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To Me, Ten Years From Now: Is The Apocalypse Over Yet?

People say the end is never really the end. I guess even after the apocalypse, that's still true. We're all still here, living our lives, worrying about things like electric bills and school and taxes. I even hear that way out in the eastern states, they've started bringing back some of the normal jobs like customer service. Yikes. At least they have cell service.

But none of that really matters. At least, not to people around here. We're a small town. Especially after the apocalypse—most people just up and left the second they heard about a rabies case in the next town over. Most of my friends moved away with their families too. I don't blame them. Sometimes I think about what life would be like in the big city, with shopping malls and towering apartments and some decent healthcare. But we're the Shintanis— and that means we stick to our roots, come hell or high water or so-called zombies. And even if we had a choice, we can't go anywhere.

I stare down at my dad, who's laying on the floor in the hallway. Mom sets down the canned food in the kitchen and hurries over.

“Dear, are you okay?” she asks in Japanese, checking him for bruises. Dad drags himself up to lean against the wall. Mom gestures to me. “Mari-chan, help me carry him to the couch.”

I drape Dad's arm over my shoulder and lift, half-carrying, half-supporting him to sit on the couch. Mom starts fussing over him again. “I told you to call for one of us if you needed to get up. You're lucky your friend didn't leave you to that infected man yesterday.”

“I told you, he was a paralytic-type. I was just surprised by him having a seizure, and I fell down the stairs.” He pats her arm. “Don't worry. A few weeks, and I can walk again.”

He's wrong; it'll probably take a few months before he's back to normal. Dad's spry for his age, but he's getting old, even if he won't say it. I've started hearing him complain about his joints being sore.

Mom waves me away when I start grabbing pillows. "I'll do it. Are you done with your homework?"

"I finished this morning," I tell her.

It's not *real* homework. We haven't had actual school in almost two years. The teachers got together on our last day of school and told us we could take home all the homework packets they'd planned for the rest of the year. My biology teacher, Miss Williams, even went out of her way to grade our homework over email. Said it made at least something for all of us feel normal.

"This morning?" She frowns. "What have you been doing all day then—"

She jumps hard. I turn around to see Hide standing behind me. He's got dark circles under his eyes, and his forehead shines with sweat. His legs wobble as he toddles closer, reaching out for me. I grab his hands, helping him hang on to my leg for support. He doesn't make a sound. I don't expect him to; not since he was treated. But that's okay. He's still just my brother.

"Hide, are you okay?"

He hugs my leg tighter. I ruffle his already messy hair. Mom frowns at me again, but doesn't say anything. Dad reaches over and pats Hide's back.

"Do you have your pen, Hide-kun?"

I spot the ballpoint pen peeking out of the hoodie I lent him and take it, uncurling his tiny fingers and putting it on his palm. I set his thumb on top of the clicker. "Did you have a nightmare?"

One click.

I kneel down and check his eyes. They're a little unfocused and hazy, staring around the living room like he's never seen it before. His legs are still shaking. I squeeze his hands, and he focuses on me again.

“Do you want me to pick you up?”

One click.

I lift him by the armpits and set him on my hip. Even at five years old, he's still so light. The doctors warned us it would take a while for his weight to get back to normal. An aftereffect of getting infected, I guess. They forgot to say that the treatment didn't include helping him relearn everything, which is bullshit, because the older patients got to go to some facility for physical therapy. He only got two months. The other patients got six. And then the military and medical team just left for the next county.

But hey, five months out of the hospital, and he's already walking on his own. And he's *alive*. I'm more than okay with that.

Mom ignores Hide and goes back to the kitchen, picking up the food cans again. “Well, with your papa's broken leg, we'll need someone else to go outside and get more food. Mari-chan, why don't you go to the grocery store on the south side of town and pick up some things for us tomorrow?”

My heart flutters at the idea. Me, going outside? I haven't gone out in almost two months, when I helped Dad bring back some extra jugs of water. Can you imagine what that's like, finally getting some fresh air, getting to see actual people outside your own family? It's like New Year's came early.

“I can do that. What do we need?”

“I’ll write you a list.” She waves vaguely at me without looking up. “And take Hide-kun with you. He could use the fresh air.”

“Okay.”

“Good. Both of you should go to bed now, so you have enough energy tomorrow.” She smiles at me. “I’ll even let you eat the last can of tuna for breakfast.”

Hell yeah, tuna? It’s a done deal. “Thanks, Mama. C’mon, Hide. Let’s get you in bed.”

I carry Hide down the hall and open the door to our room, then set him down on his futon. It’s already past sunset– the only light we keep on is a nightlight in the hall, so no one trips when going to the bathroom. My shadow takes up half the wall, strange and warped as I sit down on my own futon next to his. Hide doesn’t lay down, instead staring at me with his usual blank expression.

“Do you want something?”

One click.

“Are you hungry?”

Two clicks.

“Thirsty?”

One click.

That’s good. The first couple months after treatment, he’d throw a screaming fit whenever we tried to make him drink water. It still makes my skin crawl, thinking about it. The doctors said it wasn’t because of rabies anymore, just that he was traumatized, which is really not much better. But he survived. Not a lot of kids his age did.

“All right. I’ll be back in a second.”

As I close the door and take a step down the hall, I notice that a light in the kitchen is still on. Shadows move across the walls, carrying hushed whispers with it. I creep closer and crouch down to peek around the corner. Mom is pacing around the room, searching cupboards and drawers. A flashlight shines up at the ceiling, illuminating the sparse cans and water bottles on the counter. Dad is still sitting on the couch with his leg propped up on the kotatsu and some pillows. His ankle looks twice as big as normal, skin covered in red and purple blotches. I can't see his face from here, but I can hear his breath catching every time he shifts position. Mom sighs at him when he lets out a sharp breath.

"I told you not to move," she scolds in Japanese. "You'll make it worse."

Dad let out a laugh that sounds more like a wheeze of pain. "I'll be fine, Rin."

At this Mom whirls on him with a scowl and lightly smacks his shoulder. "This isn't a laughing matter, Nobu. You could have been infected!" she hisses. "You could have died! What am I supposed to do if that happens? I can't provide for this family by myself."

"You're much more capable than you give yourself credit for, darling." Dad turns his head, and I see him frown. "You know how to protect yourself. I'd feel better knowing you went with Mari-chan."

"I can barely speak English, much less read it, you know that." She sits down on the arm of the couch with a deep sigh and folds her hands over her lap, knuckles turning white as she grips the fabric of her skirt. "At least Mari-chan is fluent. She'll have less trouble dealing with anyone she meets outside. And she's fifteen. In Japan, she'd would've been fine going outside on her own by age ten."

"This is America, not Japan. Things are different here. And why do you want Hide-kun to go with her? He's not recovered enough."

“He can walk, at least.”

“Rin, he hasn’t even relearned how to speak. He should stay home—”

Mom suddenly covers her face, and I hear a quiet snuffle. “I can’t look at him like that,” she whispers. My throat closes up. “I just need a few hours away from him. Just a few.”

Dad lets out a deep sigh, and the dim rays of the flashlight seem to make his wrinkles look deeper, lining his tired face. “He’s still our son.”

“I know. I know he is, and I love him, but— they took my baby. They took my baby and all I can see is a walking corpse. I just want my baby back.” Mom sobs, and it takes everything in me to not get up and give her a hug. But her words make my stomach churn too. Hide’s not a *corpse*. Why doesn’t she see that?

Dad reaches up and puts a hand on her knee, gently patting it. “I understand. Just be patient with him, darling. We’ll get through this.” He shakes her leg a little. “Our children are strong. They’ll be okay.”

Mom tries to wipe her face as best she can and nods, holding Dad’s hand tightly. “They’ll be okay,” she echoes. “I’d better write that grocery list. Do you need anything?”

“If the pharmacy has anything left, then have them look for painkillers and some bandages.” Dad smiles up at her. “And maybe some flowers for a certain someone.”

Mom laughs and squeezes his hand. “Smooth. You can bring me a bouquet yourself when you’re better.”

Gross. Keep the lovey-dovey stuff to yourself. I creep back to our room and slip back inside. Hide’s still sitting up in his futon, and he stares at me as I close the door. I offer him a small smile— he probably can’t see it anyways. The moon outside only sends the faintest slivers of light through the blinds.

“Sorry I took so long,” I whisper as I sit down next to him. “Mom’s busy in the kitchen. You can have my water instead.”

I uncap my water bottle and help him hold on to it, tilting it up. He flinches when the water meets his lips. I can barely see his eyes in the dark, looking up at me with fear. I rub his back.

“It’s okay. Just take little sips.”

He tries again, and relief floods my chest when he manages to take a few sips. I screw the cap back on and set it by the wall. I feel Hide’s hands cling to the sleeve of my sweater, and as soon as I see his eyes finally close, the heaviness in my eyelids wins, and I drift off too.

The next morning, Hide and I get all set to leave. Mom’s eyes look puffy and a little red, but she doesn’t make noise about it, so neither do I. Dad’s still on the couch, watching me help Hide with his shoes. The velcro on them is getting old, and the cheap Ultra-man icons on the sides are pretty faded— a birthday gift from our aunt and uncle in Japan. Hide’s worn these to hell and back. His toes have started to peek through the holes in the front.

“Mari-chan.” Dad waves me over to him. I finish putting Hide’s mittens on for him and hurry up to my dad. He holds my hand tight.

“Remember: don’t eat or drink anything with a broken seal, and stay away from houses. If you find anyone infected, keep quiet and stay away. And come back home before dark.” He smiles. “The last thing we want is two people with broken legs in this house.”

“I’ll be careful, Papa.”

Mom hands me a small notebook. “Here’s your grocery list. There’s no rush if you can’t get everything today. Just find what you can and come home.”

“Okay, Mama.” I put my own gloves on and take Hide’s hand. “Say bye, Hide.”

I wave, just to show him. He stares at me for a long moment before lifting his hand in a jerky imitation. For a second, Mom looks ready to cry again. But she ushers us out the front door and closes it behind us with a loud click. I take a deep breath, feeling the cool, crisp air fill my lungs. A faint breeze tickles my face, bringing the smell of fresh pine and earth with it. Damn, it's good to be outside again. I smile down at Hide.

“You ready?”

One click.

“Okay, grocery store, here we come!”

We're lucky our grocery store was built with a lot of windows. You'd think fluorescent lights aren't something I'd miss, but the store looks downright haunted without them. I let Hide get down off my back as we walk across the parking lot towards the front doors. There's a couple of guys standing by it, playing cards on a ripped-up couch that they probably brought out from the store. I guess that makes it more of a supermarket, but whatever. The guys both have crowbars, and there's a shotgun propped up against the table between them. They both look bored, even with their game. When Hide and I get closer, they look up and sort of jump. The guy on the right squints at me through his mask as I walk up.

“Aren't you a little young to be walking around out here?”

I shake my head, trying my best to not sound excited, because oh boy, I actually get to talk to people. “My dad broke his leg a couple days ago, so I'm here instead.”

“Your dad— Hang on.” The guy stands and keeps staring at me, then pulls his mask down.
“Mari?”

My jaw drops. Holy shit, I thought he left town during the break out. “Charlie?”

Charlie grins wide. “Dude, you’re alive! I figured, since your dad was out combing through the stores on northside, but man— Holy shit, it’s good to see you.” He rounds the table and practically tackles me in a hug. I can’t help the grin on my face as I hug him back. He holds my shoulders and looks me over. Charlie looks almost the same as when he left, a bit taller maybe, and he’s got ginger stubble on his jaw, but there’s the same crooked grin and gap teeth, and that look he gets in his eye when he’s about to burst into one of his big rants.

“Aw, you haven’t grown at all.” He ruffles my hair. “Kat’s definitely got you beat by now.”

My heart feels like it’s going to fly out of my chest. “Kat’s okay too? Is she back in town? I thought you guys left for good.”

Charlie laughs. “No. Our dad figured it’d be safer for her to just head upstate to live on campus with me, but then the colleges got shut down too, and we had to keep hopping apartments, and then I thought we should just come back home and be with Dad again. We moved back a few months ago.”

Hide pulls on my hand. I look down to find him staring at me. He pulls again.

“What is it?” I switch to Japanese. Hide clumsily gestures to the glass doors. “Ah, sorry. Just a second.”

Charlie’s frowning when I look back at him. “Is that Hide?”

It takes a second for me to shift gears back to English. I’m *way* out of practice. “Yeah. He’s five now.”

“Oh.” He studies Hide again, who just kind of stares around the parking lot instead. “Oh, fuck. Mari, I’m so sorry. When—”

“He’s five months out of the hospital now.” I smile down at Hide, who’s now watching a beetle on the sidewalk. “The doctors said he’s recovering fast.”

“Still— Well, I’m glad he’s not infected, at least.” Charlie gestures to the doors. “Grab whatever you need. There’s not much left, but I heard the state’s sending in a restock in a few weeks. And hey,” he boxes my shoulder as I walk past, “I’ll let Kat know about you. Maybe we can hang out sometime soon.”

“Sure.” I wave as I head in. “It’s good to see you, Charlie!”

Man, he wasn’t kidding about the stocks. Most of the shelves are empty. Some of the tallest shelves have a couple random items here and there. Dust coats the cleared out aisles, and I can see smudges where someone plucked an item from one of the unlocked cases. There’s several people already hanging out in here, browsing what’s left like it’s a normal grocery day, and they just sort of nod and smile at us when we pass them by. I try to smile back, but my mind’s whirling. There’s no canned food left. It’s just clothes, electrical products, and random craft supplies.

“Great,” I mutter under my breath, scowling at the allergy medicine in my hands. “I’ll cure Papa’s broken leg with Benadryl. Good job, Mari.”

I hand the box to Hide, who’s sitting facing me in the shopping cart I grabbed for us. He turns it over in his hands, gripping the box like a wooden block, which honestly? Progress. Good for him. At least he’s not crushing it or dropping it.

I roll the cart over to the drinks aisle and sigh when I’m just met with more empty shelves. Even that nasty kombucha is gone, picked clean by whoever was desperate enough to

consider it drinkable. Mom's grocery list doesn't have a single item crossed out yet. What am I supposed to do, just go home empty? If I don't do it today, we still need to tomorrow. I have to get *something*.

Maybe one of the convenience stores down the street has supplies. They've got to keep things like toilet paper and cleaning stuff and first aid for employees to use, right?

One click.

I look at Hide. "What?"

Another click. Then another.

I follow his gaze to the toy section, and it hurts my chest a little when I laugh. "Ah, okay." I roll him over to the toys. "Which one do you want?"

He points. A stuffed Winnie-the-Pooh toy sits on the shelf, a little saggy from being left there for so long. Clumps of dust have gathered around it sticking, to golden brown fur. Despite that, its little black eyes feel warm, its stitched mouth curving upwards like it's seen a long-lost friend. For a second, my breath catches. It looks just like the one Hide's doctors threw away.

As soon as I pick it up, Hide starts reaching for it, kicking his legs and actually calling for it with cooing noises. He hugs the plushie tight and buries his face in its fur, and it's like suddenly he's back. He's here, and I mean really here, because when he peeks up at me over the plushie, he sees me, really truly sees me, and there's a light in his black eyes that make them look less hollow than before.

My eyes burn. I ignore it and ruffle his hair. "Let's keep going, Hide."

We say goodbye to Charlie and head over to the other stores down the street. The outlet stores are pretty picked over too, and the McDonald's on the corner's been cleaned out. I found a couple jugs of water— that's one thing easier to find, since most people with rabies won't touch

the stuff – and a few small bags of chips and cookies, plus some leftover bandages and ice packs from a first aid kit. But it’s not enough. We need real food.

I push the cart outside of our eleventh store with a deep sigh. “Sorry, Hide, we’ll just have to go home like this–”

I stop short. The sky glows a brilliant shade of orange, turning the clouds pink and purple, and the first stars glitter high in the darkened navy shades to the east. Dread creeps up my spine and coils up in my stomach.

“I’m so stupid,” I hiss to myself. Hide’s looking at the sky too, and I just feel worse when I see the look of awe on his face. How did I lose track of time? I can’t hole up in one of the stores. There’s too many openings, too much glass. I can’t go back to the supermarket; Charlie would have left long before now. I won’t even think about trying to race the sun home. Some sister I am, putting Hide in danger the second he goes outside.

Then I spot a house behind the convenience store. All the lights are off, and the shingles on the roof are falling out. The grass hasn’t been cut in ages. It’s a terrible idea. It’s also our best shot. I park the cart by the front porch and lift Hide out, then load my backpack with our groceries, and with water jugs in one hand and Hide’s hand in the other, I march up to the front door and kick it.

No one replies. I figured: the windows are all boarded up. I kick again, just in case. No voices or footsteps, human or otherwise. The sun’s almost gone. I move to the window and peek through the boards. All I see is brown carpet. Maybe I could try to bust through, open the door from the inside. But then we have to deal with glass, plus trying to board up the window again. Maybe the back door?

My thoughts get interrupted by a click and a call of panic. Hide's practically dangling from the door handle, both hands wrapped over the latch as he tries to catch up to the door swinging open on its own. I quickly grab him before he falls.

"Good job, Hide."

He hugs my leg. I take his hand again, and we both go inside. Hide points at the kitchen when I lock the door.

"We can look. There might be food left."

That's all the permission he needs, because he's beelining for the lower cupboards before I even finish talking. I dump my things on the dining table and grab a chair to join him, opening drawers and cupboards. There's a couple dry ingredients here and there – flour, baking soda, salt – but they're used. I don't check the fridge. I've only made that mistake once.

Hide holds up a can of refried beans. I grin. "Good job! Can you go put it on the table—"

My heart almost stops when I see the figure in the living room. An old man stares back at me with wide, almost glassy eyes and deep wrinkles lining his face. His clothes look disheveled. His hands shake as he raises a fireplace poker at us.

"Who are you? How did you get in?"

His voice sounds hoarse, choked up. I slowly get down from the chair and pull Hide behind me. "We thought this place was abandoned," I say in English. "We're sorry for coming in. We just needed a place to stay for the night."

Even though my voice is quiet, he jumps and raises the poker higher. "You– You infected?"

"No, sir."

He flinches. "I don't want you here."

“Sir, please, it’s already dark.” I point at the table. “You can have one of our water jugs if you want. But can we please stay here? We’ll be gone as soon as the sun comes up, I promise.”

The old man eyes us, then the water. He quickly shakes his head. “No– No water. Not from strangers. You can stay, but no snooping. You hear me?” He shakes the poker at me. “No snooping.”

“Okay. Thank you, sir.”

He just sort of nods and shuffles off, limping back down the dark hall. As soon as I hear him close his door, I let out a big breath. “Fuck, that was close.” I manage to smile at Hide and switch to Japanese. “That nice uncle is going to let us stay the night, so let’s get some sleep.”

Hide takes my hand, and I help him onto the couch in the living room, taking his shoes off and draping my jacket over him. He hugs his Winnie-the-Pooh plush tight and closes his eyes. I kiss his forehead.

“Good night, Hide.”

I curl up in the armchair next to him.

I wake up to a hand shaking my arm, and round dark eyes appear close to mine. I try not to sigh. “Are you thirsty–”

Hide dumps three cans of food in my lap. I sit up straight and stare down at them, and my stomach rumbles, and it takes me a second to realize I’m *starving*.

“Where did you find these?” I whisper. Hide points at the hallway. I sigh. “Hide, it’s not nice to take people’s food. Come on, let’s put them back.”

His lower lip sticks out in a small pout, but he follows me to the first open door in the hall, and I stop short. The garage is *filled* with food. Corn, mashed potatoes, beans, green beans and tomatoes— everything you could think of, it's stacked on all the metal shelves lining the room wall-to-wall. The rising sun sends rays through the little windows in the garage door, reflecting off the cans, and for a minute I think maybe this is what heaven looks like. I almost feel numb. How is one guy supposed to eat all this? And here I was, offering him half the measly scraps I had.

I pick up a can of tuna and check the expiration date. It's set to expire in five months. This guy must've been stockpiling since before the apocalypse, then. One of those doomsday preppers I used to hear about in the county news. I guess all that paranoia paid off, but damn, share a little.

“What are you doing?”

I almost scream. I whip around to see the old man staring down at us with wide eyes, still shaking and holding his fireplace poker. Hide hides behind my legs. “Sir, I'm so sorry, I promise it's not what it looks like—”

“Who are you? How did you get in?”

Discomfort creeps up my spine. “You let us stay the night because it was dark outside yesterday. My brother and I were just about to leave.” I slowly put the tuna can back on the shelf. The man flinches *hard*.

“Get out.”

“We want to, but you're blocking us.” I nudge Hide and point to the far wall. He scurries through the aisle and watches me with wide eyes. The man violently shakes his head.

“I don't want you here. Who are you?”

Something about him makes my skin crawl. The jerky movements, the paranoia, the forgetfulness— “Are you okay, sir? Do you need to sit down? I can get you some water.”

“No water!”

He stumbles down the steps and swings at me with a hoarse scream. I duck and scramble out of his reach. The man crashes into the shelf and falls over. I glance around the room, looking for a weapon. In the corner, I spot a shovel and grab it. The man lunges at me again. He’s screaming, but no words come out, just jumbled noises and wheezy sobs. Saliva streams down his chin, splattering against the concrete floor. I stumble when he tries to grab at me. My heart’s pounding fast. Everything sounds loud, and I feel like my body’s moving underwater as I try to block another swing.

Another scream cuts through the haze. The man turns to his left and staggers, and suddenly a spray of water hits him in the face. I see Hide standing in the aisle next to me, holding tight to an open bottle of water. The man howls and chokes, stumbling back. I swing the shovel.

I feel bile rise in my throat when I hear his bones crack. The man collapses on the ground with a wheeze, clutching his side. Hide hurries to me and grabs my leg. The man lets out a piercing wail— then he goes silent. My stomach churns when his muscles tighten, limbs jerking, head craning back to stare blankly at the wall as his whole body begins shaking uncontrollably.

Hide whimpers and hides his face in my leg, and my body unfreezes. I pick him up and hurry out to the front door, grabbing his plushie on the way, then unlock the door and yank it open. The first thing I see is a head of ginger hair.

Charlie stares at me. “Holy shit. Mari, what happened? Matteo told me this morning that you and Hide never made it home last night, and your parents are worried sick—”

“There’s a guy in there,” I gasp. “There’s a guy, h-he’s infected, and I—”

“Infected?” Charlie slings the shotgun off his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“No, no we– we’re fine.” I see Matteo walk up behind Charlie. “But that guy– he’s having a seizure in there.”

“Okay.” Charlie looks back at Matteo. “I’m going to shoot him. Can you keep an eye on them? Make sure they don’t see any of it.”

Matteo nods and waves me over. I almost fall over as I sit down on the edge of the porch, cradling Hide in my arms. Hide buries his face in my shoulder. Matteo moves in front of the door, blocking my view inside. I cover Hide’s ears, and force myself to go completely still.

The shot echoes through the house. I uncover Hide’s ears when Charlie comes back out, looking a little shaken. But he offers me a smile anyways. “Hey, looks like you found food heaven in there.”

Just the reminder makes my stomach growl again. “Oh. Yeah, I guess so. Should we bring it all to the grocery store for everyone?”

“Don’t worry, Matteo and I can take care of that. After we bury the body though, you guys can take first pick of the food.” He takes his gloves off and ruffles my hair. “Sound good?”

“Yeah.”

The shot still rings in my ears the whole walk home. But Hide seems unbothered, having forgotten about what happened pretty much as soon as I opened up a can of sliced peaches for him. He’s sitting like a king in a pile of food, Winne-the-Pooh plushie by his side like a little advisor, snacking on food we could only dream of a few days ago.

Hide notices me looking at him and holds the can out to me. I take a peach slice and pop it in my mouth, and suddenly I feel like crying. I cover my mouth, savoring the sweet taste, before swallowing it. Hide makes a sound of worry and holds his pen up.

Two clicks.

“I’m fine,” I say.

Two clicks.

“I’m okay, Hide.”

“...Ma?”

I stare at him. Tears are already streaming down my face before it even registers that he spoke. “What?”

“Ma?” He reaches for me. “Ma.”

“Are you– Are you saying Mari?”

At that, he breaks into a huge grin. “Ma!”

I hug him tight, laughing with him. “Yes! That’s me, that’s me! I’m right here.” I kiss his forehead. “I’ll always be right here.” In the distance, I can see Mom and Dad sitting outside our house, small and bright against the shadows of the woods, and for the first time in months my heart feels less hollow. “Let’s go home, Hide.”