

## Chapter Eight

Many of us had turned sixteen by then. It was a morning of brilliant sunshine and we'd all just come down to the courtyard after a lesson in the main house, when I remembered something I'd left in the classroom. So I went back up to the third floor and that's how the thing with Miss Lucy happened.

In those days I had this secret game. When I found myself alone, I'd stop and look for a view-out of a window, say, or through a doorway into a room—any view so long as there were no people in it. I did this so that I could, for a few seconds at least, create the illusion the place wasn't crawling with students, but that instead Hailsham was this quiet, tranquil house where I lived with just five or six others. To make this work, you had to get yourself into a sort of dream, and shut off all the stray noises and voices. Usually you had to be pretty patient too: if, say, you were focusing from a window on one particular bit of the playing field, you could wait ages for those couple of seconds when there wasn't anyone at all in your frame. Anyway, that was what I was doing that morning after I'd fetched whatever it was I'd left in the classroom and come back out onto the third-floor landing.

I was keeping very still near a window looking down onto a section of the courtyard where I'd been standing only moments before. My friends had gone, and the courtyard was steadily emptying, so I was waiting for my trick to work, when I heard behind me what sounded like gas or steam escaping in sharp bursts.

It was a hissing noise that would go on for about ten seconds, pause, then come again. I wasn't alarmed exactly, but since I seemed to be the only person around, I thought I'd better go and investigate.

I went across the landing towards the sound, along the corridor past the room I'd just been in, and down to Room 22, second from the end. The door was partly open, and just as I came up to it, the hissing started up again with a new intensity. I don't know what I expected to discover as I cautiously pushed the door, but I was properly surprised to find Miss Lucy.

Room 22 was hardly used for classes because it was so small and, even on a day like that one, hardly any light got in. The guardians sometimes went in there to mark our work or get on with reading. That morning the room was darker than ever because the blinds had been pulled almost all the way down. There were two tables pushed together for a group to sit around, but Miss Lucy was there alone near the back. I could see several loose sheets of

dark, shiny paper scattered over the table in front of her. She herself was leaning over in concentration, forehead very low, arms up on the surface, scrawling furious lines over a page with a pencil. Underneath the heavy black lines I could see neat blue handwriting. As I watched, she went on scrubbing the pencil point over the paper, almost in the way we did shading in Art, except her movements were much more angry, as if she didn't mind gouging right through the sheet. Then I realised, in the same instant, that this was the source of the odd noise, and that what I'd taken for dark shiny paper on the table had also, not long before, been pages of neat handwriting.

She was so lost in what she was doing, it took a while for her to realise I was there. When she looked up with a start, I could see her face was flushed, but there were no traces of tears. She stared at me, then put down her pencil.

"Hello, young lady," she said, then took a deep breath. "What can I do for you?"

I think I turned away so I didn't have to look at her or at the papers over the desk. I can't remember if I said very much—if I explained about the noise and how I'd worried about it being gas. In any case, there was no proper conversation: she didn't want me there and neither did I. I think I made some apology and went out, half expecting her to call me back. But she didn't, and what I remember now is that I went down the staircase burning with shame and resentment. At that moment I wished more than anything that I hadn't seen what I'd just seen, though if you'd asked me to define just what I was so upset about, I wouldn't have been able to explain. Shame, as I say, had a lot to do with it, and also fury, though not exactly at Miss Lucy herself. I was very confused, and that's probably why I didn't say anything about it to my friends until much later.

After that morning I became convinced something else—perhaps something awful—lay around the corner to do with Miss Lucy, and I kept my eyes and ears open for it. But the days passed and I heard nothing. What I didn't know at the time was that something pretty significant had happened only a few days after I'd seen her in Room 22—something between Miss Lucy and Tommy that had left him upset and disorientated. There would have been a time not so much earlier when Tommy and I would have immediately reported to each other any news of this sort; but just around that summer, various things were going on which meant we weren't talking so freely.

That's why I didn't hear about it for so long. Afterwards I could have kicked myself for not guessing, for not seeking Tommy out and getting it out of him. But as I've said, there was a lot going on around then, between Tommy and Ruth, a whole host of other stuff, and I'd put all the changes I'd noticed in

him down to that.

It's probably going too far to say Tommy's whole act fell apart that summer, but there were times when I got seriously worried he was turning back into the awkward and changeable figure from several years before. Once, for instance, a few of us were going back from the pavilion towards the dorm huts and found ourselves walking behind Tommy and a couple of other boys. They were just a few paces ahead, and all of them—Tommy included—looked to be in good form, laughing and shoving each other. In fact, I'd say Laura, who was walking beside me, took her cue from the way the boys were larking about. The thing was, Tommy must have been sitting on the ground earlier, because there was a sizeable chunk of mud stuck on his rugby shirt near the small of his back. He was obviously unaware of it, and I don't think his friends had seen it either or they'd surely have made something of it. Anyway, Laura being Laura shouted out something like: "Tommy! You got poo-poo on your back! What have you been doing?"

She'd done this in a completely friendly way, and if some of the rest of us made a few noises too, it wasn't anything more than the sort of thing students did the whole time. So it was a complete shock when Tommy came to a dead halt, wheeled round and stared at Laura with a face like thunder. We all stopped too—the boys looking as bewildered as we were—and for a few seconds I thought Tommy was going to blow for the first time in years. But then he abruptly stalked off, leaving us all swapping looks and shrugging.

Nearly as bad was the time I showed him Patricia C.'s calendar. Patricia was two years below us but everyone was in awe of her drawing skills, and her stuff was always sought after at the Art Exchanges. I'd been particularly pleased with the calendar, which I'd managed to get at the last Exchange, because word had been going round about it from weeks before. It wasn't anything like, say, Miss Emily's flappy colour calendars of the English counties. Patricia's calendar was tiny and dumpy, and for each month there was a stunning little pencil sketch of a scene from Hailsham life. I wish I still had it now, especially since in some of the pictures—like the ones for June and for September—you can make out the faces of particular students and guardians. It's one of the things I lost when I left the Cottages, when my mind was elsewhere and I wasn't being so careful what I took with me—but I'll come to all that in its place. My point now is that Patricia's calendar was a real catch, I was proud of it, and that's why I wanted to show it to Tommy.

I'd spotted him standing in the late afternoon sunshine beside the big sycamore near the South Playing Field, and since my calendar was there in my bag—I'd been showing it off during our music lesson—I'd gone over to him.

He was absorbed in a football match involving some younger boys over in the next field and at this stage his mood seemed just fine, tranquil even. He smiled when I came up to him and we chatted for a minute about nothing in particular. Then I said: "Tommy, look what I managed to get." I didn't try to keep the triumph out of my voice, and I may even have gone "dah-dah!" as I brought it out and handed it to him. When he took the calendar, there was still a smile on his features, but as he flicked through I could see something closing off inside him.

"That Patricia," I began to say, but I could hear my own voice changing. "She's so clever..."

But Tommy was already handing it back to me. Then without another word he marched past me off towards the main house.

This last incident should have given me a clue. If I'd thought about it with half a brain, I should have guessed Tommy's recent moods had something to do with Miss Lucy and his old problems about "being creative." But with everything else going on just at that time, I didn't, as I say, think in these terms at all. I suppose I must have assumed those old problems had been left behind with our early teen years, and that only the big issues that now loomed so large could possibly preoccupy any of us.

So what had been going on? Well, for a start, Ruth and Tommy had had a serious bust-up. They'd been a couple for about six months by then; at least, that's how long they'd been "public" about it—walking around with arms around each other, that kind of thing. They were respected as a couple because they weren't show-offs. Some others, Sylvia B. and Roger D., for example, could get stomach-churning, and you had to give them a chorus of vomiting noises just to keep them in order. But Ruth and Tommy never did anything gross in front of people, and if sometimes they cuddled or whatever, it felt like they were genuinely doing it for each other, not for an audience.

Looking back now, I can see we were pretty confused about this whole area around sex. That's hardly surprising, I suppose, given we were barely sixteen. But what added to the confusion—I can see it more clearly now—was the fact that the guardians were themselves confused. On the one hand we had, say, Miss Emily's talks, when she'd tell us how important it was not to be ashamed of our bodies, to "respect our physical needs," how sex was "a very beautiful gift" as long as both people really wanted it. But when it came down to it, the guardians made it more or less impossible for any of us actually to do much without breaking rules. We couldn't visit the boys' dorms after nine o'clock, they couldn't visit ours. The classrooms were all officially "out of bounds" in the evenings, as were the areas behind the sheds and the

pavillon. And you didn't want to do it in the fields even when it was warm enough, because you'd almost certainly discover afterwards you'd had an audience watching from the house passing around binoculars. In other words, for all the talk of sex being beautiful, we had the distinct impression we'd be in trouble if the guardians caught us at it.

I say this, but the only real case I personally knew of like that was when Jenny C. and Rob D. got interrupted in Room 14. They were doing it after lunch, right there over one of the desks, and Mr. Jack had come in to get something. According to Jenny, Mr. Jack had turned red and gone right out again, but they'd been put off and had stopped. They'd more or less dressed themselves when Mr. Jack came back, just as though for the first time, and pretended to be surprised and shocked.

"It's very clear to me what you've been doing and it's not appropriate," he'd said, and told them both to go and see Miss Emily. But once they'd got to Miss Emily's office, she'd told them she was on her way to an important meeting and didn't have time to talk to them.

"But you know you shouldn't have been doing whatever you were doing, and I don't expect you'll do it again," she'd said, before rushing out with her folders.

Gay sex, incidentally, was something we were even more confused about. For some reason, we called it "umbrella sex"; if you fancied someone your own sex, you were "an umbrella." I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham we definitely weren't at all kind towards any signs of gay stuff. The boys especially could do the cruellest things. According to Ruth this was because quite a few of them had done things with each other when they'd been younger, before they'd realised what they were doing. So now they were ridiculously tense about it. I don't know if she was right, but for sure, accusing someone of "getting all umbrella" could easily end in a fight.

When we discussed all these things—as we did endlessly back then—we couldn't decide whether or not the guardians wanted us to have sex or not. Some people thought they did, but that we kept trying to do it at all the wrong times. Hannah had the theory that it was their duty to make us have sex because otherwise we wouldn't be good donors later on. According to her, things like your kidneys and pancreas didn't work properly unless you kept having sex. Someone else said what we had to remember was that the guardians were "normals." That's why they were so odd about it; for them, sex was for when you wanted babies, and even though they knew, intellectually, that we couldn't have babies, they still felt uneasy about us doing it because deep down they couldn't quite believe we wouldn't end up with babies.

Annette B. had another theory: that the guardians were uncomfortable about us having sex with each other because they'd then want to have sex with us. Mr. Chris in particular, she said, looked at us girls in that way. Laura said that what Annette really meant was she wanted to have sex with Mr. Chris. We all cracked up at this because the idea of having sex with Mr. Chris seemed absurd, as well as completely sick-making.

The theory I think came closest was the one put forward by Ruth. "They're telling us about sex for after we leave Hailsham," she said. "They want us to do it properly, with someone we like and without getting diseases. But they really mean it for after we leave. They don't want us doing it here, because it's too much hassle for them."

My guess, anyway, is that there wasn't nearly as much sex going on as people made out. A lot of snogging and touching up, maybe; and couples hinting they were having proper sex. But looking back, I wonder how much of it there really was. If everyone who claimed to be doing it really had been, then that's all you'd have seen when you walked about Hailsham—couples going at it left, right and centre.

What I remember is that there was this discreet agreement among us all not to quiz each other too much about our claims. If, say, Hannah rolled her eyes when you were discussing another girl and murmured: "Virgin"—meaning "Of course we're not, but she is, so what can you expect?"—then it definitely wasn't on to ask her: "Who did you do it with? When? Where?" No, you just nodded knowingly. It was like there was some parallel universe we all vanished off to where we had all this sex.

I must have seen at the time how all these claims being made around me didn't add up. All the same, as that summer approached, I began to feel more and more the odd one out. In a way, sex had got like "being creative" had been a few years earlier. It felt like if you hadn't done it yet, you ought to, and quickly. And in my case, the whole thing was made more complicated by the fact that two of the girls I was closest to definitely had done it. Laura with Rob D., even though they'd never been a proper couple. And Ruth with Tommy.

For all that, I'd been holding it off for ages, repeating to myself Miss Emily's advice—"If you can't find someone with whom you truly wish to share this experience, then don't!" But around the spring of the year I'm talking about now, I started to think I wouldn't mind having sex with a boy. Not just to see what it was like, but also because it occurred to me I needed to get familiar with sex, and it would be just as well to practise first with a boy I didn't care about too much. Then later on, if I was with someone special, I'd have more

chance of doing everything right. What I mean is, if Miss Emily was correct and sex was this really big deal between people, then I didn't want to be doing it for the first time when it was really important how well it went.

So I had my eye on Harry C. I chose him for a number of reasons. First, I knew he'd definitely done it before, with Sharon D. Next, I didn't fancy him that much, but I certainly didn't find him sick-making. Also, he was quiet and decent, so unlikely to go round gossiping afterwards if it was a complete disaster. And he'd hinted a few times he'd like to have sex with me. Okay, a lot of the boys were making flirty noises in those days, but it was clear by then what was a real proposition and what was the usual boys' stuff.

So I'd chosen Harry, and I only delayed those couple of months because I wanted to make sure I'd be all right physically. Miss Emily had told us it could be painful and a big failure if you didn't get wet enough and this was my one real worry. It wasn't being ripped apart down there, which we often joked about, and was the secret fear of quite a few girls. I kept thinking, as long as I got wet quick enough, there'd be no problem, and I did it a lot on my own just to make sure.

I realise this may sound like I was getting obsessive, but I remember I also spent a lot of time re-reading passages from books where people had sex, going over the lines again and again, trying to tease out clues. The trouble was, the books we had at Hailsham weren't at all helpful. We had a lot of nineteenth-century stuff by Thomas Hardy and people like that, which was more or less useless. Some modern books, by people like Edna O'Brien and Margaret Drabble, had some sex in them, but it wasn't ever very clear what was happening because the authors always assumed you'd already had a lot of sex before and there was no need to go into details. So I was having a frustrating time with the books, and the videos weren't much better. We'd got a video player in the billiards room a couple of years earlier, and by that spring had built up quite a good collection of movies. A lot of them had sex in them, but most scenes would end just as the sex was starting up, or else you'd only see their faces and their backs. And when there was a useful scene, it was difficult to see it more than fleetingly because there were usually twenty others in the room watching with you. We'd evolved this system where we called for particular favourite scenes to be played again—like, for instance, the moment the American jumps over the barbed wire on his bike in *The Great Escape*. There'd be a chant of: "Rewind! Rewind!" until someone got the remote and we'd see the portion again, sometimes three, four times. But I could hardly, by myself, start shouting for rewinds just to see sex scenes again.

So I kept delaying week by week, while I went on preparing, until the summer

came and I decided I was as ready as I'd ever be. By then, I was even feeling reasonably confident about it, and began dropping hints to Harry. Everything was going fine and according to plan, when Ruth and Tommy split up and it all got confused.

## Chapter Nine

What happened was that a few days after they split, I was in the Art Room with some other girls, working on a still life. I remember it being stifling that day, even though we had the fan rattling behind us. We were using charcoal, and because someone had commandeered all the easels, we were having to work with our boards propped up on our laps. I was sitting beside Cynthia E., and we'd just been chatting and complaining about the heat. Then somehow we'd got onto the subject of boys, and she'd said, not looking up from her work:

"And Tommy. I knew it wouldn't last with Ruth. Well, I suppose you're the natural successor."

She'd said it in a throwaway manner. But Cynthia was a perceptive person, and the fact that she wasn't part of our group just gave her remark more weight. What I mean is, I couldn't help thinking she represented what anyone with any distance on the subject would think. After all, I'd been Tommy's friend for years until all this couples stuff had come up. It was perfectly possible that to someone on the outside, I'd look like Ruth's "natural successor." I just let it go, though, and Cynthia, who wasn't trying to make any big point, said nothing else about it.

Then maybe a day or two later, I was coming out of the pavilion with Hannah when she suddenly nudged me and nodded towards a group of boys over on the North Playing Field.

"Look," she said quietly. "Tommy. Sitting by himself."

I shrugged, as though to say: "So what?" And that's all there was to it. But afterwards I found myself thinking a lot about it. Maybe all Hannah had meant to do was point out how Tommy, since splitting with Ruth, looked a bit of a spare part. But I couldn't quite buy this; I knew Hannah too well. The way she'd nudged me and lowered her voice had made it all too obvious she too was expressing some assumption, probably doing the rounds, about me being the "natural successor."

All this did, as I say, put me in a bit of a confusion, because until then I'd been all set on my Harry plan. In fact, looking back now, I'm sure I would have had sex with Harry if it hadn't been for this "natural successor" business. I'd had it all sorted, and my preparations had gone well. And I still think Harry was a good choice for that stage in my life. I think he would have been considerate and gentle, and have understood what I was wanting from

him.

I saw Harry fleetingly a couple of years ago at the recovery centre in Wiltshire. He was being brought in after a donation. I wasn't in the best of moods because my own donor had just completed the night before. No one was blaming me for that—it had been a particularly untidy operation—but I wasn't feeling great all the same. I'd been up most of the night, sorting all the arrangements, and I was in the front reception getting ready to leave when I saw Harry coming in. He was in a wheelchair—because he was so weak, I found out later, not because he couldn't actually walk—and I'm not sure he recognised me when I went up and said hello. I suppose there's no reason I should have any special place in his memory. We'd never had much to do with each other apart from that one time. To him, if he remembered me at all, I'd just be this daft girl who came up to him once, asked if he wanted sex, then backed off. He must have been pretty mature for his age, because he didn't get annoyed or go round telling people I was a tease, or any of that. So when I saw him being brought in that day, I felt grateful to him and wished I was his carer. I looked about, but whoever was his carer wasn't even around. The orderlies were impatient to get him to his room, so I didn't talk with him long. I just said hello, that I hoped he'd feel better soon, and he smiled tiredly. When I mentioned Hailsham he did a thumbs-up, but I could tell he didn't recognise me. Maybe later, when he wasn't so tired, or when the medication wasn't so strong, he'd have tried to place me and remembered.

Anyway, I was talking about back then: about how after Ruth and Tommy split, all my plans got confused. Looking at it now, I feel a bit sorry for Harry. After all the hints I'd been dropping the previous week, there I was, suddenly whispering stuff to put him off. I suppose I must have assumed he was raring to go, that I had my work cut out just to hold him off. Because whenever I saw him, I'd always get something in quick, then rush off before he could say anything back. It was only much later, when I thought about it, it occurred to me he might not have had sex on his mind at all. For all I know, he might have been happy to forget the whole thing, except that every time he saw me, along a corridor or in the grounds, I'd come up and whisper some excuse why I didn't want sex with him just then. It must have looked pretty daft from his side, and if he hadn't been such a decent type, I'd have been a laughing stock in no time. Well, anyway, this era of putting Harry off lasted maybe a couple of weeks, and then came Ruth's request.

That summer, right up until the warm weather faded, we developed this odd way of listening to music together in the fields. Walkmans had started appearing at Hailsham since the previous year's Sales and by that summer there were at least six of them in circulation. The craze was for several people to sit on the grass around a single Walkman, passing the headset around. Okay, it sounds a stupid way to listen to music, but it created a really good feeling. You listened for maybe twenty seconds, took off the headset, passed it on. After a while, provided you kept the same tape going over and over, it was surprising how close it was to having heard all of it by yourself. As I say, the craze really took off that summer, and during the lunch breaks you'd see all these clusters of students lying about the grass around the Walkmans. The guardians weren't too keen, saying we'd spread ear infections, but they let us carry on. I can't remember that last summer without thinking about those afternoons around the Walkmans. Someone would wander up and ask: "What's the sound?" and if they liked the answer, they'd sit down on the grass and wait their turn. There was almost always a good atmosphere around these sessions and I don't remember anyone being refused a share of the headset.

Anyway, that's what I was up to with a few other girls when Ruth came up to ask if we could have a talk. I could tell it was something important, so I left my other friends and the two of us walked off, all the way to our dorm hut. When we got to our room, I sat down on Ruth's bed, close to the window—the sun had warmed the blanket—and she sat on mine over by the back wall. There was a bluebottle buzzing around, and for a minute we had a laugh playing "bluebottle tennis," throwing our hands about to make the demented creature go from one to the other of us. Then it found its way out of the window, and Ruth said:

"I want me and Tommy to get back together again. Kathy, will you help?" Then she asked: "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I was just a bit surprised, after what's happened. Of course I'll help."

"I haven't told anybody else about wanting to get back with Tommy. Not even Hannah. You're the only one I trust."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Just talk to him. You've always had this way with him. He'll listen to you. And he'll know you're not bullshitting about me."

For a moment we sat there swinging our feet under our beds.

"It's really good you're telling me this," I said eventually. "I probably am the best person. Talking to Tommy and all that."

"What I want is for us to make a fresh start. We're about evens now, we've both done daft things just to hurt each other, but it's enough now. Martha bloody H., I ask you! Maybe he did it just to give me a good laugh. Well you can tell him he succeeded, and the scores are all even again. It's time we grew up and started afresh. I know you can reason with him, Kathy. You'll deal with it the best way possible. Then if he's still not prepared to be sensible, I'll know there's no point carrying on with him."

I shrugged. "As you say, Tommy and I, we've always been able to talk."

"Yeah, and he really respects you. I know because he's often talked about it. How you've got guts and how you always do what you say you're going to do. He told me once if he was in a corner, he'd rather have you backing him than any of the boys." She did a quick laugh. "Now you've got to admit, that's a real compliment. So you see, it's got to be you to our rescue. Tommy and I were made for each other and he'll listen to you. You'll do it for us, won't you, Kathy?"

I didn't say anything for a moment. Then I asked: "Ruth, are you serious about Tommy? I mean, if I do persuade him, and you get back together, you won't hurt him again?"

Ruth gave an impatient sigh. "Of course I'm serious. We're adults now. Soon we'll be leaving Hailsham. It's not a game any more."

"Okay. I'll talk to him. Like you say, we'll be leaving here soon. We can't afford to waste time."

After that, I remember us sitting on those beds, talking for some time. Ruth wanted to go over everything again and again: how stupid he was being, why they were really suited to each other, how differently they'd do things next time round, how they'd keep much more private, how they'd have sex in better places at better times. We talked about it all and she wanted my advice on everything. Then at one point, I was looking out of the window towards the hills in the distance, when I was startled to feel Ruth, suddenly beside me, squeeze my shoulders.

"Kathy, I knew we could depend on you," she said. "Tommy's right. You're

just the person to have when you're in a corner."

What with one thing and another, I didn't get a chance to talk to Tommy for the next few days. Then one lunch-time I spotted him on the edge of the South Playing Field practising with his football. He'd been having a kickabout earlier with two other boys, but now he was alone, juggling the ball about in the air. I went over and sat down on the grass behind him, putting my back against a fence post. This couldn't have been long after that time I'd shown him Patricia C.'s calendar and he'd marched off, because I remember we weren't sure how we stood with each other. He went on with his ball-juggling, scowling with concentration—knee, foot, head, foot—while I sat there picking away at clovers and gazing at the woods in the distance that we'd once been so frightened of. In the end I decided to break the deadlock and said:

"Tommy, let's talk now. There's something I want to talk to you about."

As soon as I said this, he let the ball roll away and came to sit down beside me. It was typical of Tommy that once he knew I was willing to talk, there was suddenly no trace left of any sulkiness; just a kind of grateful eagerness that reminded me of the way we were back in the Juniors when a guardian who'd been telling us off went back to being normal. He was panting a bit, and though I knew this was from the football, it added to his overall impression of eagerness. In other words, before we'd said anything, he'd already got my back up. Then when I said to him: "Tommy, I can tell. You haven't been too happy lately," he said: "What do you mean? I'm perfectly happy. I really am." And he did a big beam, followed by this hearty laugh. That was what did it. Years later, when I saw a shadow of it every now and then, I'd just smile. But back then, it really used to get to me. If Tommy happened to say to you: "I'm really upset about it," he'd have to put on a long, downcast face, then and there, to back up his words. I don't mean he did this ironically. He actually thought he'd be more convincing. So now, to prove he was happy, here he was, trying to sparkle with bonhomie. As I say, there would come a time when I'd think this was sweet; but that summer all I could see was that it advertised what a child he still was, and how easily you could take advantage of him. I didn't know much then about the world that awaited us beyond Hailsham, but I'd guessed we'd need all our wits about us, and when Tommy did anything like this, I felt something close to panic. Until that afternoon I'd always let it go—it always seemed too difficult to explain—but this time I burst out, saying:

"Tommy, you look so stupid, laughing like that! If you want to pretend you're

happy, you don't do it that way! Just take it from me, you don't do it that way! You definitely don't! Look, you've got to grow up. And you've got to get yourself back on track. Everything's been falling apart for you just lately, and we both know why."

Tommy was looking puzzled. When he was sure I'd finished, he said: "You're right. Things have been falling apart for me. But I don't see what you mean, Kath. What do you mean, we both know? I don't see how you could know. I haven't told anyone."

"Obviously I don't have all the details. But we all know about you splitting with Ruth."

Tommy still looked puzzled. Finally he **did** another little laugh, but this time it was a real one. "I see what you mean," he mumbled, then paused a moment to think something over. "To be honest, Kath," he said eventually, "that's not really what's bothering me. It's really something else altogether. I just keep thinking about it all the time. About Miss Lucy."

And that was how I came to hear about it, about what had happened between Tommy and Miss Lucy at the start of that summer. Later, when I'd had time to think it over, I worked out it must have happened no more than a few days after the morning I'd seen Miss Lucy up in Room 22 scrawling over her paperwork. And like I said, I felt like kicking myself I hadn't found out from him earlier.

It had been in the afternoon near the "dead hour"—when the lessons were finished but there was still some time to go until supper. Tommy had seen Miss Lucy coming out of the main house, her arms loaded with flipcharts and box files, and because it looked like she'd drop something any moment, he'd run over and offered to help.

"Well, she gave me a few things to carry and said we were headed back to her study with it all. Even between the two of us there was too much and I dropped a couple of things on the way. Then when we were coming up to the Orangery, she suddenly stopped, and I thought she'd dropped something else. But she was looking at me, like this, straight in the face, all serious. Then she says we've got to have a talk, a good talk. I say fine, and so we go into the Orangery, into her study, put all the stuff down. And she tells me to sit down, and I end up exactly where I was the last time, you know, that time years ago. And I can tell she's remembering that time as well, because she starts talking about it like it was only the day before. No explanations, nothing, she just starts off saying something like: Tommy, I made a mistake, when I said what I did to you. And I should have put you right about it long

before now.' Then she's saying I should forget everything she told me before. That she'd done me a big disservice telling me not to worry about being creative. That the other guardians had been right all along, and there was no excuse for my art being so rubbish..."

"Hold on, Tommy. Did she actually say your art was 'rubbish'?"

"If it wasn't 'rubbish' it was something like it. Negligible. That might have been it. Or incompetent. She might as well have said rubbish. She said she was sorry she'd told me what she had the last time because if she hadn't, I might have sorted it all by now."

"What were you saying through all this?"

"I didn't know what to say. In the end, she actually asked. She said: 'Tommy, what are you thinking?' So I said I wasn't sure but that she shouldn't worry either way because I was all right now. And she said, no, I wasn't all right. My art was rubbish, and that was partly her fault for telling me what she had. And I said to her, but what does it matter? I'm all right now, no one laughs at me about that any more. But she keeps shaking her head saying: 'It does matter. I shouldn't have said what I did.' So it occurs to me she's talking about later, you know, about after we leave here. So I say: 'But I'll be all right, Miss. I'm really fit, I know how to look after myself. When it's time for donations, I'll be able to do it really well.' When I said this, she starts shaking her head, shaking it really hard so I'm worried she'll get dizzy. Then she says: 'Listen, Tommy, your art, it is important. And not just because it's evidence. But for your own sake. You'll get a lot from it, just for yourself.' "

"Hold on. What did she mean, 'evidence'?"

"I don't know. But she definitely said that. She said our art was important, and 'not just because it's evidence.' God knows what she meant. I did actually ask her, when she said that. I said I didn't understand what she was telling me, and was it something to do with Madame and her gallery? And she did a big sigh and said: 'Madame's gallery, yes, that's important. Much more important than I once thought. I see that now.' Then she said: 'Look, there are all kinds of things you don't understand, Tommy, and I can't tell you about them. Things about Hailsham, about your place in the wider world, all kinds of things. But perhaps one day, you'll try and find out. They won't make it easy for you, but if you want to, really want to, you might find out.' She started shaking her head again after that, though not as bad as before, and she says: 'But why should you be any different? The students who leave here, they never find out much. Why should you be any different?' I didn't know what she was talking about, so I just said again: 'I'll be all right,

Miss.' She was quiet for a time, then she suddenly stood up and kind of bent over me and hugged me. Not in a sexy way. More like they used to do when we were little. I just kept as still as possible. Then she stood back and said again she was sorry for what she'd told me before. And that it wasn't too late, I should start straight away, making up the lost time. I don't think I said anything, and she looked at me and I thought she'd hug me again. But instead she said: 'Just do it for my sake, Tommy.' I told her I'd do my best, because by then I just wanted out of there. I was probably bright scarlet, what with her hugging me and everything. I mean, it's not the same, is it, now we've got bigger."

Until this point I'd been so engrossed in Tommy's story, I'd forgotten my reason for having this talk with him. But this reference to our getting "bigger" reminded me of my original mission.

"Look, Tommy," I said, "we'll have to talk this over carefully soon. It's really interesting and I can see how it must have made you miserable. But either way, you're going to have to pull yourself together a bit more. We're going to be leaving here this summer. You've got to get yourself sorted again, and there's one thing you can straighten out right now. Ruth told me she's prepared to call it quits and have you get back with her again. I think that's a good chance for you. Don't mess it up."

He was quiet for a few seconds, then said: "I don't know, Kath. There are all these other things to think about."

"Tommy, just listen. You're really lucky. Of all the people here, you've got Ruth fancying you. After we leave, if you're with her, you won't have to worry. She's the best, you'll be fine so long as you're with her. She's saying she wants a fresh start. So don't blow it."

I waited but Tommy gave no response, and again I felt something like panic coming over me. I leaned forward and said: "Look, you fool, you're not going to get many more chances. Don't you realise, we won't be here together like this much longer?"

To my surprise Tommy's response, when it came, was calm and considered—the side of Tommy that was to emerge more and more in the years ahead.

"I do realise that, Kath. That's exactly why I can't rush back into it with Ruth. We've got to think about the next move really carefully." Then he sighed and looked right at me. "Like you say, Kath. We're going to be leaving here soon. It's not like a game any more. We've got to think carefully."

I was suddenly lost for what to say and just sat there tugging away at the clovers. I could feel his eyes on me, but I didn't look up. We might have gone on that way for a while longer, except we were interrupted. I think the boys he'd been playing football with earlier came back, or maybe it was some students strolling by who came and sat down with us. Anyway, our little heart-to-heart was at an end and I came away feeling I hadn't done what I'd set out to do—that I'd somehow let Ruth down.

I never got to assess what kind of impact my talk with Tommy had had, because it was the very next day the news broke. It was midway through the morning and we'd been in yet another Culture Briefing. These were classes where we had to role play various people we'd find out there—waiters in cafés, policemen and so on. The sessions always got us excited and worried all at the same time, so we were pretty keyed up anyway. Then at the end of the lesson, as we were filing out, Charlotte F. came rushing into the room and the news about Miss Lucy leaving Hailsham spread through us in an instant. Mr. Chris, who'd been taking the class and who must have known all along, shuffled off guiltily before we could ask him anything. At first we weren't sure if Charlotte was just reporting a rumour, but the more she told us, the clearer it became this was for real. Earlier in the morning, one of the other Senior classes had gone into Room 12 expecting Music Appreciation with Miss Lucy. But Miss Emily had been there instead and she'd told them Miss Lucy couldn't come just at that moment, so she would take the class. For the next twenty minutes or so everything had gone quite normally. Then suddenly—right in mid-sentence, apparently—Miss Emily had broken off from talking about Beethoven and announced that Miss Lucy had left Hailsham and wouldn't be returning. That class had finished several minutes early—Miss Emily had rushed off with a preoccupied frown—and the word had started to go round as soon as the students had come out.

I immediately set off to look for Tommy, because I desperately wanted him to hear it first from me. But when I stepped into the courtyard, I saw I was too late. There was Tommy, over on the far side, on the edge of a circle of boys, nodding to what was being said. The other boys were animated, maybe excited even, but Tommy's eyes looked empty. That very evening, Tommy and Ruth got back together again, and I remember Ruth finding me a few days later to thank me for "sorting it all out so well." I told her I probably hadn't helped much, but she was having none of that. I was most definitely in her good books. And that was more or less the way things stayed throughout our last days at Hailsham.

## Part Two

### Chapter Ten

Sometimes I'll be driving on a long weaving road across marshland, or maybe past rows of furrowed fields, the sky big and grey and never changing mile after mile, and I find I'm thinking about my essay, the one I was supposed to be writing back then, when we were at the Cottages. The guardians had talked to us about our essays on and off throughout that last summer, trying to help each of us choose a topic that would absorb us properly for anything up to two years. But somehow—maybe we could see something in the guardians' manner—no one really believed the essays were that important, and among ourselves we hardly discussed the matter. I remember when I went in to tell Miss Emily my chosen topic was Victorian novels, I hadn't really thought about it much and I could see she knew it. But she just gave me one of her searching stares and said nothing more.

Once we got to the Cottages, though, the essays took on a new importance. In our first days there, and for some of us a lot longer, it was like we were each clinging to our essay, this last task from Hailsham, like it was a farewell gift from the guardians. Over time, they would fade from our minds, but for a while those essays helped keep us afloat in our new surroundings.

When I think about my essay today, what I do is go over it in some detail: I may think of a completely new approach I could have taken, or about different writers and books I could have focused on. I might be having coffee in a service station, staring at the motorway through the big windows, and my essay will pop into my head for no reason. Then I quite enjoy sitting there, going through it all again. Just lately, I've even toyed with the idea of going back and working on it, once I'm not a carer any more and I've got the time. But in the end, I suppose I'm not really serious about it. It's just a bit of nostalgia to pass the time. I think about the essay the same way I might a rounders match at Hailsham I did particularly well in, or else an argument from long ago where I can now think of all the clever things I should have said. It's at that sort of level—daydream stuff. But as I say, that's not how it was when we first got to the Cottages.

Eight of us who left Hailsham that summer ended up at the Cottages. Others went to the White Mansion in the Welsh hills, or to Poplar Farm in Dorset.

We didn't know then that all these places had only the most tenuous links with Hailsham. We arrived at the Cottages expecting a version of Hailsham for older students, and I suppose that was the way we continued to see them for some time. We certainly didn't think much about our lives beyond the Cottages, or about who ran them, or how they fitted into the larger world. None of us thought like that in those days.

The Cottages were the remains of a farm that had gone out of business years before. There was an old farmhouse, and around it, barns, outhouses, stables all converted for us to live in. There were other buildings, usually the outlying ones, that were virtually falling down, which we couldn't use for much, but for which we felt in some vague way responsible—mainly on account of Keffers. He was this grumpy old guy who turned up two or three times a week in his muddy van to look the place over. He didn't like to talk to us much, and the way he went round sighing and shaking his head disgustingly implied we weren't doing nearly enough to keep the place up. But it was never clear what more he wanted us to do. He'd shown us a list of chores when we'd first arrived, and the students who were already there—"the veterans," as Hannah called them—had long since worked out a rota which we kept to conscientiously. There really wasn't much else we could do other than report leaking gutters and mop up after floods.

The old farmhouse—the heart of the Cottages—had a number of fireplaces where we could burn the split logs stacked in the outer barns. Otherwise we had to make do with big boxy heaters. The problem with these was they worked on gas canisters, and unless it was really cold, Keffers wouldn't bring many in. We kept asking him to leave a big supply with us, but he'd shake his head gloomily, like we were bound to use them up frivolously or else cause an explosion. So I remember a lot of the time, outside the summer months, being chilly. You went around with two, even three jumpers on, and your jeans felt cold and stiff. We sometimes kept our Wellingtons on the whole day, leaving trails of mud and damp through the rooms. Keffers, observing this, would again shake his head, but when we asked him what else we were supposed to do, the floors being in the state they were, he'd make no reply.

I'm making it sound pretty bad, but none of us minded the discomforts one bit—it was all part of the excitement of being at the Cottages. If we were honest, though, particularly near the beginning, most of us would have admitted missing the guardians. A few of us, for a time, even tried to think of Keffers as a sort of guardian, but he was having none of it. You went up to greet him when he arrived in his van and he'd stare at you like you were mad. But this was one thing we'd been told over and over: that after Hailsham there'd be no more guardians, so we'd have to look after each other.

And by and large, I'd say Hailsham prepared us well on that score.

Most of the students I was close to at Hailsham ended up at the Cottages that summer. Cynthia E.—the girl who'd said about me being Ruth's "natural successor" that time in the Art Room—I wouldn't have minded her, but she went to Dorset with the rest of her crowd. And Harry, the boy I'd nearly had sex with, I heard he went to Wales. But all our gang had stayed together. And if we ever missed the others, we could tell ourselves there was nothing stopping us going to visit them. For all our map lessons with Miss Emily, we had no real idea at that point about distances and how easy or hard it was to visit a particular place. We'd talk about getting lifts from the veterans when they were going on their trips, or else how in time we'd learn to drive ourselves and then we'd be able to see them whenever we pleased.

Of course, in practice, especially during the first months, we rarely stepped beyond the confines of the Cottages. We didn't even walk about the surrounding countryside or wander into the nearby village. I don't think we were afraid exactly. We all knew no one would stop us if we wandered off, provided we were back by the day and the time we entered into Keffers's ledgerbook. That summer we arrived, we were constantly seeing veterans packing their bags and rucksacks and going off for two or three days at a time with what seemed to us scary nonchalance. We'd watched them with astonishment, wondering if by the following summer we'd be doing the same. Of course, we were, but in those early days, it didn't seem possible. You have to remember that until that point we'd never been beyond the grounds of Hailsham, and we were just bewildered. If you'd told me then that within a year, I'd not only develop a habit of taking long solitary walks, but that I'd start learning to drive a car, I'd have thought you were mad.

Even Ruth looked daunted that sunny day the minibus dropped us in front of the farmhouse, circled round the little pond and disappeared up the slope. We could see hills in the distance that reminded us of the ones in the distance at Hailsham, but they seemed to us oddly crooked, like when you draw a picture of a friend and it's almost right but not quite, and the face on the sheet gives you the creeps. But at least it was the summer, not the way the Cottages would get a few months on, with all the puddles frozen over and the rough ground frosted bone hard. The place looked beautiful and cosy, with overgrown grass everywhere—a novelty to us. We stood together in a huddle, the eight of us, and watched Keffers go in and out of the farmhouse, expecting him to address us at any moment. But he didn't, and all we could catch was the odd irritated mutter about the students who already lived there. Once, as he went to get something from his van, he gave us a moody

glance, then returned to the farmhouse and closed the door behind him.

Before too long, though, the veterans, who'd been having a bit of fun watching us being pathetic—we were to do much the same the following summer—came out and took us in hand. In fact, looking back, I see they really went out of their way helping us settle in. Even so, those first weeks were strange and we were glad we had each other. We'd always move about together and seemed to spend large parts of the day awkwardly standing outside the farmhouse, not knowing what else to do.

It's funny now recalling the way it was at the beginning, because when I think of those two years at the Cottages, that scared, bewildered start doesn't seem to go with any of the rest of it. If someone mentions the Cottages today, I think of easy-going days drifting in and out of each other's rooms, the languid way the afternoon would fold into evening then into night. I think of my pile of old paperbacks, their pages gone wobbly, like they'd once belonged to the sea. I think about how I read them, lying on my front in the grass on warm afternoons, my hair—which I was growing long then—always falling across my vision. I think about the mornings waking up in my room at the top of the Black Barn to the voices of students outside in the field, arguing about poetry or philosophy; or the long winters, the breakfasts in steamed-up kitchens, meandering discussions around the table about Kafka or Picasso. It was always stuff like that at breakfast; never who you'd had sex with the night before, or why Larry and Helen weren't talking to each other any more.

But then again, when I think about it, there's a sense in which that picture of us on that first day, huddled together in front of the farmhouse, isn't so incongruous after all. Because maybe, in a way, we didn't leave it behind nearly as much as we might once have thought. Because somewhere underneath, a part of us stayed like that: fearful of the world around us, and—no matter how much we despised ourselves for it—unable quite to let each other go.

The veterans, who of course knew nothing about the history of Tommy and Ruth's relationship, treated them as a long-established couple, and this seemed to please Ruth no end. For the first weeks after we arrived, she made a big deal of it, always putting her arm around Tommy, sometimes snogging him in the corner of a room while other people were still about. Well, this kind of thing might have been fine at Hailsham, but looked immature at the Cottages. The veteran couples never did anything showy in public, going about in a sensible sort of way, like a mother and father might do in a normal family.

There was, incidentally, something I noticed about these veteran couples at the Cottages—something Ruth, for all her close study of them, failed to spot—and this was how so many of their mannerisms were copied from the television. It first came to me watching this couple, Susie and Greg—probably the oldest students at the Cottages and generally thought to be “in charge” of the place. There was this particular thing Susie did whenever Greg set off on one of his speeches about Proust or whoever: she'd smile at the rest of us, roll her eyes, and mouth very emphatically, but only just audibly: “Gawd help us.” Television at Hailsham had been pretty restricted, and at the Cottages too—though there was nothing to stop us watching all day—no one was very keen on it. But there was an old set in the farmhouse and another in the Black Barn, and I'd watch every now and then. That's how I realised that this “Gawd help us” stuff came from an American series, one of those with an audience laughing along at everything anyone said or did. There was a character—a large woman who lived next door to the main characters—who did exactly what Susie did, so when her husband went off on a big spiel, the audience would be waiting for her to roll her eyes and say “Gawd help us” so they could burst out with this huge laugh. Once I'd spotted this, I began to notice all kinds of other things the veteran couples had taken from TV programmes: the way they gestured to each other, sat together on sofas, even the way they argued and stormed out of rooms.

Anyway, my point is, it wasn't long before Ruth realised the way she'd been carrying on with Tommy was all wrong for the Cottages, and she set about changing how they did things in front of people. And there was in particular this one gesture Ruth picked up from the veterans. Back at Hailsham, if a couple were parting, even for a few minutes, it had been an excuse for big embraces and snogging. At the Cottages, though, when a couple were saying goodbye to each other, there'd be hardly any words, never mind embraces or kisses. Instead, you slapped your partner's arm near the elbow, lightly with the back of your knuckles, the way you might do to attract someone's attention. Usually the girl did it to the boy, just as they were moving apart. This custom had faded out by the winter, but when we arrived, it was what was going on and Ruth was soon doing it to Tommy. Mind you, at first, Tommy didn't have a clue what was going on, and would turn abruptly to Ruth and go: “What?,” so that she'd have to glare furiously at him, like they were in a play and he'd forgotten his lines. I suppose she eventually had a word with him, because after a week or so they were managing to do it right, more or less exactly like the veteran couples.

I'd not actually seen the slap on the elbow on the television, but I was pretty sure that's where the idea had come from, and just as sure Ruth hadn't realised it. That was why, that afternoon I was reading Daniel Deronda on the

grass and Ruth was being irritating, I decided it was time someone pointed it out to her.

It was nearly autumn and starting to get chilly. The veterans were spending more time indoors and generally going back to whatever routines they'd had before the summer. But those of us who'd arrived from Hailsham kept sitting outside on the uncut grass—wanting to keep going for as long as possible the only routine we'd got used to. Even so, by that particular afternoon, there were maybe only three or four apart from me reading in the field, and since I'd gone out of my way to find a quiet corner to myself, I'm pretty sure what happened between me and Ruth wasn't overheard.

I was lying on a piece of old tarpaulin reading, as I say, Daniel Deronda, when Ruth came wandering over and sat down beside me. She studied the cover of my book and nodded to herself. Then after about a minute, just as I knew she would, she began to outline to me the plot of Daniel Deronda. Until that point, I'd been in a perfectly okay mood, and had been pleased to see Ruth, but now I was irritated. She'd done this to me a couple of times before, and I'd seen her doing it to others. For one thing, there was the manner she put on: a kind of nonchalant but sincere one as though she expected people to be really grateful for her assistance. Okay, even at the time, I was vaguely aware what was behind it. In those early months, we'd somehow developed this idea that how well you were settling in at the Cottages—how well you were coping—was somehow reflected by how many books you'd read. It sounds odd, but there you are, it was just something that developed between us, the ones who'd arrived from Hailsham. The whole notion was kept deliberately hazy—in fact, it was pretty reminiscent of the way we'd dealt with sex at Hailsham. You could go around implying you'd read all kinds of things, nodding knowingly when someone mentioned, say, War and Peace, and the understanding was that no one would scrutinise your claim too rationally. You have to remember, since we'd been in each other's company constantly since arriving at the Cottages, it wasn't possible for any of us to have read War and Peace without the rest noticing. But just like with the sex at Hailsham, there was an unspoken agreement to allow for a mysterious dimension where we went off and did all this reading.

It was, as I say, a little game we all indulged in to some extent. Even so, it was Ruth who took it further than anyone else. She was the one always pretending to have finished anything anyone happened to be reading; and she was the only one with this notion that the way to demonstrate your superior reading was to go around telling people the plots of novels they were in the middle of. That's why, when she started on Daniel Deronda, even

though I'd not been enjoying it much, I closed the book, sat up and said to her, completely out of the blue:

"Ruth, I've been meaning to ask you. Why do you always hit Tommy on the arm like that when you're saying goodbye? You know what I mean."

Of course she claimed not to, so I patiently explained what I was talking about. Ruth heard me out then shrugged.

"I didn't realise I was doing it. I must have just picked it up."

A few months before I might have let it go at that—or probably wouldn't have brought it up in the first place. But that afternoon I just pressed on, explaining to her how it was something from a television series. "It's not something worth copying," I told her. "It's not what people really do out there, in normal life, if that's what you were thinking."

Ruth, I could see, was now angry but unsure how to fight back. She looked away and did another shrug. "So what?" she said. "It's no big deal. A lot of us do it."

"What you mean is Chrissie and Rodney do it."

As soon as I said this I realised I'd made a mistake; that until I'd mentioned these two, I'd had Ruth in a corner, but now she was out. It was like when you make a move in chess and just as you take your finger off the piece, you see the mistake you've made, and there's this panic because you don't know yet the scale of disaster you've left yourself open to. Sure enough, I saw a gleam come into Ruth's eyes and when she spoke again it was in an entirely new voice.

"So that's it, that's what's upsetting poor little Kathy, Ruth isn't paying enough attention to her. Ruth's got big new friends and baby sister isn't getting played with so often..."

"Stop all that. Anyway that's not how it works in real families. You don't know anything about it."

"Oh Kathy, the great expert on real families. So sorry. But that's what this is, isn't it? You've still got this idea. Us Hailsham lot, we have to stay together, a tight little bunch, must never make any new friends."

"I've never said that. I'm just talking about Chrissie and Rodney. It looks daft, the way you copy everything they do."

"But I'm right, aren't I?" Ruth went on. "You're upset because I've managed to move on, make new friends. Some of the veterans hardly remember your name, and who can blame them? You never talk to anyone unless they're Hailsham. But you can't expect me to hold your hand the whole time. We've been here nearly two months now."

I didn't take the bait, but said instead: "Never mind me, never mind Hailsham. But you keep leaving Tommy in the lurch. I've watched you, you've done it a few times just this week. You leave him stranded, looking like a spare part. That's not fair. You and Tommy are supposed to be a couple. That means you look out for him."

"Quite right, Kathy, we're a couple, like you say. And if you must intrude, I'll tell you. We've talked about this, and we've agreed. If he sometimes doesn't feel like doing things with Chrissie and Rodney, that's his choice. I'm not going to make him do anything he's not yet ready for. But we've agreed, he shouldn't hold me back. Nice of you to be concerned though." Then she added, in a quite different voice: "Come to think of it, I suppose you haven't been that slow making friends with at least some of the veterans."

She watched me carefully, then did a laugh, as though to say: "We're still friends, aren't we?" But I didn't find anything to laugh about in this last remark of hers. I just picked up my book and walked off without another word.

## Chapter Eleven

I should explain why I got so bothered by Ruth saying what she did. Those early months at the Cottages had been a strange time in our friendship. We were quarrelling over all kinds of little things, but at the same time we were confiding in each other more than ever. In particular, we used to have these talks, the two of us, usually up in my room at the top of the Black Barn just before going to bed. You could say they were a sort of hangover from those talks in our dorm after lights out. Anyway, the thing was, however much we might have fallen out during the day, come bed-time, Ruth and I would still find ourselves sitting side by side on my mattress, sipping our hot drinks, exchanging our deepest feelings about our new life like nothing had ever come between us. And what made these heart-to-hearts possible—you might even say what made the whole friendship possible during that time—was this understanding we had that anything we told each other during these moments would be treated with careful respect: that we'd honour confidences, and that no matter how much we rowed, we wouldn't use against each other anything we'd talked about during those sessions. Okay, this had never been spelt out exactly, but it was definitely, as I say, an understanding, and until the afternoon of the Daniel Deronda business, neither of us had come anywhere near breaching it. That was why, when Ruth said what she did about my not being slow making friends with certain veterans, I wasn't just cross. To me, it was a betrayal. Because there wasn't any doubt what she'd meant by it: she was referring to something I'd confided in her one night about me and sex.

As you'd expect, sex was different at the Cottages from how it had been at Hailsham. It was a lot more straightforward—more "grown up." You didn't go around gossiping and giggling about who'd been doing it with whom. If you knew two students had had sex, you didn't immediately start speculating about whether they'd become a proper couple. And if a new couple did emerge one day, you didn't go around talking about it like it was a big event. You just accepted it quietly, and from then on, when you referred to one, you also referred to the other, as in "Chrissie and Rodney" or "Ruth and Tommy." When someone wanted sex with you, that too was much more straightforward. A boy would come up and ask if you wanted to spend the night in his room "for a change," something like that, it was no big deal. Sometimes it was because he was interested in becoming a couple with you; other times it was just for a one-nighter.

The atmosphere, like I say, was much more grown up. But when I look back,

the sex at the Cottages seems a bit functional. Maybe it was precisely because all the gossip and secrecy had gone. Or maybe it was because of the cold.

When I remember sex at the Cottages, I think about doing it in freezing rooms in the pitch dark, usually under a ton of blankets. And the blankets often weren't even blankets, but a really odd assortment—old curtains, even bits of carpet. Sometimes it got so cold you just had to pile anything you could over you, and if you were having sex at the bottom of it, it felt like a mountain of bedding was pounding at you, so that half the time you weren't sure if you were doing it with the boy or all that stuff.

Anyway, the point is, I'd had a few one-nighters shortly after getting to the Cottages. I hadn't planned it that way. My plan had been to take my time, maybe become part of a couple with someone I chose carefully. I'd never been in a couple before, and especially after watching Ruth and Tommy for a while, I was quite curious to give it a try for myself. As I say, that had been my plan, and when the one-nighters kept happening, it unsettled me a bit. That was why I'd decided to confide in Ruth that night.

It was in many ways a typical evening session for us. We'd brought up our mugs of tea, and we were sitting in my room, side by side on the mattress, our heads slightly stooped because of the rafters. We talked about the different boys at the Cottages, and whether any of them might be right for me. And Ruth had been at her best: encouraging, funny, tactful, wise. That's why I decided to tell her about the one-nighters. I told her how they'd happened without my really wanting them to; and how, even though we couldn't have babies from doing it, the sex had done funny things to my feelings, just as Miss Emily had warned. Then I said to her:

"Ruth, I wanted to ask you. Do you ever get so you just really have to do it? With anybody almost?"

Ruth shrugged, then said: "I'm in a couple. So if I want to do it, I just do it with Tommy."

"I suppose so. Maybe it's just me anyway. There might be something not quite right with me, down there. Because sometimes I just really, really need to do it."

"That's strange, Kathy." She fixed me with a concerned look, which made me feel all the more worried.

"So you don't ever get like that."

She shrugged again. "Not so as I'd do it with just anybody. What you're saying does sound a bit weird, Kathy. But maybe it'll calm down after a while."

"Sometimes it won't be there for ages. Then it suddenly comes on. It was like that, the first time it happened. He started snogging me and I just wanted him to get off. Then suddenly it just came on, out of nowhere. I just really had to do it."

Ruth shook her head. "It does sound a bit weird. But it'll probably go away. It's probably just to do with the different food we're eating here."

She hadn't been a huge help, but she'd been sympathetic and I'd felt a little better about it all afterwards. That's why it was such a jolt to have Ruth suddenly bring it up the way she did in the middle of the argument we were having that afternoon in the field. Okay, there was probably no one to overhear us, but even so, there was something not at all right about what she'd done. In those first months at the Cottages, our friendship had stayed intact because, on my side at least, I'd had this notion there were two quite separate Ruths. There was one Ruth who was always trying to impress the veterans, who wouldn't hesitate to ignore me, Tommy, any of the others, if she thought we'd cramp her style. This was the Ruth I wasn't pleased with, the one I could see every day putting on airs and pretending—the Ruth who did the slap-on-the-elbow gesture. But the Ruth who sat beside me in my little attic room at the day's close, legs outstretched over the edge of my mattress, her steaming mug held in both her hands, that was the Ruth from Hailsham, and whatever had been happening during the day, I could just pick up with her where we'd left off the last time we'd sat together like that. And until that afternoon in the field, there'd been a definite understanding these two Ruths wouldn't merge; that the one I confided in before bed was one I could absolutely trust. That's why when she said that, about my "not being slow making friends with at least some of the veterans," I got so upset. That's why I just picked up my book and walked off.

But when I think about it now, I can see things more from Ruth's viewpoint. I can see, for instance, how she might have felt I had been the one to first violate an understanding, and that her little dig had just been a retaliation. This never occurred to me at the time, but I see now it's a possibility, and an explanation for what happened. After all, immediately before she made that remark, I'd been talking about the arm-slapping business. Now it's a bit hard to explain this, but some sort of understanding had definitely developed between the two of us about the way Ruth behaved in front of the veterans. Okay, she often bluffed and implied all sorts of things I knew weren't true. Sometimes, as I said, she did things to impress the veterans at our expense.

But it seems to me Ruth believed, at some level, she was doing all this on behalf of us all. And my role, as her closest friend, was to give her silent support, as if I was in the front row of the audience when she was performing on stage. She was struggling to become someone else, and maybe felt the pressure more than the rest of us because, as I say, she'd somehow taken on the responsibility for all of us. In that case, then, the way I'd talked about her slap on the elbow thing could be seen as a betrayal, and she might well then have felt justified retaliating as she had. As I say, this explanation only occurred to me recently. At the time I didn't look at the larger picture or at my own part in it. I suppose, in general, I never appreciated in those days the sheer effort Ruth was making to move on, to grow up and leave Hailsham behind. Thinking about this now, I'm reminded of something she told me once, when I was caring for her in the recovery centre at Dover. We'd been sitting in her room, watching the sunset, as we so often did, enjoying the mineral water and biscuits I'd brought, and I'd been telling her how I still had most of my old Hailsham collection box safely stowed inside my pine chest in my bedsit. Then—I wasn't trying to lead onto anything, or make any kind of point—I just happened to say to her:

"You never had a collection after Hailsham, did you?"

Ruth, who was sitting up in bed, was quiet for a long time, the sunset falling over the tiled wall behind her. Then she said:

"Remember the guardians, before we left, how they kept reminding us we could take our collections with us. So I'd taken everything out of my box and put it into this holdall bag. My plan was I'd find a really good wooden box for it all once I got to the Cottages. But when we got there, I could see none of the veterans had collections. It was only us, it wasn't normal. We must all have realised it, I wasn't the only one, but we didn't really talk about it, did we? So I didn't go looking for a new box. My things all stayed in the holdall bag for months, then in the end I threw them away."

I stared at her. "You put your collection out with the rubbish?"

Ruth shook her head, and for the next few moments seemed to be going through in her mind all the different items in her collection. Finally she said:

"I put them all in a bin bag, but I couldn't stand the idea of putting them out with the rubbish. So I asked old Keffers, once when he was about to drive off, if he'd take the bin bag to a shop. I knew about charity shops, I'd found it all out. Keffers rummaged in the bag a bit, he didn't know what any of it was—why should he?—and he did this laugh and said no shop he knew would want stuff like that. And I said, but it's good stuff, really good stuff. And he

could see I was getting a bit emotional, and he changed his tune then. He said something like: 'All right, missy, I'll take it along to the Oxfam people.' Then he made a real effort and said: 'Now I've had a closer look, you're right, it is pretty good stuff!' He wasn't very convincing though. I suppose he just took it away and put it in some bin somewhere. But at least I didn't have to know that." Then she smiled and said: "You were different. I remember. You were never embarrassed about your collection and you kept it. I wish now I'd done that too."

What I'm saying is that we were all of us struggling to adjust to our new life, and I suppose we all did things back then we later regretted. I was really upset by Ruth's remark at the time, but it's pointless now trying to judge her or anyone else for the way they behaved during those early days at the Cottages.

As the autumn came on, and I got more familiar with our surroundings, I began noticing things I'd missed earlier. There was, for instance, the odd attitude to students who'd recently left. The veterans were never slow coming out with funny anecdotes about characters they'd met on trips to the White Mansion or to Poplar Farm; but they hardly ever mentioned students who, right up until just before we'd arrived, must have been their intimate friends.

Another thing I noticed—and I could see it tied in—was the big hush that would descend around certain veterans when they went off on "courses"—which even we knew had to do with becoming carers. They could be gone for four or five days, but were hardly mentioned in that time; and when they came back, no one really asked them anything. I suppose they might have talked to their closest friends in private. But there was definitely an understanding that you didn't mention these trips out in the open. I can remember one morning watching, through the misted-up windows of our kitchen, two veterans leaving for a course, and wondering if by the next spring or summer, they'd have gone altogether, and we'd be taking care not to mention them.

But it's perhaps stretching it to claim students who'd left were an actual taboo. If they had to be mentioned, they got mentioned. Most commonly, you'd hear them referred to indirectly, in connection with an object or a

chore. For example, if repairs were needed to a downpipe, there'd be a lot of discussion about "the way Mike used to do it." And there was a tree stump outside the Black Barn everyone called "Dave's stump" because for over three years, until a few weeks before our arrival, he'd sat on it to read and write, sometimes even when it was raining or cold. Then, maybe most memorably, there was Steve. None of us ever discovered anything much about the sort of person Steve had been—except that he'd liked porn magazines.

Every now and again, you'd come across a porn mag at the Cottages, thrown behind a sofa or amidst a pile of old news-papers. They were what you'd call "soft" porn, though we didn't know about such distinctions then. We'd never come across anything like that before and didn't know what to think. The veterans usually laughed when one showed up and flicked through it quickly in a blasé way before throwing it aside, so we did the same. When Ruth and I were remembering all this a few years ago, she claimed there were dozens of these magazines circulating around the Cottages. "No one admitted to liking them," she said. "But you remember how it was. If one turned up in a room, everyone pretended to find it dead boring. Then you came back half an hour later and it would always be gone."

Anyway, my point is that whenever one of these magazines turned up, people would claim it was a left-over from "Steve's collection." Steve, in other words, was responsible for every porn mag that ever showed up. As I say, we never found out much else about Steve. We did, though, see the funny side of it even then, so that when someone pointed and said: "Oh look, one of Steve's magazines," they did it with a bit of irony.

These magazines, incidentally, used to drive old Keffer's mad. There was a rumour that he was religious and dead against not just porn, but sex in general. Sometimes he'd work himself into a complete state—you could see his face under his grey whiskers blotchy with fury—and he'd go thudding around the place, barging into people's rooms without knocking, determined to round up every one of "Steve's magazines." We did our best to find him amusing on these occasions, but there was something truly scary about him in these moods. For one thing, the grumbling he usually kept up suddenly stopped and this silence alone gave him an alarming aura.

I remember one particular time when Keffer's had collected up six or seven of "Steve's mags" and stormed out with them to his van. Laura and I were watching him from up in my room, and I'd been laughing at something Laura had just said. Then I saw Keffer's opening his van door, and maybe because he needed both hands to move some stuff about, he put the mags down on top of some bricks stacked outside the boiler hut—some veterans had tried to build a barbecue there a few months earlier. Keffer's's figure, bent forwards,

his head and shoulders hidden in the van, went on rummaging about for ages, and something told me that, for all his fury of a moment ago, he'd now forgotten about the magazines. Sure enough, a few minutes later, I saw him straighten, climb in behind the wheel, slam the door and drive off.

When I pointed out to Laura that Keffer's had left the magazines behind, she said: "Well, they won't stay put for long. He'll just have to collect them all up again, next time he decides on a purge."

But when I found myself strolling past the boiler hut about half an hour later, I saw the magazines hadn't been touched. I thought for a moment about taking them up to my room, but then I could see if they were ever found there. I'd get no end of teasing; and how there was no way people would understand my reasons for doing such a thing. That was why I picked up the magazines and went inside the boiler hut with them.

The boiler hut was really just another barn, built onto the end of the farmhouse, filled with old mowers and pitch-forks—stuff Keffer's reckoned wouldn't catch alight too easily if one day the boiler decided to blow up. Keffer's also kept a workbench in there, and so I put the magazines down on it, pushed aside some old rags and heaved myself up to sit on the tabletop. The light wasn't too good, but there was a grimy window somewhere behind me, and when I opened the first magazine I found I could see well enough.

There were lots of pictures of girls holding their legs open or sticking their bottoms out. I'll admit, there have been times when I've looked at pictures like that and felt excited, though I've never fancied doing it with a girl. But that's not what I was after that afternoon. I moved through the pages quickly, not wanting to be distracted by any buzz of sex coming off those pages. In fact, I hardly saw the contorted bodies, because I was focusing on the faces. Even in the little adverts for videos or whatever tucked away to the side, I checked each model's face before moving on.

It wasn't until I was nearing the end of the pile that I became certain there was somebody standing outside the barn, just beside the doorway. I'd left the door open because that's how it was normally, and because I wanted the light; and twice already I'd found myself glancing up, thinking I'd heard some small noise. But there'd been no one there, and I'd just gone on with what I was doing. Now I was certain, though, and lowering my magazine I made a heavy sighing sound that would be clearly audible.

I waited for giggling, or maybe for two or three students to come bursting into the barn, eager to make the best of having caught me with a pile of porn mags. But nothing happened. So I called out, in what I tried to make a weary

tone:

"Delighted you could join me. Why be so shy?"

There was a little chuckle, then Tommy appeared at the threshold. "Hi, Kath," he said sheepishly.

"Come on in, Tommy. Join in the fun."

He came towards me cautiously, then stopped a few steps away. Then he looked over to the boiler, and said: "I didn't know you liked that sort of stuff."

"Girls are allowed too, aren't we?"

I kept going through the pages, and for the next few seconds he stayed silent. Then I heard him say:

"I wasn't trying to spy on you. But I saw you from my room. I saw you come out here and pick up that pile Keffers left."

"You're very welcome to them when I've finished."

He laughed awkwardly. "It's just sex stuff. I expect I've seen them all already." He did another laugh, but then when I glanced up, I saw he was watching me with a serious expression. Then he asked:

"Are you looking for something, Kath?"

"What do you mean? I'm just looking at dirty pictures."

"Just for kicks?"

"I suppose you could say that." I put down one mag and started on the next one.

Then I heard Tommy's steps coming nearer until he was right up to me. When I looked up again, his hands were hovering fretfully in the air, like I was doing a complicated manual task and he was itching to help.

"Kath, you don't... Well, if it's for kicks, you don't do it like that. You've got to look at the pictures much more carefully. It doesn't really work if you go that fast."

"How do you know what works for girls? Or maybe you've looked these over

with Ruth. Sorry, not thinking."

"Kath, what are you looking for?"

I ignored him. I was nearly at the end of the pile and I was now keen to finish. Then he said:

"I saw you doing this once before."

This time I did stop and look at him. "What's going on here, Tommy? Has Keffers recruited you for his porn patrol?"

"I wasn't trying to spy on you. But I did see you, that time last week, after we'd all been up in Charley's room. There was one of these mags there, and you thought we'd all left and gone. But I came back to get my jumper, and Claire's doors were open so I could see straight through to Charley's room. That's how I saw you in there, going through the magazine."

"Well, so what? We all have to get our kicks some way."

"You weren't doing it for kicks. I could tell, just like I can now. It's your face, Kath. That time in Charley's room, you had a strange face. Like you were sad, maybe. And a bit scared."

I jumped off the workbench, gathered up the mags and dumped them in his arms. "Here. Give these to Ruth. See if they do anything for her."

I walked past him and out of the barn. I knew he'd be disappointed I hadn't told him anything, but at that point I hadn't thought things through properly myself and wasn't ready to tell anyone. But I hadn't minded him coming into the boiler hut after me. I hadn't minded at all. I'd felt comforted, protected almost. I did tell him eventually, but that wasn't until a few months later, when we went on our Norfolk trip.

## Chapter Twelve

I want to talk about the Norfolk trip, and all the things that happened that day, but I'll first have to go back a bit, to give you the background and explain why it was we went.

Our first winter was just about over by then and we were all feeling much more settled. For all our little hiccups, Ruth and I had kept up our habit of rounding off the day in my room, talking over our hot drinks, and it was during one of those sessions, when we were larking around about something, that she suddenly said:

"I suppose you've heard what Chrissie and Rodney have been saying."

When I said I hadn't, she did a laugh and continued: "They're probably just having me on. Their idea of a joke. Forget I mentioned it."

But I could see she wanted me to drag it out of her, so I kept pressing until in the end she said in a lowered voice:

"You remember last week, when Chrissie and Rodney were away? They'd been up to this town called Cromer, up on the north Norfolk coast."

"What were they doing there?"

"Oh, I think they've got a friend there, someone who used to live here. That's not the point. The point is, they claim they saw this... person. Working there in this open-plan office. And, well, you know. They reckon this person's a possible. For me."

Though most of us had first come across the idea of "possibles" back at Hailsham, we'd sensed we weren't supposed to discuss it, and so we hadn't—though for sure, it had both intrigued and disturbed us. And even at the Cottages, it wasn't a topic you could bring up casually. There was definitely more awkwardness around any talk of possibles than there was around, say, sex. At the same time, you could tell people were fascinated—obsessed, in some cases—and so it kept coming up, usually in solemn arguments, a world away from our ones about, say, James Joyce.

The basic idea behind the possibles theory was simple, and didn't provoke much dispute. It went something like this. Since each of us was copied at some point from a normal person, there must be, for each of us, somewhere out there, a model getting on with his or her life. This meant, at least in

theory, you'd be able to find the person you were modelled from. That's why, when you were out there yourself—in the towns, shopping centres, transport cafés—you kept an eye out for "possibles"—the people who might have been the models for you and your friends.

Beyond these basics, though, there wasn't much consensus. For a start, no one could agree what we were looking for when we looked for possibles. Some students thought you should be looking for a person twenty to thirty years older than yourself—the sort of age a normal parent would be. But others claimed this was sentimental. Why would there be a "natural" generation between us and our models? They could have used babies, old people, what difference would it have made? Others argued back that they'd use for models people at the peak of their health, and that's why they were likely to be "normal parent" age. But around here, we'd all sense we were near territory we didn't want to enter, and the arguments would fizzle out.

Then there were those questions about why we wanted to track down our models at all. One big idea behind finding your model was that when you did, you'd glimpse your future. Now I don't mean anyone really thought that if your model turned out to be, say, a guy working at a railway station, that's what you'd end up doing too. We all realised it wasn't that simple. Nevertheless, we all of us, to varying degrees, believed that when you saw the person you were copied from, you'd get some insight into who you were deep down, and maybe too, you'd see something of what your life held in store.

There were some who thought it stupid to be concerned about possibles at all. Our models were an irrelevance, a technical necessity for bringing us into the world, nothing more than that. It was up to each of us to make of our lives what we could. This was the camp Ruth always claimed to side with, and I probably did too. All the same, whenever we heard reports of a possible—whoever it was for—we couldn't help getting curious.

The way I remember it, sightings of possibles tended to come in batches. Weeks could go by with no one mentioning the subject, then one reported sighting would trigger off a whole spate of others. Most of them were obviously not worth pursuing: someone seen in a car going by, stuff like that. But every now and then, a sighting seemed to have substance to it—like the one Ruth told me about that night.

According to Ruth, Chrissie and Rodney had been busy exploring this seaside town they'd gone to and had split up for a while. When they'd met up again, Rodney was all excited and had told Chrissie how he'd been wandering

the side-streets off the High Street, and had gone past an office with a large glass front. Inside had been a lot of people, some of them at their desks, some walking about and chatting. And that's where he'd spotted Ruth's possible.

"Chrissie came and told me as soon as they got back. She made Rodney describe everything, and he did his best, but it was impossible to tell anything. Now they keep talking about driving me up there, but I don't know. I don't know if I ought to do anything about it."

I can't remember exactly what I said to her that night, but I was at that point pretty sceptical. In fact, to be honest, my guess was that Chrissie and Rodney had made the whole thing up. I don't really want to suggest Chrissie and Rodney were bad people—that would be unfair. In many ways, I actually liked them. But the fact was, the way they regarded us newcomers, and Ruth in particular, was far from straightforward.

Chrissie was a tall girl who was quite beautiful when she stood up to her full height, but she didn't seem to realise this and spent her time crouching to be the same as the rest of us. That's why she often looked more like the Wicked Witch than a movie star—an impression reinforced by her irritating way of jabbing you with a finger the second before she said something to you. She always wore long skirts rather than jeans, and little glasses pressed too far into her face. She'd been one of the veterans who'd really welcomed us when we'd first arrived in the summer, and I'd at first been really taken by her and looked to her for guidance. But as the weeks had passed, I'd begun to have reservations. There was something odd about the way she was always mentioning the fact that we'd come from Hailsham, like that could explain almost anything to do with us. And she was always asking us questions about Hailsham—about little details, much like my donors do now—and although she tried to make out these were very casual, I could see there was a whole other dimension to her interest. Another thing that got to me was the way she always seemed to want to separate us: taking one of us aside when a few of us were doing something together, or else inviting two of us to join in something while leaving another two stranded—that sort of thing.

You'd hardly ever see Chrissie without her boyfriend, Rodney. He went around with his hair tied back in a ponytail, like a rock musician from the seventies, and talked a lot about things like reincarnation. I actually got to quite like him, but he was pretty much under Chrissie's influence. In any discussion, you knew he'd back up Chrissie's angle, and if Chrissie ever said anything mildly amusing, he'd be chortling and shaking his head like he couldn't believe how funny it was.

Okay, I'm maybe being a bit hard on these two. When I was remembering

them with Tommy not so long ago, he thought they were pretty decent people. But I'm telling you all this now to explain why I was so sceptical about their reported sighting of Ruth's possible. As I say, my first instinct was not to believe it, and to suppose Chrissie was up to something.

The other thing that made me doubtful about all this had to do with the actual description given by Chrissie and Rodney: their picture of a woman working in a nice glass-fronted office. To me, at the time, this seemed just too close a match to what we then knew to be Ruth's "dream future."

I suppose it was mainly us newcomers who talked about "dream futures" that winter, though a number of veterans did too. Some older ones—especially those who'd started their training—would sigh quietly and leave the room when this sort of talk began, but for a long time we didn't even notice this happening. I'm not sure what was going on in our heads during those discussions. We probably knew they couldn't be serious, but then again, I'm sure we didn't regard them as fantasy either. Maybe once Hailsham was behind us, it was possible, just for that half year or so, before all the talk of becoming carers, before the driving lessons, all those other things, it was possible to forget for whole stretches of time who we really were; to forget what the guardians had told us; to forget Miss Lucy's outburst that rainy afternoon at the pavilion, as well as all those theories we'd developed amongst ourselves over the years. It couldn't last, of course, but like I say, just for those few months, we somehow managed to live in this cosy state of suspension in which we could ponder our lives without the usual boundaries. Looking back now, it feels like we spent ages in that steamed-up kitchen after breakfast, or huddled around half-dead fires in the small hours, lost in conversation about our plans for the future.

Mind you, none of us pushed it too far. I don't remember anyone saying they were going to be a movie star or anything like that. The talk was more likely to be about becoming a postman or working on a farm. Quite a few students wanted to be drivers of one sort or other, and often, when the conversation went this way, some veterans would begin comparing particular scenic routes they'd travelled, favourite roadside cafés, difficult roundabouts, that sort of thing. Today, of course, I'd be able to talk the lot of them under the table on those topics. Back then, though, I used to just listen, not saying a thing, drinking in their talk. Sometimes, if it was late, I'd close my eyes and nestle against the arm of a sofa—or of a boy, if it was during one of those brief phases I was officially "with" someone—and drift in and out of sleep, letting images of the roads move through my head.

Anyway, to get back to my point, when this sort of talk was going on, it was often Ruth who took it further than anybody—especially when there were

veterans around. She'd been talking about offices right from the start of the winter, but when it really took on life, when it became her "dream future," was after that morning she and I walked into the village.

It was during a bitterly cold spell, and our boxy gas heaters had been giving us trouble. We'd spend ages trying to get them to light, clicking away with no result, and we'd had to give up on more and more—and along with them, the rooms they were supposed to heat. Keffer refused to deal with it, claiming it was our responsibility, but in the end, when things were getting really cold, he'd handed us an envelope with money and a note of some igniter fuel we had to buy. So Ruth and I had volunteered to walk to the village to get it, and that's why we were going down the lane that frosty morning. We'd reached a spot where the hedges were high on both sides, and the ground was covered in frozen cowpats, when Ruth suddenly stopped a few steps behind me.

It took me a moment to realise, so that by the time I turned back to her she was breathing over her fingers and looking down, engrossed by something beside her feet. I thought maybe it was some poor creature dead in the frost, but when I came up, I saw it was a colour magazine—not one of "Steve's magazines," but one of those bright cheerful things that come free with newspapers. It had fallen open at this glossy double page advert, and though the paper had gone soggy and there was mud at one corner, you could see it well enough. It showed this beautifully modern open-plan office with three or four people who worked in it having some kind of joke with each other. The place looked sparkling and so did the people. Ruth was staring at this picture and, when she noticed me beside her, said: "Now that would be a proper place to work."

Then she got self-conscious—maybe even cross that I'd caught her like that—and set off again much faster than before.

But a few evenings later, when several of us were sitting around a fire in the farmhouse, Ruth began telling us about the sort of office she'd ideally work in, and I immediately recognised it. She went into all the details—the plants, the gleaming equipment, the chairs with their swivels and castors—and it was so vivid everyone let her talk uninterrupted for ages. I was watching her closely, but it never seemed to occur to her I might make the connection—maybe she'd even forgotten herself where the image had come from. She even talked at one point about how the people in her office would all be "dynamic, go-ahead types," and I remembered clearly those same words written in big letters across the top of the advert: "Are you the dynamic, go-ahead type?"—something like that. Of course, I didn't say anything. In fact, listening to her, I even started wondering if maybe it was all feasible: if one day we might all of us move into a place like that and carry on our lives

together.

Chrissie and Rodney were there that night, of course, hanging onto every word. And then for days afterwards, Chrissie kept trying to get Ruth to talk some more about it. I'd pass them sitting together in the corner of a room and Chrissie would be asking: "Are you sure you wouldn't put each other off, working all together in a place like that?" just to get Ruth going on it again.

The point about Chrissie—and this applied to a lot of the veterans—was that for all her slightly patronising manner towards us when we'd first arrived, she was awestruck about our being from Hailsham. It took me a long time to realise this. Take the business about Ruth's office: Chrissie would never herself have talked about working in any office, never mind one like that. But because Ruth was from Hailsham, somehow the whole notion came within the realms of the possible. That's how Chrissie saw it, and I suppose Ruth did say a few things every now and then to encourage the idea that, sure enough, in some mysterious way, a separate set of rules applied to us Hailsham students. I never heard Ruth actually lie to veterans; it was more to do with not denying certain things, implying others. There were occasions when I could have brought the whole thing down over her head. But if Ruth was sometimes embarrassed, catching my eye in the middle of some story or other, she seemed confident I wouldn't give her away. And of course, I didn't.

So that was the background to Chrissie and Rodney's claim to have seen Ruth's "possible," and you can maybe see now why I was wary about it. I wasn't keen on Ruth going with them to Norfolk, though I couldn't really say why. And once it became clear she was completely set on going, I told her I'd come too. At first, she didn't seem too delighted, and there was even a hint that she wouldn't let Tommy come with her either. In the end, though, we all went, the five of us: Chrissie, Rodney, Ruth, Tommy and me.