

“What if...”

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This story was inspired by ‘De jongen zonder gisteren’ (‘The boy without yesterday’) by Jur Deitmers, a young Dutch man who lost his memory due to encephalitis and had to rebuild his identity from scratch. His experience made me think about how memory shapes who we are and how sometimes in society people choose to forget things on purpose.

The One Who Chose to Remember

In a world where forgetting was required by law, Bouke began his life with none. He woke up in a white room, quiet except for the soft beeps of machines. The nurse said he had survived a rare brain infection, encephalitis. His memory was gone completely. No name, no past, not even a favourite colour. “Welcome to the present,” she said gently. “The safest place to be.”

In their law system, there was an Act called the Memory Act which entailed that every citizen was required to erase one painful memory per year. The government called this “emotional hygiene.” It was said to lower anxiety, reduce violence, and protect democracy. People didn’t protest anymore, but they didn’t really remember how. Bouke had become a clean slate by accident, but for most forgetting was a civic duty. He was assigned to Noor, a government-certified Memory Technician. Her job was to help patients “transition peacefully” by identifying and removing lingering trauma. Bouke had none, yet, but the system required her involvement.

“This is a gift,” Noor told him during their first session. “You’ve been spared the weight of pain. You can start over. No ghosts from the past.” But Bouke wasn’t sure that was a gift. He didn’t know who he was; the absence felt like a hole, not freedom. There were no bad memories but also no good ones. No joy, no belonging. Only blankness. At night, strange fragments began to visit him: smoke, sirens, running feet. A voice calling a name. Sometimes his own. He asked Noor what they meant. “Residual trauma,” she said. “Leftovers from the infection. They’ll fade. Or we can erase them now before they root if you want.” Bouke hesitated. “What if I want to remember?” Noor laughed. “No one wants that.” But Bouke did.

Bouke began to wander the city, observing the silences no one seemed to notice. There were no memorials, no protests, no stories of struggle. History had been reduced to approved dates and sanitized slogans. One afternoon, he met an old woman sitting on the edge of a dried-up fountain. Her eyes were sharp. “You’re the one they say woke up empty,” she said. Bouke nodded. “Lucky,” she said, then paused. “Or maybe not.”



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Depends on what you do now.” She introduced herself as Zara. Years ago, she had been Noor’s patient, one of the first to reject the treatment. *“I asked her not to clean me. She said that meant I’d suffer. I said I already was.”* Zara told Bouke what the world used to be, not perfect, but honest. People had pain, yes, but also memory, resistance, and meaning. They argued they cared, they remembered the names of the lost. *“They said memory made us weak,”* she whispered. *“But it also made us human.”* Bouke listened.

And for the first time, something inside him stirred. He returned to Noor, not for cleansing, but to ask why. Why had she joined this system? Why had she helped people forget instead of helping them heal? At first, she deflected. *“Peace is better than chaos.”* *“But is that true?”* Bouke asked. *“Or is it just numbness?”*

Noor said nothing. That night, she found a photo she’d hidden years ago: a boy holding a protest sign. A client she had once wiped clean. His eyes were fierce. Afterward, he’d smiled more — but the fire was gone. For the first time, she cried.

In the following weeks, Bouke began to speak publicly. Not to accuse, but to question. He told people what it was like to wake up with no story, no roots, no grief. He said it felt safe but also hollow.

“If we forget pain,” he said to a small crowd at a community centre, *“we forget why we needed change. If we erase struggle, we erase the people who survived it. And if we only remember comfort, we stop growing.”*

Some people left. But others stayed. And listened. Noor joined him at the next gathering. She stood beside him, silent, and when he finished, she said quietly: *“I was wrong to make forgetting a cure. It was only ever a pause.”*

A movement began. Small, at first. People began requesting access to their stored memories. They wrote stories. Drew timelines. Shared pain, and also beauty. The government didn’t collapse. But something else did the idea that safety required silence. Bouke never recovered his old memories. But he built new ones, ones he chose to keep. In a world that told him forgetting was peace, he proved that remembering could be power.



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