RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

REVENGE

YOKO OGAWA

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About the Book

A woman goes into a bakery to buy a strawberry cream tart. The place is immaculate but there is no one serving so she waits. Another customer comes in. The woman tells the new arrival that she is buying her son a treat for his birthday. Every year she buys him his favourite cake; even though he died in an accident when he was six years old.

From this beginning Yoko Ogawa weaves a dark and beautiful narrative that pulls together a seemingly disconnected cast of characters. In the tradition of classical Japanese poetic collections, the stories in *Revenge* are linked through recurring images and motifs, as each story follows on from the one before while simultaneously introducing new characters and themes. Filled with breathtaking images, Ogawa provides us with a slice of life that is resplendent in its chaos, enthralling in its passion and chilling in its cruelty.

About the Author

Since 1988, Yoko Ogawa has written more than twenty works of fiction and non-fiction, and has won every major Japanese literary award. Her fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker, A Public Space*, and *Zoetrope*. Harvill Secker published *The Diving Pool*, a collection of three novellas, in 2007, and her novels *The Housekeeper and the Professor* in 2009 and *Hotel Iris* in 2010.

Also by Yoko Ogawa

The Diving Pool

The Housekeeper and the Professor

Hotel Iris

REVENGE

ELEVEN DARK TALES

YOKO
OGAWA

Translated from the Japanese by
STEPHEN SNYDER

HARVILL SECKER

LONDON

AFTERNOON AT THE BAKERY

It was a beautiful Sunday. The sky was a cloudless dome of sunlight. Out on the square, leaves fluttered in a gentle breeze along the pavement. Everything seemed to glimmer with a faint luminescence: the roof of the ice-cream stand, the faucet on the drinking fountain, the eyes of a stray cat, even the base of the clock tower covered with pigeon droppings.

Families and tourists strolled through the square, enjoying the weekend. Squeaky sounds could be heard from a man off in the corner, who was twisting balloon animals. A circle of children watched him, entranced. Nearby a woman sat on a bench knitting. Somewhere a horn sounded. A flock of pigeons burst into the air, and startled a baby who began to cry. The mother hurried over to gather the child in her arms.

You could gaze at this perfect picture all day—an afternoon bathed in light and comfort—and perhaps never notice a single detail out of place, or missing.

As I pushed through the revolving door of the bakery and walked inside, the noise of the square was instantly muffled, and replaced by the sweet scent of vanilla. The shop was empty.

“Excuse me,” I called hesitantly. There was no reply, so I decided to sit down on a stool in the corner and wait.

It was my first time in the bakery, a neat, clean, modest little shop. Cakes, pies, and chocolates were carefully arranged in a glass case, and tins of cookies lined shelves on either side. On the counter behind the register was a

roll of pretty orange and light blue checkered wrapping paper.

Everything looked delicious. But I knew before I entered the shop what I would buy: two strawberry shortcakes. That was all.

The bell in the clock tower rang four times. Once more a flock of pigeons rose into the sky and flew across the square, settling in front of the flower shop. The florist came out with a scowl on her face and a mop to drive them away, and a flurry of gray feathers wafted into the air.

There was no sign of anyone in the shop, and after waiting a little while longer I considered giving up and leaving. But I had only recently moved to this town and I did not know of another good bakery. Perhaps the fact that they could keep customers waiting like this was a sign of confidence, rather than rudeness. The light in the glass display case was pleasant and soft, the pastries looked beautiful, and the stool was quite comfortable—I liked the place, in spite of the service.

A short, plump woman stepped from the revolving door. Noise from the square filtered in behind her and faded away. “Is anybody here?” she called out. “Where could she have gone?” she added, turning and smiling at me. “She must be out on an errand. I’m sure she’ll be right back.” She sat down next to me and I gave a little bow.

“I suppose I could get behind the counter and serve you myself,” the woman said. “I know pretty well how things work around here, I sell them their spices.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I’m not in a hurry,” I said.

We waited together. She rearranged her scarf, tapped the toe of her shoe, and anxiously fidgeted with the clasp on a black leather wallet—apparently used to collect her accounts. I realized she was trying to come up with a topic for conversation.

“The cakes here are delicious,” she said at last. “They use our spices, so you know there’s nothing funny in them.”

“That’s reassuring,” I said.

“The place is usually very busy. Strange that it’s so empty today. There’s often a line outside.”

People passed by the shop window—young couples, old men, tourists, a policeman on patrol—but no one seemed interested in the bakery. The woman turned to look out at the square, and ran her fingers through her wavy white hair. Whenever she moved in her seat, she gave off an odd smell; the scent of medicinal herbs and overripe fruit mingled with the vinyl of her apron. It reminded me of when I was a child, and the smell of the little greenhouse in the garden where my father used to raise orchids. I was strictly forbidden to open the door; but once, without permission, I did. The scent of the orchids was not at all disagreeable, and this pleasant association made me like the old woman.

“I was happy to see they have strawberry shortcake,” I said, pointing at the case. “They’re the real thing. None of that jelly, or too much fruit piled on top, or those little figurines they use for decoration. Just strawberries and cream.”

“You’re right,” she said. “I can guarantee they’re good. The best thing in the shop. The base is made with our special vanilla.”

“I’m buying them for my son. Today is his birthday.”

“Really? Well, I hope it’s a happy one. How old is he?”

“Six. He’ll always be six. He’s dead.”

He died twelve years ago. Suffocated in an abandoned refrigerator left in a vacant lot. When I first saw him, I didn’t think he was dead. I thought he was just ashamed to look me in the eye because he had stayed away from home for three days.

An old woman I had never seen before was standing nearby, looking dazed, and I realized that she must have been the one who had found him. Her hair was disheveled,

her face pale, and her lips were trembling. She looked more dead than my son.

"I'm not angry, you know," I said to him. "Come here and let me give you a hug. I bought the shortcake for your birthday. Let's go back to the house."

But he didn't move. He had curled up in an ingenious fashion to fit between the shelves and the egg box, with his legs carefully folded and his face tucked between his knees. The curve of his spine receded into a dark, cramped space behind him that I could not see. The skin on his neck caught the light from the open door. It was so smooth, covered in soft down—I knew it all too well.

"No, it couldn't be," I said to the old woman nearby. "He's just sleeping. He hasn't eaten anything, and he must be exhausted. Let's carry him home and try not to wake him. He should sleep, as much as he wants. He'll wake up later, I'm sure of it."

But the woman did not answer.

The reaction of the woman in the shop to my story was unlike anything I'd encountered in the past. There was no sign of sympathy or surprise or even embarrassment on her face. I would have known if she was merely pretending to respond so placidly. The experience of losing my son had taught me to read people, and I could tell immediately that this woman was genuine. She neither regretted having asked me the question nor blamed me for confessing something so personal to a stranger.

"Well," she said, "then it was lucky you chose this bakery. There are no better pastries anywhere; your son will be pleased. And they include a whole box of birthday candles for free. They're darling—red, blue, pink, yellow, some with flowers or butterflies, animals, anything you could want."

She smiled faintly, in a way that seemed perfectly suited to the quiet of the bakery. I found myself wondering

whether she understood that my son had died. Or perhaps she knew only too well about people dying.

Long after I had realized that my son would not be coming back, I kept the strawberry shortcake we were meant to have eaten together. I passed my days watching it rot. First, the cream turned brown and separated from the fat, staining the cellophane wrapper. Then the strawberries dried out, wrinkling up like the heads of deformed babies. The sponge cake hardened and crumbled, and finally a layer of mold appeared.

"Mold can be quite beautiful," I told my husband. The spots multiplied, covering the shortcake in delicate blotches of color.

"Get rid of it," my husband said.

I could tell he was angry. But I did not understand why he would speak so harshly about our son's birthday cake. So I threw it in his face. Mold and crumbs covered his hair and his cheeks, and a terrible smell filled the room. It was like breathing in death.

The strawberry shortcakes were displayed right on the upper shelf of the pastry case, the most prominent place in the shop. Each was topped with three whole strawberries. They looked perfectly preserved, no sign of mold.

"I think I'll be going," the old woman said. She stood up, smoothed her apron, and glanced out the window toward the square, as though looking one last time for the return of the bakery shop girl.

"I'll wait a little longer," I said.

"You do that," she said, reaching out to gently touch my hand. Hers was callused and wrinkled—made rough by her work—and she had dirt under her fingernails. Still, her hand was warm and comforting, perhaps like the heat from those little birthday candles she had mentioned. "I'm going

to check on a couple of places where the girl might be, and if I find her I'll tell her to come straight back."

"Thank you," I said.

"Not at all … Good-bye."

Clutching her wallet under her arm, she turned to leave. As she stepped through the revolving door, I noticed that her apron strings were coming untied in the back. I tried to stop her, but I was too late. She disappeared into the crowd in the square, and I was alone again.

He was an intelligent child. He could read his favorite picture book from beginning to end aloud without making a single mistake. He would use a different voice for each character—the piglet, the prince, the robot, the old man. He was left-handed. He had a broad forehead and a mole on one earlobe. When I was busy making dinner, he would often ask questions I did not know how to answer. Who invented Chinese characters? Why do people grow? What is air? Where do we go when we die?

After he was gone, I began to collect newspaper clippings about children who had died under tragic circumstances. Each day I would go to the library and gather articles from every newspaper and magazine, and then make copies of them.

An eleven-year-old girl who was raped and buried in a forest. A nine-year-old boy abducted by a deviant and later found in a wine crate with both of his ankles severed. A ten-year-old on a tour of an ironworks who slipped from a catwalk and was instantly dissolved in the smelter. I would read these articles aloud, reciting them like poems.

How had I not noticed before? I rose slightly from my seat and looked past the counter. A doorway behind the cash register was half open, and I could see into the kitchen. A young woman was standing inside with her face turned away. I was about to call out to her, but I stopped myself.

She was talking to someone on the telephone, and she was crying.

I couldn’t hear anything, but I could see her shoulders trembling. Her hair had been gathered carelessly under a white cap. Despite some spots of cream and chocolate, her apron looked neat and pressed. Her slight frame seemed almost that of a little girl.

I returned to my stool and looked out at the square. The balloon seller was still making animals for the children. Pigeons were clustered here and there, and the woman was still knitting on the bench. Nothing appeared to have changed, except that the shadow of the clock tower had grown longer and thinner.

The kitchen was as neatly arranged as the shop. Bowls, knives, mixers, pastry bags, sifters—everything needed for the work of the day was right where it should be. The dish-towels were clean and dry, the floor spotless. And in the middle of it stood the girl, her sadness perfectly at home in the tidy kitchen. I could hear nothing, not a word, not a sound. Her hair swayed slightly with her sobs. She was looking down at the counter, her body leaning against the oven. Her right hand clutched a napkin. I couldn’t see the expression on her face, but her misery was clear from the clench of her jaw, the pallor of her neck, and the tense grip of her fingers on the telephone.

The reason she was crying didn’t matter to me. Perhaps there was no reason at all. Her tears had that sort of purity.

The door that would not open no matter how hard you pushed, no matter how long you pounded on it. The screams no one heard. Darkness, hunger, pain. Slow suffocation. One day it occurred to me that I needed to experience the same suffering he had.

First, I turned off our refrigerator and emptied it: last night’s potato salad, ham, eggs, cabbage, cucumbers, wilted spinach, yogurt, some cans of beer, pork—I pulled