



Alone Together

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Audrey lived in a house that was connected to the houses on either side in a long row stretching out for what seemed like forever. Or at least to the end of the block, which was basically forever. All the houses looked the same. And inside people lived, with only the thin walls between them.

Alone. But together too.

Sometimes it annoyed Audrey, how close everyone was. She could sometimes hear a neighbour bumping against their wall, or vacuuming their floor when she was trying to sleep. And when she played outside, the yappy dog next door scared her.

But Audrey was happy. She loved her mom, and her dad. She loved her cat, Critter (even though Critter didn't like her very much.) She was happy.



But that was before the pandemic. The pandemic seemed to happen all at once. And now Audrey had to stay home. She had to wash her hands. All. The. Time. She couldn't play in the playground. She couldn't see her friends.

She was alone.

Audrey hated it. It was boring. And it was weird.

Every day was weird now. So weird that the weird was beginning to feel normal. But she knew it wasn't normal.

It was the pandemic.

Sometimes it was hard to remember what things had been like before the pandemic. Audrey did remember, if she thought hard about it. She remembered birthday parties. She remembered daycare. She remembered swimming pools and splash parks.

Mostly, she remembered kids. Lots and lots of kids.

But now things were weird.

There were good things about the pandemic. Audrey was allowed to watch a lot more cartoons. Tyler couldn't steal her favourite toy at daycare. True, she couldn't play with her favourite toy, but it was good to know that Tyler didn't have it either! And she got to stay in her pyjamas all day if she wanted.

Things weren't exactly bad.

They were just weird.

And she had to wash her hands. All. The. Time.



"I know how to do it," she shouted at Daddy when he soaped up her hands after they got home from a walk.

"I know you do, sweetheart," Daddy said, "but you aren't doing a good enough job. We need to make sure that all the germs are gone."

Audrey hated germs. Germs were weird. Germs were part of the pandemic. They made people sick. And they could move from person to person if you weren't careful not to touch anything and wash your hands. All. The. Time.

Audrey thought it was like a story. Like she was a princess in a tower, locked away, so that she could be protected from the pandemic.

"Do you think a prince will come save us?" Audrey asked, after Daddy had scrubbed her hands.

"What?" Daddy asked. But he wasn't really listening. He was looking at his phone. Audrey hated phones.

She left Daddy and climbed up the stairs to find Mum. Mum was working. Sometimes she put a sign on the door telling Audrey that she was in a meeting. But there was no sign right now. So Audrey pushed the door open.

"Hi," she called out, flopping on the bed in Mum's office. Once, before the pandemic, the bed was a place where Audrey's grandparents would sleep when they came to visit. Now it was mostly a place for Critter to sleep.

Critter was there now. He lifted his head and glared at Audrey. She stuck her tongue out at him.

"Mmm," Mum was frowning at her computer. "Did you have a good walk?"

"Yes," Audrey said. "We found seven mud puddles to splash in."

"Mmm," Mum wasn't really listening either.



"Mum, is a prince going to come rescue me?"

"What?" Mum looked up from the screen. "What do you mean, rescue you?"

"Cause I'm trapped in a tower. I'm a princess."

"You aren't trapped," Mum said. "You just went out for a walk."

"But I can't go and play with anyone. Like a princess."

"Then you'll just have to go play by yourself."

"Is a prince coming?" Audrey asked again.

"Like in your fairy tales?" Mum asked.

Audrey nodded. "Yup. We need a prince to come and. . . and fight the pandemic, and then we wouldn't be locked up. Then things wouldn't be weird anymore."

Mum smiled. "It's a good thought, kid," she said. "But you don't need a prince."

"I don't?" Audrey asked.

"No," mum said. "I think you can rescue yourself. You just need to figure out how." Then mum's computer made a little ping. Mum turned to it, muttering one of those words Audrey was never allowed to say.

Audrey stayed for a few more minutes. She tossed pencils and paperclips at Critter for a while, watching him get madder and madder. When he hissed, she knew it was time to leave. She wasn't sure that mum was right. After all, she didn't really know what a pandemic was. So how was she going to fight it?

She wandered into her room, but she had already played with all the toys in there a hundred times. So she crawled down the long hallway, pretending to be a cat herself. If she was a cat, she wouldn't be grumpy like Critter. She'd be fun. And happy.

She was happy. But everything was just so. . . weird.



Then she heard someone crying.

She followed the noise. She tiptoed through her parents' bedroom. She searched under the bed, and behind the chair, but couldn't find anything. So she sat on the bed and listened until she heard the cry again.

She followed it into her parents' bathroom.

There, curled on the floor behind the shower door, Audrey saw a small creature that looked sort of like an owl, except it also looked sort of like a cat.

It was Totyn.

She hadn't really seen him since she had started going to daycare. He was smaller than she remembered. But maybe she had just gotten bigger.

"Totyn," she shouted. Totyn squeaked in surprise. "Will you play with me?"

Totyn shook his head. "I can't," he said.

"Why not?" Audrey asked.

"Because everything is scary. I might have germs." He shivered. But Audrey didn't think he was cold. Sometimes people shiver when they're scared too.

Audrey sat beside Totyn, thinking. Totyn was her friend. So there must be something she could do to help. But she didn't know how to make him feel better. She decided she needed some help.

Audrey stood up. "I can fix this," she said. "Just let me go talk to Daddy. Stay here, okay?"

Totyn looked at her with big scared eyes, but he nodded.

Satisfied that he wasn't going to leave, Audrey ran back downstairs. Daddy was cooking dinner, stirring the saucepan with one hand and looking at his phone with the other. The radio was on, but it wasn't playing songs or anything good. It was news.



"Daddy, Totyn is here."

"Is he?" Daddy asked. "Well, why don't you go play with him while I cook dinner, okay?"

"Okay, but Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Totyn is scared."

"Why is he scared?" Daddy put his phone down looked at her.

"Because he thinks the pandemic is going to come get him. He says he has germs."

Daddy laughed. "Audrey, sweetie, you can tell Totyn he doesn't need to be scared."

"He doesn't?"

"Nope. Know why?"

Audrey frowned, thinking. "Is it because he's imaginary?"

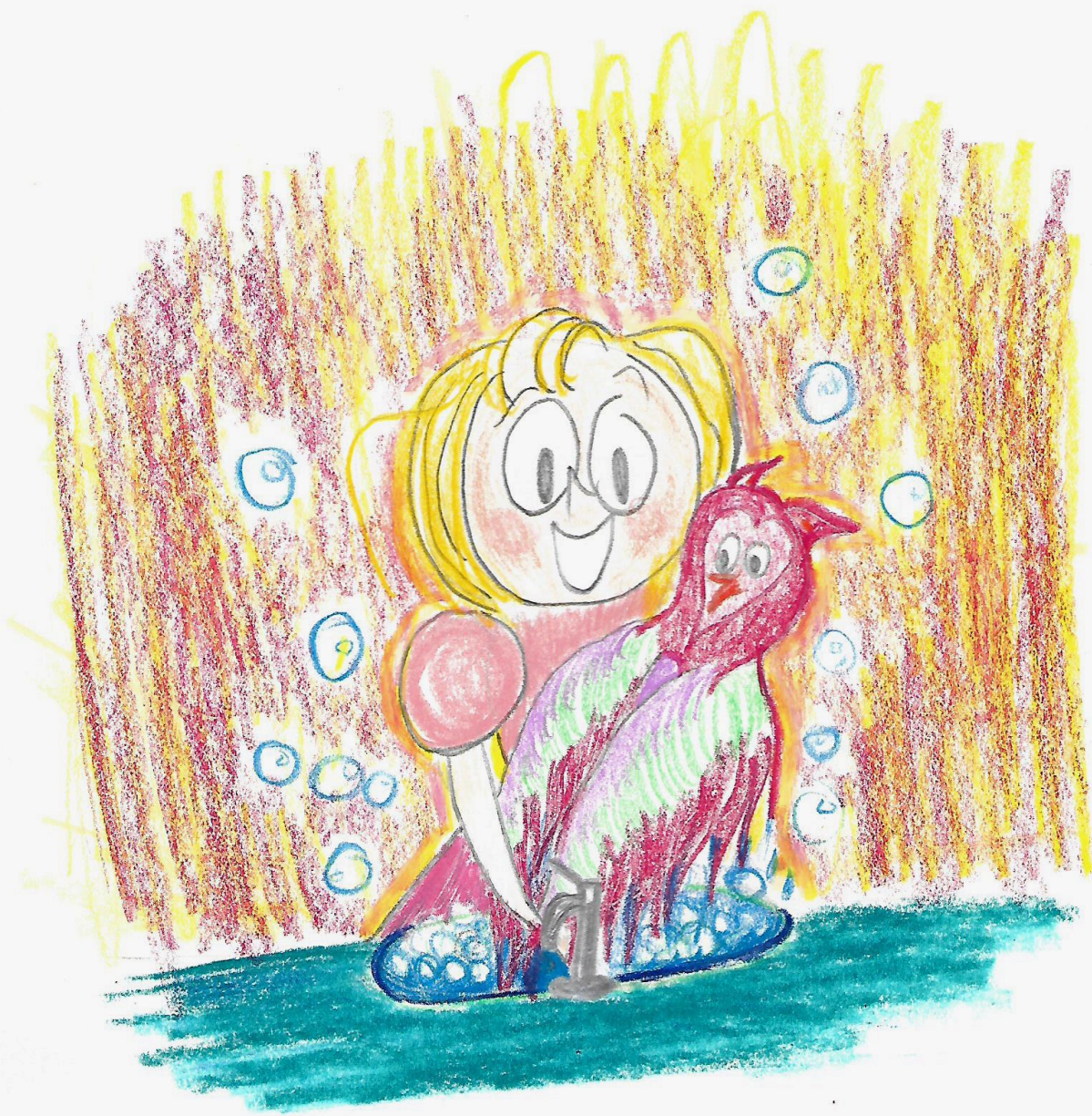
"Yes," Daddy said. "I'm glad you found Totyn. I know you miss your friends. But Totyn can stay as long as you need."

Happy, Audrey ran back upstairs. But Totyn wasn't where she had left him. She searched all over and finally found him on the window seat behind the curtain, with his face pressed up to the glass.

"You don't have to be scared, Totyn," she announced proudly, climbing up beside him. "Imaginary friends can't get germs."

"Are you sure?" Totyn whispered.

"I think so," Audrey replied. "But we could wash your hands just to make sure."



Totyn stared at his big paws. "I've never washed my hands before."

"I can show you," Audrey said with confidence. "I know all about how to wash hands. I do it All. The. Time."

"Okay," Totyn grinned.

They both stared out the window in silence, watching the rain fall on a quiet street.

"I don't think any prince is coming to save us," Audrey whispered.

"I don't need a prince," Totyn replied, "Cause you saved me. You figured out how to protect me from the pandemic."

A light came on in the house across the street. And the house attached to it had the faint glow of a TV, and somewhere nearby she could hear a dog yapping, and a neighbour vacuuming.

Audrey lived in a house that was connected to the houses on either side in a long row stretching out for what seemed like forever. And inside everyone lived, with only the thin walls separating them.

They were all alone, locked up inside. But they were all together, too, protecting each other from the pandemic.

And she thought that, maybe, no one needed a prince to save them. They were all going to save each other.

She grinned. "Let's play!" she said to Totyn.

"Okay, but first you have to teach me how to wash my hands. Just in case."

Audrey nodded, and led Totyn to the bathroom.

She was happy. Things were weird. But weird was okay.

All the best adventures were weird, after all.