

*'A dreamlike story
of dystopia'*
—Jia Tolentino

Shortlisted

The
2020
International
Booker
Prize



*'Beautiful...
Haunting'*
—Sunday Times

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YOKO OGAWA

Yoko Ogawa has won every major Japanese literary award. Her fiction has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *A Public Space* and *Zoetrope*. Her works include *The Diving Pool*, *The Housekeeper and the Professor*, *Hotel Iris* and the story collection *Revenge*. *The Memory Police* was a finalist for the 2019 National Book Award for Translated Literature, and was shortlisted for the 2020 International Booker Prize.

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The Memory Police

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I sometimes wonder what was disappeared first—among all the things that have vanished from the island.

“Long ago, before you were born, there were many more things here,” my mother used to tell me when I was still a child. “Transparent things, fragrant things . . . fluttery ones, bright ones . . . wonderful things you can’t possibly imagine.

“It’s a shame that the people who live here haven’t been able to hold such marvelous things in their hearts and minds, but that’s just the way it is on this island. Things go on disappearing, one by one. It won’t be long now,” she added. “You’ll see for yourself. Something will disappear from your life.”

“Is it scary?” I asked her, suddenly anxious.

“No, don’t worry. It doesn’t hurt, and you won’t even be particularly sad. One morning you’ll simply wake up and it will be over, before you’ve even realized. Lying still, eyes closed, ears pricked, trying to sense the flow of the morning air, you’ll feel that something has changed from the night before, and you’ll know that you’ve lost something, that something has been disappeared from the island.”

My mother would talk like this only when we were in her studio in the basement. It was a large, dusty, rough-floored room, built so close to the river on the north side that you could clearly hear the sound of the current. I would sit on the little stool that was reserved for my use, as my mother, a sculptor, sharpened a

chisel or polished a stone with her file and talked on in her quiet voice.

“The island is stirred up after a disappearance. People gather in little groups out in the street to talk about their memories of the thing that’s been lost. There are regrets and a certain sadness, and we try to comfort one another. If it’s a physical object that has been disappeared, we gather the remnants up to burn, or bury, or toss into the river. But no one makes much of a fuss, and it’s over in a few days. Soon enough, things are back to normal, as though nothing has happened, and no one can even recall what it was that disappeared.”

Then she would interrupt her work to lead me back behind the staircase to an old cabinet with rows of small drawers.

“Go ahead, open any one you like.”

I would think about my choice for a moment, studying the rusted oval handles.

I always hesitated, because I knew what sorts of strange and fascinating things were inside. Here in this secret place, my mother kept hidden many of the things that had been disappeared from the island in the past.

When at last I made my choice and opened a drawer, she would smile and place the contents on my outstretched palm.

“This is a kind of fabric called ‘ribbon’ that was disappeared when I was just seven years old. You used it to tie up your hair or decorate a skirt.

“And this was called a ‘bell.’ Give it a shake—it makes a lovely sound.

“Oh, you’ve chosen a good drawer today. That’s called an ‘emerald,’ and it’s the most precious thing I have here. It’s a keepsake from my grandmother. They’re beautiful and terribly valuable, and at one point they were the most highly prized jewels on the island. But their beauty has been forgotten now.

“This one is thin and small, but it’s important. When you had something you wanted to tell someone, you would write it down on a piece of paper and paste this ‘stamp’ on it. Then they would deliver it for you, anywhere at all. But that was a long time ago . . .”

Ribbon, bell, emerald, stamp. The words that came from my mother’s mouth thrilled me, like the names of little girls from distant countries or new species of plants. As I listened to her talk, it made me happy to imagine a time when all these things had a place here on the island.

Yet that was also rather difficult to do. The objects in my palm seemed to cower there, absolutely still, like little animals in hibernation, sending me no signal at all. They often left me with an uncertain feeling, as though I were trying to make images of the clouds in the sky out of modeling clay. When I stood before the secret drawers, I felt I had to concentrate on each word my mother said.

My favorite story was the one about “perfume,” a clear liquid in a small glass bottle. The first time my mother placed it in my hand, I thought it was some sort of sugar water, and I started to bring it to my mouth.

“No, it’s not to drink,” my mother cried, laughing. “You put just a drop on your neck, like this.” Then she carefully dabbed the bottle behind her ear.

“But why would you do that?” I asked, thoroughly puzzled.

“Perfume is invisible to the eye, but this little bottle nevertheless contains something quite powerful,” she said.

I held it up and studied it.

“When you put it on, it has a wonderful smell. It’s a way of charming someone. When I was young, we would use it before we went out with a boy. Choosing the right scent was as important as choosing the right dress—you wanted the boy to like both.

This is the perfume I wore when your father and I were courting. We used to meet at a rose garden on the hill south of town, and I had a terrible time finding a fragrance that wouldn't be overpowered by the flowers. When the wind rustled my hair, I would give him a look as if to ask whether he'd noticed my perfume."

My mother was at her most lively when she talked about this small bottle.

"In those days, everyone could smell perfume. Everyone knew how wonderful it was. But no more. It's not sold anywhere, and no one wants it. It was disappeared the autumn of the year that your father and I were married. We gathered on the banks of the river with our perfume. Then we opened the bottles and poured out their contents, watching the perfume dissolve in the water like some worthless liquid. Some girls held the bottles up to their noses one last time—but the ability to smell the perfume had already faded, along with all memory of what it had meant. The river reeked for two or three days afterward, and some fish died. But no one seemed to notice. You see, the very idea of 'perfume' had been disappeared from their heads."

She looked sad as she finished speaking. Then she gathered me up on her lap and let me smell the perfume on her neck.

"Well?" she said.

But I had no idea what to answer. I could tell that there was some sort of scent there—like the smell of toasting bread or the chlorine from a swimming pool, yet different—but no matter how I tried, no other thought came to mind.

My mother waited, but when I said nothing she sighed quietly.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "To you, this is no more than a few drops of water. But it can't be helped. It's all but impossible to recall the things we've lost on the island once they're gone." And with that, she returned the bottle to its drawer.

When the clock on the pillar in her studio struck nine, I went up to my room to sleep. My mother returned to work with her hammer and chisel, as the crescent moon shone in the large window.

As she kissed me good night, I finally asked the question that had been bothering me for some time.

“Mama, why do you remember all the things that have been disappeared? Why can you still smell the ‘perfume’ that everyone else has forgotten?”

She looked out through the window for a moment, gazing at the moon, and then brushed some stone dust from her apron.

“I suppose because I’m always thinking about them,” she said, her voice a bit hoarse.

“But I don’t understand,” I said. “Why are you the only one who hasn’t lost anything? Do you remember everything? Forever?”

She looked down, as though this were something sad, so I kissed her again to make her feel better.

My mother died, and then my father died, and since then I have lived all alone in this house. Two years ago, the nurse who took care of me when I was small died as well, of a heart attack. I believe I have cousins living in a village near the source of the river on the far side of the mountains to the north, but I have never met them. The mountainsides are covered with thorny trees and the summits are always cloaked in mist, so no one ever attempts to cross them. And since there is no map of the island—maps themselves having long since been disappeared—no one knows its precise shape, or exactly what lies on the other side of the mountains.

My father was an ornithologist. He worked at an observatory at the top of the hill to the south. He spent several months a year there, collecting data, photographing the creatures, and trying to hatch eggs. I loved to visit him and went as often as I could—using the excuse that I had to deliver his lunch. The young researchers were kind to me and spoiled me with cookies and hot chocolate.

I would sit on my father's lap and study his creatures through his binoculars. The shape of a beak, the color of the feathers around the eyes, the way the wings moved—nothing escaped his notice as he worked to identify them. The binoculars were too heavy for a little girl, and when my arms grew tired, my father would slip his hand under them to support the weight. When we

were cheek to cheek like that, watching them take flight, I always wanted to ask him whether he knew what was in the drawers of the old cabinet in my mother's studio. But just as I was about to speak, I remembered her profile as she gazed at the sliver of a moon through the transom window, and I never found the words. I contented myself instead with passing along my mother's instructions to him to eat his lunch before it spoiled.

When it was time for me to go, he would walk with me as far as the bus stop. At a spot along the road where the creatures came to feed, I would pause to crumble one of the cookies I'd received from his assistants.

"When are you coming home?" I'd ask him.

"Saturday evening, I think," he would tell me, looking uncomfortable. "Be sure to give my love to your mother." He waved good-bye so vigorously that he nearly lost the red pencil—or the compass or highlighter or ruler or tweezers—stuffed in his breast pocket.

. . .

I think it's fortunate that the birds were not disappeared until after my father died. Most people on the island found some other line of work quickly when a disappearance affected their job, but I don't think that would have been the case for him. Identifying those wild creatures was his one true gift.

When the hats were disappeared, the milliner who lived across the street began making umbrellas. My nurse's husband, who had been a mechanic on the ferryboat, became a security guard at a warehouse. A girl who was a few years ahead of me in school had been employed at a beauty salon, but she quickly found work as a midwife. None of them said a word about it.

10 Even when the new job was less well paid, they seemed to have no regrets about losing the old one. Of course, had they complained, they might have attracted the attention of the Memory Police.

People—and I’m no exception—seem capable of forgetting almost anything, much as if our island were unable to float in anything but an expanse of totally empty sea.

The disappearance of the birds, as with so many other things, happened suddenly one morning. When I opened my eyes, I could sense something strange, almost rough, about the quality of the air. The sign of a disappearance. Still wrapped in my blanket, I looked carefully around the room. The cosmetics on my dressing table, the paper clips and notes scattered on my desk, the lace of the curtains, the record shelf—it could be anything. It took patience and concentration to figure out what was gone. I got up, put on a sweater, and went out into the garden. The neighbors were all outside, too, peering around anxiously. The dog in the next yard was growling softly.

Then I spotted a small brown creature flying high up in the sky. It was plump, with what appeared to be a tuft of white feathers at its breast. I had just begun to wonder whether it was one of the creatures I had seen with my father when I realized that everything I knew about them had disappeared from inside me: my memories of them, my feelings about them, the very meaning of the word “bird”—everything.

“The birds,” muttered the ex-milliner across the way. “And good riddance. I doubt anyone will miss them.” He adjusted the scarf around his neck and sneezed quietly. Then he caught sight of me. Perhaps recalling that my father had been an ornithologist, he gave me an awkward little smile and went off to work. When the others outside realized what had disappeared, they too seemed relieved. They returned to their morning duties, leaving me alone to stare at the sky.

The little brown creature flew in a wide circle and then vanished to the north. I couldn't recall the name of the species, and I found myself wishing I had paid better attention when I'd been with my father at the observatory. I tried to hold on to the way it looked in flight or the sound of its chirping or the colors of its feathers, but I knew it was useless. This bird, which should have been intertwined with memories of my father, was already unable to elicit any feeling in me at all. It was nothing more than a simple creature, moving through space as a function of the vertical motion of its wings.

That afternoon I went to the market to do my shopping. Here and there I saw groups of people holding cages, with parakeets, Java sparrows, and canaries fluttering nervously inside, as if they knew what was about to happen. The people holding the cages were quiet, almost dazed, perhaps still trying to adjust to this new disappearance.

Each owner seemed to be saying good-bye to his bird in his own way. Some were calling their names, others rubbing them against their cheeks, still others giving them a treat, mouth to beak. But once these little ceremonies were finished, they opened the cages and held them up to the sky. The little creatures, confused at first, fluttered for a moment around their owners, but they soon were gone, as if drawn away into the distance.

When they were gone, a calm fell as though the air itself were breathing with infinite care. The owners turned for home, empty cages in hand.

And that was how the birds disappeared.

. . .

Something rather unexpected happened the next day. I was eating breakfast and watching television when the doorbell rang.

12 From the violent way it rang, I could tell that something unpleasant was about to happen.

“Take us to your father’s office,” said one of the officers from the Memory Police whom I found standing in the doorway. There were five of them, dressed in dark green uniforms, with heavy belts and black boots. They wore leather gloves and their guns were half hidden in holsters on their hips. The men were nearly identical, with only three badges on their collars to tell them apart—though I had no time to study them closely.

“Take us to your father’s office,” echoed a second man, his tone the same as the man who had spoken first. This one wore badges in the shapes of a diamond, a bean, and a trapezoid.

“My father died five years ago,” I said as slowly and evenly as I could, trying to remain calm.

“We know,” said another man, wearing insignia shaped like a wedge, a hexagon, and the letter “T.” As though his words had been some sort of signal, the five officers marched into the house without even removing their shoes. Suddenly, the corridor was filled with the clatter of boots and guns.

“I’ve just cleaned the carpets,” I said. “Please take off your shoes.” I knew I should have said something more forceful, but this simple request was all that came to mind. It hardly mattered, since they paid no attention to me and were already climbing the stairs.

They seemed to know exactly where they were going, and a moment later they were in my father’s office on the east side of the house, setting to work with remarkable efficiency. First, one of them opened all the windows, which had been sealed shut since my father’s death. Meanwhile, another one used a long, thin tool like a scalpel to force the locks on the cabinets and the desk drawers. The rest ran their fingers over every inch of the walls, apparently in search of secret compartments.

Then they all began to riffle through my father's papers, pawing at his notes, drafts, books, and photographs. When they came upon something they considered dangerous—in other words, anything that contained the word “bird”—they threw the item unceremoniously on the floor. Leaning against the door-frame, I fiddled nervously with the lock as I watched them work.

The Memory Police, just as I'd heard, went about their assigned tasks in the most efficient manner. They worked in silence, their eyes fixed, making no unnecessary movements. The only sound was the rustling of papers, like the fluttering of wings.

In no time at all, a mountain of paper had formed on the floor. Nearly everything in the room had to do with my father's work in some way. Documents covered with my father's familiar handwriting and the photographs he had taken at the observatory flew out of the officers' hands one after the other. There was no doubt that they were creating chaos, but they went about it in such a precise manner that they gave an impression of careful order. I felt I should try to stop them, but my heart was pounding and I didn't know what to do.

“Please be careful,” I murmured, but they ignored me. “These are the only things I have from my father.” Not one of them so much as turned to look at me, and my voice was lost in the pile of memories on the floor.

Then one of the officers reached for the handle on the bottom drawer of the desk.

“There's nothing in there that has to do with birds,” I cried out. It was the drawer where my father kept family letters and photographs. The officer—this one wore a badge made up of concentric circles, as well as one shaped like a rectangle and another like a teardrop—continued his search. The only offending item in the drawer was a photograph of our family with a

brightly colored rare bird—I no longer recall the name—that my father had managed to hatch from an egg he had incubated. The man carefully gathered up the remaining photographs and letters and put them back in the drawer. That was the only kindness shown that day.

When they had finished sorting through everything, they took the items piled on the floor and shoved them into large black plastic bags they pulled from pockets inside their jackets. It was clear from the brutal way they stuffed the bags that they were going to dispose of everything they took. They had not been looking for anything in particular; they had simply wanted to eliminate all trace of anything relating to birds. The first duty of the Memory Police was to enforce the disappearances.

I realized at some point that this search was unlike the day they took my mother away. Today, they seemed to have found everything they wanted, and I was fairly sure they would not be back. My father was dead, and the memory of the birds was gradually fading from the house.

The search had taken an hour and had yielded ten large bags. The office had grown quite warm from the bright sun that streamed in. The polished badges shone on the officers' collars, but none of the men appeared to be sweating or suffering from the heat in any way. They shouldered two bags each and carried them to the truck they had left parked outside.

The room had changed completely. The traces of my father's presence, which I had done my best to preserve, had vanished, replaced by an emptiness that would not be filled. I stood in the middle of that emptiness, feeling myself on the verge of being drawn into its terrible depth.

I make my living now from my writing. So far, I've published three novels. The first was about a piano tuner who wanders through music shops and concert halls searching for her lover, a pianist, who has vanished. She relies solely on the sound of his music that lingers in her ears. The second was about a ballerina who lost her right leg in an accident and lives in a greenhouse with her boyfriend, who is a botanist. And the third was about a young woman nursing her younger brother, who suffers from a disease that is destroying his chromosomes.

Each one told the story of something that had been disappeared. Everyone likes that sort of thing. But here on the island, writing novels is one of the least impressive, most underappreciated occupations one can pursue. No one could claim that the island is overflowing with books. The library, a shabby single-floor wooden building next to the rose garden, has only a handful of patrons, no matter when one visits, and the books seem to cower on the shelves, fearful of crumbling to dust at the slightest touch. They will all, in the end, be tossed out without being cared for or rebound—which is why the collection never grows. But no one ever complains.

The bookstores are much the same. Nearly deserted, and the managers appear almost surly behind their stacks of unsold books with yellowing covers.

Few people here have any need for novels.

I generally begin writing at about two o'clock in the afternoon and keep at it until nearly midnight, yet I rarely finish more than five pages. I enjoy writing slowly, filling each square on the paper, one character at a time. There's no need to hurry. I take my time.

I work in my father's old room. But it's much neater and more orderly now, since my novels require no notes or other materials. My desk holds only a stack of paper, a pencil, a small knife to sharpen it, and an eraser. Though I've tried, I've found no way to fill in the voids left by the Memory Police.

When evening comes, I go out to walk for an hour or so. I follow the coastal road to the dock, and on the way home I take a path over the hill that passes the observatory.

The ferry has been tied to the dock for a very long time and is now completely covered with rust. No passengers board it and it can no longer take them anywhere. It, too, is among the things that have been disappeared from the island.

The name of the boat is painted on the bow, but the salt air has scoured it away, leaving it illegible. The windows are coated with dust, and the hull and anchor chain and propeller are covered with mussels and seaweed—as though it is an enormous sea creature that is slowly turning to stone.

My nurse's husband had once served as mechanic on the boat. After the ferry had disappeared, he worked as a watchman for a warehouse by the docks. But at some point he retired and he lives now on the abandoned boat. On my walk, I invariably stopped in to chat with him.

"How have you been?" he asked one evening, offering me a chair. "Are you making progress with your novel?" There are lots of places to sit, so depending on the weather or our mood we might find ourselves occupying a bench up on deck or relaxing on a comfortable couch in the first-class lounge.

"Slowly," I told him.

"Well, the most important thing is that you take care of yourself." He nodded to himself and added, "There aren't many people who can sit all day at a desk and make up such complicated things right out of their head. If your parents were here to see you, they would be so proud."

"A novel isn't as marvelous as all that. To me, taking apart a boat engine, fixing it, and putting it all back together again is much more mysterious and wonderful."

"No, no. The ferry has been disappeared and there's nothing more to be said about it." We fell silent then for a moment.

"Ah," he said at last. "I've managed to get some excellent peaches. Why don't we have one?" He went into the tiny galley next to the boiler room, where he laid out slices of peach on a plate lined with ice and topped them with a sprig of mint. Then he made a pot of strong green tea. He was truly gifted when it comes to machines, food, and plants.

I've always given him one of the first copies of each of my books.

"So this is your new *novel*," he would say each time, pronouncing the word with great care and taking the book in both hands, as though he were receiving a sacrament. "Thank you, thank you," he would repeat, as his voice grew almost tearful and I felt increasingly embarrassed.

But he has never read a single page of any of my books.

Once, when I told him I'd love to know what he thinks of them, he demurred.

"I couldn't possibly say," he said. "If you read a novel to the end, then it's over. I would never want to do something as wasteful as that. I'd much rather keep it here with me, safe and sound, forever."

Then he placed the book in the little altar to the sea gods in the ship's wheelhouse and joined his wrinkled hands in prayer.

As we enjoyed our snack, we talked about all sorts of things—but most often we spoke of our memories. Of my mother and father, my old nurse, the observatory, sculptures, and the distant past when one could still take a boat to other places. But our memories were diminishing day by day, for when something disappeared from the island, all memory of it vanished, too. We divided the last bit of peach and repeated the same stories to each other, allowing the fruit to dissolve, ever so slowly, on our tongues.

When the sun began to tilt down toward the sea, I climbed down from the boat. Though the gangway wasn't particularly steep, the old man came out to escort me. He treated me as though I were still a little girl.

"Take care on the way home."

"I will," I told him. "See you tomorrow."

He stood watching me as I walked away, never moving until I was completely out of sight.

Leaving the harbor behind, my next stop was the observatory at the top of the hill. But I never lingered long. I gazed out at the sea, taking a few deep breaths, and then walked down again.

The Memory Police have done their work here, much as they did in my father's study, leaving it little more than a ruin. Nothing at all remains to remind a visitor that it had once been a place to observe wild birds. The researchers, too, have scattered.

I stood at the window, where I once stood with my father looking out through binoculars, and even now small winged creatures occasionally flitted by, but they were no more than reminders that birds mean nothing at all to me anymore.

As I climbed down the hill and made my way through town, the sun was setting. The island was quieter in the evening. People coming home from work walked with their heads lowered, chil-

dren hurried along. Even the sputtering engines of market trucks, empty after the day's sales, were muffled and forlorn.

19

Silence fell around us all, as though we were steeling ourselves for the next disappearance, which would no doubt come—perhaps even tomorrow.

So it was that evening came to the island.

On Wednesday afternoon, on my way to take my manuscript to my publisher, I had an encounter with the Memory Police. It was the third time I'd seen them this month, and they seemed to grow a bit more brutal each time.

It occurred to me that it has been fifteen years since they first appeared. In those days, it was just becoming obvious that some people, like my mother, did not lose their memories of the things that had disappeared, and the Memory Police began taking them all away. Though no one had any idea where they were being held.

I had just gotten off the bus and was waiting to cross the street when three of their dark green trucks with canvas covers in back rumbled into the intersection. The cars along the street slowed and pulled to the curb to let them pass. The trucks stopped in front of a building that housed a dentist's office, an insurance company, and a dance studio. Ten men from the Memory Police jumped out and hurried into the building.

The people in the street watched tensely, some ducking into nearby alleys, and they all seemed to hope that the scene unfolding before them would be over before they themselves were pulled into it.

I clutched the envelope that held my manuscript and stood stock-still behind a lamp pole. Several times, as I waited, the traf-

fic light changed from green to yellow to red and back again to green. No one ventured into the crosswalk. The passengers on the streetcar peered out the windows. At some point I realized that my envelope had gotten completely wrinkled.

A short time later, the sound of footsteps could be heard coming from the building—the forceful, rhythmic boots of the Memory Police mixed with quieter, more uncertain steps. Then a line of people emerged: two middle-aged gentlemen, a woman in her thirties with dyed brown hair, and a thin girl barely in her teens.

Though the cold weather had not yet set in, they each wore several layers of shirts, an overcoat each, and mufflers and scarves wrapped around their necks. They held bags and suitcases that were obviously stuffed full. It seemed they had been trying to bring with them as many useful items as they were able to carry.

Judging from the loose buttons, fluttering shoelaces, and bits of clothing protruding from their bags, it was clear that they had been forced to pack quickly. And now they were being marched out of the building with weapons at their backs. Still, their faces were calm and they stared into the distance with eyes as still as a lonely swamp deep in the woods. In those eyes, no doubt, were all sorts of memories that had been lost to us.

As always, the Memory Police, badges glinting from their collars, went about their appointed task with terrible efficiency. The four were led past the spot where I was standing, and I caught just a whiff of an antiseptic smell—perhaps they had come from the dentist's office.

They were loaded, one after another, into the back of one of the trucks, the guns trained on them the entire time. The young girl, who was last in line, carried an orange bag decorated with

22 an appliqué of a bear. She had thrown this into the truck and was attempting to climb up herself, but it was too high and she ended up falling on her back.

I cried out before I could stop myself and dropped my envelope. The pages of my manuscript scattered over the sidewalk, and the other bystanders turned to look disapprovingly. They were afraid of creating a disturbance, of giving the police reason to notice them.

A boy who was standing nearby helped me pick up the pages. Some were damp from falling in puddles and others had been trampled, but we managed to find everything.

“Is that all of them?” the boy whispered in my ear. I nodded and gave him a grateful look.

But this little incident had no effect on the work of the Memory Police. Not one of them had turned to look at us.

The girl had scrambled to her feet, and one of the officers who was already in the truck reached down, caught hold of the girl’s hand, and pulled her up. There was still something childish in the small, knobby knees that protruded below her skirt. The canvas cover was lowered over the back of the truck and the engines started.

Even after they were gone, it took a moment before time resumed its normal flow. When the trucks had gone and the sound of their engines had receded in the distance, the streetcar started up again—and only then did I feel sure that the Memory Police had left and would do me no harm. The people on the sidewalk went off in whatever direction they had been heading, and the boy who had helped me crossed the street.

I stood looking at the door to the building, now tightly shut, and wondered how the officer’s hand must have felt to the young girl as he pulled her into the truck.

. . .

"I saw something terrible on my way here," I told R, my editor, in the lobby of the publishing house.

"The Memory Police?" he asked, lighting a cigarette.

"Yes. They seem worse recently."

"They're awful," he agreed, slowly exhaling a long stream of smoke.

"But today was different somehow. They took four people at once from the center of town, in broad daylight. As far as I know, they've generally acted at night, on the edge of town, taking just one member of a family."

"Those people must have been hidden in a safe house."

"A safe house?" I said, repeating the unfamiliar words, but they died in my throat almost before I'd said them. I'd been told it was best not to talk about such sensitive matters in public. There was no telling whether plainclothes police might be nearby. Rumors about them were rampant on the island.

The lobby was nearly deserted. Just three men in suits near the potted ficus tree, deep in discussion around a thick stack of papers, and a receptionist sitting at the desk looking bored.

"I would guess they had converted one of the rooms in the building into a hiding place. There isn't really much else they can do. I've heard that there's a fairly large underground network that creates these safe houses and then keeps them running. They build the rooms and then provide the occupants with supplies and money. But if the police are starting to raid the safe houses, then there's really no place left to hide . . ."

R seemed to want to add something more, but he fell silent and reached instead for his cup of coffee, his gaze wandering to the garden in the courtyard.

There was a small fountain made of bricks in the garden. A plain, nondescript thing. As the conversation lagged, the sound of the spray could be heard through the window, like soft chords being played on an instrument in the distance.

"It's always struck me as odd that the police can tell who they are," I said, watching him as he looked out at the fountain. "I mean, the people who don't forget after a disappearance. I don't think they have any distinguishing features. They're men and women, all ages, from all different families. So if they're careful and make sure to blend in with everyone else, they should be able to pass. It shouldn't be that hard to play the game, to pretend that the disappearances affect them like they do the rest of us."

"I wonder whether it's really as simple as you make it sound." R thought for a moment. "The conscious mind is embedded in a subconscious that's ten times as powerful, which may make trying to pretend almost impossible. They can't even imagine what these disappearances mean. If it were easy to pretend, they wouldn't be hiding away in these safe houses."

"That's true," I said.

"It's just a rumor, but I've heard they're learning to analyze our genes to find out who has this trait. They're assembling technicians in a secret facility at the university."

"Analyzing genes?" I murmured.

"That's right. There are no visible identifiers that link this group of people together, but the assumption is that there must be something in their genetic makeup. Judging from the behavior of the Memory Police, it seems the research must be fairly advanced."

"But how do they access our genes?" I asked.

"You just drank from this cup, didn't you?" R said, stubbing out his cigarette and lifting my coffee cup to eye level. I nodded.

"They could take this and isolate your genetic material from