movers with a cart of familiar shapes.

“Are those comic book long boxes?” Aiden asked.

Zambrano’s eyes lit up. “Yeah. You read comics?!”

“X-Men all the way.”

Zambrano scrunched up his face. “Oh. I’m all about DC Comics. Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, Justice League Dark.”

Now Aiden held his nose. “Gross. Maybe you should move back to Brooklyn.”

“That’d be a sick burn—if it hadn’t come from someone who prefers the Marvel Cinematic Universe to Zack Snyder’s genius DC movies.”

162
“Seriously?” Aiden asked. “Please don’t tell me you’re excited the just-announced Snyder’s Justice League Cut.”

“2021 HBO Max,” Zambrano said.

“And here I thought we could be friends. Guess not.”

“Nope. Take care of yourself.”

“You too.”

Both boys laughed.

“I tell you what,” Aiden said, “since we’re going to be neighbors, I’ll give you a second chance. If you agree to read Hickman’s *House of X*, I’ll read six issues of whatever DC story you recommend. Then we can chat.”

“Yeah?” Zambrano asked. “You’ve got yourself a deal. Get ready for *Batman: Hush*. Or *Earth 2*. Or maybe *Flashpoint*... I’ll have you converted in no Xme.”

“We’ll see,” Aiden smiled.

After breakfast, Aiden came back out and chatted with Zambrano. They talked about school and movies and *Harry Potter* and their uncles and funny YouTube clips of this one super weird author who made a video of just his mouth, but upside down with his beard in pigtails. They talked about Hannah Montana and Miley Cyrus and Billy Ray Cyrus and country music versus pop music and the episode of *Teen Titans Go* titled Mr. Butt. Zambrano told Aiden about his friends back in New York: Pat, Hunter, Valencia, Hazel, Micah, Gretchen, Bennett, Stoddard, Gilmore, Freddy, Sally, Reagan, Jayce, Colbie, Leyla, Melissa, Rosco, Garion, and Juju. Aiden told Zambrano about his friends too.

Zambrano had a dog too. His name was Wrigley. Within seconds of meeting Stormy, they were wrestling and chasing each other. Whenever Zambrano threw a tennis ball for Wrigley, he shouted, “Yeet!” which made Stormy bark like crazy because it reminded him of Jackson’s chase.

The two boys and their dogs hung out until the sun went down, and Aiden had to go inside and make dinner for Jackson and Sophia. When they said goodnight, they bumped elbows, then tapped shoes.
That night, Abuela called and asked Aiden how his weekend went. He said, “It was good. Really good. Actually, it was great.”

When he crawled into bed, Aiden’s mind wandered. He thought back to his conversation with Zambrano, to a story he started but forgot to finish about last summer, when Uncle Josh came to visit and they went to Universal Studios...

At The Wizarding World of Harry Potter, Uncle Josh held a Sorting Hat over Aiden’s head and declared “GRYFFINDOR!” Sophia was Ravenclaw and Jackson Hufflepuff. Uncle Josh did it to himself and got Slytherin. He bought all of them robes, one for each of their houses. Then he took them to Ollivander’s and they got wands. It was the most amazing day ever—until it started raining.

A huge downpour came out of nowhere, and they couldn’t ride the roller coasters and they all got soaked. Sophia didn’t realize it until they got to the car, but she’d lost her wand. She cried and cried and cried, even though Josh said he would get her a new one. On the way home, Mike rear-ended someone’s car. It wasn’t a bad accident, but Mom freaked out. They got into a huge fight. It went from an amazing day to a horrible one.

But the next morning, Josh woke the kids up early and took them to Santa Monica. They built sandcastles on the beach, played video games at a retro arcade, then rode a roller coaster on the pier itself.

As he drifted off to sleep, Aiden thought about life—and how life was like a roller coaster. It went up and down and sideways, and sometimes upside down. Sometimes it went fast, sometimes it went slow, sometimes it turned at breakneck speeds and threw you into the side, sometimes you came to a dead stop, or it climbed hills reeeeeeal slow, one klik-clack klik-clack at a time, and you’re freaking out because you know what comes next—the big drop, that gives you that horrible sick feeling, but then you’re screaming and laughing and then it’s over and you want to go again.

Quarantine life was like that too. It was a roller coaster.

Just a different roller coaster than Aiden was used to.

It wasn’t that it was good or bad, or better or worse, it was just different. And sometimes, Aiden was going to hate the slow parts, and love the fast parts, but after the ride,
Aiden was going to realize how much he enjoyed it. He just needed to stop dreading the *klik-clack klik-clack* parts so much. Because they were part of the ride. And you have to do the bad parts to get to the good parts, so you can appreciate them even more.