

The Memory Police



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF YOKO OGAWA

Yōko Ogawa was born in Okayama, Japan and studied writing at Waseda University in Shinjuku, Tokyo. She worked as a medical engineering secretary until she married her husband and quit her job—a common practice for women in her generation. Ogawa wrote while home alone when her husband was at work. She published her first novel, *The Breaking of the Butterfly*, in 1988, a debut that would go on to win the Kaien Literary Prize. In 1990, Ogawa won the Akutagawa Prize for her book *Pregnancy Diaries*, which she wrote while taking care of her young son. Since her first publication, Ogawa has written over 50 works of fiction and nonfiction. Internationally, her work has been recognized with the Shirley Jackson Award and the American Book Award, and the English translation of *The Memory Police* was a finalist for the International Booker Prize in 2020. Ogawa cites authors such as Haruki Murakami, Marguerite Duras, and Paul Auster as influences in her writing. Ogawa has said that no matter where life takes her, she always wants “to have a life of writing.”

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As mentioned above, *The Diary of Anne Frank* was a large influence on Ogawa while she wrote *The Memory Police*, suggesting that the atrocities of World War II—and specifically the Holocaust—impacted Ogawa’s writing. Ogawa has visited the Anne Frank annex in Amsterdam and even wrote two other books explicitly about Frank. When *The Memory Police* was published in 1994, it was nearly the 50th anniversary of World War II. However, Ogawa also uses sci-fi (or magical realism) to make a broader statement about not just bad actors in charge but the groupthink and emotional numbness that can occur among civilians in times of war or social strife.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Memory Police has been compared to the English author George Orwell’s dystopian [1984](#). Although Ogawa’s novel strikes a much different (softer and more melancholic) tone than Orwell’s, the parallels between the all-seeing Big Brother in [1984](#) and the Memory Police’s shadowy surveillance in Ogawa’s novel are evident. Also related to *The Memory Police* are the works of Haruki Murakami, a Japanese author who Ogawa cites as an influence in her writing. *Kafka on the Shore*, for example shares themes of memory, fate, and isolation with *The Memory Police*, as well as dream-like narration. Lastly, Ogawa has said that *The Diary of Anne Frank* directly influenced

her writing *The Memory Police*. Written between 1942 and 1944 while Frank was concealed in an attic hiding from the Nazis, *The Diary of Anne Frank* inspired Ogawa to explore what happens to people when confined in impossibly small spaces. Though not an exact allegory of Nazi-occupied Europe, *The Memory Police* echoes *The Dairy of Anne Frank* by confining characters to secret rooms, hiding from a lethal state force that hunts people down and prevents collective uprising through violence and surveillance.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Memory Police
- **When Written:** 1994 (translated into English 2019)
- **Where Written:** Ōsaka, Japan
- **When Published:** 1994
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Dystopian, Science-Fiction, Magical Realism
- **Setting:** An unnamed island (likely in Japan)
- **Climax:** The unnamed narrator disappears, and R leaves the hidden room.
- **Antagonist:** The Memory Police
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Eavesdropper. Ogawa doesn’t like being categorized as a strictly feminist writer, even though much of her writing centers on women. Rather, she says that when she is writing, she simply thinks of herself as an “eavesdropper” and that, to create a character, she just “peeks into their world and takes notes.”

Translation Trouble. The Japanese title of *The Memory Police* loosely translates to “secret” or “crystallization.” In this sense, the original title had less emphasis on the Memory Police themselves and more of a focus on the mysterious forces underpinning the disappearances on the island—supernatural, all-consuming forces that even the Memory Police cannot control.



PLOT SUMMARY

The Memory Police takes place on an unnamed island where a mysterious, supernatural force makes things “disappear.” “Disappearances” start in the mind—people on the island first lose all association with the object that’s been disappeared, and then they physically get rid of the item (if they can) by throwing

it in the river or burning it. Nature, too, seems to comply with the mysterious rules of these disappearances, like when roses disappear and the wind somehow knows to only blow off the rose petals and not other flowers' petals.

The story takes place through the eyes of the unnamed narrator, a young woman whose mother was part of a minority of people on the island whose minds are not affected by the disappearances. When the narrator was a young girl, her mother used to show her a cabinet full of secret items, all objects that had been disappeared years ago. The narrator loved hearing her mother talk about these mysterious objects, even though she was unable to remember them or create any associations with any of these items. Eventually, a state force called the Memory Police found out that the mother did not lose her memories, and they summoned her to their headquarters—a week later, she died, and the narrator is sure that the Memory Police killed her.

In the present, the narrator is grown up and lives alone. Her father also died, though of natural causes. The narrator is grateful that her father didn't live long enough to see **birds** disappear, because he was an ornithologist, and living without birds would have devastated him. As an adult, the narrator is a writer, and she's published a few novels. She trusts her editor, R, with her manuscripts. When she finds out that R is also one of the people who doesn't lose his memories—and is thus in danger of being captured and killed by the Memory Police—she comes up with a plan to hide him. She and an old family friend, the old man, build a secret room underneath the narrator's father's old office, and R leaves his wife to move into the room for safety.

Over the course of the novel, more and more things disappear, and though the island inhabitants try to get along, they find themselves less and less capable of handling the disappearances. When calendars disappear, time itself adheres to the mysterious rules of disappearances: the island is stuck in winter, with **snow** falling most days. When novels disappear, R tries desperately to get the narrator not to get rid of her books. But even though she is a novelist and writing was previously so important to her, she burns most of them.

Punctuating the novel are excerpts from a manuscript that the narrator has been writing. In the manuscript, a young woman falls in love with her typing teacher. She loses her voice and can only communicate by typing on a typewriter. One day, her typewriter breaks, and the teacher says he will fix it. He leads her to a room at the top of a clocktower (the same building where he teaches classes)—there, the woman sees that there are many broken typewriters, all stacked high to the ceiling. Instead of fixing the machine, the teacher tells her that it was he who had taken her voice and that he'd "locked" it inside a typewriter. He then proceeds to lock the woman into the room. She has no voice, and she can't fight back.

Back in the main narrative, the Memory Police increase the

intensity of their searches and the brutality of their tactics. They begin searching whole neighborhoods without warning or reason. One day, the old man is arrested and interrogated—the narrator goes to the Memory Police's headquarters, but she's told she cannot visit him and is turned away. Luckily, the old man is released later that week. One night, the Memory Police storm the narrator's home. The narrator and the old man are terrified as they watch the Memory Police search the house. However, through another stroke of luck, the Memory Police don't find the hidden room and leave without discovering R.

The narrator, the old man, and R try to carry on with life despite the disappearances and despite the looming fear of the Memory Police. R cannot leave the hidden room, so he becomes quite reliant on the narrator, who brings him all of his meals and looks after him. The two get into the habit of talking often—sometimes about simple things, but often about how different it is being someone who remembers versus somebody who forgets. The narrator realizes that she's fallen in love with R.

Meanwhile, R tries to help the old man and the narrator retrieve some of their lost memories by showing them lost items, like a music box, that he illicitly kept after a disappearance. But although the narrator and the old man are always interested, they never form any associations with these foreign objects. Eventually, they discover that the narrator's mother had hidden more secret objects in some of her old sculptures. But even seeing these items cannot bring back any of the narrator and the old man's memories.

The narrator forces herself to finish her manuscript, even though writing has become incredibly exhausting at best and impossible at worst since the disappearance of novels. In the manuscript, the woman is still locked in the room in the tower—the teacher visits her to feed her and to abuse her, but he eventually stops caring that much about her and focuses his attention on a new student. The woman is unable to leave the room, but she is also mentally deteriorating—the manuscript ends with her being "absorbed" into the room and with the teacher choosing a new victim.

In the main narrative, the narrator is also disintegrating. The old man dies because of an injury he sustained during an earthquake, and the narrator feels incredibly alone. Then, not long after, left legs disappear. Slowly but surely, all body parts eventually disappear, and the people of the island are reduced to just their voices. The narrator (as a voice) sits in the hidden room with R, who begs her to remember her body. But she says that she cannot. Then, even her voice disappears. R sits, devastated, alone in the hidden room for a long time. But with this final disappearance, it is as though something has shattered through the rules of the island, and R no longer seems to fear the Memory Police (the narrator thinks that even they have disappeared). So, he eventually walks up and out of the hidden room. The narrator, no longer any sort of real entity,

“continues to disappear.”



CHARACTERS

The Unnamed Narrator – The unnamed narrator is the protagonist of *The Memory Police*. She is a young woman who lives alone, since both her mother and her father are dead. She is a novelist and shares her writing with her editor, R, whom she cares deeply for and eventually falls in love with. She is close friends with her late nurse’s husband, the old man who lives on a dilapidated ferry. The book is vague about her physical appearance, but she is a quiet and demure woman. When the Memory Police begin rounding up people who are unaffected by the “disappearances” on the island, she, along with the old man, devises a plan to hide and shelter R (who does not forget the memories of things that are disappeared). Sheltering R becomes her mission throughout the novel. The narrator has a bit more knowledge than the average citizen about the “disappearances,” because her mother also did not forget like she was supposed to and used to show the narrator some of the beautiful items that disappeared from the island a long time ago. The narrator tries to fight back against the Memory Police and against the epidemic of forgetting—she even finishes a manuscript after novels are disappeared—but ultimately, she is unable to fill the void in her heart and mind where the memories used to be. The novel ends with the narrator—who’s entire body and voice are gone—disappearing in the hidden room that she used to shelter R.

R – R is a literary editor who works with the unnamed narrator’s manuscripts. He has a wife—and, eventually, a baby son—but for the majority of the novel, he lives in the narrator’s home in a room hidden away from the Memory Police. R is part of a minority of people on the unnamed island where the story takes place who do not forget objects after a “disappearance.” This puts him in danger, since the Memory Police hunt down anyone who remembers things, so R takes the shelter offered to him by the narrator and the old man and moves into a hidden room in the narrator’s home. R is a slightly removed and unreadable character at first, but he becomes more animated as the story progresses and he tries to help the narrator and the old man keep or retrieve their memories of disappeared objects. He develops deep feelings for the narrator during the time that she cares for him while he lives hidden in her home, and they often spend nights lying next to each other and talking on the small bed in the hidden room. One night, they share a kiss, and by the end of the story R seems to be as in love with the narrator as she is with him. R’s ultimate fate is unknown, but the story suggests that he might fare the best out of all of the characters, since, on the last page, he finally leaves the secret room and goes out into the world.

The Memory Police – The Memory Police function as a unified entity, even though they are made up of many men. They are a

relatively new, shadowy, and repressive arm of the state government whose main goal is to destroy objects that are “disappeared” and to hunt down anyone who does not forget disappeared things. Early in the story, the Memory Police summon the unnamed narrator’s mother to a government location—she dies a week later, and most people in the story believe that the Memory Police murdered her. The Memory Police wear dark green, very well-made coats and have heavy **snow** boots—luxuries that no civilian on the island seems to have access to. They also eat decadent food and seem well-prepared to deal with difficult disappearances, meaning that they have advanced resources and money. When they first barge into the narrator’s house in the beginning of the story looking to get into her father’s office, they appear to “know exactly where they are going,” suggesting they have unexplained methods of surveillance. Despite their total dominance throughout most of the novel, the end of the story suggests that even they end up disappearing, since R leaves the hidden room seeming unafraid of being caught.

The Old Man – The old man is the unnamed narrator’s late nurse’s husband. He used to be a ferry mechanic until those boats “disappeared”—for most of the novel, he lives on a derelict ferry that only functions as a large hunk of metal. He has known the narrator for most of her life and is a kind and handy man. He agrees to help the narrator hide R before he even knows what he is agreeing to. When she explains what she needs him to do to help her, he builds out most of the room that R ultimately stays in: the ventilation, the plumbing system, insulation, and even the bed that R sleeps on. He gets along well with everyone. The old man, like the narrator and like most of the people on the island, is affected by the disappearances and forgets things as soon as they are disappeared. However, at one point he is captured and interrogated (possibly tortured) by the Memory Police—some people escaped the island on a boat, and even though he had nothing to do with it he was taken in and questioned. One day, the city is hit by an earthquake, and the old man becomes trapped underneath a cabinet. Although the narrator is able to get him out from underneath, he suffers a brain injury and dies a short time later of an intracranial hemorrhage. The old man’s death deeply affects the narrator, and she feels terribly sad, lonely, and anxious after he’s gone.

The Narrator’s Mother – The unnamed narrator’s mother was a sculptor who was part of the minority on the island that does not forget “disappeared” objects. The story heavily implies that the Memory Police killed the narrator’s mother when the narrator was a young girl. A week after complying with a summons from the (then newly-formed) Memory Police, the narrator’s mother died, and although the official cause of death was a heart attack, the narrator feels sure that her mother was killed by the state because she didn’t get rid of the objects that were supposed to be forgotten. The narrator’s mother used to tell the narrator all about disappeared objects, which she kept

in a secret, hidden cabinet in her sculpting studio. The narrator loved listening to these stories, even if she couldn't recognize any of the items. The narrator's mother also hid disappeared objects in sculptures—some of which the Professor Inui later gives the narrator before he goes into hiding, and some of which the narrator and the old man track down later in the novel. The narrator's mother is generally regarded as brave by many characters in the story, since she went through impressive efforts to hold onto the memories and objects that the Memory Police tried to eradicate.

The Narrator's Father – The unnamed narrator's father is an ornithologist who passed away of natural causes when the narrator was a young girl. The narrator has very fond memories of visiting her father at work—she would go up to the observatory near their house, pretending to bring him lunch but really just wanting to visit, and look through her father's big binoculars at all of the **birds**. The narrator's father was a studious researcher and had many notes, which he kept in the office in their home. Five years after he died, birds “disappeared” from the island. The narrator is relieved that her father never had to live to see birds disappear, as she doesn't think he would have been able to bring himself to find new work—identifying birds was his “one true gift.” The Memory Police ransacked the narrator's father's office right after he died, in an attempt to get rid of any and all paperwork referring to birds. Years later, the narrator hides R in a hidden room below her father's old office.

The Woman – The woman is the narrator and protagonist of the unnamed narrator's manuscript, sections of which appear throughout *The Memory Police*. She takes typing classes and falls for her typing teacher, and the two strike up an affair. One day, the woman loses her voice, so she can only communicate to the teacher by typing to him on a typewriter. Their relationship seems typical aside from this, but it takes a turn for the worse when the teacher tricks her into following him to a room in a clock tower and locks her there. He also reveals to her that he is the one who stole her voice. At first, she wants to escape, but she eventually becomes dismally accustomed to living in the room—she even admits that she continues to find the teacher beautiful, even after he abuses her. The woman does not take her opportunity to escape when, one day, someone besides the teacher comes and knocks on the door, and after this she gives up entirely ever leaving the room. At the end of the manuscript, the woman, who has been mentally deteriorating, is simply “absorbed silently into the room, leaving no trace.” The woman's captivity, inability to express herself, and eventual demise parallels the narrator's own experience living under an authoritarian regime.

The Typing Teacher – The typing teacher is the antagonist of the unnamed narrator's manuscript. His character starts off innocently enough—he and the woman apparently fall for each other during a typing class, and they become lovers. However,

some time afterwards, the woman's voice disappears, and he pretends that he will fix her broken typewriter when really he ends up locking in the top room of the clock tower where he teaches typing classes. There, he reveals that he actually was the reason that the woman's voice went away—he says he “trapped” her voice inside the typewriter. After locking the woman inside the room and preventing her from leaving, the typing teacher physically and mentally abuses her. Eventually, the woman becomes such a shell of her former self that she does not fight back or try to leave—in the end, she is “absorbed” into the room. The typing teacher doesn't care about her absence, though, and he just picks his next victim out of the young woman in his typing class. The typing teacher can be read as an allegory for the Memory Police, the government-run militia on the island where the narrator lives.

Professor Inui – **Professor Inui** is an old friend of the unnamed narrator and her family who works in the dermatology department at the university hospital. One night, he shows up at the narrator's basement door and tells her that he and his family (his wife, daughter, and son) are going into hiding because he has been summoned by the Memory Police—just like the narrator's mother was. He gives the unnamed narrator four statues of tapirs, made by the narrator's mother, which the narrator later finds out have “disappeared” objects hidden inside of them. Professor Inui does not tell the narrator where he and his family are going, thinking that the narrator will be safer if she does not know the specifics. Later in the story, the narrator sees blue gloves that belong to the Inuis' son in the back of a Memory Police's truck, suggesting that the Inui family was unable to avoid being captured.

The Inuis' Son – On the night that the Inuis show up at the unnamed narrator's door to tell her they are fleeing, the narrator clips the Inuis' young son's fingernails. He removes a pair of sky-blue gloves to let her do this. Later in the story, the narrator knows by the Memory Police have captured the Inuis because she recognizes this same set of gloves in the back of one of the Memory Police's trucks.

The Young Couple – The young couple are the narrator's quiet neighbors. Other people in the neighborhood think they are aloof. However, after the Memory Police raid their home and arrest them, along with the teenage boy they were hiding, the narrator learns that the couple are part of an underground network of people who hide those who don't forget when they're supposed to. When the narrator learns this, she thinks that she must have misjudged them. She later cares for their abandoned dog, Don.

R's Wife – R is married throughout the novel, but he and his wife are never together in any scene. After R goes into hiding, his wife—who is pregnant—is only able to communicate through secret notes that the old man brings to R. Despite having to move back to her parent's home after R goes into hiding, R's wife is very supportive of and grateful to the

unnamed narrator for keeping R safe. R's wife gives birth to their son midway through the story, but R never gets to meet his child.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MEMORY AND CONNECTION

In *The Memory Police*, objects on an unnamed island gradually and inexplicably start disappearing. An unknown force causes many of the island's

inhabitants to immediately lose their memories of “disappeared” things and to dispose of them in turn. There are some people who retain their memory, though, and a government-run militia called the Memory Police hunts them down, arrests them, and sometimes even kills them. The narrator, a young woman on the island, is affected by the disappearances (meaning she loses her memories right away). Every time there is a new disappearance—whether it is roses, calendars, or even a body part—the narrator and other people on the island seem to adjust to their new way of life “without much fuss.” The inhabitants' ability to adapt may at first seem commendable, but by the end of the book, it's clear that their hearts and minds have been hollowed out as a result of forgetting so much. The more things disappear, the colder and less helpful the townspeople become to one another, and the less they care to fight back or change what is going on. In this sense, the novel portrays memory as a fundamental part of the human experience—without it, people find it more difficult to connect with one another and lead purposeful lives.

Amid all of this, the narrator (who is a novelist) shelters her editor, R, from the Memory Police because he does not forget things when he is supposed to. R constantly tries to assure the narrator that the memories everyday objects trigger are much bigger than the items themselves—these objects can connect people to their family, friends, past generations, even the future. But the disappearances never stop, and eventually the narrator's entire body and voice disappear—which, in turn, causes her to lose her sense of self. By the end of the novel, the narrator is completely gone. Her disappearance suggests the danger of forgetting things (even seemingly mundane objects) completely and the importance of holding on to memories if we are to retain our connections to other people—and indeed, if we are to be fully alive.



LOSS, ISOLATION, AND IDENTITY

On the island where *The Memory Police* is set, characters frequently lose things—sometimes everyday objects, but sometimes more important things, like family members or close friends. Aside from death, loss in the novel can also mean “disappearance”: the mysterious phenomenon where most people collectively forget and dispose of a once-familiar object. Or loss can be something more ambiguous, like when a person “vanishes” because they *don't* forget disappeared objects like they're supposed to and are either forced into hiding or arrested. Each time a character experiences a loss, they feel deeply isolated and actually seem to lose a piece of themselves—first in a figurative sense, but by the novel's end, in a very literal sense. The narrator, for instance, loses both parents at a young age, which leaves her unmoored and alone, with only two personal connections: an old man she's known since childhood and her aloof editor, R. And when **birds** are disappeared from the island, the narrator loses a specific bond she used to share with her father (who was an ornithologist) as well as an important part of her connection to nature. Later, when novels are disappeared, the narrator (who is a writer) loses another intangible piece of herself: her creative drive and self-expression. In this sense, the novel shows how loss of all kinds can gradually chip away at a person's very identity, leaving them isolated, directionless, and disconnected from the world around them.

This idea also comes up in excerpts of the narrator's new novel, which punctuate the book. In this manuscript, a sadistic typing teacher steals a young woman's voice as well as her freedom, locking her away in the top room of a clocktower. Eventually, she disassociates so much from herself that her body is “cut away from her soul.” The narrator's novel ends with the young woman disappearing, as she's inexplicably “absorbed” into the room. A similar phenomenon plays out at the end of main narrative in *The Memory Police*: the narrator cannot fight against all that she has lost and believes that her heart is empty—she's lost every body part through disappearances—so she, too, disappears into nothing. In this way, *The Memory Police* makes literal the isolating feeling of despair and indeed the loss of self that can accompany physical or emotional loss.



AUTHORITARIANISM AND SURVEILLANCE

In *The Memory Police*, objects on an unnamed island mysteriously “disappear,” meaning that people suddenly forget them. Following a disappearance, the townspeople will typically destroy these items, often tossing them into the river or burning them in bonfires. However, there is a subset of people who are immune: they don't forget like they're supposed to and don't physically destroy the objects. So, the government creates a law enforcement branch called

the Memory Police [to hunt these people down. This militia spies on citizens, makes arrests without warning or reason, and operates in secret and with total impunity. The level of surveillance is so intense that the island's inhabitants live in a constant state of fear. At a certain point, even people who are suspected of hiding an immune person are subject to arrest, and the island's inhabitants grow colder to one another so as not raise suspicion. This shows how relationships and cooperation are undermined in an authoritarian state where people are constantly surveilled.](#)

However, by the end of the novel, the Memory Police's role in the narrative gets significantly smaller. The losses from disappearances become increasingly serious (even people's body parts begin to disappear), and the citizens are so good at adhering to the rules of the regime that they start to enforce them without really thinking about it. Their behavior demonstrates that if people live under an authoritarian regime for long enough, their entire way of thinking can be altered, and the state may not even *need* to intervene to get people to act a certain way. There is some ambiguity to the novel's ending, though, since it's possible that the Memory Police themselves have even disappeared. Before the unnamed narrator herself "disappears," she tells R (her editor who is unaffected by the disappearances) that even the Memory Police are gone. So, R is able to leave the room he was hiding in and go out into the world. In this way, the book ends by suggesting that authoritarian regimes are so destructive and antithetical to humane life that they may eventually even be their own undoing.



STORYTELLING, LONGEVITY, AND DEFIANCE

Though so many things disappear throughout *The Memory Police*, the one thing that seems to endure is storytelling. On an unnamed island, objects "disappear" without warning and are never supposed to be spoken of again—there is even a government body, the Memory Police, who roam the island to ensure these things are gone for good. However, there are people on the island who do not forget—like the unnamed narrator's mother—and who pass along their knowledge and memories through stories. The novel opens with the narrator and her mother covertly going through a hidden drawer filled with wondrous and curious items (items that have "disappeared"), and the narrator's mother sharing exciting personal stories connected to each item. Though the narrator's mother eventually gets rid of the objects, the narrator never forgets these stories her mother shares—they are integral to the narrator's character and facilitate intergenerational connection. Moreover, sharing these stories at all is an act of defiance against the Memory Police, who eventually arrest and kill the narrator's mother for the crime of remembering "disappeared" things.

Additionally, the narrator is a writer, and even after novels are "disappeared," she makes a grand gesture for R (her editor whom she is in love with) to finish her final manuscript and leave him with the story before she fully disappears. She finishes "the one thing" that she is "able to leave to him." When the whole town starts burning books because they have been "disappeared," a woman who does not forget like she is supposed to screams "They'll never erase these stories!" just before she is carted off by the Memory Police, suggesting that the only notion of any kind of permanence in this novel comes through stories. Thus, the novel insists on the importance of stories and suggests that they are the most effective (possibly even the only) defiance people have against both cruel dictatorships and the general deterioration of memories over time.



FATE VS. FREE WILL

The question of fate versus free will is an important element of *The Memory Police*. On an unnamed island, objects mysteriously and supernaturally "disappear," meaning that the island's inhabitants almost instantly forget everything about them. Who is and is not affected by this phenomenon seems entirely up to chance, and a government-run militia called The Memory Police hunts down, arrests, and sometimes even executes those who do remember "disappeared" things. The unnamed narrator's mother is one of these affected people, and she tells the narrator—who *is* affected—that she thinks she keeps her memories because she's "always thinking about" these lost items. This admission suggests that the forgetting may *not* be entirely random—that there may be some level of personal choice in the matter.

Throughout most of the novel, the narrator, her close friend the old man, and most of the people on the island who are afflicted accept the disappearances without "much fuss." They seem to accept new "holes in their hearts" every time a disappearance happens, conceding that there's nothing to be done, even as the circumstances on the island get worse and worse. But characters like R, the narrator's editor who doesn't forget and who desperately tries to bring back his friends' memories, insist that there is a greater capacity for free will than the narrator and the old man seem to believe. The book doesn't necessarily end on a *hopeful* note—the narrator herself "disappears" when she disconnects from her entire body and essentially dies. But R, who has been hiding from The Memory Police in a secret room most of the book, does finally get to leave and go out into the world. Thus, the novel seems to subtly side more with R's way of thinking. The ending implies that people have more control over seemingly uncontrollable circumstances than they think, and that people should tap into their free will and try to make changes that will benefit society.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



SNOW

In *The Memory Police*, snow symbolizes emotional numbness to tragic events. On the unnamed island where the novel takes place, the mysterious phenomenon that causes objects to disappear from people's memories starts off gradually but increases in intensity as the story goes on. When calendars "disappear," the weather mysteriously freezes—spring never comes, and snow falls continuously on the island. The days get grayer and darker, and the people on the island have to combat worsening conditions with inadequate clothing and resources. Eventually, snow accumulates everywhere. At the same time, larger and more meaningful items disappear (such as roses, novels, and even body parts), and the island's inhabitants become emotionally numb to the repercussions of living without things they had once enjoyed. By the end, most people on the island are reduced to nothing—all of their body parts have "disappeared"—and snow blankets the island. The uptick in snowfall corresponds with the people's weakening desire to fight back against the Memory Police or even to question the disappearances themselves. Though there was always a tendency for the people to accept the disappearance without "much fuss," their resolve still weakens considerably at the same time as snowfall increases. In this way, the omnipresent snow in the later portion of the story represents the weakening of spirit from the citizens of the island and their increasing willingness to accept devastating events.



BIRDS

In *The Memory Police*, birds symbolize how memories of a lost loved one—even strong ones—vanish over time. The unnamed narrator's father was an ornithologist, and when she was younger—before the "disappearance" of birds—she would spend time watching birds with him while he worked. She used to love doing this and would even make up an excuse, like bringing him his lunch, just to visit him at the observatory. Birds "disappear" about five years after her father dies, meaning that most of the island's inhabitants collectively forget about them. But this portion of the narrative is condensed so that her father's death and birds disappearing seem to happen simultaneously, which this narratively links the narrator's memories of her father to her memories of birds. In this way, birds act as a stand-in for all of the positive and connective associations she had to him. Since the narrator is often not even able to remember what birds are called—she calls them "creatures"—the story uses the

disappearance of birds and the narrator's lost connection to them to symbolize how even poignant memories associated with a loved one who passes away are possible to forget altogether.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Memory Police* published in 2020.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● *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 on the island.

Yet that was also rather difficult to do. The objects in my palm seemed to cover 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 could 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.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this early passage, the narrator (as a young girl) looks at a hidden chest of drawers, where her mother keeps items that have "disappeared" from the island. The drawers hold an array of different things—some beautiful and expensive, some ordinary but useful. The variety of objects that have disappeared show the randomness of the various disappearances, suggesting that anything could vanish at any moment. This unpredictability makes disappearances all the more difficult for the citizens of the island to combat.

The ordinariness of (most) of the items also contrasts the suspicious way they're being stored, as though they are contraband. This is a clue that something is already very wrong in the story, since there's no obvious explanation for why this list of ordinary objects would need to be hidden. In fact, it's unusual that these names of mostly household objects would be so foreign to the young narrator as to be "thrilling" and exotic. This also suggests that if the mother


had not kept these items, the narrator would never have known they existed. All of this sets up (though doesn't yet fully explain) the supernatural element on the island.

It's also notable that the narrator thinks the objects look like "animals hibernating," since this suggests a time when they might wake up (or a time when she might remember them) and offers a little bit of hope in the beginning of the novel. But the next sentence tapers this hope with "uncertainty," and these two feelings—the possibility of hope met with uncertainty—fill up the rest of the book.

☝ [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.](#)

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Mother

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator's mother shows her daughter a mysterious "disappeared" item called *perfume*. The narrator's misinterpretation of the object is amusing and serious at the same time: since the reader likely knows what perfume is, it feels a little silly to watch a character misunderstand what such a simple item is used for, let alone try to *drink* it. However, the more serious undertone is that something is clearly not right on this island, and that people must either have lost their memories, their ability to share basic information with each other, or both.

It's also important to note that the story about perfume is the narrator's "favorite story," indicating that her mother has told her similar stories about other mysterious items. It also emphasizes the fact that though the narrator doesn't know what perfume is, she's still able to enjoy the story about it—showing that storytelling might be a way to combat forgetting.

Additionally, this is one of the first examples of the narrator describing a disappeared item in this clinical way, almost as though describing it to someone from another planet. Breaking down perfume to just the way it looks—"clear liquid in a small glass bottle"—is disorienting for a reader who, again, likely knows exactly what perfume is. This


technique is repeated throughout the story, like when the narrator describes a bird or a music box. The technique is an effective narrative tool that the novel employs to remind readers how disorienting such disappearances are.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ The little brown creature flew in a wide circle and then vanished north. I couldn't recall the name of the species, and I found myself wishing I'd paid more 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.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Father

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes when the present-day narrator sees a bird and thinks about her father, who died years ago. Birds were important to her father because he was an ornithologist, but they "disappeared" five years after her father died. The way the narrator describes the bird now is very similar to how she described perfume in the first chapter: she talks about them in a very removed way, saying that they are only "simple creature[s]." She even describes the bird flying in a way that shows she has no emotions left for these creatures—she's not in awe of them flying or appreciative of it, she only comments on the very dry mechanics of the way it moves through the air.

It's important that the narrator feels like she "should" have emotions attached to birds, but that she does not. This means that the narrator has the capacity to see the problem with forgetting but does not feel like she has the ability to stop it. However, it's strange that the narrator chides herself for not remembering the *species* of bird—as though she should have just studied harder when her father was alive—because *all* of her memories of birds are gone, and she knows this. In other words, it wouldn't have mattered if she'd once memorized the species name, because she still

would have lost it when birds disappeared. This strange relationship to disappearances—seeming to understand them but then also not entirely appreciating the way they work—is part of what living on the island is like, since the disappearances are so mysterious and disorienting for everyone.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ “But why do they take people away? They haven’t don’t anything wrong.”

“The island is run by men who are determined to see things disappear. From their point of view, anything that fails to vanish when they say it should is inconceivable. So they force it to disappear with their own hands.”

“Do you think my mother was killed?” I knew it was pointless to ask R, but the question slipped out.

“She was definitely under observation, being studied.” R chose his words carefully.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator , R (speaker), The Memory Police , The Narrator’s Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is one of the first conversations the narrator has with her editor, R, and it is one of the only conversations they have outside of the secret room where he eventually hides. They talk together in the publishing house where R works—later on, when the Memory Police gain even more power, this sort of talk in a public place becomes inconceivable.



It’s very important that the narrator feels this comfortable talking to R so early in the story, even though their relationship is strictly professional here. This type of conversation—where the narrator questions the motives and the actions of the Memory Police—is impossible to have further on in the story. The Memory Police have a way of turning neighbors against each other, so trust is very important, and the narrator confiding in R even at this stage shows she trusts him quite a bit. This level of trust likely comes from the fact that she considers him such a capable and thoughtful editor, which suggests the narrator values people who share an appreciation for stories. R often helps the narrator make sense of things in the world, and she takes his opinion seriously. Him choosing his words

“carefully” shows that he doesn’t feel comfortable completely agreeing that the Memory Police killed the narrator’s mother (even though the narrator later realizes that they must have). The narrator is still fairly naïve this early in the book—later on, she likely wouldn’t ask “why” the Memory Police take people away, since she comes to understand that they don’t need a reason.

☝ “It seems strange that you can still create something totally new like this—just from words—on an island where everything else is disappearing,” he said, brushing a bit of dirt from one of the pages as though he were caressing something precious.

I realized that we were thinking the same thing. As we looked into each other’s eyes, I felt, once again, the anxiety that had taken root in our hearts a long time ago.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator , R (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Here, R appraises the narrator’s manuscript. The narrator trusts R completely with her work, and the reverence that he shows for her manuscript indicates that he is a thoughtful and careful editor.

This passage continues developing the theme of storytelling in the novel, since the most sympathetic characters have an admiration for books and stories. The look that passes between the narrator and R is significant because she feels a connection to him based on a shared love of literature—but also based on a shared anxiety. This is one of the few scenes that takes place between them before the narrator hides R from the Memory Police. She chooses to build an entire hidden room for him just because of the interactions she has with him at the publishing house, which indicate that little moments like this have added up for her and perhaps made her fall in love with him.



It’s also possible to read this passage as a foreshadowing of the narrator and R’s intimate relationship, since he brushes dirt from the manuscript as though “caressing something precious.” This mirrors the way that he will eventually tend the narrator’s body, even after she can no longer feel it. This reading is backed up by the fact that the narrator uses her manuscript to express herself, and that a character within the manuscript is a stand-in for the narrator, showing that it’s not too far-fetched to suggest that the physical pieces of

her manuscript stand in for the narrator in this moment.

Chapter 5 Quotes

“It’s terribly kind of you to be concerned, but I think it would be best not to tell you anything about the safe house. It’s not that we’re worried you might let something slip—if that were the case, we would never have brought the sculptures here in the first place. But we can’t allow ourselves to cause you any more trouble than we already have. The more deeply you become involved, the more danger you’ll be in. You can’t be forced to reveal what you don’t know, but if you do know something, there’s no telling what they might do to get it out of you. So I beg of you, please don’t ask about the safehouse.”

Related Characters: Professor Inui (speaker), The Unnamed Narrator

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Professor Inui and his family are about to go into hiding. They stop at the narrator’s home to tell her, which is already an act of complete trust. But they don’t go so far as to tell her where they are hiding, since they are scared that doing so would put everyone in danger. Though this shows that the narrator and the Inui family are closely connected, it also shows that people on the island must keep each other at arm’s length these days, which ultimately isolates them from each other.

This quote is one of the earliest present-day examples of someone’s life getting torn apart because of the Memory Police. The narrator’s mother was taken (and likely murdered) by the government, but this happened in the past, and the story only tells about it. However, Professor Inui and his family get to tell about their troubles first-hand. This type of scene effectively shows just how terrified people on the island are of the Memory Police, as Inui makes clear. The narrator also only just learned what a “safehouse” was earlier that day, which suggests that there has been an uptick in danger on the island—otherwise, the narrator probably would have already known about safehouses. This furthers the idea that the Memory Police are getting more and more brutal and are becoming less tolerant of disobedience on the island.

Chapter 6 Quotes

The few flowers in the garden other than roses had survived—bellflowers, a couple of spiny cacti, some gentians. They bloomed discreetly, as though embarrassed to have been spared. The breeze seemed to discriminate, choosing only the rose petals to scatter.

A garden without roses was a meaningless, desolate place, and it was terribly sad to see the trellises and other signs of all the care that had been lavished on the flowers [...] I wandered across the hill as though walking through a cemetery of unmarked graves.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears in the aftermath of the disappearance of roses. It demonstrates the strangeness of the disappearances, because even the environment on the island seems to comply. No one on the island *fully* seems to grasp how disappearances work—not even the Memory Police. They are mysterious, difficult things. This scene shows how it really does feel like there is a great, unnamable force working against the people on the island, since even the wind gets rid of rose petals (and only the rose petals). This must be an overwhelming and isolating feeling, and it is only made worse because of how empty the island becomes. The narrator confirms how isolating each loss is because the rose garden is now “meaningless” and “desolate,” and the rose garden now feels like a “cemetery of unmarked graves.” This clearly shows that disappearances feel like a death in some way, because the loss of an object, and of the memories attached to it, feels so permanent. Having to experience so many little tragedies all the time takes a huge toll on the island and on the narrator, and it is understandable that she feels so sad seeing so much emptiness.

Chapter 7 Quotes

“It’s true, I know, that there are more gaps in the island than there used to be. When I was a child, the whole place seemed...how can I put this?...a lot fuller, a lot more real. But as things got thinner, more full of holes, our hearts got thinner, too, diluted somehow. I supposed that kept things in balance. And even when that balance begins to collapse, something remains. Which is why you shouldn’t worry.”

Related Characters: The Old Man (speaker), The Unnamed Narrator

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a conversation between the old man and the narrator, when the narrator expresses concern about the difficulties of living on the island as things disappear.

The old man is very kind and always seems to try to make the narrator feel better. But, in this moment, even though he is telling her not to worry, he admits that people's hearts are "thinning" and "diluting," showing how the connections between people are also thinning. It's difficult to know how to feel about the old man's statement: on the one hand, he really believes that leaving things up to fate is better and that there's no need to "worry" as long as things are in "balance." Plus, he's trying to comfort the narrator. On the other hand, it's possible to see how the disappearances and growing feeling of apathy on the island makes for a dangerous climate—people who give up are easy to take advantage of. This passage highlights how even well-meaning people might be letting too much go on the island, and how authoritarian governments like the Memory Police actually thrive on this type of passive acceptance.

The old man has been here for a very long time, though—much longer than the narrator or even her mother—so it's also possible to read the old man's statements as a generational difference: perhaps as people age, they are more likely to accept things that happen and put up less of a fight, even if it means losing bits and pieces of themselves.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ "Sometimes I try to remember—those were precious moments with my mother—but I can't recall the objects. My mother's expression, the sound of her voice, the smell of the basement air—I can remember all that perfectly. But the things in the drawers are vague, as though those memories, and those alone, have dissolved."

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator (speaker), R, The Narrator's Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator and R are in the narrator's home, in the basement in her mother's studio. This is an intimate scene, since it is the first time the two characters have been together outside of work and have talked about personal things rather than work. The narrator clearly trusts R completely, since she's telling him her most important secret—that her mother did not forget things and kept disappeared objects in the basement. This confidence is an extension of the faith she puts in R as an editor, and it shows how their shared love of stories brings them together.

This quote is also significant because it shows the narrator in the act of remembering. Memory is so precious on this island, so it's always noteworthy when a character remembers something in real-time. It's very curious to see how the narrator describes those moments in the basement with her mother, since it shows that the narrator's memory is still very much intact in some ways—but also that it *does* have gaps and holes. The objects themselves are gone, but the narrator is able to remember around them, in a way, which shows that she very much still has an active, working mind. It's also relevant that she calls these moments "precious," because it again speaks to how much the narrator treasures the stories her mother entrusted her with—must as she is entrusting R with renditions of those stories in this moment. This shows that another reason the narrator might be so connected to R is because he reminds her of many of the positive attributes her mother had.



Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ R let out a little gasp of surprise as I rolled up the carpet and lifted the trapdoor.

"Like a cave floating in the sky," he murmured.

"It's a bit tight, I know, but at least you'll be safe here. No one can see you from outside, and there's not much chance of them hearing you either."

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator, R (speaker), The Memory Police, The Old Man, The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes as R sees the small, secret room where he will spend the rest of book (until the final page). He goes

into hiding because the Memory Police are hunting down people who do not forget things that have disappeared. The security of this room, hidden in the floor of the narrator's father's office and only available through a trapdoor, shows how serious the job of hiding someone from the Memory Police is. The narrator had to make sure it was hidden from view from the outside and that no one around them would hear any noise R might make. This also shows how the people on the island are already growing distrustful of—and isolated from—their neighbors. The narrator not only thinks about whether the Memory Police will be able to see in but also whether *anyone* at all can.

Additionally, R's comment that the room is like "a cave in the sky" proves how isolated and confined it will be, but it also suggests that he finds the idea of his new dwelling place somewhat freeing. After all, evoking the sky suggests a certain sense of liberation, so it's possible that R feels like he will be able to be himself in this small room, since he'll no longer have to hide the fact that he remembers. The description of this hidden room also calls to mind *The Diary of Anne Frank* (or *The Diary of a Young Girl*), a book that heavily influenced this novel. The annex where Anne Frank and her family had to hide from the Nazis was hidden behind a bookcase. Similarly, although the trapdoor to R's secret room is hidden underneath a rug, it is in the narrator's father's office, which is full of books.



Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ "Memories don't just pile up—they also change over time. And sometimes they fade of their own accord. Though the process, for me, is quite different from what happens to the rest of you when something disappears from the island."

"Different how?" I asked [...]

"My memories don't feel like they've been pulled up by the root. Even if they fade, something remains. Like tiny seeds that might germinate again if the rain falls."

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator , R (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator and R talk in the secret room. R shares his relationship with memory, which is much different than the narrator's. However, importantly, it's likely to be similar to a reader's relationship with memory. The narrator and other people who forget are affected by an unnatural

phenomenon (that is, it's fictional). R's immunity thus makes him a relatable character, since his mind works in a recognizable way. In real life, most people also forget things, but, like R, it usually happens because memories "fade of their own accord." The way that R describes memory is meant to resonate because it is familiar, but also because it seems like a less scary option than how the narrator experiences memory loss. It feels a lot better if a memory can come and go than if it is "pulled up at the root." The idea that memories can "germinate" means that, outside of disappearances, memories could be retrieved even if they were previously lost.


However, it's important to realize that just because the narrator's memory is affected by an unnatural phenomenon doesn't mean it has no relationship to the way memory works outside of the novel. The novel is concerned with the idea of collective forgetting, especially in the wake of tragic events, and it's likely that the narrator's relationship to memory is a representation of a worst-case scenario in this regard. In other words, it's not as though the novel suggests people can't forget things entirely with or without supernatural disappearances—it just illustrates how scary that type of forgetting would be.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ The tapping of the key striking the paper was the only sound in the room. Snow had begun to fall again, covering the tracks I had made [...] He continued to hold me tighter [...] The bell in the clock tower began to chime. Five o'clock. The vibration came from far above, rattling the window glass and passing through our bodies, before being absorbed by the snow below. The only motion was the falling of the snowflakes. I held my breath, unable to move, as though locked inside the typewriter.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator , The Woman (speaker), The Typing Teacher

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from the third time an excerpt from the narrator's manuscript appears. The narrator often draws on the things happening to her in the real world as inspiration for her fictional story. Because of this, her manuscript is a

way to further understand how the narrator is thinking or feeling.

In this section of the manuscript, the narrator's protagonist—the woman—takes a typing class. Her typing teacher, with whom she has started a relationship, stands behind her. Though the woman mysteriously lost her voice in a previous section, there hasn't been much tension in the manuscript up to this point. However, in this moment, the story takes a turn, and the typing teacher seems to become a malevolent presence. In the larger narrative, the narrator just got R set up in his secret room, which means that she took on a huge level of risk. It's possible that the typing teacher "holding" the woman tighter and tighter represents the increased pressure that the narrator is under in her daily life.

Snow is also important in this quote, because snow functions as a symbol for collective numbness in the larger narrative. In this portion of the manuscript, snow swirls outside as the woman finds herself almost paralyzed by the typing teacher. Her inability to move, as though she's "locked in the typewriter," likely represents the people of the island's growing inability to resist disappearances or the Memory Police.

☛ In this way we managed to live in relative security. Everything went according to plan, and we seemed to have solutions for any problems that did occur. The old man did much to help us, and R did his best to adjust quickly to the secret room.

But quite apart from the small satisfactions we enjoyed, the world outside was deteriorating day by day. The disappearances, which had slowed down after the roses, returned with two in quick succession: first, photographs, and then fruits of all sorts.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator (speaker), R, The Old Man

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

This passage shows the difference between the pleasant daily life that the narrator, R, and the old man settle into, as well as the harsh realities of the outside world. The three characters begin to work as a team, and they feel like they can manage the difficulties of day-to-day life with R in the secret room. But, as the second part of the quote shows, the

disappearances make the characters feel as though they actually have little control over their lives, since they can't anticipate when the next important thing will vanish.

The idea of "small satisfactions" is important because it shows that the characters are trying to stay connected by daily practices and by caring for each other. Compared with the fact that the world "outside" is "deteriorating," it almost seems as though the characters are living in two separate universes—the space inside their home, and the world outside. This again proves how hard it is for them to feel a sense of power over their lives, emphasizing how living under authoritarian regimes makes even the "small" things seem big and important.

Photographs disappearing is also something of a turning point, because it marks one of the moments in the novel where something that helps with the act of remembering "disappears." This is doubly isolating for the characters, since their memories of the *idea* of photographs will disappear (except for R) but then photographs themselves, which are keepers of memories, will also be burned and destroyed. This moment foreshadows a darker turn in the narrative, as it becomes harder and harder to fight the disappearances, despite the "relative safety" the narrator, R, and the old man feel because they have each other.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☛ "Everything outside is completely different from when you came here. The snow has changed everything."

"Changed how?"

"Well, it's difficult to describe. For one thing, the world is completely buried. The snow is so deep that the sun barely starts to melt it when it does come out. It rounds everything, makes it look lumpy, and it somehow makes everything seem much smaller—the sky and sea, the hills and the forest and the river. And we all go around with our shoulders hunched over."

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator, R (speaker), The Old Man

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears when the narrator and R are having an intimate conversation through the intercom in the narrator's house. It also takes place after an incredibly hard

day for the narrator—she went to the Memory Police headquarters in search of the old man, who was taken without warning.

To start, the placement of this quote is important, since the narrator begins this chapter with a lot of motivation and determination. She doesn't even tell R what she is doing when she goes to the Memory Police headquarters, which is very unusual and shows she wanted to make the choice on her own. But she has a scary and unfruitful experience (she doesn't find any information and isn't allowed to see the old man), and she seems weary when she comes home. In this passage, the narrator tells R about all of the snow on the ground, and how people walk with their shoulders "hunched over." She includes herself in that group of people, saying, "our shoulders." So, as usual, snow indicates an increased level of apathy and dejection from all of the people on the island—but here, it also shows that the narrator personally is feeling more tired and hopeless. Snow has made the island feel "much smaller" and even deformed ("lumpy"), which means the island has become a more isolated and claustrophobic place. This underscores how people's apathy to the increasingly troubling changes around them makes the island unrecognizable.

It's also noteworthy that the narrator thinks R wouldn't even recognize the world outside. This shows how much she feels like the world is shaping itself around people who forget, not around people who remember, and how R, who has kept all of his memories of disappeared things, would feel like an outsider in such a slowly declining world.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ I watched him from behind for a few moments. Was it an illusion, or had his body actually begun to shrink since he'd hidden himself away here? He had definitely grown pale, without any contact with sunlight, and his appetite was poor, so he'd lost weight, but what I sensed was not that sort of tangible change but some more abstract transformation. Every time I saw him, I could feel the outline of his body blurring, his blood thinning, his muscles withering.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator (speaker), R

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis



This passage appears when the narrator assesses the physical state that R is in after he has spent some time in the

hidden room. The idea that he may have physically shrunk to fit the room is alarming, ultimately highlighting the detrimental impact that the oppressive forces on the island have had on him, since the Memory Police are the reason he has been pushed into hiding. At the same time, though, his sorry state recalls the old man's notion that people's hearts possibly shrink as they forget things. And yet, R *hasn't* forgotten anything. It's noteworthy, then, that he undergoes this physical and "more abstract" transformation, since he is one of the few people on the island who *does* remember things. While the other characters' hearts and minds are slowly growing thinner, R's symptoms are a result of his being locked away and forced to hide from society. This suggests that everybody on the island is weakened by the disappearances, albeit it is in different ways.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ "You'll forget you ever had a voice," he continued. "You may find it annoying at first, until you get used to it. You'll move your lips as you just did, go looking for a typewriter, a notepad. But soon enough you'll see how pointless it is. You have no need to talk, no need to utter a single word. There's nothing to worry about, nothing to fear. Then, at last, you'll be all mine."

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator, The Typing Teacher (speaker), The Memory Police, The Woman

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis


This passage comes from an excerpt of the unnamed narrator's manuscript. The tide of her story just officially turned, and the typing teacher—previously a benign character—reveals himself to be a sadistic man who traps the woman in the top room of a clocktower.


The typing teacher, now completely in control of the woman's life, seems to represent the narrator's worst fears in the larger narrative. He is an oppressive figure, forcing the woman to stay locked in the room for as long as he wants (which ends up being forever). He took away her voice, and now he's taken away her only means of communication by breaking her typewriter. These losses represent the narrator's fear that things will disappear at such a fast rate that they won't be able to create enough new things on the island, or that words themselves will disappear.

The typing teacher also says that the woman will soon “forget” she “even had a voice.” This indicates that the typing teacher is also something of a representation of the Memory Police, who would like to see everyone on the island forget they ever had access to anything that disappears. This is a very authoritarian statement and represents the wishes of the Memory Police. It’s also important that it’s a “voice” that the typing teacher says the woman will forget she ever had—this increases the meaning of the loss, because voices are what people use to speak out against unjust governments. In turn, the narrator not only uses her manuscript to express her anxiety about losing many objects and the memories associated with them, but she also uses it to express her worries about losing her voice and, thus, her agency.

☛ [In the end, however, it was the old woman’s prediction that turned out to be accurate. No matter how long we waited, spring never came, and we lay buried under the snow along with the ashes of the calendars.](#)

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes after calendars disappear. Though people think calendars are just pieces of paper, the supernatural force that controls disappearances seems to consider the disappearance of calendars as the complete disappearance of the future. So, after this point, seasons never change on the island. The fact that spring never comes marks a turning point in the story, since the people of the island are now “buried” in snow. This means that, literally, snow covers the island, but it also means that, symbolically, the people of the island are getting weaker and weaker and find it increasingly difficult to show any resistance. Also, the tense of “never comes” means that spring will not come for the rest of the story (present tense makes it continuous across the rest of the book), which is an alarming and distressing cue only about halfway into the book. This proves that the novel is not worried about offering hope, necessarily, but about telling a meaningful story. This quote also shows again how the “rules” of the disappearances are very murky, and they could change at any time. This unpredictability only adds to the challenges

that the people on the island face.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☛ Just then, three shadows emerged from the house to the east of mine. It was too dark to distinguish their features, but they walked wearily through the snow, backs bent, the Memory Police pushing them from behind, the light glinting cruelly off their guns.

Snatches of my neighbors’ voices could be heard in the dark.


“I had no idea they were hiding people in there,” said the former hatmaker. “Who would have thought it?”

“Seems as though both the husband and wife were in a secret group that help folks like that.”

“I guess that’s why they didn’t get to know anyone in the neighborhood.”

“Look at him. He’s just a child.”

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator (speaker), The Memory Police, The Young Couple

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears when the Memory Police raid the narrator’s neighborhood. Luckily, the Memory Police do not find R that night, even though they search the house. However, the quiet couple next door (that neighbors previously thought were standoffish) turned out to also be hiding somebody, showing how people need to pull away from their neighbors for their safety and the safety of others. The child that the other neighbors refer to is the person that the young couple was hiding—a teenage boy. The young couple and the boy are arrested and never heard from again, proving to be another example of people who are taken by the Memory Police and seem to vanish. This scene has echoes of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and of Nazi-occupied Europe when the Nazis performed raids on homes and arrested both Jewish people and anyone who tried to shelter them.

It’s also relevant that the narrator is unable to “distinguish” the “features” of the young couple, even though she can tell who it is because of which house they come out of. This literally means that it is dark out, but it represents how the fear created by the Memory Police isolates neighbors from each other until they hardly know or recognize each other.



“I think all this crying must be proof that my heart is so weak that I don’t know how to help myself.”

“But I’d say it’s just the opposite. Your heart is doing everything it can to preserve its existence. No matter how many memories these men take away, they’ll never reduce it to nothing.”

“I hope that’s true.”

I looked at R. I needed only to lean slightly in his direction for us to be touching. He raised his hand and brushed away a tear at the corner of my eye with his fingers.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator , R (speaker), The Memory Police , The Old Man

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

This scene takes place in the wake of the Memory Police’s raid on the narrator’s home the night of the old man’s birthday. After she watches her neighbors get taken away, the narrator seeks comfort in R. The narrator has been crying uncontrollably and now asks R if he thinks that her weakening heart is the reason for her sobbing. R points out that deep emotions are not signs of a weakening heart—to the contrary, such emotions are the signs of a heart that is still full. In this way, he shows that he believes the narrator can overcome disappearances. Simply put, he believes that she is still fully herself, because she still has access to such strong emotions.

This moment is also important because it occurs just before the narrator and R have sex for the first and only time in the novel. Though R and the narrator share deep, deep feelings for each other—they essentially become each other’s lifelines—the narrative only mentions that this happens on one night. This scene, where R wipes away a tear, shows how tenderly he’s come to care for the narrator after everything she’s done for him. But their relationship is complicated, because though it’s built on true admiration for each other, it’s also clear that they get closer as things get worse in the outside world. This shows that they are prevented from interacting the way they might like to outside of such terrible circumstances.

Despite R’s comforting words of reassurance, though, there is a somber note to this quote, since, at the end of the story, exactly what R says will not happen *does* happen. He insists that “these men” (the Memory Police) will never be able to reduce the narrator’s heart “to nothing.” Yet, in the final scene of the book, the narrator disappears into thin air. The story shows, then, how more than just optimism is needed to fight incredibly strong, overbearing forces bent on

destroying memory and society.

Chapter 19 Quotes

Needless to say, R was violently opposed to losing our collection of novels.

“You’ve got to bring them all here,” he said, “including your manuscript.”

If I do, the room will be buried in books, with no place for you to live.” I shook my head.

“Don’t worry about that, I don’t need much space. If we hide them here, they’ll never find them.”

“But what happens to them? What’s the point of storing away books that have disappeared?”

He sighed and pressed his fingers to his temples—as he always did when we talked about the disappearances. Try as we might to understand each other, nothing changed for either of us. The more we talked, the sadder we became.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator , R (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs just after the disappearance of novels. Although the narrator spends a lot of time throughout the book worrying about this eventuality, suddenly, she doesn’t seem too concerned. R, however, is “violently” opposed to the idea of novels disappearing. This shows the great distance between those who can retain their memory after a disappearance and those who cannot. It also shows that the narrator is losing important parts of herself with each disappearance, whereas R is able to keep much of his identity intact.

Again, it’s quite concerning that the narrator is able to get over the loss of novels so quickly—even asking what the point of keeping them is—because this means she won’t be able to write as a way of processing her emotions anymore. So not only has her profession become unnecessary, but her way of coping with the world around her has been taken away. It’s painful that R understands this while the narrator does not. R rubbing his head when the narrator speaks shows how disappointed he is that she can’t fight off forgetting, especially this time. The fact that “nothing has changed” between the two characters shows that their ongoing struggle of understanding each other all comes down to the problem of remembering and forgetting. It’s a

remarkably isolating moment for each of them because it suggests that they feel like they can't understand each other. Their closest bond was a shared belief that stories and books are incredibly important, so if that's gone, they lose a very important connection to each other.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☝ When we'd finished eating, the old man went to find the music box hidden in the bathroom. He set it on the table and we listened together. As always, it faithfully repeated its tune, over and over. We stopped chatting, sat up straight, and closed our eyes. I had no idea where or how one was supposed to listen to a music box, but I had decided arbitrarily that closing my eyes would enhance the effect R had hoped it would induce in us.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator (speaker), R, The Old Man

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears when the narrator and the old man sit and talk on the old ferry. It is some time after the narrator threw the old man a birthday party—the same night that the Memory Police raided the narrator's house. R had given the old man a music box as a birthday present, even though music boxes disappeared years ago. On that night, the old man was thrilled about this gift. However, in this scene, neither the old man nor the narrator know what good listening to the music box will do.

In fact, it seems as though the narrator and the old man only listen to the music box because they want to be able to report back some positive news to R. This is especially true for the narrator, since, while closing her eyes, she's not thinking about the music but about what R hopes the music will "induce" (make her feel). She seems very detached from the music box, which shows how she is growing more and more resigned to the island's fate. It also suggests that R and the narrator don't really understand each other like they used to, since R clearly wants the narrator to bring back her memories so that she can be herself again, and the narrator mostly wants to remember so that she can make R happy.

It's also a little sad that the music box sits there "faithfully" playing the same song over and over. This underscores that disappeared items never actually change—people's attitudes towards them just do. This highlights a troubling

component of the disappearances: namely, that they are mostly all inside people's heads. While this feels like this should be good news (because that feels easier to resist than an outside force), it is actually disappointing at this point in the story, because it means most people can't or won't change the way they think.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☝ I'd heard rumors that people who had been hiding were forced to wander the streets when their homes were destroyed by the earthquake or the fires that followed it. And that the Memory Police had been rounding them up and taking them into custody one after the other. But I had no way to know whether the Inui family had actually been in that truck or not. All I could do was pray that someone had continued to cut the little boy's fingernails and that the blue gloves were still protecting him.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator (speaker), The Memory Police, Professor Inui, The Inuis' Son

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears after the earthquake that rattles the island and immediately after the narrator thinks she sees the Inuis' son in a Memory Police van.

The Memory Police rounding up people in the wake of a natural disaster, like the earthquake, is a particularly cruel turn of events, but it's completely in line with the brutality that they've shown throughout the story. It's disturbing to think how the people on the island live in fear of natural disasters *and* of their government, when governments are supposed to be there to aid citizens after an environmental catastrophe.

It's also particularly tragic that the narrator thinks she saw the young son's gloves in the back of a truck, because the story has not talked about the Inuis since the very beginning—it seemed possible, until now, that the family had escaped to a safe place. However, by adding this detail, the story dashes all hope that the Inuis might get out alive. This doesn't move the plot forward, and the moment is fleeting, and the narrator never mentions the Inuis again—in other words, the story didn't *have* to add this detail about how the narrator saw the gloves. But, by including it, the story proves that happy endings are hard to come by under tyrannical and oppressive governments.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☛ “Even if the whole island disappears, this room will still be here,” R said. His tone was even and calm, filled with love, as though he were reading an inscription engraved on a stone monument. “Don’t we have all the memories preserved here in this room? The emerald, the map, the photograph, the harmonica, the novel—everything. This is the very bottom of the mind’s swamp, the place where memories come to rest.”

Related Characters: R (speaker), The Unnamed Narrator

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 232

Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place as R and the narrator (lightly) argue about whether or not everything on the island is going to disappear. R is optimistic at this point in the book, while the narrator is becoming less and less hopeful. The narrator thinks of her mind as a “swamp,” but R turns this negative outlook into something a bit more positive by saying that the hidden room is like the bottom of a swamp, where things rest and thus can be found again.



This particular topic of conversation is one of the most common between the narrator and R at this point. They struggle to see each other’s point of view, even if they technically understand what the other is trying to say. R is very optimistic in this quote: he seems to think that the little space they’ve created in the hidden room doesn’t operate like the rest of the world. Or, at least, it feels that way for him. This is a little naïve, but it’s also hopeful. The fact that R is so expressive in this moment—his voice is “filled with love” and he speaks as though he is reciting something gravely important—shows just how much he has changed since the earlier sections of the book. Although locked away, he’s turned into a sincere, emotional man instead of a reserved person. This shows that people can indeed grow, even in confined spaces. It’s also significant that R lists the names of each of the items lost—this shows that he is dedicated to keeping these names in circulation. In other words, he clearly believes there is power in just saying the words. After all, if he doesn’t say them, no one else will.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☛ By the time their right arms disappeared, people were less troubled than they had been with the disappearance of their left legs. They didn’t linger in bed, wondering what had happened, or spend hours trying to figure out how to get dressed, or worry about how to dispose of the disappeared item. To be honest we had been certain something like this would happen sooner or later.

The disappearances of body parts were, in fact, easier and more peaceful than earlier ones, as no one had to gather in the square to burn the objects or send them floating down the river. There was no uproar, no confusion. We merely went about our usual morning routines, accepting that a new cavity had opened in our lives.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 256

Explanation and Analysis



This quote takes place after right arms disappear, which comes a short time after left legs. Though the narrator speaks, she uses “we,” which means that she feels like she understands how the whole island is feeling. A great complacency has swept over everyone on the island, as though the disappearances of body parts confirms that there is no hope left and that everyone should resign themselves to their fate. It’s a little twisted, too, that such bodily disappearances are “more peaceful” than others. Although very important things (novels, photographs) have vanished from the island, it’s still difficult not to see the disappearance of body parts as a worrying turn of events, since it suggests that whole bodies might eventually disappear. Thus, it’s alarming that the people on the island are so accustomed to getting along that they choose to find an upside in such a dismal situation. In other words, while it’s impressive that the people of the island are so willing to be flexible in difficult times, their lack of concern proves that they’ve completely given up hope that anything will ever change on the island.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☛☛ For a very long time, he sat staring at the void in his palms. When at last he had convinced himself that there was nothing left, he let his arms drop wearily. Then he climbed the ladder one rung at a time, lifted the trapdoor, and went out into the world. Sunlight came streaming in for one moment but vanished again as the door creaked shut. The faint sound of the rug being rolled out on the floor came to me from above.

Closed in the hidden room, I continued to disappear.

Related Characters: The Unnamed Narrator (speaker), R

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 269

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is the last page of the novel. Despite the bravery that R, the narrator, and the old man show throughout the book, there is no neat and happy ending—the narrator herself “disappears,” becoming one with the hidden room, which means that even R can’t find or save her.

This passage is mystical in a way that the rest of the story is not, even though the book contains supernatural elements. The disappearances, though mysterious, do seem to follow logic within the novel: the physical things don’t actually

disappear—only the memories of those things legitimately disappear (until people burn or get rid of the item). However, in this last scene, it is unclear as to what is happening, since R—who is unaffected by the disappearances and can both see and remember everything that other people forget—has only a “void” in his palm. This might be the narrator’s interpretation of herself, suggesting that, though R is holding her body, he is only holding a “void” because she herself has “disappeared.” Alternatively, it could be more literal, meaning that the narrator’s body could really have vanished. Either way, the conclusion is the same: the narrator no longer substantially exists (even though she keeps narrating) and will soon be gone forever.

This ending is not particularly happy, then, since the narrator never overcomes her affliction of forgetting. The only reason that R is able to leave the room is because so *much* has disappeared—even, it seems, the Memory Police—so the world outside is completely new, allowing R to start over with whatever is left. This, in some ways, shows how authoritarian regimes have the potential to become their own undoing. It also suggests that sometimes, when so much tragedy has happened, society can only move on if it starts afresh. The novel never reveals what happens to R after he leaves the room. But, since there is sunlight “streaming” in from outside after so much snow, the narrative hints at the possible existence of a new, more optimistic reality.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

An unnamed narrator sits in her mother's sculpture studio in the basement of their home on an unidentified island. The mother tells her young daughter how, long ago, there were far more things on the island, but things have been disappearing one by one. She says it's a "shame" that the people on the island haven't been able to hold on to the memories of the things that disappeared. The narrator asks if they are scary—these "disappearances"—and her mother says that they're not and that they don't hurt, and that often when it happens it will be over before the narrator even realizes it.

The narrator listens to her mother while sitting on a little stool. Her mother, in a soft voice, continues telling her how people are emotional in the days after a disappearance, but that they usually settle down after a few days. No one "makes a fuss." Eventually, most people can't even remember what it was that disappeared.

The narrator's mother then leads the narrator to an old cabinet with small drawers, which is situated behind a staircase. The mother tells the narrator to pick any drawer she'd like, and the narrator hesitates before deciding, even though she's done this many times before. Her mother keeps many of the things that have been disappeared from their island in this secret spot. The narrator takes her time choosing, thinking about all of the mysterious things that the cabinet contains.

The novel's opening sets up the narrator's relationship to her mother, as well as her mother's relationship to "disappearances." These "disappearances" are very mysterious in the beginning, but the reader at least understands that there are fewer things on the island now than there used to be. The mother conveys that this is a disappointment, even if she tries to make her daughter feel better by assuring her that disappearances don't hurt—this is important, because the mother's sense of loss will later contrast with other people's apathy about disappearances. It is also noteworthy that the novel begins with the narrator's mother telling her daughter a story—this centers the importance of storytelling in the narrative and shows how stories can be passed down even if certain physical objects are gone.



The narrator's mother is experienced with disappearances, which signals that they've been going on for the narrator's whole life. Saying that people are upset at first but then move on rather quickly shows how the people on the island tend to accept the disappearances, and it suggests that most people think there is nothing to be done about them.



The fact that the disappeared objects are so clandestinely hidden foreshadows the existence of the Memory Police and suggests that it is very dangerous to hold on to these simple things. This moment also signifies something else, though, about the disappearances—that some people seem to be able to resist them. The fact that the narrator has done this activity with her mother multiple times also indicates that her mother shows her these objects often, which must mean she feels it's important.



Once the narrator chooses, her mother opens the drawer, smiles, and hands the narrator a “kind of fabric called ‘ribbon.’” They also look at something called a “bell” that would ring and make a pleasant sound, an “emerald” that used to be beautiful and precious, and a “stamp” that would make it possible for someone to deliver a letter anywhere in the world. The narrator treasures hearing these words—they feel exotic and otherworldly. But when the narrator tries to imagine a time when all of these things existed on the island, she has trouble doing so. It is like trying to sculp clouds out of modeling clay.

The narrator’s favorite story that her mother tells her is about “perfume”—the narrator thinks she is supposed to drink this liquid, but her mother tells her she used to wear it when she was young, before a date. The perfume that her mother keeps in the cabinet is the same one that she wore when she and the narrator’s father began dating. She says that back in those days, everyone could smell perfume. When perfume disappeared, everyone dumped their bottles out into the river. Now most people don’t even remember what it was.

At nine o’clock, the narrator is about to go upstairs to bed. But first, she asks her mother the question that has been on her mind: why does she (the mother) remember all the things that have been disappeared, and no one else does? The mother pauses a moment, looks out of the window, and tells the narrator that it must be because she is always thinking about these things. The narrator says that she doesn’t understand and asks if her mother remembers everything, forever. Her mother does not respond, just looks down sadly, and the narrator gives her a kiss to try and make her feel better.

CHAPTER 2

Years pass. The narrator’s mother and father have died. The narrator mentions that she might have family living on the other side of the mountains from her, but she has no way of knowing where, since maps, too, are “disappeared.”

The objects’ randomness (the lack of connection between these items) suggest that disappearances are arbitrary and could happen to any odd thing. The items’ ordinariness (stamp, ribbon, bell) also doesn’t really match the covert way that the narrator views them, again emphasizing the danger that she and her mother must be in by just looking at these objects and, in turn, foreshadowing the presence of the Memory Police.



The narrator’s total lack of connection to the mysterious “perfume” contrasts with the mother’s meaningful, personal connection to the object. This emphasizes how each item is important not only because of its function, but also because it sparks a memory, which in turn sparks an emotion. This suggests that without memories, there would be less and less human emotion.



This scene shows how “disappearances” have made the mother sad and isolated, even though she’s kept her memories. This suggests that memories must be shared, or their meaning lessens. The mother saying that she thinks she remembers things because she thinks about them all the time (not that she is lucky, etc.) suggests that people may be able combat the forgetting linked to disappearances. The narrator is also clearly very fond of her mother, and her mother’s brave act of hiding disappeared objects will shape the way the narrator sees the world.



The narrator’s sudden isolation at the beginning of Chapter 2 shows that she is a lonely character. The fact that, had maps not disappeared, she may have been able to find other family members emphasizes the sense of isolation that disappearances make people feel.



The narrator thinks of her father, who was an ornithologist. He spent his time collecting data and photographing **birds**, and the narrator, when she was young, loved to visit him while he worked. His coworkers would spoil her. She'd sit on her father's lap, look through his binoculars, and study the birds (which she calls "creatures"). In these intimate father-daughter moments, the narrator always wanted to ask him whether he knew about her mother's secret chest of drawers, but she'd stop herself. She is relieved that birds were not disappeared until after her father died.

The narrator explains that most people are able to quickly move to another profession when a thing disappears that affects their work (though she doesn't think her father would have been able to do this). She marvels at how most people—and she notes that she's not an exception—are "capable" of forgetting just about anything, as though their island could float in an "expanse of totally empty sea."

The narrator remembers the morning **birds** were disappeared. In the memory, she wakes up with the familiar, strange feeling that disappearances give her. She checks the items around her room and then goes out into the garden. There, she sees a small, brown, flying thing, and realizes that all of her knowledge about these creatures is gone, though birds themselves will continue to technically exist until they are somehow disposed of by the Memory Police. A neighbor confirms her intuition that it is birds that have disappeared—good riddance, he says, but then feels guilty when he sees the narrator and remembers her late father's profession. All sense of connection is gone for the narrator as she watches the bird. It is now "nothing more than a simple creature."

The day after the **birds'** disappearance, there's an unexpected, violent ring on the narrator's doorbell. The Memory Police—the feared arm of the state that enforces "disappearances"—are at her home, and they demand to be taken to the narrator's father's old office. She reminds them that her father died five years ago, but they don't care. They are rude, dismissive, and forceful, barging into her home without removing their shoes.

The narrator shows a clear fondness for her father and has meaningful memories of her time with him. However, she lacks the ability to say birds, always calling them "creatures," showing that disappearances have greatly affected her in her adult life—unlike her mother, who was able to resist them. This moment also introduces birds as a symbol for memories of a loved one that disappear over time—rather than just saying that this happens, the story uses birds as an embodiment of that phenomenon.



The narrator's belief that most people are "capable" of forgetting just about anything shows how many people on the island can passively accept the disappearances, even if they uproot their lives in a meaningful way. Yet it is significant that she thinks her father would not have been able to move on from his job as an ornithologist, suggesting he was incredibly dedicated. The image of the island floating in "an expanse of totally empty sea" is a metaphor for the way that the disappearances isolate the people on the island from the rest of the world and from each other.



This scene is an important first description of the strange, mysterious ways that disappearances work on the island and in the story. The simplicity of disappearances (nothing dramatic happens, people just wake up and know something is gone) suggests that "disappearances" in the novel are a metaphor for slowly forgetting something that happens (less mysteriously but just as consequentially) in real life. The narrator's clinical description of birds as "nothing more" than "simple creatures" shows how effective disappearances are, since she only registers the bird as an object.



This is the first scene with the Memory Police, and it is important that it comes right after something sad—like the disappearance of birds—has happened. This shows that the Memory Police aren't concerned with empathy—they don't try to sympathize with the narrator, since they only have one job to do. The detail of not removing their shoes to come into the narrator's home confirms their disrespect for the civilians on the island.



The Memory Police then storm into the narrator's father's office, seeming to know exactly how to get through the house. They brusquely go through all of her father's old papers, tossing everything out from the drawers that haven't been touched in years onto the floor, making a mess. They search for anything having to do with birds. They even go through a drawer that only contains family photos—mercifully, they put these photos back after they look through them, but that is the "only kindness" they show her that day.

After an hour, the Memory Police leave with 10 bags full of the narrator's father's old papers. She feels like this experience is different than when her mother was taken away—this time, they've taken everything they need and will likely not be back. The narrator stands in her father's old office and feels how empty it now is—all traces of her father, which she'd tried too hard to hold onto, are gone. She feels like she might be swallowed up by the emptiness of the room.

The fact that the Memory Police know just how to get through the house shows that it's possible they have surveillance capacities. Their disrespect for the narrator's father's things again highlights their total lack of empathy or sympathy. A simple act—putting the photographs back in the drawers—being the "only kindness" the Memory Police show to the narrator solidifies their willingness to be excessively cruel most of the time.



The Memory Police storming the narrator's father's office only one day after birds disappear show how committed they are to enforcing disappearances. That they take 10 bags shows that the father had many papers about birds—he must have been a thorough researcher, as the narrator has already suggested. The narrator comparing this moment to the time her mother was taken away hints that something bad must have happened to her mother at the hands of the Memory Police. The narrator is devastated that her father's papers are gone, which shows how much his research connected him to her.



CHAPTER 3

The narrator's profession is writing. She has published three novels. Each book is about something that has been disappeared, because "everyone likes that sort of thing." However, she admits that on the island, writing—and books—aren't particularly appreciated, so libraries and books are often in poor condition. She believes that few people on the island have a need for novels.

The narrator's writing routine involves staying up late, working in her father's old office. She often takes walks at night, along a coastal road. There is a ferry tied to a dock she passes, but no one has used it in years, and it is completely covered with rust. The name of the boat is no longer visible. The narrator always stops on this walk to talk to an old man, her old nurse's husband, who used to work on the boat before it was disappeared. He'd briefly found other work but then retired, and he now lives on the abandoned ferry.

The narrator being a professional writer again emphasizes how the novel values storytelling. However, it's disheartening if people on the island don't have much need for books or storytelling, because it might mean that they are not interested in this important way of connecting to other people.



This scene shows a strange component to the disappearances—even when something physically still exists, like the ferry, people's memories are so contorted that they will not use these things. The old man still living on the ferry, despite losing all or most of his memories surrounding it, suggests that there is still some connection to the ferry even though it is hard to pin down or describe. This shows the difficulty people have of forgetting about the disappeared objects entirely.



The old man always asks how the narrator's next novel is coming along, to which she replies "slowly." Her work as a writer impresses him—he says that her parents would be so proud of her, but he also admits that he's never read one of her books. If he were to read one of her books, then it would be over, which would be "wasteful"—but unread, it is kept safe. The two often share a snack and talk about old memories, but these conversations are increasingly difficult as more and more things disappear from the island.

The old man and the narrator will share many conversations like this throughout the novel, and they are meaningful because they show the bond the two have with each other. The talks also expose key components of the narrator and the old man's personalities. Here, it is important that the old man hasn't actually read any of the narrator's books—this means that he has different interests, and he sees the world differently than the narrator. This will happen over the course of the novel, as the narrator asks questions about disappearances and the old man seems certain that they are simply fate. However, these differences do not prevent the narrator and the old man from becoming very close friends.



When the sun starts to go down, the narrator says goodbye and leaves the ferry and the old man. On the way home, she likes to walk by the observatory, even though the Memory Police have "done their work" there and left it in ruins. As the narrator makes her way home, she thinks how quiet the island gets in the evening. At this point, the people of the island live mostly with their heads down, just waiting for the next disappearance.

The destroyed observatory being evidence that the Memory Police have "done their work" emphasizes how their primary job is to destroy, making them an oppressive force. The fact that people live in anticipation of the next disappearance shows how much this force has taken over their lives, and how they feel helpless to do anything other than wait for the next disappearance.



CHAPTER 4

That Wednesday, the narrator has an "encounter" with the Memory Police. She's seen them three other times this month and believes that they are growing more brutal. They have been on the island for 15 years—their appearance coincided with people realizing that there were some people (like the narrator's mother) who did not lose their memory of things that disappeared. The narrator is on her way to meet her editor, walking along the road, when the encounter takes place. The Memory Police's trucks—dark green with canvas covering—pull up, and 10 men get out and hurry into a building. People gather on the street to watch nervously.

The fact that the Memory Police have existed for a shorter time than the disappearances have been taking place indicates that the Memory Police do not cause disappearances—however, they have taken advantage of the situation to seize control of this island society. People gathering nervously on the street as they pull up shows that citizens have anxiety about seeing the Memory Police, which supports the narrator's feeling that they are growing more and more brutal.



Soon, the Memory Police emerge from the building with two middle-aged men, a woman in her thirties, and a thin teenage girl. It's clear to the narrator—from the untied shoelaces and messy bags—that these people had to pack quickly. The Memory Police point weapons at the civilians as they march them out of the building. The Memory Police's badges glint in the sunlight.

This scene shows how quickly and abruptly the Memory Police work, and how the citizens of the island already feel like there's little they can do other than watch. The fact that the Memory Police take even a young child highlights their increasing cruelty.



The Memory Police load the people into one of their vans. The youngest girl (who is at the back of the line) tries to climb into the van, but it is too high, and she falls on her back. The narrator cries out inadvertently, dropping her manuscript. The other people watching look at the narrator “disapprovingly”—only one person moves to help the narrator gather papers. But the Memory Police do not notice the disturbance—they grab the girl who fell, pull her into the truck, and drive off. The narrator wonders what the officer’s hand had felt like to the young girl.

Once the Memory Police are gone, it takes a moment for the people on the street to continue what they were doing. Only when the narrator hears an engine start up does she feel like she can move again.

When the narrator arrives at the publishing house, she tells her editor, R, that she saw something horrible. He immediately guesses the Memory Police, and she says that she thinks they’re getting worse. R agrees that they’re awful, but the narrator insists that today was unusual, since taking four people in the middle of town in broad daylight is especially bad. R says that those people must have been hidden in a “safe house.”

The narrator wants to ask more questions about what a safe house means, but she gets nervous that there could be plain clothes Memory Police officers listening. However, there are only three other people in the lobby, so R explains that there is an underground network of citizens building rooms in their homes to shelter the people the Memory Police are looking for. However, R says that if the Memory Police are starting to raid safe houses, “then there’s really no place left to hide...”

The Memory Police not being concerned that a young girl fell backwards out of their van again shows their cold indifference to the citizens of the island. People looking “disapprovingly” at the narrator for making a noise—possibly drawing attention to the crowd on the street—shows how worried citizens are that any attention from the Memory Police is dangerous. The narrator’s curiosity about the touch of the Memory Police’s hand possibly speaks to her belief that they are growing more inhumane: would the officer’s hand even feel like the hand of a fellow human being?



The nervousness of the people on the street, unable to move until jolted to life by a loud noise, again proves how intimidating the Memory Police are and how much the people of the island fear them.



This is first interaction between the narrator and R, who later becomes one of the novel’s central characters, and it seems serious but not particularly intimate. Their relationship, at this point, is that of writer and editor. It’s noteworthy that they talk about safe houses, though, because this shows that there is an established element of trust already between them—safe houses are not a casual topic of conversation, since it’s too risky to discuss such matters. R mentioning safe house is also one of the novel’s earliest allusions to the Holocaust and to The Diary of Anne Frank (a huge influence on the story), since Frank had to hide with her family in the annex of a safe house during WWII.



It’s ominous that R and the narrator have to regulate their conversations even in their workplace—this shows that they fear the Memory Police’s surveillance abilities. It’s also worrying that R thinks there is “no place left to hide,” since this suggests that he’s incredibly worried about the state of their society. However, R will later find that there is a place left to hide on the island, after all.



The conversation trickles off. Eventually, the narrator says that she always found it strange that the Memory Police can tell who these people are—those who are immune to the disappearances. Aesthetically, they seem like everyone else, and they are a mix of old, young, female, and male. She wonders why it isn't easier to blend in with the rest of the population. But R says that it must be hard to suppress all those memories. If it were so easy to pretend that they forgot things, they wouldn't need to be in safe houses.

R continues that he's heard a rumor about how the Memory Police may soon be able to test people's genes to tell the difference, and that they could be collecting gene samples from anywhere—a cup of coffee, for example. He says that the island is "run" by men who are determined to make disappeared things stay forgotten. The narrator asks R if he thinks the Memory Police killed her mother, and R answers carefully, not says a definitive yes but admitting that he definitely thinks her mother was "under observation."

R then holds the narrator's manuscript and muses about how odd it is to still be able to create something with words on an island where everything is disappearing. The narrator frightfully wonders to herself what would happen if words disappeared. She's afraid to ask the question and afraid it might one day come true.

CHAPTER 5

The end of autumn arrives. The old man and the narrator work together to prepare the ferry for winter. The old man says that although it hasn't snowed in years, he thinks it might this year. The narrator is excited at the prospect, since she's only seen it **snow** a few times in her life. She gives him a sweater that she's knitted for him—though it doesn't fit perfectly, he seems to love it.

It's telling that R is the one who says it must be difficult to pretend to forget, since this foreshadows an important thing about him. His statement also proves something important about how the novel views memory: that it is a fundamental part of being human.



The rumor about the Memory Police testing people's genetics further underscores their surveillance capabilities. The narrator asking R about her mother shows again that they have a lot of trust between them, but R's careful response shows that he's not willing to say something so damning about the Memory Police (to the narrator) just yet. However, this is a meaningful development in the mystery about what happened to the narrator's mother—the details of which have not yet been fully revealed.



R's appreciation for writing and storytelling is a big part of his personality. To that end, the narrator's admiration of R's passion for storytelling is a big part of what draws her to him. It's meaningful that they bond over the narrator's manuscript. The narrator's worry about the future of the island is one she will repeat throughout the story, and it's telling that she's too afraid to ask it, because it shows that this is one of her deepest fears.



The old man and the narrator's connection deepens here, since they become a team working together to get the ferry ready for winter. This foreshadows how they will work together to help R later in the story. It's interesting that, though ferries are disappeared, the defunct ferry still acts as a connector between the two characters, furthering the idea that many things are more than simple objects—they can facilitate powerful connections between people.



The next day, winter sets in, and the river ices over. The narrator works on her new novel, about a woman—a typist—who loses her voice. The woman’s boyfriend—her typing teacher—tries to massage her throat, but the voice never comes back, so they communicate only through a typewriter. The narrator isn’t sure how the story will end. At the moment, it seems “pleasant enough,” but she feels it might take a “frightening turn.”

Later that night, the narrator is working late—past midnight—when she hears a knock. Though at first she can’t place it, eventually she realizes that it’s coming from the basement, a place she’s hardly gone since her mother’s death. After locating the key (it’s been so long since she’s been down there that she has trouble finding it), she goes downstairs and sees that there is indeed someone outside of her mother’s studio.

The narrator is nervous, but the knock seems too polite to be that of a burglar, so she asks who’s there. An apologetic voice responds saying that it is Inui. The narrator opens the door to find Professor Inui, his wife, and their two children (a 15-year-old daughter and a younger son) standing there. Inui, an old friend of the narrator’s parents, teaches in the dermatology department at the island’s university hospital. The family is clearly anxious and uneasy, and they huddle together. The narrator invites them in and suggests that they go up to the living room where it is warm, but the professor says that there is no time. Each family member carries two bags.

Once inside, Professor Inui says that “it finally arrived” and explains that he’s received a summons from the Memory Police: they want him at their genetic analysis center. He’s been “dismissed” from his job at the university and is supposed to be escorted to the center later that morning along with his family. When the narrator asks why, Inui says that he has no idea. However, he suspects that they want to use him to help detect those people who can retain their memory, and the narrator remembers what R told her about genetic testing.

The narrator’s story mirrors, thematically, what is happening in the larger narrative. So, at the moment, the woman (the narrator’s protagonist) has suffered a loss, but it doesn’t seem to be the end of the world. This mirrors how, though things are disappearing from the island, people are still able to lead “pleasant enough” lives. However, the narrator’s premonition that her own story might turn “frightening” is ominous, foreshadowing what might happen in the larger narrative. Storytelling is a way for the narrator to make sense of her own life, which shows the value that the novel itself places on writing and stories.



The fact that the narrator has not been to her mother’s studio in so long shows that she’s rather detached from the memory of her mother—or, at the very least, that she doesn’t like stirring up old memories by going down there. This furthers the story’s overall claim that ordinary objects (or places) have the ability to act well beyond only their intended function, since places and things act as conduits for memories.



The Inui family is clearly flustered and scared. Saying that they have no time to go upstairs shows that they’re probably on the run. Still, the narrator welcoming them into her house hints at her willingness to help others.



It is noteworthy that Professor Inui seems to think that his summons was inevitable. By saying “it finally arrived,” he suggests that he was only waiting for some sort of call like this from the Memory Police. Clearly, since he’s on the run, he doesn’t have any plans to follow the summons, which shows that he fears even something official like a summons if it comes from the Memory Police. The fact that he was fired (“dismissed”) from his teaching job shows how the Memory Police are willing to use manipulation to scare people into doing what they want. Inui’s belief that the Memory Police are expanding their capabilities by developing technology to detect people who keep their memory signifies again how the Memory Police are increasing surveillance and authority over the island.



Professor Inui explains that the offer is “frighteningly” generous. They’re offering three times what he currently makes, the government center has a school for the children, and there is a car and housing all set up for him and his family. The order came three days ago. Inui’s wife says that everything happened so fast, they weren’t even able to take their family cat, Mizore.

Professor Inui’s wife hesitantly adds that their summons is just like the letter that came for the narrator’s mother. The narrator thinks about her mother’s death, which happened when she was much younger. No one had heard of the Memory Police at that time, so her mother and father hadn’t been particularly worried when a summons arrived—just a bit apprehensive about how long her mother might be gone. However, the narrator remembers feeling sure that the summons had something to do with the chest of drawers in the basement.

A fancy black car picked the narrator’s mother up on the day she left—the narrator remembers her mother waving from the car as though she were on her way to an awards ceremony. But one week later, her mother was dead—the government sent her body back alongside a death certificate. Cause of death was ruled a heart attack, which was never technically disproven.

Professor Inui says that he recognized the letter he received as the same—even the same paper and font. If he refuses the summons, the Memory Police will take him away by force. He says he’ll never work for them. Though he doesn’t want to frighten his children, he explains to the narrator how serious he thinks this is, which is why they all have to be on the run. Inui asks the narrator if she will take five small, wooden sculptures of tapirs that her mother made and gave to the Inuis as gifts. The narrator accepts them.

Professor Inui demonstrates further anxiety about the summons by saying how outrageous the offer was. This shows both that the Memory Police have more money than everyone else, and that they’re not the sort of organization that the average citizen trusts. The fact that the Inuis had to leave their family cat is another allusion to Anne Frank, since she wrote in her diary that she had to leave her beloved cat, Moortje, to go into hiding from the Nazis.



The narrator’s sense of foreboding about the letter from the Memory Police shows how dangerous it was for her mother to keep those seemingly mundane objects in the basement. The fact that their family didn’t run, though, like the Inui family, shows how oppressive regimes can often hide their true intentions at the beginning.



The narrator’s mother’s sudden and mysterious death while in government care was formative for the narrator. Though she never got confirmation that the Memory Police killed her mother, it’s clear that she has reason to believe that they murdered the mother. It’s also noteworthy that, back when the narrator was young, there were more covert ways of collecting people. This contrasts with the more aggressive method of rounding citizens up on the street during the day. Either way, the narrator certainly knows a lot more than she did when she was a child, and it seems that no one is prepared to trust the Memory Police now.



Again, the Memory Police are a source of fear and dread. The fact that Professor Inui thinks they will take him anyway if he refuses the summons shows how absolute their power is on the island. It’s also significant that, before they part, Inui gives the narrator statues that her mother made—this is a thoughtful gesture, since the narrator would never have seen the sculptures again if the Inuis hadn’t brought them to her.



Before Professor Inui and his family leaves, the narrator hurries upstairs to make a drink. She brings the family heated milk in mugs, and they all make a silent toast. The narrator asks where they will go, but Inui refuses to tell her, so that she won't be made to confess anything if she is captured and questioned. She says she will pray for their safety. Mrs. Inui asks for a nail clipper, and the narrator finds one. The narrator helps the young son remove his sky-blue gloves, then gently clips his nails. After she finishes, the Inui family leaves, "vanishing" into the night.

The fact that the Inuis won't tell the narrator where they're going again shows how much people on the island fear the Memory Police and speaks again to the government's possible methods of surveillance. Everything about the way the Memory Police operate is so unknown that people decide not to take any risks. The narrator cutting the young boy's nails is a tender gesture, showing how even in times of war or authoritarianism, everyday activities—like sharing a drink or nail-clipping—still go on. It is also significant that the Inuis "vanish" when they leave: this suggests that, when people go into hiding, it is almost like they've died, because they are lost to the community and the people around them.



CHAPTER 6

A woman climbs up a narrow staircase. It reminds her of running up a lighthouse staircase when she was younger. She is climbing this staircase to meet her lover, almost tripping in her excitement. Her lover is a typing teacher—halfway up the staircase, she begins to hear the "click-clacking" of typing. She wonders if her lover is gently correcting his students when they make a mistake, just as he used to correct her...

This is the first time an excerpt from the narrator's manuscript appears in the book. The woman's (the story's protagonist) excitement is optimistic, but the narrowness of the staircase she climbs could be read as foreshadowing something more threatening. The fact that the woman in the narrator's story is a typist emphasizes the larger narrative's focus on words and storytelling.



The narrator stops writing and puts down her pencil. The new novel is not going well, and she thinks she is writing in circles. R is constantly asking her how she is doing—she wonders if he means how she is doing emotionally, or with the novel. It is always just with the novel. He tells her she must write with her hand instead of her head, since the hand is where the story comes from. The narrator stops writing for the evening.

This is the first sign of the narrator's romantic attachment to R, since she wonders if he's asking her personal questions when they're really just professional questions. This also shows how he is rather distant, still, even though later their relationship will drastically change. The narrator finds it difficult to write—this is possibly because she's writing a pleasant story while so many bad things happen on the island, which foreshadows the direction her story will take.



Once in bed, the narrator thinks of the Inui family. She has been walking by their old apartment since the night they came to say goodbye, and she can tell that it is empty. But the students on campus continue about their school, and there is already a different name on Inui's old office door. No one seems to wonder where the professor went—it is as though the family has truly vanished, "melted into thin air." The narrator worries about the family's safety.

The fact that no one seems to have noticed Professor Inui's disappearance on campus shows how numb people are to otherwise significant disappearances. It also shows how effectively the Memory Police can isolate the people on the island from each other. The narrator, though, still feels connected to the Inui family and appears to be the only one grieving their loss, which shows that she might feel things a little bit deeper than the majority of the people on the island.



The next morning, when the narrator wakes up, she knows that something else has “disappeared.” The morning is cold. She makes herself breakfast, trying to figure out what is gone—she’s happy it’s not the food she is eating (buttered rolls, tea, honey). It’s always sad when it’s a food.

The narrator goes outside so she can see the river, which is flowing and looks beautiful. She dips her hand in and pulls up rose petals—the entire surface of the river is covered in them. Citizens quietly murmur about how lovely a sight it is. The narrator understands that roses have disappeared and wants to walk up the hill to the rose garden to see if it is already empty. The Memory Police are out “in full force,” because this is a particularly beautiful disappearance. They appear as they always do: “weapons on their hips, faces devoid of expression.”

The next day, there is not a single rose left in the rose garden. The stems, leaves, and thorns are left, but no roses. Though a few other types of flowers remain, the garden looks hollow and barren without its signature bloom. The narrator realizes that she’s already begun to forget what “this thing called a rose” ever looked like.

CHAPTER 7

People continue to dispose of their roses. The narrator comes across a woman who once won a prize for the beauty of her roses, who tells her that they are the “last and most beautiful memento” she has of her late father (since raising roses was her family business). However, her voice contains no sadness as she says this.

Soon, the river is back to normal. The old man saw all this happen from the ferry. The narrator, visiting him, asks how the wind knows to get rid of only the rose petals during the disappearance, and he says that there’s no way of knowing. They continue to talk, mentioning how empty the area will be without the rose garden. The narrator worries that things are disappearing quicker than people on the island can create things.

The matter-of-fact way that the narrator responds to another disappearance shows how often this has happened in her life. The narrator is relatively relaxed and calm, which shows that, when loss or tragedy is slow or spread out over time, people often choose to cope by downplaying the emotional impact.



The beauty of the disappearance of roses momentarily brings the citizens together, since it feels like they can collectively appreciate the immense loss of something so wonderful. The fact that the Memory Police are out “in full force” emphasizes that there is brief solidarity among the people, since the Memory Police are prepared for possible, unusual resistance. The fact that the Memory Police carry weapons and look expressionless underscores that they are an intimidating government entity, and they appear especially inhuman in this moment, since their goal is to make sure people part with something that seems so innocent and pleasurable.



The narrator experiences another physical loss, which causes her to lose all emotional connection to this thing (in this case, a rose). This mental loss that accompanies the physical loss shows how objects and memories are closely tied together. The barrenness of the rose garden mirrors the emptying out of people’s hearts, minds, and identity with each disappearance.



The narrator’s interaction with this woman demonstrates again how objects are closely tied to memories, and how much is lost when something disappears. The woman’s lack of sadness proves that people’s emotions are starting to dull with each disappearance.



This is one of the first direct conversations in the book about the mechanics of “disappearances.” It is clear, from the old man’s response, that no one quite knows how they work, only that there is a force greater than themselves at play. The old man and the narrator seem to feel victims of fate—since they do not know what is causing the disappearances, and all they can do is worry about when the next one will come. The narrator’s concern that things will disappear faster than people can create sets up a recurring worry she has throughout the story.



The old man tries to reassure the narrator, telling her she doesn't need to worry because it's possible to get used to any type of disappearance—he was even fine after the ferry disappeared though he'd loved working on it. The narrator asks if it makes him sad that the ferry is nothing more than a scrap of metal. The old man responds that even though the island feels more “diluted” since the disappearances began, people's hearts, too, have gotten “thinner,” so everything is kept in balance. The narrator notices that she can no longer see a single rose petal in the river.

The old man is trying to be reassuring to the narrator, but there is something tragic about the fact that people's hearts need to get “thinner” to match island's “dilution.” In other words, even the kind old man is admitting that people are hollowing out because of the disappearances on the island, which shows that their identities and connections to each other are getting weaker. The narrator worrying about the disappearances shows that she wants to offer some kind of resistance, but it is unclear if this will be enough to make a difference. The chapter ends with the narrator noticing how all of the rose petals are officially gone, which strikes a pessimistic and somber tone for the island's future.



CHAPTER 8

The woman explains that it's been three months since she lost her voice. To communicate with her lover, the typing teacher, she types everything. Even when they have sex, the typewriter is on the bed. It was hard for her at first, going mute, but she became accustomed to it. One day, her lover asks her what she'd like for her birthday, and she says an ink ribbon. He says that that's not very romantic, but she says that she worries they'll disappear, and she won't be able to communicate with him anymore. He says he'll go to the store and buy all the ink ribbons they have.

Despite the protagonist of the narrator's manuscript losing her voice, the story remains fairly cheerful, which shows that the narrator herself may be hopeful the island will be able to one day recover from the disappearances. The typewriter, within the manuscript, is very important to the woman because it is the way that she can share her thoughts even without a voice. Since a typewriter is usually a way to write down stories, its importance in the manuscript emphasizes the larger narrative's belief that stories are critical to connection.



The woman remembers the first time the typing teacher showed her how to change an ink ribbon and how impressive it was watching him demonstrate it for the class. His hands were deft and beautiful while he did it. Though she was never able to change the ribbon in class, she's since learned to do it even quicker than he can. Since she's lost her voice, she never throws away any of the old ribbons.

The woman in the narrator's story seems to understand how people can attach memory or feeling to objects, since she never throws away the old ribbons. This connects to the larger narrative because people throw away things as soon as they are “disappeared,” which isolates them from their emotions. The woman being unable to throw out the typewriting ribbon suggests that the narrator might not fully accept the disappearances, even as she is affected by them and complies with them.



The narrator invites R to her house to show him what she wrote. He shows great consideration looking over and editing her manuscript, and she is nervous that the work is not good enough. They take a break, and the narrator serves tea. R comments on a photograph of the narrator's mother on the wall, saying that she was very beautiful, and that the narrator looks a lot like her.

The narrator's manuscript is an important part of her relationship to R, which proves how storytelling can connect people. R's careful consideration of the manuscript shows that he is a thoughtful person, and this, again, attracts the narrator on a personal (not just professional) level. Her worry that her manuscript won't be good enough shows that she really values what R thinks. R commenting that the narrator's mother was beautiful and saying that they look alike is a sly compliment, which shows that maybe he is developing feelings for the narrator that go beyond work.



After discussing the manuscript, R and the narrator sit together without speaking. She realizes that she knows almost nothing about R outside of him being her editor. After a while, R asks if the narrator has any of her mother's old works. The narrator replies that she has a few, scattered around the studio downstairs. R asks if he can see the studio, and the narrator says she'd be happy to show it to him. R seems quite pleased.

Once downstairs, the narrator tells R that he can look around and open any drawers or notebooks he'd like. R finds the old cabinet of drawers and asks about it. The narrator explains that when she was little, the cabinet held all sorts of "secret things," even though it is empty now. She thinks that her mother had a chance to dispose of everything right after she got her summons from the Memory Police—before she'd gone away.

The narrator admits that even though she can remember many of the details surrounding her mother's stories (the sound of her mother's voice, the smell of the studio, the look on her mother's face) she has difficulty remembering the objects themselves. R asks her to tell him about the items anyway, even if her memory is faulty. She talks about a precious green stone her mother had had, describing it without naming it. R asks if she might be talking about an "emerald." The narrator says the word to herself, unsure if it's right, but she thinks it is.

The narrator then asks R how he knew what she was talking about. He doesn't respond but keeps opening the drawers, stopping at one to say that it used to hold perfume. He asks if the narrator can smell it, and she says no, apologizing. He says she doesn't have to apologize, since it's so hard to remember things after they've been disappeared. He, however, he remembers everything.

Things are more intimate between R and the narrator because they are not at the office. R's interest in the narrator's mother's work hints that he might have something in common with the narrator's mother. The night the Inuis came, the narrator admitted that she hadn't been down in the studio much since her mother died, so it speaks to her affection for R that she's happy to go down there just because he wants to.



R's interest in the narrator's mother and in the cabinet of drawers further indicates that he may have something in common with the narrator's mother. The narrator speaks very freely to R, which shows that she's pleased he's spending time at her home. She also tells him he can look around in whatever drawers and notebooks he likes, which clearly indicates that she trusts him completely at this point, since she knows how dangerous her mother's secret project was.



It's shocking that R might know the name of this disappeared item—a fact that hints that he is hiding something important. It's also noteworthy that the narrator can remember so many details of her mother's stories, even if she can't picture the objects, because it proves how storytelling is a way to combat the disappearances specifically and forgetting more broadly.



R finally reveals what he's been hiding—that he, just like the narrator's mother, is not affected by the disappearances. He remembers everything. This means that he is in danger, but it also means that he has something in common with the narrator's mother, which the narrator appreciates. It's sad that the narrator can't smell perfume, even though her mother's story about perfume was one of the narrator's favorites, but it's important that R knew what it was and identified it.



CHAPTER 9

Winter continues, chilling the air on the island. The Memory Police's trucks are more prevalent around the city, and their tactics become more brutal. They have been wielding batons, storming into homes searching for anybody who might be hiding and dragging out both the stowaway and the people who hide them. It is becoming difficult to know if a friend or relative has gone into hiding, or if they've been taken away. Citizens on the island are becoming accustomed to losing people.

The narrator sits with the old man on the boat. She is about to tell him a secret but says that if he doesn't want to hear it, he should say so. Even though he doesn't know what she is going to say, he agrees to hearing the secret and swears he won't tell anybody. She tells him she needs help hiding her editor, R, whom she trusts with her work more than anybody else. The old man says he will help her, and she clasps his hands in gratitude.

The narrator and the old man agree that a small, hidden room underneath the narrator's father's old office is the best place to hide R. The basement would be more comfortable, but too many people know about it. The pair write down all the things they need to do to renovate the room and make it safe and livable—everything from clearing out the space to installing a toilet. After memorizing the list, they throw it into the fire.

The next day, the narrator and the old man get to work setting up the hideaway. It is a terribly daunting task, because they cannot hire carpenters (the Memory Police have recruited them all), and they have to sneak around even to gather nails and wood. However, the narrator is very impressed by the old man, who is sly and sneaky and seems to be enjoying their risky project. He is incredibly deft at construction and finishes everything, even the new plumbing setup and an intercom system, in four days. Though the space is tight, they've managed to make the room a livable hideout for R—who, the narrator understands, will be confined to the space once he arrives.

The Memory Police's growing brutality corresponds with the weakening spirits of the people on the island. This shows how authoritarian regimes reinforce themselves by relying on people to feel too afraid to resist, and to turn neighbors against neighbors. The fact that people are becoming used to losing people shows how they feel their free will is diminishing and are resigning themselves to their fate.



It's very meaningful that the old man agrees to help the narrator hide R, since he's taking on a very challenging and dangerous task—and he doesn't even know R. This shows how strong and important the friendship between the old man and the narrator is. It's also incredibly meaningful that the narrator decides to find a way to hide R without even telling him—this is how certain she is that he is in danger, and also how precious he is to her.



It's very impressive how quickly the narrator and the old man are able to come up with this plan, suggesting that they already sensed that they'd have to do something like this at some point. They are very organized, and they're sure to throw their list into the fire, which shows that they know how important it is that no one know what they are working on.



Again, there is something very impressive about the speed with which the narrator and the old man work, indicating that they knew something like this was coming. It's lucky that the old man is so resourceful, otherwise they wouldn't be able to construct the room that they do—this suggests that people in less fortunate circumstances are in even more danger, since the Memory Police is hoarding resources.



CHAPTER 10

A few days later, in the office of the publishing house, the narrator tells R that she has a place for him to hide. She tells him to hurry and get himself ready, but he cuts her off saying that his wife is pregnant, and that he won't leave her behind. The narrator says that it is the safest thing for his whole family if he goes into hiding, otherwise they are not safe either. He is very hesitant, since he has no idea how long it will be for—or if it will even end. The narrator says that no one knows what will happen in the future, and that even the Memory Police may disappear.

The narrator continues insisting that this is the best plan for everyone. R thinks about it, admitting that the narrator seems to have gotten into a dangerous situation because of him, but she says not to mind that. She wants to keep writing novels and having him edit them. In two days, he needs to be packed and head to the train station at eight o'clock—there, an old man will approach him. R is to follow this man to the safe location.

Two days later, it rains heavily. The narrator waits nervously in her home. It normally takes 25 minutes to walk to her house from the train station—after 8:25, it seems like time is moving in slow motion. She can't see anything outside except sheets of rain. The old man and R (finally) arrive after 8:45, soaking wet. The old man tells the narrator that it all went exactly to plan, and that the rain covered their tracks.

R is surprised that the hiding space is in the narrator's house. She tells him that they're not working with any of the underground organizations and properly introduces him to the old man, explaining how they've known each other since her childhood. R is thankful for their help. The three sit in the dining room drying off and drinking tea, and afterwards, the narrator shows R to his room. R is very impressed when he sees the hideaway, observing that "it's like a cave floating in the sky."

The old man and the narrator leave R to get situated, and the narrator tells R she'll bring him his lunch in a little while, to which he says thank you. After she closes the door to the room, she realizes how moved she is by his voice thanking her.

The Memory Police are once again tearing families apart. R's hesitancy to leave his wife shows that he is a caring person. Ultimately, though, it's hard to argue with the narrator's logic, since the Memory Police are rounding up not only immune people but also their families and loved ones. R's concern about when his confinement will end also speaks to how everything on the island is in a very precarious state and how hard it is to imagine a future in which the Memory Police don't exist.



The narrator's relationship to R is still mostly professional, although she clearly has some strong personal feelings for him, since she's willing to drop everything and create a hiding space for him. This shows that she is impressed by his love of stories and that she wants to preserve his memories.



This scene again shows the difficulty ordinary citizens have when trying to avoid surveillance by the Memory Police. The narrator waits nervously because she understands that what they are doing is very risky.



R is impressed with the work that the narrator and the old man have done, calling his small room "a cave in the sky," which shows that, while he'll be isolated, he'll also be free. So, there is a duality to his confinement: he won't be able to leave, but he won't have to pretend he doesn't remember things anymore, which will be liberating for him.



The narrator and R have an interesting relationship at this point—she is quite attached to him, and R admires the narrator's writing and is appreciative of what she's done. When R tells the narrator thank you, it seems as though she may be in love with him, which foreshadows how their relationship will grow while R is in confinement.



CHAPTER 11

After 10 days, this new way of living together is still a bit strange. The narrator finds herself thinking about the room often, and she is not making much progress on her novel. Though she can't hear any noise coming from the hideaway, she realizes that this lack of noise from R makes her "all the more conscious" that he is there. Eventually, though, they settle into a routine, and some nights they eat dinner together and talk.

Although R is very grateful, it's clear to the narrator that he's not totally comfortable in the tight, plain space. The two sit together one, sharing food. They are very close together in the confines of the room. The narrator asks R what it feels like to remember everything. R admits that he doesn't remember *everything*, that some memories fade for him too. But it's not the same as what most people who are victim to the disappearances experience, because he doesn't feel like his memories have been "pulled up by the root."

The narrator wonders what it might feel like holding R's heart in her hand, and if by holding his heart she would be able to feel everything that she's lost. He asks her if she'd really like to remember all of the things that she's forgotten, but she isn't sure. She admits that she feels like the only reason she's been able to write for as long as she has is because she's had R's heart next to her the whole time. He's glad to hear this.

The next day, the publishing house calls and assigns the narrator a new editor. He is plain and small, and he asks the narrator when she'll be finished with her novel—something R never did. After they talk about her manuscript, she casually asks this man if he knows what has happened to R. The new editor says that he disappeared, which was quite shocking. The narrator says that she has some of R's records and asks the new editor to let her know if he finds out where R is.

The narrator and the old man figure out how to communicate with R's wife, who is now living with her parents while she waits to give birth. R's wife leaves items in a designated pick-up spot, and the old man brings them to the house. The narrator asks how the wife is doing, and the old man says that she's confused but being strong, and she's grateful to the narrator and the old man for hiding R. The old man hands the narrator an envelope with some things to bring up to R, and she takes them up to him.

As R is cut off from most of the world, he and the narrator get closer. This speaks to the way that people can sometimes find intimacy through difficult, trying situations.



R opens up to the narrator in the secret room in a way that he didn't in the outside world. This is perhaps because he feels close to her since she knows his secret, and it shows how sharing intimate parts of oneself usually creates connection. The way that R talks about memory is also noteworthy, because it sets up a direct contrast between how the narrator's mind works and how R's mind operates. Their different relationships to memory will prove hard to overcome later in the story.



The narrator and R start talking to each other in a very honest, intimate way that suggests they might become even closer in the future. They both feel that they can trust each other, which is a huge component of their relationship. The narrator also feels creatively inspired by R, which attracts him to her. She is also attracted to him because he remembers everything, which is somewhat inspirational to her at this point.



The new editor's lack of appreciation for the narrator's creative process (by asking her when she'll be finished) only makes the narrator like R more, since he respects her work. The narrator fishing around to see if anybody knows anything about R shows that she's getting savvy and that she knows how she has to behave to keep R safe.



It's thoughtful that the old man and the narrator work out a system to correspond with R's wife, which again shows how well they've thought out their plan. R is a mysterious person, and his connection to his wife is not all that developed, but she is pregnant, so it's important that R stay in contact with her. The wife's reaction to R's confinement shows that she is brave and that she, too, may even have seen something like this coming, since people are vanishing more and more on the island.



CHAPTER 12

The woman was surprised when her lover, the typing teacher, first showed up to teach typing class, since he was a young man in well-cut clothing. She didn't find him classically handsome, but the strength of his features moved her. He used to give the students in his classes timed typing tests, which she admits she was not very good at—she was particularly bothered by the odd calm that set in in the moments just before a test was administered, since this made her nervous, and she would always mess up. In the time she's known him—whether in class or outside of it, even now that they've started a relationship—she has never actually seen him type.

The woman recounts the class that she and the teacher first got close. It was a stormy day, and she was the only student who made it in. She was typing up a manual, and he was standing behind her, watching her. As she made a mistake, he stood over her and held her arms and hands into place on the typewriter. She was out of breath at the intensity of him holding her, as though she was “locked inside the typewriter.”

Ever since the narrator got a new editor, she's shown R all of her work before handing it to the other man. Her editing sessions with R are intimate—since he can no longer mark up the manuscript, they carefully go over everything together in the secret room, sitting next to each other on the bed. Editing also helps R keep his mind busy, though he eventually asks the narrator to find him other work to do, too. The narrator says that that's an excellent idea because she has lots of work to give him, so it will be like “killing two creatures with one stone.” She gives him menial tasks—like adding page numbers to her manuscript—that the happily takes to. They begin to settle into a relatively safe and comfortable routine.

Yet, despite the satisfaction inside their home, the outside world is in decline. Photographs, as well as different kinds of fruits, have been disappeared. The day photographs disappeared, R pleaded with the narrator not to burn them. He told her that they were valuable since they sustain memory, and that although they were only pieces of paper, they “captured something profound.” But the narrator responded that even though she had enjoyed photographs and knew they allowed her wonderful memories, it was simply time for them to go—she did not have the strength to resist a disappearance. R begged her to keep them even if she couldn't resist forgetting what they were, but she said there was no point. The narrator told R that he could not understand. He gave in, and she burned the photographs.

Though the narrator's story still seems relatively pleasant, there now seem to be cues that something is wrong. First, the woman says that she used to be so nervous before timed typing tests, which show that she was anxious in the presence of her teacher. Second, it's very strange that she's never seen her typing teacher type, which suggests he might have some sinister secret. These components of the narrator's manuscript don't add up to much just yet, but likely speak to her growing anxiety about life on the island.



The woman feeling as though she is “locked inside the typewriter” foreshadows how a part of her will, soon, be locked away. The teacher's intensity is also much more unnerving than it was earlier in the manuscript, showing that the narrator must be feeling a lot of pressure and is working through it in her writing. As always, this shows how the narrator processes what is going on in her life with her writing.



The fact that the narrator and R have to go over her manuscript together on the same bed show that their personal and professional lives have completely overlapped. The narrator clearly only trusts R with her manuscript, since she makes sure he sees it before the new editor—this shows how important she considers her work and how seriously she takes R's opinions. It's also noteworthy that the narrator tries to use a common expression—killing two birds with one stone—but can't, since she's forgotten the word “bird.” This doesn't move the plot forward, but it does remind the reader how the consequences of disappearances can pop up at any moment.



Photographs are one of the most consequential disappearances of late, since photographs themselves are a way to keep memories alive. This means that the people on the island lose not only an object, but also an important way to protect against forgetting. R's attempts to have the narrator keep a few photographs shows that he wants her to fight against what is happening to her mind, but she doesn't—this remains a common tension between the two throughout the book.



CHAPTER 13

Snow falls on the island for the first time in a long time. It collects everywhere. The Memory Police patrol the town in extremely elegant clothing (soft-looking coats with green-dyed fur trim). These coats are far lovelier than any coat that a civilian on the island could dream of finding for themselves.

The Memory Police begin to search houses without any particular reason—showing up on a block, surrounding the houses, and searching from top to bottom. Nobody knows how they select the houses for these searches or who will be next. Even the lightest sounds wake the narrator up at night, as she's worried for R. People have taken to staying in their homes, as though "the **snow** had frozen their hearts."

One day, without warning, the Memory Police take the old man. The narrator opens the trapdoor of the secret room and desperately calls out to R. She says that the Memory Police must have learned something. She is shaking so hard that it is difficult to climb down the ladder into the room. She feels certain that the Memory Police will be at the house soon, and she frantically lists all the other places R might go to hide. He puts an arm around her to sooth her, but this just quickens her heartbeat. R says that if they had known about the secret room, they already would have come to get him, so there is no need to panic yet.

R concludes that the old man must have been taken for something unrelated, since the Memory Police often round up people just to try and collect information. The narrator hopes nothing horrible has happened to him. R says that it's possible he's been tortured, since there's no way of knowing exactly what the Memory Police are capable of. If the narrator wants R to leave, he will—but she says she's not fearful of being arrested, only of losing him, which is why she's shaking. R holds the narrator for a long time.

Since it starts snowing, and snow is symbolic of the people of the island growing numb to tragic events, the story indicates that things on the island might take a disappointing turn. The Memory Police's fancy jackets prove that they are richer than most people on the island.



The Memory Police's uptick in searches creates an unavoidable anxiety on the island. People live in fear, which prevents them from taking any sort of collective action. It's as though "snow has frozen their hearts," which shows that they think the only way to move forward is to put their heads down and accept their fates without getting into trouble.



The narrator's reaction to the old man's arrest suggests that she automatically assumes the worst, and that R will be arrested soon. This demonstrates how much fear she carries every day.



The terrifying circumstances of the old man's arrest drive R and the narrator closer together. R admitting that the Memory Police could be torturing the old man shows that there's no way to know exactly how bad things get once someone is taken.



The next day, without telling R, the narrator decides she'll go to the Memory Police headquarters. She wants any information she can get and to help the old man if possible. She trudges to the headquarters—the sun is weakly shining, but there is still snow everywhere, and only the Memory Police have snow boots. Two guards stand outside the front door, staring straight ahead. Although the narrator tells them that she's here to visit someone, the guards do not look at her or acknowledge her. She asks to go inside, but they still do not reply or look at her. She manages to open the heavy wooden front door on her own and walk inside.

Once inside the building, the narrator is in a large, dimly lit hall. There are more Memory Police officers inside, marching across the room. The narrator hears no voices, no laughter—just boots clacking against the floor.

The narrator sees an officer sitting at a desk and approaches him. She tells him that she has a package she'd like to deliver to someone. The officer repeats back the word "package" as though it were a challenging philosophical term. He asks her who she is here to visit, and the narrator responds with the old man's name. The officer says that the old man is not there. The narrator asks how he could know if he didn't even check, and the officer responds that he knows the name of everyone there.

The narrator tries to argue with the Memory Police officer, determined to figure out where the old man is, but the officer says it's a complicated system that the narrator doesn't understand. He then makes a subtle movement, and two guards appear next to the narrator. In silence, the guards hurry her away through a "maze" of hallways until they are in a room in the center of the building.

The narrator is shocked by the elegance of the room—tapestries on the wall, leather couches—but this suddenly reminds her of the fancy car that took her mother away. A man comes to sit in front of her, telling her that he is sorry she made the trip, but that "both visits and packages are forbidden." The man is wearing medals on his chest, and the narrator figures he must be high-ranking in the Memory Police.

This is an uncharacteristic move for the narrator—not because it is brave, but because she normally confides in R in most things she does. The Memory Police, however, are characteristically stoic, reinforcing the idea that they are a cold, menacing presence to the people of the island. The narrator shows courage and loyalty by opening the door on her own to find information about the old man.



Again, the Memory Police come across as a cold—and even unhuman—group.



Since the officer seems baffled by the word "package," it's clear that people don't come inside the headquarters often, which further shows how much the Memory Police scare people on the island. The narrator knows that the old man is there, so when the officer tells her that he isn't, the narrator knows the officer is lying. This underscores the untrustworthiness of the Memory Police.



The Memory Police are eerily orchestrated inside the headquarters, again making them seem not like a group made up of individual human beings, but a single solid, cruel, and unempathetic entity.



The abundance in this room confirms the fact that the Memory Police have an enormous budget, even though resources on the island are dwindling. This shows how authoritarian regimes often spare no expense, often at the cost of the rest of society. It's scary that neither packages nor trips are allowed, because it means that the authorities don't want anyone seeing what they are doing behind closed doors.



The narrator asks this man why she is not allowed to visit or to bring things, and he tells her that those are the rules. She counters that she has brought nothing dangerous and shows the man everything in her bag. The man tells the narrator that she shouldn't worry, that her friend is being fed and cared for. She argues back, asking why such an innocent old man would be taken. He says that it is up for them to decide if there is any reason to hold the old man.

The narrator then asks if they can at least tell her if the old man is safe, to which the man suggests that if he is indeed as innocent as the narrator says, she should have no need to be worried. The old man is being fed three meals a day from a first-class chef, and the man says that he's sure the old man wouldn't even want any of the food that the narrator brought even if he was offered it.

The man continues that his job is only to ensure that memories disappear the way they're supposed to, saying that it is like a bodily infection: "if your big toe becomes infected with gangrene, you cut it off as soon as you can. If you do nothing, you end up losing the whole leg," and memories after a disappearance follow the same principle. Since their "adversary" is invisible—since they cannot see inside each person's heart to figure out what they've forgotten—they do "extremely delicate work." The Memory Police must work in secret, then, to protect themselves.

The narrator looks around—she can see outside, where people are huddled waiting in line for a bank. She decides it will do no good to ask any more questions. The man then tells her that it is his turn to ask questions and hands her a form asking for her name, address, occupation, academic history, religious affiliation, employment expertise, height, weight, shoe size, hair color, blood type, and more. She starts to realize that coming here might have been a mistake, because the more information she gives the Memory Police, the closer they will be to R. Still, she decides that she must not hesitate—since they likely know most of this information already, she thinks this is more of a test to see how she responds. She fills out the form slowly, to avoid shaking.

Later that night, back at home, the narrator is alert and on edge. She thinks she might write, but she can't put down a single word. **Snow** falls. After staring out the window for a while, the narrator uses the makeshift intercom to ask R if he is asleep. She tells him that it's snowing, and he says it's hard to imagine that there's snow just outside his windowless walls. They have a tender, slow conversation about the snow and the world outside—the narrator tells R how different the island looks with snow everywhere.

The narrator shows courage and resistance as she argues with the guard—a potentially dangerous thing to do, especially inside the headquarters. This shows that she's trying not to give into the Memory Police's rule.



The Memory Police keep lying to the narrator—the comment about fancy meals is almost certainly a lie. In turn, it becomes clear that the authorities want to be impenetrable and impossible to argue with.



The Memory Police officer's reasoning shows what the government (supposedly) thinks of disappeared things: that they are useless. This shows a lack of creativity and understanding on the part of the Memory Police, who don't want to admit that objects and memories have connective value. The man also thinks that the job of the Memory Police is very grand and important, when really they are just being repressive.



The fact that people are huddled in line for the bank suggests that money is starting to become scarce on the island, which contrasts sharply with the decadence inside the headquarters. This again shows how the Memory Police don't actually care about the citizens of the island. The form that the narrator must fill out is incredibly detailed, but it's noteworthy and worrying that she assumes they already have all this information. This suggests the Memory Police are just as powerful as she expected.



Although the narrator and R have a meaningful conversation, it is worrying that snow is now everywhere—since snow symbolizes collective numbness, the story might be suggesting more tragedy and indifference is yet to come.



The narrator then tells R about how, when she was younger, “the mystery of sleep” fascinated her—she thought that in the “land of sleep,” there would be no chores, bad meals, or pain. She recounts how one day, when her parents were out, she found a bottle of sleeping pills and takes as many as possible, “in search of the land of sleep.” She was disappointed when the pills only made her fall sleep until the evening—she felt refreshed, but she hadn’t found what she was looking for. After her story, the narrator offers to bring her end of the intercom to the window, so that R can hear the snow falling. She does, and R says that he can feel the snow up in the secret room.

This is quite a sad story, and even suggests that the narrator might have had some suicidal thoughts when she was younger. However, she doesn’t talk about her experiment as a young girl in a nervous way, which means that maybe she really did just want to go to sleep for as long as possible. Either way, this story shows that the narrator felt isolated as a young girl. Sharing this story with R makes her feel more connected. This again emphasizes how people can connect through stories and memory.



CHAPTER 14

Three days later, the Memory Police release the old man, and the narrator finds him on the ferry in his room. She tells him how glad she is that he’s safe and strokes his hair. His voice is hoarse, his face is pale, and his lips have scabs all over them. The narrator makes him soup and feeds it to him.

The narrator cares for the old man in a way that shows love still exists on the island, even if the Memory Police are trying to separate people.



The narrator asks the old man about what happened while the Memory Police had him. He says not to worry about R, since they captured him (the old man) for an unrelated “smuggling incident.” Apparently, recently, a group of people who had not lost their memories got on a boat and fled the island. The narrator is stunned that anyone could remember how to use a boat, let alone plan an escape. The Memory Police rounded up anyone who had once had knowledge of ships. The old man says that the interrogation was “impressive” and long, but since he didn’t know anything about the incident, it wasn’t too bad. He assures the narrator that the Memory Police don’t know anything about the secret room.

The story that the old man tells the narrator is significant, because it proves that there are people fighting against the Memory Police and against the island’s isolation. It’s also noteworthy that the Memory Police left the old man in such bad shape, because it speaks to their level of cruelty—that they’d harshly interrogate an old man—and to their obsession with control, since they hate the idea of someone leaving the island.



The narrator is in awe that anyone would plan such a daring escape and imagines what it must have been like to get into a boat and go out to sea under the cover of darkness. She wonders aloud if they escaped safely and asks the old man where he thinks they were going. He says he doesn’t know, but maybe there’s somewhere beyond the island where “people whose hearts aren’t empty can go on living.”

The narrator is impressed that there are people taking charge of their own fate and trying to leave the island. It’s noteworthy that neither she nor the old man even know if there’s somewhere else in the world where people aren’t affected by disappearances, since this speaks to how totally isolated they are on the island.



Not long after the old man’s return, R’s wife gives birth to their baby boy. The narrator facilitates the communication between R and his wife, since the old man is still not fully healthy. The narrator finds out about the baby because R’s wife leaves a picture of a sleeping baby drawn in colored pencil in their pre-arranged hiding spot. His wife includes a note saying that the pregnancy went smoothly, and that they are waiting for the day when R will be able to take the child in his arms.

It is both a hopeful and a sad moment when R’s wife tells him about the baby, because, though it means there is a new life in the world, it is also a reminder that R is isolated and locked away. The pencil drawing of the newborn shows how people learn to navigate disappearances (since, ordinarily, this would be a photograph, but photographs have disappeared).



When the narrator opens the trap door to give R his wife's package, she notes that his body seems smaller than it used to, like it's shrinking to accommodate the smallness of the secret room. She wonders if his body is ridding itself of everything but the essential in order to "adapt" to this new way of living. She finds him polishing her mother's old silver, a task he's taken to. When he notices her, he explains that it's a satisfying job—the more care you give silver, the more pleasure you can take from it.

Spontaneously, the narrator starts to tell R a story she once heard about very wealthy families who would have servants carefully polish their silver—so carefully that if one smudge was left, the servants would have to start over. She heard that, over time, servants who did this work eventually lost their voice. But they kept the job because they needed the money, so they "sacrificed" their voices for the income. The narrator then assures R that there's no rush to polish the silver. She says it would be terrible if he lost his voice, to which he responds that there's no need to worry, that he's the one that doesn't lose anything—remember?

The narrator then gives R the box from his wife, and he sits quietly as he looks at the picture of the baby. After a little while, he says, "of course, photographs have already disappeared." The narrator doesn't understand, but then vaguely remembers there used to be smooth pieces of paper that held a person's image. She tells R that although photographs are gone, they still have frames, and she'll find him one for the picture of the baby.

R's body appearing to shrink signifies how, even though he does not lose his memories, he is affected by what is happening on the island.



This story is likely inspiration for what will happen later in the narrator's manuscript, when a woman loses her voice to disastrous ends. The fact that a story she heard long ago inspires her to create a new story shows how storytelling takes different shapes and can be passed down across time and space.



This scene encapsulates the difference between someone who remembers and someone who doesn't. The narrator is not affected by the absence of a photograph, whereas R is moved and worried by it. This suggests that those who remember carry a heavier emotional burden, even if they are lucky, in a way, that the disappearances don't erase their conceptions of the world. This shows that there is probably an ease or comfort in forgetting, which may be why people are so willing to accept disappearances as beyond their control.



CHAPTER 15

One morning, the woman realizes that her typewriter is broken. She can't get the keys to move no matter what she does. She's completely confused because it had just worked the night before, and she can't communicate without it. As she forcefully prods at the keys, her typing teacher kneels next to her, telling her that will just make it worse. He opens the typewriter's cover and says that the damage is serious. However, he knows a room in the church where he gives his typing lessons that has the right tools, and they can take it there to fix it.

At this time, the narrator's manuscript still appears to be cheerful enough, though the typewriter breaking is a huge problem for the protagonist and foreshadows trouble ahead. As always, the narrator's manuscript mirrors the way she feels about the outside world.



The woman and the teacher climb the stairs to the top of the steeple. The woman remembers how this room always scared her, since the sound of the clock-tower bell reminded her of the “groans of a dying man.” The door is locked, but the teacher has the keys to the room. Once they are inside, the woman is shocked to find a mountain of old typewriters. The room is cold and dusty. The teacher tells her to sit over at a table in the middle of the room. He seems uncharacteristically happy. He asks her how she likes the room. The woman is agitated, since she’s lost her voice and needs her typewriter to communicate with him. She wonders why he’s not starting to repair her typewriter.

Although the woman taps the teacher on the shoulder, indicating he should start the repairs, he just takes off his pocket watch and starts polishing it. He does this for a while, and she can’t understand why he won’t begin working on the typewriter. He changes the subject, mentioning that he has a class that afternoon. The woman takes note of how many typewriters there are in the room, stacked nearly as high as her head and all sorts of different sizes and shapes. She wonders if they are all waiting to be repaired. She goes over to one that seems the least damaged, but she can’t get it to work. He tells her that every last one is useless. It is then that she realizes there is no paper in the room.

Unable to communicate, the woman wants to say, “fix one, quickly!” but she can only move and grip the teacher’s shoulder. He finally looks up from his stopwatch and says, plainly, that her voice will never come back, because it’s trapped inside the typewriter. “It’s not broken, it’s just sealed off now that it no longer has a purpose.” He then looks around the room and observes how extraordinary it is that each broken typewriter also contains someone’s voice “wasting away” in that room. The woman tries to move her mouth and ask him why he’s doing this, but he tells her there’s no use, that she’ll soon forget she ever had a voice.

The typist tells the woman that she no longer has any use for using words—she will now be all his. He holds a hand over her mouth, then holds her throat. She is tense and frozen. He tells her that he became a typing teacher because of the silence of the classroom. His students’ voices disgusted him when they would make idle chatter, but when they were typing, they could not speak because they were so focused. He says he is glad he was able to erase the woman’s voice. He finally lets go of her throat and she sits down, in shock. He tells her he needs to go to class, but she is to stay in the room and be quiet. He leaves and locks the door, leaving her alone.

The woman starts to really feel the weight of her lost voice and the loss of the typewriter, which shows that these losses are no longer easy to work around and are starting to affect her. The teacher’s behavior is unusual and odd, which worries the woman and signifies that she might be in trouble.



This scene is very foreboding, as more and more things seem to be off. The fact that there are so many other broken typewriters is not good, and signals that something like this may have happened before. Because typewriters are so significant to the woman, and signify connectivity and communication, broken typewriters indicate that there will soon be isolation in the story.



The teacher reveals his true nature to the woman, which is evil and malicious. The fact that her voice didn’t just disappear but is “sealed off” means that she may never be able to get it back. This is a terrifying moment for the woman and ultimately mirrors the way that the narrator might feel like it is nearly impossible to retrieve lost memories in the larger narrative.



The fact that the narrator has taken her manuscript in this terrifying direction shows that she is more and more worried about the fate of the island. The oppressive force that she deals with in real life—the Memory Police—takes the form of the typing teacher, who is happy that things are gone forever. The woman is stunned at this turn of events, showing that the narrator may have believed for a time that there was a way out of the cycle of disappearances—but now she’s not so sure. The narrator continues to use storytelling and writing as a way to process the events of her life.



The narrator realizes that the protagonist of her novel (the woman) is also now “trapped in a tight place.” This wasn’t her original plan—she’d initially thought her two characters, “bound by a more ordinary affection,” might calmly go on an adventure to seek out the woman’s lost voice. However, this isn’t how things ended up. Her writing does often take unexpected turns.

When the narrator wakes up the next day, calendars have disappeared. She isn’t too concerned about this disappearance—it feels like more of an inconvenience than anything else. As she puts her calendars in the neighborhood fire, she realizes how, when something burns, it’s like it loses all sense of what it once was. A neighbor, who used to make hats, begins talking to the narrator, saying how cold it’s been lately and how little food there seems to be at the market. All the people on the street commiserate about finding food. A woman with bad knees mentions how other neighbors, a young couple with no children, had recently been rude to her and seem not to want to engage with the neighborhood association.

The narrator and her neighbors all continue to chat on street. One person wonders if spring will ever come back, and the woman with the bad knees says that it might not. She thinks that maybe the disappearance of calendars means the seasons will no longer change. Everyone is very anxious about the prospect of the cold staying, but the ex-hatmaker says that’s unlikely. Spring will come soon, and then summer. Calendars are just scraps of paper. However, the woman with the bad knees ends up being right, and spring never comes. The island remains buried in **snow**.

CHAPTER 16

A little while after the calendars disappear, it is the old man’s birthday. Even though they can’t keep dates on calendars anymore or keep time through the seasons, the narrator feels sure that it is his birthday, and she says a celebration will do some good. The narrator has to go to the market once a day for a whole week to get the food for the party, since rations on the island are so low. However, she’s able to get meat and fish easily enough, since the butcher and the fishmonger are friends of the old man.

The narrator is surprised by the direction her story has taken. The fact that the tension in her story is rapidly escalating beyond her control is a good indication that she feels increasingly overwhelmed by her own surrounding reality.



There is something strangely communal about the moments after a disappearance, since everyone comes out onto the street to burn or throw away the item, and it is as though they connect briefly over the loss. However, this always seems fleeting, and when it is over, people are more isolated than before. It’s clear that the disappearances are having an economic impact on the island, since people are talking about food becoming more and more scarce.



Again, though the neighbors briefly come together right after a disappearance, disappearances on the whole are pushing them further apart. Since they are now plunged into endless winter, they will be more isolated than ever before. It is meaningful that the island will stay buried in snow, since this is a turning point and the citizen’s collective numbness will only increase from here on out.



Keeping up birthdays shows how the group wants to maintain some semblance of normalcy even amidst the chaos of their outer lives. The narrator’s impressive efforts to get things ready for the party underscores how much she cares about the old man, and how close to him she feels. It’s also worth noting that the old man is friends with the butcher and the fishmonger, which shows that he’s a kind, well-liked figure on the island.



On the day of their celebration, the old man shows up at the narrator's house dressed well. The narrator has set everything up in the secret room, so that when the old man climbs down and sees the platters of food and the decoration, he is surprised and delighted. There is steam coming off the dishes of chicken and fish, which are decorated with wildflowers and herbs. The narrator, the old man, and R have to squeeze to fit at the table—but once they're seated, they toast with wine. The wine was secretly made at the hardware store and is nothing fancy, but it is a pretty color under the glow of the lamp. They all cheer to the old man's health, and it is the first time in a long time that they've felt this "jolly."

The party continues merrily. For a while, the narrator, the old man, and R are almost able to forget their circumstances. However, any time one of them lets out a particularly loud laugh, they still cover their mouths and look around. The old man and R remark at how lovely the meal is. R and the narrator make sure that the old man eats his fill.

Once they finish dinner and dessert, the narrator and R take out their presents. The narrator gives the old man a porcelain shaving set, and he is moved to have received something so beautiful. Then R brings out his present for the old man: a small wooden box. The narrator and the old man stare at it in wonder, and when R opens it, they see a mirror and felt on the inside. There is no record or instrument, but music begins to play. The old man and the narrator are puzzled and transfixed. They ask where the music is coming from, and R says the box itself. The old man thinks it is magic, but R responds that it is an *orugōru* (music box). The *orugōru* was disappeared years ago.

The narrator tries desperately to remember a time when the *orugōru* existed, at least for R's sake, but she cannot. R explains that he began to realize he wasn't affected around the time the *orugōru* disappeared. He knew instinctively not to tell anyone, but he also started hiding the disappeared objects because he couldn't bring himself to throw them out. The old man objects, saying he could never keep such a precious gift, but R insists that he is more than happy to give it if it helps to "delay or stop this decay in your hearts in even some small way."

It is peaceful and pleasant to see how the old man, the narrator, and R try to keep up spirits despite things getting harder and harder. This shows that they're dedicated to maintaining human connection, even amidst all the difficulties around them. Their modest celebration brings them more joy than they've had in a while, which suggests that there can be some happiness even in the hardest of times.



This scene is notable for how happy and normal it is—except that the narrator, the old man, and R are having this celebration in a secret room. This scene contrasts the difficulties of life under an authoritarian regime with the simple, everyday pleasures that people still yearn to enjoy.



R's generous and beautiful gift shows that his character is thawing, and he is able to connect to the narrator and the old man in a way that he wasn't able to at the beginning of the novel. The beauty of the gift is overshadowed, though, by its mystery, since the narrator and the old man struggle to recognize the object.



The narrator and the old man's reaction shows how removed they are from things that have disappeared. The narrator wants to please R by remembering something, and even though she wants to do this so badly, she can't, and this only emphasizes how difficult it is to reclaim memories once they're gone. However, R's attitude in this scene suggests that he thinks some memory loss—at least memory loss related to disappearances—can be overcome. This highlights his belief that there is an element of free will to forgetting and that the narrator and the old man don't have to passively accept them.



The music continues to play. The narrator asks R if he really thinks their hearts are decaying. He says he's not sure about the wording, but that something irreversible seems to be happening, and it frightens him. The narrator can barely say "o...ru...gō...ru." R asks if it's painful to be reminded of the things that they forget. The old man says no—he'll be honored to play the music box in his home on the boat.

The narrator comments on how wonderful the party was, and R agrees that it was the best birthday party he can remember. They open the box to listen to the music one last time. Just as the song ends, the doorbell rings loudly.

CHAPTER 17

The narrator freezes at the sound of the doorbell. The old man puts an arm around her shoulders, and R looks up at the trap door above them. The doorbell continues to ring, and the three now hear pounding at the door. The narrator whispers that it is the Memory Police. The front door is locked, and the old man decides that it is better to let them in than to pretend the narrator is not home. They need to act as though they couldn't care less. He assures the narrator and R that everything will be fine. As they climb the ladder out of the room, the old man insists that he'll be back for his birthday present.

The Memory Police are indeed at the narrator's front door. They tell her and the old man to put their hands behind their heads. They instruct the old man and the narrator not to touch anything or talk; they'll be put under arrest if they don't comply. There are about five or six of them. The narrator thinks how they must be used to giving this speech at people's doorsteps. She sees through the window that they've parked their trucks in front of other houses throughout the neighborhood.

The Memory Police are brusque and systematic. Without "any trace of emotion," they begin searching the rooms of the narrator's house. They never take their shoes off, and spots form on the floor from their boots. The narrator tries to keep herself calm by remembering the song from the music box.

R again shows how much he now cares for the narrator and the old man, since he is not only connected to them but also truly worried about them.



This demonstrates shows just how quickly happiness can be taken away when people live in fear of an oppressive, authoritarian government.



It's noteworthy how quickly the narrator, the old man, and R must make a life-or-death choice, emphasizing again the terror of living under authoritarian governments.



It's telling that the Memory Police appear to have given this speech so many times—this is a frightening reminder that they have arrested so many people on the island. The fact that they've parked their trucks around the neighborhood means that it's a search of the entire block. This is both comforting (because it means that they might not be looking for R specifically) and scary, since the randomness of the searches only adds to the terror of everyday life on the island.



The Memory Police's gruff, cold actions—and their lack of "any trace of emotion"—again signify how they hardly seem human; they are just one, collective, oppressive entity. This emphasizes the dangerous kind of uniformity that frequently takes place within regimes that have absolute control over citizens.



The Memory Police ask the old man why he is there, and he replies that he's been doing odd jobs for the family for years. They ask why the sink is full of dirty pots and pans. The narrator amazes herself by being able to lie, saying that she cooked enough for a whole week and froze the food. She is grateful that they left the three dirty dishes in the secret room. This seems to fool the guards, and they move on.

The Memory Police then move upstairs. Though there are fewer rooms upstairs, they seem to search more thoroughly. The old man and the narrator are able to see what is happening in the study because the door is ajar. One man examines a space on a bookshelf behind some books, and another rifles through the narrator's manuscript pages. The narrator worries about the manuscript's proximity to the dictionaries on her desk, behind which is one end of the makeshift intercom. She thinks how the Memory Police's well-tailored coats make the men seem unusually and terribly tall.

A guard then asks the narrator what the pages on the desk are. She looks at the floor and tells them that she is writing a novel. At this, he snorts and throws the pages on the ground. The narrator thinks that his disinterest in books is good luck, because he moves away from the dictionaries.

Suddenly, the narrator realizes one corner of the rug that covers the trap door is askew. She begins to chide herself in her head, wondering how she could have been so careless as to not smooth down the rug before she left. She can't take her eyes off the rug, even though she knows this might draw attention to it. When a Memory Police guard says, "what's this?" she thinks he must be asking about the rug.

Luckily, the guard only holds an old datebook that the narrator had missed when gathering up all her calendars, and she is able to calmly say that she'd forgotten it was there because she hardly used it. The Memory Police guard flips through it and tells her that she should have gotten rid of it, then lights it on fire with a lighter from his pocket and tosses it out the window. She hears it hit the river. Just then, the guard in charge calls for the men to stop, and they immediately form a line and march down the stairs. They leave the room a mess. When they are out of the house, the narrator collapses into the old man's arms.

Again, the heightened pressure in this moment demonstrates how dire seemingly every aspect of life can become while living under the constant threat of an authoritarian government. In normal circumstances, it wouldn't matter much whether or not the narrator left dirty dishes in a separate room—now, though, the fact that she left them out of sight ends up saving her and the others.



The Memory Police's nice coats suggest that they are hoarding resources from the general population. The fact that the Memory Police look by the bookshelves (and the fact that this makes the narrator nervous) is again a reference to Anne Frank—she and her family hid in an annex whose door was covered by a bookshelf.



It's telling that the Memory Police sneer at the idea of a novel, because this shows that they don't believe in the arts or in the importance of stories. This contributes to the idea of the Memory Police as a single, inhuman entity, since the story argues that novels and books are an important part of what make people feel human.



The narrator's certainty that the rug will be the thing that gives her away shows just how terrified she is, and how much risk she and the old man are taking by hiding R. Again, the idea that something as small as a rug's misplaced corner shows that every little detail can be life-or-death under authoritarian regimes.



There's a small moment of relief here, since the narrator is mistaken about what she thought the Memory Police found. The guard's gruff, automatic behavior shows that the men who work for the Memory Police hardly seem like individuals anymore. The narrator takes refuge in the old man's arms once the Memory Police are gone, showing how much she needs him.



People from the neighborhood look outside to watch the Memory Police leave. The narrator notices three figures come out of the house east of hers. She hears some of her other neighbors talking: the ex-hatmaker says that he had no idea that the young couple had been hiding people in their house. The two were part of an underground group. He never would have guessed it. They note that the third person getting escorted away is only a child, a teenager. The old man and the narrator hold each other's hands tightly.

Later that night, back in the secret room, the narrator weeps for longer than she ever has in her life. She knows she should be happy that the Memory Police didn't find anything, but she seems to be overcome with emotion. She doesn't even know how to describe what she is doing, exactly—she isn't sad, and the crying isn't relieving tension. It is more that the tears are impossible to stop. R sits next to her, trying to comfort her. She tells him that for once, she's happy about the tiny size of the room, because it means the two of them are close, and it's peaceful to be together in such a small space.

The narrator thinks she can smell the slightest hint of the old man's birthday cake from earlier. R tells the narrator that she can stay in the room as long as she'd like. She can't seem to stop crying, but through her tears she assures R that she's not crying out of fear. She thinks it must be because her heart has weakened, but R says it is the opposite: her tears are a sign that her heart is doing "everything it can to preserve its existence."

R wipes a tear from the narrator's face and holds her. The narrator thinks how, sitting there in the quiet, it feels surreal that the Memory Police rang the doorbell only an hour ago. In fact, everything from that night feels like a "distant past"—but now, alone in the room, she and R are "entirely in the present." The narrator, her cheek on R's chest, thinks about all the memories he has stored in his heart. She tells him how after the Memory Police left, she stood outside in the cold without a coat or gloves, hoping to figure out where her memories went if she waited long enough. Before she can tell him that she's sure she'll never figure it out, he kisses her.

It's telling that the neighbors had no idea that the young couple were hiding anybody, which shows how isolated even neighbors have become from each other—a distance that is seemingly necessary if people want to resist an oppressive regime. The Memory Police again show themselves to be cruel and merciless, as they arrest not only a very young person but also those who were hiding him.



The narrator's intense response to the raid shows how much pressure she was under trying to keep the hidden room a secret. However, her belief that she's not crying to release tension suggests that there is also something deeper going on—a wave of emotion that is very hard to pin down. R is very concerned for the narrator and shows that he cares for her by trying to comfort her. Their relationship feels like it has been leading to this point. The fact that the narrator thinks the small room is a blessing, for once, shows that she is truly in love with R and just wants to be close to him.



R and the narrator will go back and forth about the narrator's ability to resist the disappearances for the rest of the novel—R is always optimistic and thinks that the narrator's heart and mind is trying to "preserve" itself, but the narrator is not quite so sure.

It is meaningful that the narrator and R share their first kiss, because she's always had deep feelings for him, and he appears to finally feel the same way. They've connected over the shared difficulty of their situation and over a mutual respect for the other. However, although they are both living through the same time, their experiences are very different, and the end of this chapter foreshadows that their differing realities (R's full of memories and the narrator's full of holes) will be a challenge to overcome.



CHAPTER 18

The woman wonders how long she's been stuck in the room with the clock. In the beginning, she made marks on the leg of a chair with her fingernail to count the days, but now she's lost track. She supposes that, stuck in the room, surrounded by "voices of the dead," it would not do her much good to know the day or date.

The woman sometimes climbs on top of a sink in the room to open the window and stare outside. She notices that the clocktower is the tallest building in the town, so above her she sees only sky. She also finds that there's a small drawer in the room with trinkets: an empty box of chocolates, a glasses case, some thumbtacks. These aren't as good as a hammer to break through the door, but that they "add a little flavor" to her "life of captivity."

At one point, the typing teacher brought up a folding sofa bed. When he brought it up the stairs, it was the first time the woman had ever seen his appearance out of his control. His clothes, hair, and voice are all typically "subject to his will," but that day he was visibly tired, and she saw the sweat on his brow. She thinks that it was probably worth it for him, though, since he does "all sorts of things to her" on the bed.

The ringing belltower still frightens the woman, and she "cowers" on the other side of the room when she knows the clock is going to ring. She feels as though the typewriters are all crying out together when the bell rings. She realizes that she can no longer tell which typewriter had once been hers, and that she can no longer remember the sound of her own voice.

The typing teacher brings the woman her meals. He never eats with her, but he watches her eat. She is afraid of leaving any food leftover. At night, he takes her clothes off and makes her stand in the center of the room. He brings hot water in a bucket and washes her with the same intensity as he polished his stopwatch. He takes a long time washing her, attending to every body part. When he's finished, he dresses her in very odd clothes, handmade from materials like vinyl, paper, or fruit peels. They hardly fit. She has a horrible realization one day: that his hands must have been beautiful while he was making the clothes.

The narrator's manuscript really takes a turn for the worse. The fact that this section comes right after the Memory Police's raid on the narrator's home shows that this raid might have made her a lot less hopeful. There is also a reference to the narrator's real life: the woman thinks it's no use knowing the day or date, which is a callback to the fact that calendars have "disappeared" in the larger narrative.



This scene foreshadows something that will happen in the larger narrative, where everyday objects make a different character feel like their "life of captivity" has been given some "flavor." The woman is very much still locked in the room, with no way of escaping, suggesting that the narrator is increasingly consumed with ideas of isolation and confinement.



This moment in the manuscript is disturbing, since the typing teacher starts abusing the woman, who is unable to fight back. It's possible that the narrator sees the force that she's unable to fight against—the Memory Police—as a stand-in for the typing teacher. But it's also possible that the typing teacher represents the disappearances—a force that makes things vanish and isolates people from each other.



The woman experiences severe and traumatic isolation because of the loss of her voice, which mirrors how the narrator feels a growing isolation to the world outside her in the larger narrative.



Again, the typing teacher abuses the woman who is (or certainly feels) powerless to stop him. Her attraction to his hands might represent some sort of Stockholm syndrome, where a kidnapped person develops a form of love or affection for their captor. The typing teacher seems to have complete control over the woman, to the point where she is even fearful to leave food on her plate, showing the fear that the narrator feels every day under the threat of the Memory Police.



The woman continues to deteriorate locked in the room, though not being able to speak irks her more than not being able to leave. Every now and then, the typist asks her if she wants to speak and stares at her coldly, daring her to nod. She always shakes her head no. She thinks how she's feeling "distant from her soul." She's disassociating from her body and can only watch while the typing teacher plays with it.

One day, the woman hears voices from the open window and sees the teacher on the ground laughing and talking to some students. She hears what he's saying but can't make out the students' responses. After a little while, she realizes that it's not that she can't hear what the students are saying, but that she can't understand their words. She realizes that she can only understand the man's voice. She thinks that even if she were to escape from the tower, it would be too late—if she left the room, her body would "dissolve into a million pieces." From now on, she can only wait every night for the sound of the man climbing up the stairs to her.

A little while after the Memory Police's raid on her house, the reality of what happened that night sinks in for the narrator. She has not been down to the secret room since that night—she leaves R his food at the top of the ladder. She seems to have given up any hope that one day he will be able to leave the secret room. R, too, appears more dejected, smiling rarely and not finishing his food. The narrator thinks how the events of that night feel like a distant reality. When she and R had sex that night, it had been the only way for them to protect themselves. Or so she tells herself, to "comfort" herself.

The narrator sits in the study and finishes writing for the day. She picks up her side of the intercom connected to the secret room and listens to R washing himself. She can almost visualize the scene in the room below her just by hearing the sounds. She looks at the pages of her manuscript and thinks that they are the only "ticket" she has "for admittance" to the secret room these days. She again listens to R washing himself in a basin of water.

The woman feeling "distant from her soul" is a direct link to how the narrator feels about her growing dissociation from the person she once was.



It's telling that the woman can only hear and understand the teacher's voice—this represents how many people on the island are only able to see the Memory Police's point of view. The woman's belief that it would be no use fighting back or trying to escape mirrors the growing feeling on the island that people do not have any power over their fate anymore.



The narrator's mental state deteriorates a bit after the raid and after she and R become intimate for the first time. Their relationship stalls, which may be because R feels guilty about cheating on his wife. The narrator feels guilty, too, which is why she tells herself that it was necessary—almost like a survival tactic.



The narrator and R's relationship suffers a bit after they have sex, and she feels nervous to approach him unless she is bringing him her manuscript. This shows how stories and an appreciation for books are one of the most important links that R and the narrator have to each other.



CHAPTER 19

Several weeks pass. In this time, the narrator has a strange encounter with a woman while out on a walk. A woman selling vegetables comes up to the narrator and sells her some cauliflower and peppers, but then suddenly asks the narrator if she knows of a safe hiding place. The narrator does not know what to do, as she doesn't recognize the older woman, and it is a very odd request from a total stranger. The narrator tells the old woman that she is sorry but that she cannot help her. The narrator knows that there is no way she could have hidden this woman without putting R in danger, but she still thinks about her throughout the next week. A week later, the older woman is gone, and the narrator has no way of knowing what happened to her.

During these weeks, the narrator also hosts her neighbors, the ex-hatmaker and his wife. They need somewhere to stay while having their house painted, as it is too cold to sleep with the windows open while the paint dries. The narrator is nervous the entire time the couple is in the house, even though they are not intrusive. Every sound scares her, since she thinks it could give away R and the secret room. Nothing happens, though, and a few days after the couple leaves, they send the narrator food to thank her for her hospitality.

Also in this time, the narrator starts caring for the young couple's dog, Don. The old man helps the narrator move his doghouse into her backyard. He is a sweet mutt who takes to the narrator, and she makes him a bed of blankets in her entry hall inside the house. The narrator realizes that she's caring for the dog the way she wishes she could have cared for his previous owners, the young boy they were hiding, the Inui family, and even the Inui's cat.

After these "relatively uneventful" weeks, another disappearance occurs. The narrator thought she had become accustomed to them, but this disappearance is tricky. This time, novels disappear. R is "violently" opposed to the narrator getting rid of all of her novels. He pleads with the narrator to bring the books to him, but she tells him there is not enough space in the room and, anyway, what's the point of storing something disappeared?

The encounter that the narrator has with this woman shows the strangeness of living on the island—how people are going about their daily lives but there is this undercurrent of terror and fear. It also unfortunately shows how sometimes people have to make the hard call of prioritizing friends and loved ones over strangers, because caring for one person could mean danger for another.



Again, the narrator's fear after doing a simple favor for her neighbors shows the terror that people living under authoritarian control feel on a daily basis—especially when they defy the oppressive regime in order to do good things for other people.



The narrator's projection onto the dog shows how much she still cares for people in her community, even if she isn't always able to help them. There is a deep sadness to this feeling, though, because it shows how she has been prevented from helping people. It also suggests that she feels isolated even from those she'd like to care for.



The narrator's worst fear comes to pass. However, it is remarkable (and troubling) how quickly she becomes desensitized to the idea that novels will no longer exist. After spending much of the book worrying about this eventuality, she already tells R that it's not worth keeping something that has disappeared, which highlights the enormous, destructive power of disappearances. R's "violent" opposition to getting rid of the narrator's books shows that he's still the same person—a person who cares about stories. But this is contrasted with the narrator's immediate indifference, which foreshadows the difficulties they might have agreeing on things in the future.



R tries to remind the narrator that she writes novels, but this seems to hardly register with her. She admits that she feels like her “soul must be breaking down.” He begs her to at least not burn her manuscript. She ends up acquiescing, even though the word “novel” is becoming difficult for her to say. She selects 12 books to bring to the secret room along with her manuscript.

It's worth noting that the narrator can recognize changes within herself, even if she feels like she is powerless to stop them. This almost makes it worse, since she is aware of just how much she is losing. Again, it's remarkable how quickly the disappearance has taken effect—the narrator already seems like almost a different person.



The people in the town start burning their books. Flames rise all over the island. The old man helps the narrator carry all her remaining books to the center of town, so they can throw them into the mountain of burning books. It is a “solemn ceremony.”

Since this is a “solemn ceremony” for the people on the island, it is likely that many people are experiencing something similar to what the narrator is going through—they know what is happening is sad (because of how meaningful books are), but they don't feel like they can do anything to stop it.



Suddenly, a young woman moves to the front of the crowd, climbs on a bench, and starts shouting. The narrator cannot hear her, but she looks distraught and agitated. She's wearing something odd on her head. The narrator says to the old man that she should get down, otherwise the Memory Police will take her. He replies that it's too late, and guards begin to pull the young woman down by her arms. The narrator hears her yell “no one can erase these stories!” The narrator then realizes what the young woman had been wearing: a hat. It falls off as the guards take her away, and someone from the crowd throws it into the fire.

This scene is important because it shows how there really are two forces acting on most of the people on the island: the Memory Police, who are repressive and cruel, but also their own mind and forgetfulness, because someone throws the hat into the fire without being instructed to. The woman who tries to stand up for books is immediately silenced, and no one tries to help her, which demonstrates the dual sense of terror and apathy that the citizens live with.



On their way home from burning the books, the old man and the narrator see that the library is on fire. The beauty of the burning library mesmerizes the narrator, and her anxieties about the disappearance of books seem to fade away. The narrator and the old man hear people on the street saying that the area will likely be turned into a headquarters for the Memory Police one day.

The narrator's mind already appears to be working differently than it used to, since she is able to watch the burning library without worrying about the fact that books are burning. That the library—once a place for stories, which themselves are a way to resist forgetting—will be turned into a headquarters for the Memory Police is a cruel metaphor for the deterioration of the island and the way that authoritarian regimes completely eclipse the cultures that existed before the government's oppressive, all-consuming policies.



Continuing their walk home, the narrator and the old man stop by the observatory, which is in ruins. The narrator says aloud a quote she heard once: “Men who start by burning books end by burning other men.” She can't remember where she heard it. The old man says that even if that's where they're headed, there's nothing to be done about it. She wonders if human beings will disappear. He tells her that she has to stop worrying about things like that, since they are all going to die someday.

The quote that the narrator offers up in this scene comes from Heinrich Heine, a Jewish German who wrote about Nazi Germany. This emphasizes that the story is heavily influenced by the treatment of Jewish people under Nazi Europe in WWII. The old man's calm attitude towards the fate of the island is at once commendable—because he is trying to get the narrator not to worry—and troublesome, because so much tragedy has happened on the island that it feels wrong to say there's nothing they can do.



The narrator has a few more books with her, and she and the old man throw them out the observatory window. She asks him how he felt when ferries disappeared, but he says that was too long ago to remember. He tells the narrator not to worry—she'll find something else to do for a living. She'll eventually forget she ever wrote novels.

The narrator tells the old man she is going to try and write in secret, because R told her this was possible. The old man looks thoughtful and admits that even though he's been listening to the music box on the boat, he doesn't feel any different inside. His memories are not coming back. He says that she shouldn't tire herself out.

Suddenly, the narrator “takes a deep breath and feels a sharp pain,” as though a “spark” has entered “the bottomless swamp of her heart.” She realizes that the books, flying through the air out of the observatory, fluttered just like the wings of the things she used to watch through binoculars with her father. **Birds.** But even this memory soon fades, and she only sees the fires illuminating the dark night.

Again, the old man's attitude is reassuring and startling at the same time. So much of the narrator's identity was wrapped up in being an author that it feels like a terrible loss for her to not be able to write anymore, even if she finds another way to make a living.



Here, the difference between R's optimism and the old man's realism is clear, since the old man suggests that it's unlikely they'll be able to regain lost memories.



The narrator feeling like she can connect to the memory of her father even for an instant proves how closely memory and connection are linked. The suddenness of the moment is important because it causes her a “sharp pain”—suggesting that realizing she has access to a memory she thought was lost is a painful thing. The chapter does not end on an optimistic note, though, which means that there may not be any narrative payoff for this fleeting burst of connection and memory.



CHAPTER 20

Soon, just as the old man said she would, the narrator finds another job as a typist for a trading company. Something about the word “typist” stirs the narrator, but she can't figure out what it is. The narrator begins a new routine where she works outside of the house for 10 hours a day. At first, this makes her nervous, and she imagines the worst happening while she's gone, but she soon gets used to her new schedule.

Later, when the narrator reads her manuscript that she keeps in R's room, she remembers why the word “typist” meant something to her. But though she is capable of reading the words on the page, she can't understand them as part of any “coherent story” with “a plot to connect them.” On Friday and Saturday nights, she sits at her desk with the pages of the manuscript and tries to read them. But this is such a daunting task that she can usually only get through five or six pages. Eventually, even seeing lines on a page starts to make her dizzy. She tries writing something new, since she can't add to her current story, but this also proves impossible.

The fact that the narrator gets a new job and starts a new routine after the devastating loss of novels shows how life must go on even if the world is falling apart. The narrator is getting good at becoming accustomed to things, which again can be seen as a useful coping mechanism but also as a numbing of the spirit and soul. The narrator's dull recognition of the word “typist” shows that she has some, but not much, of her old self left.



The narrator's difficulty with writing again shows that she has dissociated with a big part of what used to be her identity. Her attempts to work on her manuscript are admirable, though it's disheartening to watch her get exhausted, and this ultimately hints that she may never be her full self again.



R encourages the narrator not to force the memories to return, but rather to slowly “untangle” them. She insists that it is useless. He tells her that’s not true, that she’s the same person who used to write full novels. He says that only the paper has disappeared, not the stories. She starts telling him about all of the burning fires that night, and her flashes of memories of a “hat” and a “bird.” When she finishes, R is contemplative and admits that so much must have changed since he was last outside the secret room.

Later, the old man asks the narrator if doing something she’s not used to doing is tiring. She replies that she’s enjoying the office work. The pair sit on the old ferry and share tea and breakfast for the first time in a while, and they enjoy chatting and playing with Don. After a little while, the old man goes and gets the music box, and they sit and listen attentively. But the narrator does not believe that the music will be able to fix the “exhaustion” that is “taking over her soul.”

The old man asks the narrator how her novel writing is going, although it is difficult for him to say the word. She says not well. The old man admits that although he appreciates how precious a gift the music box was, it fills him with a certain emptiness every time he listens to it. The narrator agrees that seeing a fresh sheet of paper on her desk gives her a similar feeling. She can’t even believe she thought to write a story about a typist—she’d never been a typist or known a typist. The old man supposes anyone can just make anything up in a novel. People can create things that don’t exist, just with words—that’s why R insists they’re so important.

The old man then asks the narrator if she is in love with R. She says she supposes she is. But, she says, she knows he’ll never be able to come out of hiding—if he did, he’d dissolve into pieces. His soul is too heavy at this point. The old man says he understands. Suddenly, there is a terrible noise, and the boat begins to rock. Everything in the room starts crashing down around them. The old man shouts, “earthquake!”

R's conviction to help the narrator regain her ability to write shows that he's become a much different person than the aloof editor he once was outside the secret room. He seems to be even more himself these days, while the narrator is deteriorating. His passionate optimism is tapered, though, when the narrator tells him about all the fires on the night the town burned their books. He realizes that he might not recognize the world outside if he ever rejoins it.



Again, the narrator and the old man bond over their shared sense of loss. Even though it is sad that they both feel an overwhelming “exhaustion” and futility from the situation, it is good that they have each other to connect to. However, it's not a good sign that the narrator feels her soul is “taken over” by fatigue, because it means she may not try to regain any of her memories if she becomes too tired.



Again, the narrator and the old man are able to connect over the fact that they have experienced terrible loss. The narrator's alienation from novels seems pretty complete here, since she can't even believe she made up a character who had a different job than her. The old man is impressed by the idea of novels, even if he can't really remember them. There is something intentionally meta about this conversation, too, since the novel is referencing the magic (and importance) of storytelling while simultaneously telling a story itself.



It's significant that the narrator finally says she's in love with R, since this proves how closely she connects with and values him. However, it's sad that the narrator thinks he'll never be able to leave the room—this shows that she and R, who has been optimistic lately, have very different outlooks. The sudden earthquake during a conversation about love shows how unpredictable the world is, and how all the characters have to balance interpersonal problems with larger societal and environmental disasters.



CHAPTER 21

Don hides under the old man's couch, trembling. The narrator searches for the old man among the debris and finds him underneath a fallen dish cabinet, his face bloody. The narrator tries lifting the cabinet, but it won't move. The old man tells her to leave him and get out quickly, because a tsunami will surely follow the earthquake. But the narrator will not leave. She figures out a way to lift the heavy cabinet while the old man crawls out, inch by inch. The boat shifts beneath them. The narrator bleeds from her hands but keeps holding the cabinet. The old man at last struggles out from under the cabinet, and he, the narrator, and Don flee the ship.

The narrator and the old man make it safely off the ferry and keep running until they reach the ruins of the library. The old man says he is fine, but the narrator worries about the blood coming from his ear. They hear a rumbling, and a huge wave starts heading for land. The sea smashes up the houses on the coastline and covers the boat. When the wave is gone, Don howls, and this seems to set the world back into motion.

When the narrator and the old man turn to look at each other, they realize that they are in bad shape: their clothes are torn, there's dust in their hair, and the old man has lost both of his shoes. Somehow, though, he is holding the music box, which is unscathed. The narrator asks him why he brought it, but the old man doesn't know—he must have unconsciously put it in his pocket without realizing. The ship is completely destroyed, along with anything the old man had onboard.

The neighborhood is damaged from the tsunami—the buildings are crumbled, and there are fires burning. It starts to snow as emergency vehicles and the Memory Police's trucks drive through the town. The old man and the narrator hurry to the narrator's house, which appears fine from the outside but is damaged on the inside. They rush to the office and try to lift the trap door, but they cannot.

The old man calls down to R, who knocks from his side and says he's there. Even with R pushing and the old man pulling, the door won't move—the tsunami must have warped it, says R, whose voice sounds faint and distant. R says that the ventilation is not working and that the electricity is out. The narrator panics, saying that if they can't get him out, he could starve to death. She tells him that they'll find a way to get it open.

In this time of crisis, the narrator does not leave the old man, proving that the unfavorable circumstances have not yet fully diminished her as a person. She and the old man have a very important and strong connection, and the narrator saving his life underscores how she cares for him.



The sudden threat of the earthquake and tsunami prove that not every threat to survival is man-made. The characters are accustomed to hiding from the Memory Police, but the earthquake reminds them that there are indeed forces beyond the Memory Police's control.



It's very meaningful that the old man rescued the music box, since it shows that, even though it doesn't help him get his memories back, he still somehow understands the object's significance.



Again, the sudden earthquake and tsunami show how environmental disasters can still take place in the midst of war or social collapse—the world, in other words, goes on. The narrator and the old man thus have to worry about hiding from the Memory Police while also minding the physical safety of R after the quake.



R, the narrator, and the old man having to deal with such unpredictable circumstances ultimately accentuates the challenges that currently govern their lives. But their dedication to each other through this trauma shows how much they care for each other and how close a unit the three have become.



The narrator goes across the street to get tools, and the old man is able to pry the trapdoor open. The narrator borrowed the tools from the ex-hatmaker. He'd offered to come help, so she had to lie to him, telling him that the old man had broken out in a rash and was too proud to see anyone else. With the door open, the old man and the narrator rush down to check on R, whose hair is covered in splinters. In the secret room, in the darkness and among the rubble of R's things scattered on the floor, the three hold hands and stare at one another. They feel like this is the only way to assure themselves they'd all survived.

Again, the group shows how close they've gotten since R first move in by holding each other. However, the fact that the narrator had to lie about borrowing tools from the neighbor shows that this society has pushed people into self-contained units, afraid of anyone besides the people closest to them.



CHAPTER 22

The town never quite recovers from the earthquake and tsunami. Debris from homes pile up, and fresh **snow** covers them. Three days after the ordeal, on a walk near her office, the narrator sees the Inuis—or, more exactly, she sees a set of blue gloves that belonged to the young son. She is running an errand when she sees one of the Memory Police's trucks. Poking out from behind the canvas of the truck is the same pair of gloves that she'd seen all that time ago in her basement. She's heard that the Memory Police are rounding up people who were in hiding and whose safe houses were destroyed by the earthquake.

Snow covering the debris from the earthquake and tsunami symbolizes how the people of the island have become desensitized to tragedy. The Memory Police using a natural disaster to round up more people proves just how callous, cruel, and power-hungry they are. It's devastating to know that the Inui family might not be safe, since it's been so long since the story mentioned them, so it has been easy to assume they hid themselves well. However, the Inui family's capture signals the novel's commitment to showing tragic outcomes for people who try to hide from an authoritarian regime.



After the earthquake, the old man moves into the narrator's house. Though this seems like the most natural solution and the old man is used to spending time at the narrator's home, he is oddly dejected. He does, however, enthusiastically help fix the damage caused by the quake. The old man's scar from the cabinet doesn't seem to be healing quickly, and the narrator tells him to take it easy, but the old man just waves her off.

The fact that the old man is not fully happy moving into the narrator's home—even though he and the narrator are so close—highlights the extent to which he will miss his life on the ferry. This shows that he was perhaps more attached to the ferry than he thought, even though it was totally decrepit and “disappeared.” Despite this, the ferry itself seems to have represented a part of the old man's identity.



While the old man and the narrator are cleaning up the house, they encounter something in the basement. The narrator thinks that since the basement is already a mess, she'll use this as an excuse to clean up, but she can't bring herself to throw away any of her mother's things. One day, the old man finds the sculptures that Professor Inui gave the narrator, three of which have fallen and shattered. They find a plastic bag with white tablets; a yellowed, folded piece of paper; and a metal square with holes on one side hidden in the sculptures. They don't know what these mysterious, humble items are, only that they are objects that have been disappeared.

The narrator is too moved by the memories of her mother in the basement to throw anything away, which shows how people on the island must cling to whatever memories they still have. When the old man and the narrator come across strange, disappeared objects that were hidden inside the sculptures, it is a reminder that the narrator's mother fought against disappearances and believed that she could resist what other people accepted as inevitable.



Later that night, the narrator is upstairs in the secret room with R and the items. R guesses that the narrator's mother hid the objects inside the sculptures after she received the summons from the Memory Police but before she went away. He identifies one of the things as a ferry ticket. R gently tries to see if the narrator has any memories associated with the ticket. She says that she has one memory: she remembers her mother, in the basement, sculpting among pieces of wood and stone and plaster. She thinks that she touched the ticket before it went inside the sculpture that night.

The narrator is out of breath after recounting this memory in full. R insists that the narrator has done very well, that this is a good start to wake up her "sleeping soul." But the narrator says that her soul is not sleeping—it is gone.

Next, R picks up the metal object and brings it to his mouth. The narrator thinks that it looks like a chocolate bar, and that he'll eat it. But he blows on it instead, and it makes a peculiar, full sound. He tells her that this is a harmonica. She loves the unfamiliar word. He hands it to her and, though she says she can't play it, she puts it to her lips and makes a sound. As R takes it back and plays some songs with the harmonica, the narrator begins to remember music lessons she took as a child.

Every now and then, R asks the narrator to play a song so that he can be the audience. She is able to play songs that sound like ones she heard as a child, and R applauds. When they both finish playing all the songs they know, R moves on to the third object. The little white pills are called ramune, R tells the narrator. It is a lemon-flavored candy. He's impressed the narrator's mother was interested in saving such an ordinary item. They each eat one, savoring the flavor.

Again, the fact that the narrator's mother hid illegal, disappeared items in her sculptures shows that she felt she could resist disappearances, even if other people thought that was useless. However, it's noteworthy that the narrator's memory of the ferry ticket has nothing to do with ferries and only with seeing her mother store the ticket inside the sculpture—this shows how removed the piece of paper is from the function it used to have.



It is impressive that the narrator can bring up any memories associated with something disappeared. But the conversation between R and the narrator is the embodiment of the issue of fate versus free will on the island—is it possible to wake up the narrator's soul (is it only "sleeping")? Or is that part of her gone, like the narrator suggests, and is fighting to bring it back is pointless?



The narrator's misinterpretation of what R is going to do with the harmonica is a reference to the first chapter, when the narrator was a young girl in her mother's studio and tried to drink perfume out of the bottle because she didn't know what it was. R and the narrator strengthen their connection by playing music together with this lost object. It is noteworthy that even though she doesn't recognize the harmonica, the narrator recognizes some of the songs that R plays, which shows how memory is still an important, meaningful part of her life even if she feels like she has no control over when memories come or go.



The narrator and R continue to grow closer over their connection to the harmonica and music. When R realizes that the narrator's mother saved such an ordinary object as candy, he commends her for it—this shows that R's way of thinking is similar to the how the narrator's mother thought, and that they both believed memories, even of something trivial, are too precious to throw away.



After going over the objects, R and the narrator lay together on the tiny bed in the hidden room. R shares all the memories he has that are associated with the ferry, with the harmonica, and with ramune. He is able to talk without stopping or feeling winded. Usually, the narrator is exhausted when she hears memories about disappeared items, but tonight it feels like she is back in her mother's studio, listening to her mother tell her secret stories. She is content listening to everything R says.

It feels as though something might be changing in the narrator, since she listens to R talk about his memories without feeling tired. She realizes that she's able to do this because of the stories her mother told her, which proves that storytelling is a way of memory-keeping and may be the only way to resist forgetting. Memories and stories are also clearly a way for two people to grow close, as R and the narrator have, since sharing memories is like sharing a part of oneself.



CHAPTER 23

The next Sunday, the narrator decides she'll visit her mother's old cabin, where her mother used to go to sculpt. It's nothing fancy, and it's possible that it was destroyed in the earthquake—nevertheless, she and the old man pack a lunch and leave that morning. They take a train down the mountain, walk along the river, and find the cabin by noon.

After the positive experience finding the harmonica and the other items in the basement, the narrator seems willing to make an effort to try and remember. The fact that she wants to go to her mother's cabin shows that she might believe she can fight against forgetting if she finds enough disappeared objects.



The cabin is hardly standing up—the roof is caved in, and the chimney is gone. Mushrooms grow on the moss covering the walls. The old man and the narrator take a brief rest (the Memory Police will know if they are out late), then set to work pulling back boards to be able to enter the cabin.

It's telling that a trip to the cabin could set off alarm bells for the Memory Police—this shows how mighty their authority is.



Once inside, the narrator and the old man see sculpting tools strewn all over the floor. A beam fell through the room, so they move with caution. The narrator shrieks as she sees something soft and slimy on a table—the old man says it is likely a dead cat that came into the cabin to die. The two say a prayer for the animal then try to pretend it is not there as they continue moving around the room. The pair is able to tell relatively easily which sculptures might be hiding something inside of them—these sculptures appear more abstract. The pair fill their bags with as many sculptures as they can fit.

The dead cat and the caved-in ceiling show how long it has been since anyone has set foot inside this cabin. Again, it's impressive that the narrator chose to come to this cabin, considering the risks she and the old man are taking, but this proves that she wants to find more objects to help her remember things. It's also impressive that the narrator's mother was clever and forward-thinking enough to stash the disappeared items in her sculptures, which demonstrates again the narrator's mother's hope that people could regain their memories.



When they return to the train station, the narrator and the old man realize that everyone there is very anxious. The old man figures out that the Memory Police are checking people's bags. He quietly tells the narrator that they must remain calm and get to the back of the line. The old man comments that the Memory Police have been doing these checks a lot lately, and that many people are leaving the town to head for the country, where they think it might be safer. He then realizes that they are mostly checking paperwork—still, the two are worried, because they have out-of-the-ordinary items on their suitcases.

The fact that the Memory Police are checking bags proves that the trip to the cabin was very dangerous, because the narrator and the old man will be in serious trouble if the Memory Police find the disappeared items in their bags.



Suddenly, a man in line—carrying an unusually large array of food—loudly asks how much longer this will take. He says that he is the person who supplies the dining hall at the Memory Police headquarters, and he starts flashing his paperwork to the guards. If he's late, he'll have to take the blame. Just after he speaks, a young woman in line faints, and her mother cries out that she is anemic. The old man immediately gathers the girl in her arms. In all of this chaos, the other passengers form a mass, and the guards end up letting everyone through with just a glance at their papers. The old man and the narrator make it onto the train back to town with their bags.

By the time they make it back to the house, the old man and the narrator are too exhausted to go through the contents of their bags. As they eat dinner that night, the narrator notices that the old man's motor skills are off, and that his lips are slightly blue. She asks him if he is alright, and he says he is fine, just tired. She rubs his shoulders the same way he always did to comfort her.

CHAPTER 24

Two weeks later, the old man seems like himself again. He, the narrator, and R have still not gone through all of the statues. R waits impatiently to do so, as though he is “waiting to meet old friends he has not heard from in decades.” The narrator and the old man, though, know that the contents of the sculptures will not “thaw” their hearts, no matter how hard R tries to make it so. Their top concerns are what they'll have for their next dinner and when the Memory Police will come back.

Still, the following Sunday, the narrator and the old man bring the sculptures to the basement and begin taking them apart. They first tap the figures gently with hammer. Once broken apart, they see that each statue has one item inside. The old man and the narrator are disoriented, since they don't know how fragile the objects are or how they should be handled. The narrator realizes that her mother must have hidden many, many items, because there are more things than there had been in the chest of drawers. Some objects provoke a slight recollection, but that is it. None of the items disturb the “swamp” of the narrator's memory.

It is simply a stroke of luck that allows the narrator and the old man to get onto the train, which shows that who lives and who dies under authoritarian regimes is sometimes a matter of luck. The fact that the man in line is carrying lots of food also shows how the Memory Police are hoarding resources—another way for them to exert exact power over the people of the island. The old man shows his bravery and his kindness by immediately tending to the young woman who fainted.



The narrator and the old man share a tender moment of connection, because she comforts him the same way that she remembers him comforting her when she was small. However, it is not a good sign that the old man seems to be having difficulty moving or that his lips turn blue.



It is significant that R feels as though the hidden objects in the statues are “old friends”—this highlights how important memories can be to someone's identity. But something seems to have shifted in the narrator and the old man since their brave trip to the cabin: they are much more dejected, as though their interaction with the Memory Police at the station took away their hope. It's also noteworthy that they feel like they need to focus on everyday things (like meals) instead of trying to regain their memories, which reveals how difficult it is for people in unstable political situations to think about the future.



The narrator thinking of her memory as a “swamp” shows that she's losing hope of regaining her memories. A swamp is still and muddy, and so it's clear she thinks of her mind as foggy and inactive. It is noteworthy again that the narrator's mother went to such impressive lengths to hide disappeared objects and that she kept many more than even the narrator knew about. However, it's starting to become unclear whether or not this will have any positive impact on the narrator.



When they finish extracting the objects, the narrator and the old man take the items to R on a tray. R is exuberant upon seeing so many disappeared things, and he immediately starts spurring out all of the memories that they bring up for him. The narrator and the old man watch him speak. When the narrator finally says she's happy that the items please him so much, R insists that they're not for him but for the two of them, to try to change their hearts and minds.

R says that everyone's hearts have been "battered" by the disappearances. He makes an impassioned plea—holding up the narrator's manuscript—about how the narrator and the old man still have hearts that are sitting right next to him. Since the two of them rescued him, he must rescue them in return. The narrator quietly asks what will happen if everything on the island disappears. She realizes that this is many people's ultimate fear, and R and the old man are stunned into silence at first. But R then says that even if the whole island is gone, the room will still be there. His voice is filled with love.

Weeks go by, and the narrator's typing skills improve. The old man gives R a much-needed haircut, and Don the dog has a health scare but recovers. Things are relatively calm. One day, the narrator bumps into the old man coming back from the market with groceries. They sit on the hill overlooking the sea, looking at the half-sunken ferry still not entirely gone from the day of the earthquake. They chat, and the old man thanks the narrator again for saving his life that day.

The narrator and the old man keep talking. She thinks how his hands, which she's known since she was a little girl, are so reassuring and can make just about anything. The narrator suggests that they walk home before the sun sets, but the old man says he'll stay a little longer and make a quick stop on the way home. The narrator remembers the ramune, which she's saved, and hands it to the old man, telling him what it is. She gives him the rest of the candies that she has in her pocket, and he thanks her, bowing. They part, saying they'll see each other at home. The narrator never sees the old man alive again.

CHAPTER 25

That night, the narrator gets a call from the hospital saying that the old man collapsed. She runs all the way to the hospital, but the old man is already gone—the hospital staff tell the narrator that they did all they could, but his heart stopped. The old man had an intracranial hemorrhage, and the narrator realizes that it must have been from the cabinet the day of the earthquake. The narrator looks at his hands, folded across his chest, which will never again make anything. She is in shock. The old man's bag of groceries is there in the hospital.

It is a sweet moment when R sees the disappeared items. They bring back so many exciting memories, illustrating how deeply memory and emotion are connected. However, the narrator and the old man have no connection to the items (the narrator is only happy that R is happy), and this only highlights the growing differences between the rejuvenated R and the other two.



R is clearly very impacted by seeing the lost objects, which shows again the link between memory, emotion, and connection. He is more determined than ever to rescue the narrator and the old man. His suggestion that their hearts have been "battered" admits that they have suffered but also that it might be possible to heal. However, the narrator seems to be more and more hopeless, since she's unable to stop thinking about everything on the island disappearing.



The story listing little things that happen—like a haircut or a trip to the vet—show how everyday life must go on even when circumstances are incredibly difficult. The old man shows again how kind he is by thanking the narrator for saving his life.

The simple act of giving the old man a piece of candy is made all the more important because that piece of candy is a lost object that shows how everyday interactions take on extra importance when society is crumbling. The ease and stillness of this moment and this night is directly contrasted by the end of the chapter, which gestures toward the old man's death. This demonstrates life's uncertainty and the fact that disappearance actually occurs naturally, since everyone eventually dies and leaves the world behind.



The narrator's shock to the old man's death proves that she can still feel something after a loss. However, this isn't exactly a hopeful moment in the story, since the narrator is now more alone than ever.



R, of course, is unable to attend the old man's funeral. The narrator finds that the old man's death unnerves her. Unlike the deaths of her parents and nurse, which were sad but had softened with time, the old man's death leaves the narrator feeling terribly anxious. She is now alone—R can sympathize with her, but he is locked away. Anyway, he does not have the same "void" in his heart as she does, whereas the old man did.

The narrator grieving the old man in this particular way shows that she connected with him over their shared losses. Even though every disappearance makes her more and more isolated from the person she once was, she clearly took some solace in the fact that she and the old man were both impacted in the same ways. R's ability to remember things makes him much different than the narrator, she believes, so she feels especially isolated now that the old man is gone.



The narrator tries to keep it together by cooking elaborate meals for herself and R and by focusing hard at work. She takes to tasks around the house with gusto. Still, when she gets into bed, she is overcome by fatigue and anxiety. Unable to sleep, she stays up at night, staring at some of the disappeared objects and waiting to see if they change anything in her.

Again, the narrator feels deep anxiety because the one person who understood what she was going through is gone. That she tries to remember by staring at the objects shows that she deeply wants to connect with R by retrieving disappeared memories.



One night, the narrator is moved to write a few words on the pages of her manuscript on her desk. This has not happened since novels disappeared. She holds the pencil awkwardly, and her handwriting is messy, but she writes a full sentence. It exhausts her. The next day, she shows it to R, who is thrilled. He tells her that this is progress— "her soul is trying to bring back the things lost in the disappearances." Night after night, she starts stringing together sentences—certainly not a story, but full lines, nonetheless. R continues encouraging her.

The narrator deeply wants to feel connected to R (and to her old self) by writing, but she can't seem to see the point. R's constant encouragement is kind and shows his true affection for the narrator, but it's unclear if it actually has any tangible effect on her ability to recapture the person she once was.



Later, the first disappearance since the old man's death happens. The narrator wakes up and tries to think what it could be this time. She can't quite figure it out, but since she doesn't see many people outside of her window, she thinks it may not be something that important. When she moves to take her covers off, she sees that something strange is stuck to her hip. Baffled, she tries to move and twist the thing off, but it won't move. She decides to get dressed. She swings her right leg to the floor, and the protrusion from her hip also hits the ground with a thud. The force knocks her onto the floor.

The story takes its time unraveling what this next disappearance might be, and this suspense ultimately hints that something substantial has vanished. The way that the narrator describes the strange thing she sees on her body recalls the clinical way she described birds in the beginning of the story.



The narrator crawls to her dresser and takes out some clothes. When she goes to put on her pants, she sees that there are two openings. After she puts her right leg through one, she is perplexed about what to do next. She suddenly notices that the thing affixed to her body is exactly the same size as the second hole in her pants, so she decides it can't hurt to slide it into the opening. After she does this, it hits her at last: it is her left leg that is now disappeared.

In this scene, the novel depicts the strange sense of disorientation that the narrator feels upon looking at her own left leg. The narrator observes her own leg in the same detached way she would usually use to describe everyday objects that are unfamiliar to her. This moment marks a true turning point, since the loss of a body part is so personal and significant.



The narrator manages to drag herself downstairs and outside. Her neighbors are slowly gathering, wondering how they will deal with this disappearance. Some people are dumbfounded, but others say that this is how it is—it's just the same as any other disappearance. An old woman makes a joke about losing half of the arthritis in her knees.

As the townspeople wonder how they will get rid of their left legs, the Memory Police suddenly come around the corner. Unlike the townspeople, they appear to be walking with perfect balance, as though they've been training for this to happen. The people on the street decide they won't have to physically remove their disappeared legs, since the Memory Police still have theirs. They suggest the leg might one day fall off on its own, like the leaves of a tree.

Later that night, R massages the narrator's disappeared leg. He tries to show her that her leg is still there, but the narrator hardly feels his hands. She feels like a new "cavity" exists in her body. R says he imagines the outside world must be so different than he remembers, but the narrator simply says that the changes aren't as big as he thinks, and people are able to accept them with little fuss.

The narrator and R keep talking. She tells R that soon everything will "fall back into place," meaning that in no time, a new hole will open up in her heart and mind—a hole where the idea of a left leg used to be. R bends down to kiss the narrator's leg, and she thinks how nice it would be if she still had flesh there to be able to feel his lips kissing her. Instead, she registers only a dull pressure.

CHAPTER 26

As time goes by, the people on the island adjust to living without their left legs, and they develop a new kind of balance and rhythm. The Memory Police take advantage of the fact that this disappearance is harder to fake than others, so they arrest a slew of new people—that is, the Memory Police arrest the people who *know* they still have left legs, since these people find it very difficult to hide their certainty that they still have two legs. When the narrator sees the number of arrests, she's surprised that there are still so many people who don't forget. But they are unable to fake forgetting their left legs, so the Memory Police spot them right away.

The townspeople are worried, but it is notable how quickly some of them become resigned to their fate. This signifies that there is truly a lack of resistance to the disappearances. While it's admirable that people would try to make the best of a bad situation, it also seems like they are overly passive about the condition of their island and their lives.



It's remarkable that the Memory Police are still able to walk upright, which means that they must have predicted the loss of a body part and put their resources into preparing themselves. This shows the huge discrepancy between how much the Memory Police have and how little the rest of the people on the island live, again showing that authoritarian governments tend to hoard important resources while making the general population suffer.



The distance between the narrator and R is growing, even as R is more physically affectionate than ever. They can't seem to agree on whether or not the narrator's leg exists, which opens up a hole in their relationship and isolates them from each other. The narrator also seems to have the same passive attitude as the rest of the people in the town, and the fact that she denies that the world looks different than when R first went into the room shows that she's losing her perspective.



The narrator now sounds just like the old man, which shows that she's given herself over to the fate of disappearing. There's something particularly sad about the fact that the person she loves is kissing her and she can't even register his lips.



It is noteworthy that the narrator is surprised by how many people are left on the island who have resisted the disappearances. This suggests that there is a larger resistance happening than she imagined, which shows how forgetting is not as inevitable as the narrator thinks. The fact that the Memory Police use this disturbing turn of events (the disappearance of a body part) to reinforce their authority over the people shows that they have very little mercy or sympathy and that they are interested in power over all else.



The narrator continues writing. She does not feel as motivated as she did before novels disappeared, but she is able to start remembering the outline of her manuscript. Still, it is an exhausting task. The narrator also takes walks by the ocean and looks out to where the boat used to be—it is not yet completely underwater, but she thinks it will be soon. She remembers her last conversation with the old man and all the things the two of them did together, and she wonders if she will always remember those moments. When the last of the ferry no longer visible, the narrator’s “empty” heart aches as she wonders whether she’ll forget the old man.

Eventually, right arms disappear. This time, the townspeople are not surprised—this was bound to happen. They even think that body part disappearances are more peaceful than when other things disappear, because there are no burning bonfires or objects floating down the river. There are “subtle” changes to the narrator’s daily life, but she doesn’t think it’s much of a problem. Now, when she goes to visit R or bring him food, he has to carefully help her up and down the ladder.

The narrator tells R that one day, she won’t be able to get in and out of the room. R says that he’ll carry her, “like a princess.” The narrator asks how he’ll be able to hold something that’s gone, but R responds that he can touch any part of the narrator he wants, because she is all still there. The narrator disagrees, saying that her body will disappear little by little. They go back and forth about whether or not the narrator’s body really exists at all anymore.

The narrator says that her heart is chilling and hard and will certainly shatter like ice, whereas R’s heart is warm and full. R says that maybe the narrator can stay in this room, preserved just like all of the other objects that have been disappeared. She says that she’s afraid—not of disappearing, but of leaving R. He tells her that he will keep her safe.

With the loss of the old man, the narrator really leans into her fate and no longer assumes she will be able to resist disappearances in the end. Her lack of motivation to write shows the dwindling of her identity. The fact that the narrator is convinced that her heart is “empty” shows that she has lost most of her hope for the future.



The townspeople’s immediate acceptance of the fact that their right arms are gone confirms that resistance on the island is at an all-time low. The narrator saying that her daily changes are “subtle”—even though she can no longer get into the secret room without help—shows how much she is downplaying the seriousness of this disappearance. It feels like, at this point, the people on the island would accept just about anything as their fate.



The latest disappearances really isolate the narrator, since she and R can no longer agree on something simple: whether or not the narrator’s body is all there. This difference of opinion creates an unsolvable distance between them, even though R wants to help as much as he can and says he’ll hold her “like a princess.” At this stage in their relationship, it’s clear that they both care for each other so much, but the difference in how they see the world might be too significant to overcome.



R remains optimistic and suggests that there are ways for the narrator to resist the weakening in her heart. However, again, the narrator’s belief that her heart is cold and completely different from R’s shows how isolated she has become because of the many things she has forgotten.



CHAPTER 27

The woman is surprised that she doesn't hate the typing teacher as much as she should. Even though he stole her voice and locked her away in the tower, she is somehow moved when he shows her a small kindness. She knows it's "foolish," but she's just being honest. She wonders if this is because she's becoming more and more attached to the room. She notices that she isn't able to see as well as she used to. She bumps into objects in the room. Somehow, though, she is still able to see the typist—in fact, she can see him even better now.

One day, the woman hears steps coming up the stairs that are not the teacher's. She wonders who they might belong to and thinks that the person approaching must be a young woman—she can tell by the gait. The woman hears three knocks on the door, and she thinks this is her one and only opportunity to escape. She argues with herself in her mind and begins to sweat as she stays completely still and silent. Eventually, the woman outside the door moves away, back down the stairs. The woman in the room realizes that she will never be able to rejoin the world outside.

That night, the typing teacher appears with more strange clothing, though the woman notices that they're not as elaborate as pieces he used to bring. She's disappointed. The typist asks if someone came up there today, and when he realizes that someone did, and that the woman didn't ask for help, he is smug—he knew that she was already "absorbed" by the room. He tells the woman that the other woman has a beautiful voice, and that he thinks he will trap her voice in the typewriter next.

The typing teacher stops visiting the room frequently. He barely brings food anymore and hardly looks at the woman when he visits. She feels like each body part is disappearing without his touch, as though her body is vanishing into the room. When she fills the sink in the corner with water and puts her legs in, she feels nothing.

Eventually, the typing teacher no longer visits the woman. She loses track of time and of her body. She thinks that she might as well not worry, that it will all be over soon. One day, she hears footsteps—two pairs, a man and woman. By the time the pair reach the door and the man turns the key, the woman in the room understands that all of her being has been "absorbed silently into the room." She thinks that "the final moment has come."

Again, it's likely that the typing teacher stands in for the Memory Police or for the disappearances. The fact that the woman's whole life is now the teacher mirrors the way the narrator and most people on the island feel—that a force greater than them is controlling their lives, and that they are powerless to stop it.



This is a pivotal moment in the manuscript because it shows that the woman gives up trying to get out of the locked door. This mirrors the way many people on the island, in the larger narrative, have given up their resistance to the disappearances.



The fact that the teacher no longer cares about the woman is very sad because of what it symbolizes in the larger world—namely, that the people who gave up so much of their lives without a fight ultimately did it for nothing.



The manuscript takes its final tragic turn, and the woman disappears into nothing. This again shows the way the narrator feels like she is hardly even a body anymore.



The manuscript's resolution does not leave much hope for the one remaining chapter in the book. The woman feels the way the narrator feels, which is that "the final moment" is upon her and that she will be "absorbed" into the world and cease to exist.



CHAPTER 28

The narrator puts her pencil down, lays her head on her desk. She is completely exhausted. Writing with her left hand had been hard, and she's not sure if this is her best work, but she is glad that she has at least finished the manuscript—the one thing she can leave R. Everyone on the island understood that this is how it would end one day, so one resisted. R is the only one who seemed not to be able to let things go. The narrator thinks that she knew better—try as he might, R would never be able to help her remember the things she'd lost.

R tells the narrator he is so pleased she's finished the manuscript. She tells him that she worries it's not enough, since though she's finished the story, she is still "losing herself." She wonders if the story will remain once she's gone, and R tells her that of course it will, because each word will exist in his heart.

When left legs disappeared, the townspeople temporarily lost their balance, but when their whole bodies disappeared, no one seems to worry. They are lighter now and can move through the air "like clumps of dried grass blown along by the wind." There is a stillness to the island. The boat completely sinks beneath the sea. A few crops are still able to grow, and some people still knit sweaters, but not much else is created. The **snow** continues to fall.

The narrator realizes she is happy that the old man died before bodies disappeared. But then she wonders if the order of disappearances makes any difference, since it all goes away eventually.

The fact that the narrator is so exhausted after writing, which used to be her job and which she used to love, shows how much she has deteriorated over the course of the story. Her happiness in having finished the manuscript suggests that there is some small piece of her former self that remains, because she knows that R will have the story to remember her by. The fact that R is the only one who has successfully resisted the disappearances suggests that, once most people in a society accept something as inevitable, it will most likely come to pass.



The narrator's concern about "losing herself" confirms that the disappearances make her feel like someone she doesn't recognize. Her thoughts about the manuscript lasting after she's gone prove just how sure she is that everything is going to disappear on the island. That R needs to tell her what she used to understand (how stories can last even if the people who wrote them are gone) shows that the narrator is really a shell of her former self.



The people on the island have accepted disappearances as their inevitable fate, so they no longer resist or even worry about them. Snow continuing to fall symbolizes how people on the island accept that they are disappearing, and they no longer see even the disappearance of their bodies as tragic or upsetting. Comparing the people on the island to "clumps of dried grass blown along by the wind" proves that the people feel they have no agency at all—grass is thin and frail and cannot choose whether or not the wind picks it up and blows it around.



The narrator's feelings hint at how the larger society thinks: namely, society thinks that there's no longer any way to resist, and that everything that happens is inevitable. The narrator seems to have lost her optimism and resigns herself to her fate.



The narrator keeps up her routine. Now, when she goes to see R, she falls down into the hidden room, and he catches her. They hold each other tightly in the little bed in the secret room, but the narrator knows that the distance between her withered, non-existent body and his—strong and alive—is too great to overcome.

Every part of the narrator's body disappears eventually. All that is left is her voice. She tells R that it is peaceful without a body, and that he is finally free because the Memory Police have given up. What is the point of searching for people without bodies? He tells her none of it will mean anything without her and reaches out to try to hold her, but he can't figure out where her voice is.

The narrator's voice starts to disappear. She tells R that when she is gone, he must take care of the room, and that she will live there among all of the objects that have also been disappeared. Then, she says good-bye, and vanishes. R waits in the room a long time, looking at the "void" where the narrator's voice was. Eventually, he climbs up the ladder and out into the world.

There, alone in the hidden room, the narrator "continues to disappear."

The relationship between R and the narrator is still very tender, even as the narrator withers away. Now, the difference between those who remember and those who don't is especially pronounced and tangible, since it's bodies that are affected. This is a way to make literal something the story only hinted at earlier in the book: that memories keep people feeling fully alive.



The narrator's body is gone, which illustrates the idea that losing memories is the same as losing oneself. There is a discrepancy between what she tells R and what a reader can see: although she seems at peace, it is very disturbing that her body disappears. It is noteworthy, though, that the narrator thinks that even the Memory Police are gone, since maybe this means there is something to look forward to, even if the narrator is not there to see it.



The narrator can no longer communicate with R, and R feels like she is gone for good. R has not been able to leave the room the entire story, so it's significant that he climbs the ladder and leaves, suggesting that the outside world may be different and that there could be hope for his future after all.



The narrator does not meet with a happy ending, instead disappearing completely in the secret room, though the ambiguity surrounding the novel's highly conceptual premise perhaps leaves room to speculate that something about the narrator's essence "continues" to linger, even if this just means that her memory lives on in R's mind. Either way, her total disappearance possibly signifies the harsh reality that it's not easy to escape authoritarian regimes or tragic societal events—and that not everyone makes it out of such situations.





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