WHEN WORDS DISAPPEAR

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By the time Wellington began losing its nouns, nobody seemed particularly concerned.

At first, it was the little things. A woman on Cuba Street went into a dairy for milk and came out unable to remember what milk was called. She stood on the pavement, holding the bottle, staring at it as if it were an artifact from another civilization.

A week later, half the city forgot the word for 'umbrella.'

This caused some inconvenience.

“Can you pass me the—” my mother would say, pointing toward the front door.

“The rain thing?”

“Yes. That.”

“It’s an umbrella.”

“Obviously.”

Then she would look offended, as if I had accused her of something.

The government called it a temporary linguistic irregularity. The newspapers called it a phenomenon. My little brother called it “the word thing.” Nobody called it frightening. Not yet.

I worked at the Department of Internal Affairs, in a room on the seventh floor with forty-three other people whose job titles had already changed twice since I started. Unofficially, we were the ones who wrote down words before everyone forgot them.

Every morning, a list would arrive from upstairs.

BREAD.

WINDOW.

MOTHER.

We had to find examples of each word in official documents, schoolbooks, newspapers, and archived speeches. We copied definitions onto cards and stored them in climate-controlled cabinets.

The first time I saw 'MOTHER' on the list, I laughed. My supervisor didn't.

"Don't."

"Sorry."

She took the card from me.

"You're going to need to learn something very quickly."

"What is it?"

She looked at the word.

"Some things disappear before anyone notices they're gone."

That afternoon, Wellington forgot the word harbour. It happened at 3:17. You could watch it happen. People stopped at the waterfront and stared. A man pointed towards the water.

"What's that?"

Nobody answered.

The ferry terminal became the building by the water. The harbour bridge became simply the bridge. Oriental Bay became the beach near the city. The mapmakers worked through the night. By morning, every map of Wellington had blank spaces.

My mother called me.

“Are you coming home?”

“Soon.”

“What did you say that place was called?”

I knew what she meant.

“The harbour.”

She went quiet.

Then:

“Right.”

That evening, I went down to the waterfront. The wind was brutal, pushing against my coat and filling my mouth with salt. People stood along the promenade, confused. Some looked angry. Others looked lost. A child cried because her father couldn’t tell her where they were.

I walked towards the water. I knew the word. I could still say it.

Harbour.

Harbour.

Harbour.

I repeated it until it sounded meaningless.

Then I noticed an old man sitting on a bench. He was holding a notebook.

“What are you writing?” I asked.

He looked down at the notebook.

“Things I remember.”

“About what?”

He turned a page. There were dates, addresses, fragments of sentences. A grocery list. The name of a street in Island Bay. A note about rain.

“My wife,” he said.

“You were married?”

He smiled. “For forty-six years.”

He turned another page.

Tucked between the two sheets was a photograph. A woman stood beside him on the waterfront, younger than either of us, laughing in the wind.

“What’s her name?”

His finger remained on the photograph. He didn’t answer. For the first time, he seemed frightened.

“I don’t know.”

The next morning, the department issued new instructions. We were no longer to preserve words. We were to preserve concepts.

“Words are proving unreliable,” my supervisor said.

“So what do we write?”

“Descriptions.”

“Descriptions of what?”

“Everything.”

The room went silent.

A man at the end of the table raised his hand.

"How do you describe a mother?"

Nobody answered.

That afternoon, the word mother disappeared.

My mother called me.

“Hello?”

“Hi.”

“What did you call me before?”

I froze.

She laughed.

“I’ve forgotten.”

I drove home.

She was sitting at the kitchen table with a dictionary open in front of her.

“What am I?”

“What?”

“You know what I mean.”

I sat opposite her.

“You’re my mum.”

She stared at me.

“What does that mean?”

I opened my mouth. Nothing. I could have described her: brown hair, small hands, a scar near her eyebrow. The way she sang when she cooked. The way she hated coriander. The way she always checked the weather before leaving the house.

I knew every small detail that made her herself. I just couldn’t find the word that gathered them together.

But none of those things truly meant 'mother.' Not really.

She reached across the table.

“It’s all right.”

She closed her hands around mine.

Neither of us said anything after that. There was nothing to name.

Three days later, the government announced that Wellington would be placed under linguistic emergency measures. Schools closed. Public transport stopped. Road signs were replaced with symbols. The radio broadcast instructions through picture descriptions, sounds, and increasingly long silences.

At work, we stopped receiving lists. There were still things left to lose, but nobody knew what to call them anymore.

My supervisor came into my office carrying a box.

“Take this.”

“What is it?”

She looked at the label, then shook her head.

“I don’t know.”

Inside were thousands of cards. Every word we tried to save. I took them home.

My mother was resting. I sat beside her and began reading. Not the definitions. The words. One by one. Some she knew, some she didn’t. When I reached harbour, she opened her eyes.

“That’s a good one,” she said.

“What does it mean?”

She thought, then pointed towards the window.

“Where the boats come back.”

I wrote it down.

The next morning, I took the box to the waterfront. The city was quiet, with a few people walking past. No traffic. No announcements. Just gulls and wind. I placed the cards along the seawall.

HARBOUR.

TIDE.

FERRY.

HOME.

People began picking them up.

An old man took WIFE.

A child took SCHOOL.

A woman took FATHER and held it against her chest.

No one spoke.

Then the wind came. It lifted the cards. One by one, they scattered across the water.

I watched HOME disappear first. Then MOTHER. Then my own name.

I thought I should be frightened. Instead, I watched the cards drift out over the water until I could no longer see them at all.

The harbour remained. The boats remained. The wind remained. Somewhere behind me, someone laughed. I turned. My mother was standing on the promenade.

She looked at me. I looked at her.

Neither of us knew what to call the other. She smiled anyway, and I knew her. That was enough.