

**Never Let Me Go**  
**A novel by**  
**Kazuo Ishiguro**

*To Lorna and Naomi*

**England, late 1990s**

**Part One**

**Chapter One**

My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year. That'll make it almost exactly twelve years. Now I know my being a carer so long isn't necessarily because they think I'm fantastic at what I do. There are some really good carers who've been told to stop after just two or three years. And I can think of one carer at least who went on for all of fourteen years despite being a complete waste of space. So I'm not trying to boast. But then I do know for a fact they've been pleased with my work, and by and large, I have too. My donors have always tended to do much better than expected. Their recovery times have been impressive, and hardly any of them have been classified as "agitated," even before fourth donation. Okay, maybe I *am* boasting now. But it means a lot to me, being able to do my work well, especially that bit about my donors staying "calm." I've developed a kind of instinct around donors. I know when to hang around and comfort them, when to

leave them to themselves; when to listen to everything they have to say, and when just to shrug and tell them to snap out of it.

Anyway, I'm not making any big claims for myself. I know carers, working now, who are just as good and don't get half the credit. If you're one of them, I can understand how you might get resentful—about my bedsit, my car, above all, the way I get to pick and choose who I look after. And I'm a Hailsham student—which is enough by itself sometimes to get people's backs up. Kathy H., they say, she gets to pick and choose, and she always chooses her own kind: people from Hailsham, or one of the other privileged estates. No wonder she has a great record. I've heard it said enough, so I'm sure you've heard it plenty more, and maybe there's something in it. But I'm not the first to be allowed to pick and choose, and I doubt if I'll be the last. And anyway, I've done my share of looking after donors brought up in every kind of place. By the time I finish, remember, I'll have done twelve years of this, and it's only for the last six they've let me choose.

And why shouldn't they? Carers aren't machines. You try and do your best for every donor, but in the end, it wears you down. You don't have unlimited patience and energy. So when you get a chance to choose, of course, you choose your own kind. That's natural. There's no way I could have gone on for as long as I have if I'd stopped feeling for my donors every step of the way. And anyway, if I'd never started choosing, how would I ever have got close again to Ruth and Tommy after all those years?

But these days, of course, there are fewer and fewer donors left who I remember, and so in practice, I haven't been choosing that much. As I say, the work gets a lot harder when you don't have that deeper link with the donor, and though I'll miss being a carer, it feels just about right to be finishing at last come the end of the year.

Ruth, incidentally, was only the third or fourth donor I got to choose. She already had a carer assigned to her at the time, and I remember it taking a bit of nerve on my part. But in the end I managed it, and the instant I saw her again, at that recovery centre in Dover, all our differences—while they didn't exactly vanish—seemed not nearly as important as all the other things:

like the fact that we'd grown up together at Hailsham, the fact that we knew and remembered things no one else did. It's ever since then, I suppose, I started seeking out for my donors people from the past, and whenever I could, people from Hailsham.

There have been times over the years when I've tried to leave Hailsham behind, when I've told myself I shouldn't look back so much. But then there came a point when I just stopped resisting. It had to do with this particular donor I had once, in my third year as a carer; it was his reaction when I mentioned I was from Hailsham. He'd just come through his third donation, it hadn't gone well, and he must have known he wasn't going to make it. He could hardly breathe, but he looked towards me and said: "Hailsham. I bet that was a beautiful place." Then the next morning, when I was making conversation to keep his mind off it all, and I asked where *he'd* grown up, he mentioned some place in Dorset and his face beneath the blotches went into a completely new kind of grimace. And I realised then how desperately he didn't want reminded. Instead, he wanted to hear about Hailsham.

So over the next five or six days, I told him whatever he wanted to know, and he'd lie there, all hooked up, a gentle smile breaking through. He'd ask me about the big things and the little things. About our guardians, about how we each had our own collection chests under our beds, the football, the rounders, the little path that took you all round the outside of the main house, round all its nooks and crannies, the duck pond, the food, the view from the Art Room over the fields on a foggy morning. Sometimes he'd make me say things over and over; things I'd told him only the day before, he'd ask about like I'd never told him. "Did you have a sports pavilion?" "Which guardian was your special favourite?" At first I thought this was just the drugs, but then I realised his mind was clear enough. What he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to *remember* Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood. He knew he was close to completing and so that's what he was doing: getting me to describe things to him, so they'd really sink in, so that maybe during those sleepless nights, with the drugs and the pain and the exhaustion, the line would blur between what were my

memories and what were his. That was when I first understood, really understood, just how lucky we'd been—Tommy, Ruth, me, all the rest of us.



Driving around the country now, I still see things that will remind me of Hailsham. I might pass the corner of a misty field, or see part of a large house in the distance as I come down the side of a valley, even a particular arrangement of poplar trees up on a hillside, and I'll think: "Maybe that's it! I've found it! This actually *is* ailsham!" Then I see it's impossible and I go on driving, my thoughts drifting on elsewhere. In particular, there are those pavilions. I spot them all over the country, standing on the far side of playing fields, little white prefab buildings with a row of windows unnaturally high up, tucked almost under the eaves. I think they built a whole lot like that in the fifties and sixties, which is probably when ours was put up. If I drive past one I keep looking over to it for as long as possible, and one day I'll crash the car like that, but I keep doing it. Not long ago I was driving through an empty stretch of Worcestershire and saw one beside a cricket ground so like ours at Hailsham I actually turned the car and went back for a second look.

We loved our sports pavilion, maybe because it reminded us of those sweet little cottages people always had in picture books when we were young. I can remember us back in the Juniors, pleading with guardians to hold the next lesson in the pavilion instead of the usual room. Then by the time we were in Senior 2—when we were twelve, going on thirteen—the pavilion had become the place to hide out with your best friends when you wanted to get away from the rest of Hailsham.

The pavilion was big enough to take two separate groups without them bothering each other—in the summer, a third group could hang about out on the veranda. But ideally you and your friends wanted the place just to yourselves, so there was often jockeying and arguing. The guardians were always telling us to be civilised about it, but in practice, you needed to have some strong

personalities in your group to stand a chance of getting the pavilion during a break or free period. I wasn't exactly the wilting type myself, but I suppose it was really because of Ruth we got in there as often as we did.

Usually we just spread ourselves around the chairs and benches—there'd be five of us, six if Jenny B. came along—and had a good gossip. There was a kind of conversation that could only happen when you were hidden away in the pavilion; we might discuss something that was worrying us, or we might end up screaming with laughter, or in a furious row. Mostly, it was a way to unwind for a while with your closest friends.

On the particular afternoon I'm now thinking of, we were standing up on stools and benches, crowding around the high windows. That gave us a clear view of the North Playing Field where about a dozen boys from our year and Senior 3 had gathered to play football. There was bright sunshine, but it must have been raining earlier that day because I can remember how the sun was glinting on the muddy surface of the grass.

Someone said we shouldn't be so obvious about watching, but we hardly moved back at all. Then Ruth said: "He doesn't suspect a thing. Look at him. He really doesn't suspect a thing."

When she said this, I looked at her and searched for signs of disapproval about what the boys were going to do to Tommy. But the next second Ruth gave a little laugh and said: "The idiot!"

And I realised that for Ruth and the others, whatever the boys chose to do was pretty remote from us; whether we approved or not didn't come into it. We were gathered around the windows at that moment not because we relished the prospect of seeing Tommy get humiliated yet again, but just because we'd heard about this latest plot and were vaguely curious to watch it unfold. In those days, I don't think what the boys did amongst themselves went much deeper than that. For Ruth, for the others, it was that detached, and the chances are that's how it was for me too.

Or maybe I'm remembering it wrong. Maybe even then, when I saw Tommy rushing about that field, undisguised delight on his face to be accepted back in the fold again, about to play the game at which he so excelled, maybe I did feel a little stab of

pain. What I do remember is that I noticed Tommy was wearing the light blue polo shirt he'd got in the Sales the previous month—the one he was so proud of. I remember thinking: "He's really stupid, playing football in that. It'll get ruined, then how's he going to feel?" Out loud, I said, to no one in particular: "Tommy's got his shirt on. His favourite polo shirt."

I don't think anyone heard me, because they were all laughing at Laura—the big clown in our group—mimicking one after the other the expressions that appeared on Tommy's face as he ran, waved, called, tackled. The other boys were all moving around the field in that deliberately languorous way they have when they're warming up, but Tommy, in his excitement, seemed already to be going full pelt. I said, louder this time: "He's going to be so sick if he ruins that shirt." This time Ruth heard me, but she must have thought I'd meant it as some kind of joke, because she laughed half-heartedly, then made some quip of her own.

Then the boys had stopped kicking the ball about, and were standing in a pack in the mud, their chests gently rising and falling as they waited for the team picking to start. The two captains who emerged were from Senior 3, though everyone knew Tommy was a better player than any of that year. They tossed for first pick, then the one who'd won stared at the group.

"Look at him," someone behind me said. "He's completely convinced he's going to be first pick. Just look at him!"

There was something comical about Tommy at that moment, something that made you think, well, yes, if he's going to be that daft, he deserves what's coming. The other boys were all pretending to ignore the picking process, pretending they didn't care where they came in the order. Some were talking quietly to each other, some re-tying their laces, others just staring down at their feet as they trammelled the mud. But Tommy was looking eagerly at the Senior 3 boy, as though his name had already been called.

Laura kept up her performance all through the team-picking, doing all the different expressions that went across Tommy's face: the bright eager one at the start; the puzzled concern when four picks had gone by and he still hadn't been chosen; the hurt

and panic as it began to dawn on him what was really going on. I didn't keep glancing round at Laura, though, because I was watching Tommy; I only knew what she was doing because the others kept laughing and egging her on. Then when Tommy was left standing alone, and the boys all began sniggering, I heard Ruth say:

"It's coming. Hold it. Seven seconds. Seven, six, five..."

She never got there. Tommy burst into thunderous bellowing, and the boys, now laughing openly, started to run off towards the South Playing Field. Tommy took a few strides after them—it was hard to say whether his instinct was to give angry chase or if he was panicked at being left behind. In any case he soon stopped and stood there, glaring after them, his face scarlet. Then he began to scream and shout, a nonsensical jumble of swear words and insults.

We'd all seen plenty of Tommy's tantrums by then, so we came down off our stools and spread ourselves around the room. We tried to start up a conversation about something else, but there was Tommy going on and on in the background, and although at first we just rolled our eyes and tried to ignore it, in the end—probably a full ten minutes after we'd first moved away—we were back up at the windows again.

The other boys were now completely out of view, and Tommy was no longer trying to direct his comments in any particular direction. He was just raving, flinging his limbs about, at the sky, at the wind, at the nearest fence post. Laura said he was maybe "rehearsing his Shakespeare." Someone else pointed out how each time he screamed something he'd raise one foot off the ground, pointing it outwards, "like a dog doing a pee." Actually, I'd noticed the same foot movement myself, but what had struck me was that each time he stamped the foot back down again, flecks of mud flew up around his shins. I thought again about his precious shirt, but he was too far away for me to see if he'd got much mud on it.

"I suppose it is a bit cruel," Ruth said, "the way they always work him up like that. But it's his own fault. If he learnt to keep his cool, they'd leave him alone."

"They'd still keep on at him," Hannah said. "Graham K.'s

temper's just as bad, but that only makes them all the more careful with him. The reason they go for Tommy's because he's a layabout."

Then everyone was talking at once, about how Tommy never even tried to be creative, about how he hadn't even put anything in for the Spring Exchange. I suppose the truth was, by that stage, each of us was secretly wishing a guardian would come from the house and take him away. And although we hadn't had any part in this latest plan to rile Tommy, we *had* aken out ringside seats, and we were starting to feel guilty. But there was no sign of a guardian, so we just kept swapping reasons why Tommy deserved everything he got. Then when Ruth looked at her watch and said even though we still had time, we should get back to the main house, nobody argued.

Tommy was still going strong as we came out of the pavilion. The house was over to our left, and since Tommy was standing in the field straight ahead of us, there was no need to go anywhere near him. In any case, he was facing the other way and didn't seem to register us at all. All the same, as my friends set off along the edge of the field, I started to drift over towards him. I knew this would puzzle the others, but I kept going—even when I heard Ruth's urgent whisper to me to come back.

I suppose Tommy wasn't used to being disturbed during his rages, because his first response when I came up to him was to stare at me for a second, then carry on as before. It *was* ike he was doing Shakespeare and I'd come up onto the stage in the middle of his performance. Even when I said: "Tommy, your nice shirt. You'll get it all messed up," there was no sign of him having heard me.

So I reached forward and put a hand on his arm. Afterwards, the others thought he'd meant to do it, but I was pretty sure it was unintentional. His arms were still flailing about, and he wasn't to know I was about to put out my hand. Anyway, as he threw up his arm, he knocked my hand aside and hit the side of my face. It didn't hurt at all, but I let out a gasp, and so did most of the girls behind me.

That's when at last Tommy seemed to become aware of me, of the others, of himself, of the fact that he was there in that



field, behaving the way he had been, and stared at me a bit stupidly.

"Tommy," I said, quite sternly. "There's mud all over your shirt."

"So what?" he mumbled. But even as he said this, he looked down and noticed the brown specks, and only just stopped himself crying out in alarm. Then I saw the surprise register on his face that I should know about his feelings for the polo shirt.

"It's nothing to worry about," I said, before the silence got humiliating for him. "It'll come off. If you can't get it off yourself, just take it to Miss Jody."

He went on examining his shirt, then said grumpily: "It's nothing to do with you anyway."

He seemed to regret immediately this last remark and looked at me sheepishly, as though expecting me to say something comforting back to him. But I'd had enough of him by now, particularly with the girls watching—and for all I knew, any number of others from the windows of the main house. So I turned away with a shrug and rejoined my friends.

Ruth put an arm around my shoulders as we walked away. "At least you got him to pipe down," she said. "Are you okay? Mad animal."

## **Chapter Two**

This was all a long time ago so I might have some of it wrong; but my memory of it is that my approaching Tommy that afternoon was part of a phase I was going through around that time—something to do with compulsively setting myself challenges—and I'd more or less forgotten all about it when Tommy stopped me a few days later.

I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham we had to have some form of medical almost every week—usually up in Room 18 at the very top of the house—with stern Nurse Trisha, or Crow Face, as we called her. That sunny morning a crowd of us was going up the central staircase to be examined by her, while another lot she'd just finished with was on its way

down. So the stairwell was filled with echoing noise, and I was climbing the steps head down, just following the heels of the person in front, when a voice near me went: "Kath!"

Tommy, who was in the stream coming down, had stopped dead on the stairs with a big open smile that immediately irritated me. A few years earlier maybe, if we ran into someone we were pleased to see, we'd put on that sort of look. But we were thirteen by then, and this was a boy running into a girl in a really public situation. I felt like saying: "Tommy, why don't you grow up?" But I stopped myself, and said instead: "Tommy, you're holding everyone up. And so am I."

He glanced upwards and sure enough the flight above was already grinding to a halt. For a second he looked panicked, then he squeezed himself right into the wall next to me, so it was just about possible for people to push past. Then he said:

"Kath, I've been looking all over for you. I meant to say sorry. I mean, I'm really, really sorry. I honestly didn't mean to hit you the other day. I wouldn't dream of hitting a girl, and even if I did, I'd never want to hit *you*. I'm really, really sorry."

"It's okay. An accident, that's all." I gave him a nod and made to move away. But Tommy said brightly:

"The shirt's all right now. It all washed out."

"That's good."

"It didn't hurt, did it? When I hit you?"

"Sure. Fractured skull. Concussion, the lot. Even Crow Face might notice it. That's if I ever get up there."

"But seriously, Kath. No hard feelings, right? I'm awfully sorry. I am, honestly."

At last I gave him a smile and said with no irony: "Look, Tommy, it was an accident and it's now one hundred percent forgotten. I don't hold it against you one tiny bit."

He still looked unsure, but now some older students were pushing behind him, telling him to move. He gave me a quick smile and patted my shoulder, like he might do to a younger boy, and pushed his way into the flow. Then, as I began to climb, I heard him shout from below: "See you, Kath!"

I'd found the whole thing mildly embarrassing, but it didn't lead to any teasing or gossip; and I must admit, if it hadn't been

for that encounter on the stairs, I probably wouldn't have taken the interest I did in Tommy's problems over the next several weeks.

I saw a few of the incidents myself. But mostly I heard about them, and when I did, I quizzed people until I'd got a more or less full account. There were more temper tantrums, like the time Tommy was supposed to have heaved over two desks in Room 14, spilling all the contents on the floor, while the rest of the class, having escaped onto the landing, barricaded the door to stop him coming out. There was the time Mr. Christopher had had to pin back his arms to stop him attacking Reggie D. during football practice. Everyone could see, too, when the Senior 2 boys went on their fields run, Tommy was the only one without a running partner. He was a good runner, and would quickly open up ten, fifteen yards between him and the rest, maybe thinking this would disguise the fact that no one wanted to run with him. Then there were rumours almost every day of pranks that had been played on him. A lot of these were the usual stuff—weird things in his bed, a worm in his cereal—but some of it sounded pointlessly nasty: like the time someone cleaned a toilet with his toothbrush so it was waiting for him with shit all over the bristles. His size and strength—and I suppose that temper—meant no one tried actual physical bullying, but from what I remember, for a couple of months at least, these incidents kept coming. I thought sooner or later someone would start saying it had gone too far, but it just kept on, and no one said anything.

I tried to bring it up once myself, in the dorm after lights-out. In the Seniors, we were down to six per dorm, so it was just our little group, and we often had our most intimate conversations lying in the dark before we fell asleep. You could talk about things there you wouldn't dream of talking about any other place, not even in the pavilion. So one night I brought up Tommy. I didn't say much; I just summed up what had been happening to him and said it wasn't really very fair. When I'd finished, there was a funny sort of silence hanging in the dark, and I realised everyone was waiting for Ruth's response—which was usually what happened whenever something a bit awkward came up. I kept waiting, then I heard a sigh from Ruth's side of

the room, and she said:

"You've got a point, Kathy. It's not nice. But if he wants it to stop, he's got to change his own attitude. He didn't have a thing for the Spring Exchange. And has he got anything for next month? I bet he hasn't."

I should explain a bit here about the Exchanges we had at Hailsham. Four times a year—spring, summer, autumn, winter—we had a kind of big exhibition-cum-sale of all the things we'd been creating in the three months since the last Exchange. Paintings, drawings, pottery; all sorts of "sculptures" made from whatever was the craze of the day—bashed-up cans, maybe, or bottle tops stuck onto cardboard. For each thing you put in, you were paid in Exchange Tokens—the guardians decided how many your particular masterpiece merited—and then on the day of the Exchange you went along with your tokens and "bought" the stuff you liked. The rule was you could only buy work done by students in your own year, but that still gave us plenty to choose from, since most of us could get pretty prolific over a three-month period.

Looking back now, I can see why the Exchanges became so important to us. For a start, they were our only means, aside from the Sales—the Sales were something else, which I'll come to later—of building up a collection of personal possessions. If, say, you wanted to decorate the walls around your bed, or wanted something to carry around in your bag and place on your desk from room to room, then you could find it at the Exchange. I can see now, too, how the Exchanges had a more subtle effect on us all. If you think about it, being dependent on each other to produce the stuff that might become your private treasures—that's bound to do things to your relationships. The Tommy business was typical. A lot of the time, how you were regarded at Hailsham, how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at "creating."

Ruth and I often found ourselves remembering these things a few years ago, when I was caring for her down at the recovery centre in Dover.

"It's all part of what made Hailsham so special," she said once. "The way we were encouraged to value each other's work."

"True," I said. "But sometimes, when I think about the Ex-changes now, a lot of it seems a bit odd. The poetry, for instance. I remember we were allowed to hand in poems, instead of a drawing or a painting. And the strange thing was, we all thought that was fine, we thought that made sense."

"Why shouldn't it? Poetry's important."

"But we're talking about nine-year-old stuff, funny little lines, all misspelt, in exercise books. We'd spend our precious tokens on an exercise book full of that stuff rather than on something really nice for around our beds. If we were so keen on a person's poetry, why didn't we just borrow it and copy it down ourselves any old afternoon? But you remember how it was. An Exchange would come along and we'd be standing there torn between Susie K.'s poems and those giraffes Jackie used to make."

"Jackie's giraffes," Ruth said with a laugh. "They were so beautiful. I used to have one."

We were having this conversation on a fine summer evening, sitting out on the little balcony of her recovery room. It was a few months after her first donation, and now she was over the worst of it, I'd always time my evening visits so that we'd be able to spend a half hour or so out there, watching the sun go down over the rooftops. You could see lots of aerals and satellite dishes, and sometimes, right over in the distance, a glistening line that was the sea. I'd bring mineral water and biscuits, and we'd sit there talking about anything that came into our heads. The centre Ruth was in that time, it's one of my favourites, and I wouldn't mind at all if that's where I ended up. The recovery rooms are small, but they're well-designed and comfortable. Everything—the walls, the floor—has been done in gleaming white tiles, which the centre keeps so clean when you first go in it's almost like entering a hall of mirrors. Of course, you don't exactly see yourself reflected back loads of times, but you almost think you do. When you lift an arm, or when someone sits up in bed, you can feel this pale, shadowy movement all around you in the tiles. Anyway, Ruth's room at that centre, it also had these big glass sliding panels, so she could easily see the outside from her bed. Even with her head on the pillow she'd see a big lot of

sky, and if it was warm enough, she could get all the fresh air she wanted by stepping out onto the balcony. I loved visiting her there, loved those meandering talks we had, through the summer to the early autumn, sitting on that balcony together, talking about Hailsham, the Cottages, whatever else drifted into our thoughts.

"What I'm saying," I went on, "is that when we were that age, when we were eleven, say, we really weren't interested in each other's poems at all. But remember, someone like Christy? Christy had this great reputation for poetry, and we all looked up to her for it. Even you, Ruth, you didn't dare boss Christy around. All because we thought she was great at poetry. But we didn't know a thing about poetry. We didn't care about it. It's strange."

But Ruth didn't get my point—or maybe she was deliberately avoiding it. Maybe she was determined to remember us all as more sophisticated than we were. Or maybe she could sense where my talk was leading, and didn't want us to go that way. Anyway, she let out a long sigh and said:

"We all thought Christy's poems were so good. But I wonder how they'd look to us now. I wish we had some here, I'd love to see what we'd think." Then she laughed and said: "I have *still* of some poems by Peter B. But that was much later, when we were in Senior 4. I must have fancied him. I can't think why else I'd have bought his poems. They're just hysterically daft. Takes himself so seriously. But Christy, she was good, I remember she was. It's funny, she went right off poems when she started her painting. And she was nowhere near as good at that."

But let me get back to Tommy. What Ruth said that time in our dorm after lights-out, about how Tommy had brought all his problems on himself, probably summed up what most people at Hailsham thought at that time. But it was when she said what she did that it occurred to me, as I lay there, that this whole notion of his deliberately not trying was one that had been doing the rounds from as far back as the Juniors. And it came home to me, with a kind of chill, that Tommy had been going through what he'd been going through not just for weeks or months, but for years.

Tommy and I talked about all this not so long ago, and his

own account of how his troubles began confirmed what I was thinking that night. According to him, it had all started one afternoon in one of Miss Geraldine's art classes. Until that day, Tommy told me, he'd always quite enjoyed painting. But then that day in Miss Geraldine's class, Tommy had done this particular watercolour—of an elephant standing in some tall grass—and that was what started it all off. He'd done it, he claimed, as a kind of joke. I quizzed him a lot on this point and I suspect the truth was that it was like a lot of things at that age: you don't have any clear reason, you just do it. You do it because you think it might get a laugh, or because you want to see if it'll cause a stir. And when you're asked to explain it afterwards, it doesn't seem to make any sense. We've all done things like that. Tommy didn't quite put it this way, but I'm sure that's how it happened.

Anyway, he did his elephant, which was exactly the sort of picture a kid three years younger might have done. It took him no more than twenty minutes and it got a laugh, sure enough, though not quite the sort he'd expected. Even so, it might not have led to anything—and this is a big irony, I suppose—if Miss Geraldine hadn't been taking the class that day.

Miss Geraldine was everyone's favourite guardian when we were that age. She was gentle, soft-spoken, and always comforted you when you needed it, even when you'd done something bad, or been told off by another guardian. If she ever had to tell you off herself, then for days afterwards she'd give you lots of extra attention, like she owed you something. It was unlucky for Tommy that it was Miss Geraldine taking art that day and not, say, Mr. Robert or Miss Emily herself—the head guardian—who often took art. Had it been either of those two, Tommy would have got a bit of a telling off, he could have done his smirk, and the worst the others would have thought was that it was a feeble joke. He might even have had some students think him a right clown. But Miss Geraldine being Miss Geraldine, it didn't go that way. Instead, she did her best to look at the picture with kindness and understanding. And probably guessing Tommy was in danger of getting stick from the others, she went too far the other way, actually finding things to praise, pointing

them out to the class. That was how the resentment started.

"After we left the room," Tommy remembered, "that's when I first heard them talking. And they didn't care I could hear."

My guess is that from some time before he did that elephant, Tommy had had the feeling he wasn't keeping up—that his painting in particular was like that of students much younger than him—and he'd been covering up the best he could by doing deliberately childish pictures. But after the elephant painting, the whole thing had been brought into the open, and now everyone was watching to see what he did next. It seems he did make an effort for a while, but he'd no sooner have started on something, there'd be sneers and giggles all around him. In fact, the harder he tried, the more laughable his efforts turned out. So before long Tommy had gone back to his original defence, producing work that seemed deliberately childish, work that said he couldn't care less. From there, the thing had got deeper and deeper.

For a while he'd only had to suffer during art lessons—though that was often enough, because we did a lot of art in the Juniors. But then it grew bigger. He got left out of games, boys refused to sit next to him at dinner, or pretended not to hear if he said anything in his dorm after lights-out. At first it wasn't so relentless. Months could go by without incident, he'd think the whole thing was behind him, then something he did—or one of his enemies, like Arthur H.—would get it all going again.

I'm not sure when the big temper tantrums started. My own memory of it is that Tommy was always known for his temper, even in the Infants, but he claimed to me they only began after the teasing got bad. Anyway, it was those temper tantrums that really got people going, escalating everything, and around the time I'm talking about—the summer of our Senior 2, when we were thirteen—that was when the persecution reached its peak.

Then it all stopped, not overnight, but rapidly enough. I was, as I say, watching the situation closely around then, so I saw the signs before most of the others. It started with a period—it might have been a month, maybe longer—when the pranks went on pretty steadily, but Tommy failed to lose his temper. Sometimes I could see he was close to it, but he somehow controlled himself; other times, he'd quietly shrug, or react like he hadn't noticed a



thing. At first these responses caused disappointment; maybe people were resentful, even, like he'd let them down. Then gradually, people got bored and the pranks became more half-hearted, until one day it struck me there hadn't been any for over a week.

This wouldn't necessarily have been so significant by itself, but I'd spotted other changes. Little things, like Alexander J. and Peter N. walking across the courtyard with him towards the fields, the three of them chatting quite naturally; a subtle but clear difference in people's voices when his name got mentioned. Then once, towards the end of an afternoon break, a group of us were sitting on the grass quite close to the South Playing Field where the boys, as usual, were playing their football. I was joining in our conversation, but keeping an eye on Tommy, who I noticed was right at the heart of the game. At one point he got tripped, and picking himself up, placed the ball on the ground to take the free kick himself. As the boys spread out in anticipation, I saw Arthur H.—one of his biggest tormentors—a few yards behind Tommy's back, begin mimicking him, doing a daft version of the way Tommy was standing over the ball, hands on hips. I watched carefully, but none of the others took up Arthur's cue. They must all have seen, because all eyes were looking towards Tommy, waiting for his kick, and Arthur was right behind him—but no one was interested. Tommy floated the ball across the grass, the game went on, and Arthur H. didn't try anything else.

I was pleased about all these developments, but also mystified. There'd been no real change in Tommy's work—his reputation for "creativity" was as low as ever. I could see that an end to the tantrums was a big help, but what seemed to be the key factor was harder to put your finger on. There was something about Tommy himself—the way he carried himself, the way he looked people in the face and talked in his open, good-natured way—that was different from before, and which had in turn changed the attitudes of those around him. But what had brought all this on wasn't clear.

I was mystified, and decided to probe him a bit the next time we could talk in private. The chance came along before long, when I was lining up for lunch and spotted him a few places

ahead in the queue.

I suppose this might sound odd, but at Hailsham, the lunch queue was one of the better places to have a private talk. It was something to do with the acoustics in the Great Hall; all the hubbub and the high ceilings meant that so long as you lowered your voices, stood quite close, and made sure your neighbours were deep in their own chat, you had a fair chance of not being overheard. In any case, we weren't exactly spoiled for choice.

"Quiet" places were often the worst, because there was always someone likely to be passing within earshot. And as soon as you looked like you were trying to sneak off for a secret talk, the whole place seemed to sense it within minutes, and you'd have no chance.

So when I saw Tommy a few places ahead of me, I waved him over—the rule being that though you couldn't jump the queue going forwards it was fine to go back. He came over with a delighted smile, and we stood together for a moment without saying much—not out of awkwardness, but because we were waiting for any interest aroused by Tommy's moving back to fade. Then I said to him:

"You seem much happier these days, Tommy. Things seem to be going much better for you."

"You notice everything, don't you, Kath?" He said this completely without sarcasm. "Yeah, everything's all right. I'm getting on all right."

"So what's happened? Did you find God or something?"

"God?" Tommy was lost for a second. Then he laughed and said: "Oh, I see. You're talking about me not... getting so angry."

"Not just that, Tommy. You've turned things around for yourself. I've been watching. So that's why I was asking."

Tommy shrugged. "I've grown up a bit, I suppose. And maybe everyone else has too. Can't keep on with the same stuff all the time. Gets boring."

I said nothing, but just kept looking right at him, until he gave another little laugh and said: "Kath, you're so nosy. Okay, I suppose there *is* something. Something that happened. If you want, I'll tell you."

"Well, go on then."

"I'll tell you, Kath, but you mustn't spread it, all right? A couple of months back, I had this talk with Miss Lucy. And I felt much better afterwards. It's hard to explain. But she said something, and it all felt much better."

"So what did she say?"

"Well... The thing is, it might sound strange. It did to me at first. What she said was that if I didn't want to be creative, if I really didn't feel like it, that was perfectly all right. Nothing wrong with it, she said."

"That's what she told you?"

Tommy nodded, but I was already turning away.

"That's just rubbish, Tommy. If you're going to play stupid games, I can't be bothered."

I was genuinely angry, because I thought he was lying to me, just when I deserved to be taken into his confidence. Spotting a girl I knew a few places back, I went over to her, leaving Tommy standing. I could see he was bewildered and crestfallen, but after the months I'd spent worrying about him, I felt betrayed, and didn't care how he felt. I chatted with my friend—I think it was Matilda—as cheerfully as possible, and hardly looked his way for the rest of the time we were in the queue.

But as I was carrying my plate to the tables, Tommy came up behind me and said quickly:

"Kath, I wasn't trying to pull your leg, if that's what you think. It's what happened. I'll tell you about it if you give me half a chance."

"Don't talk rubbish, Tommy."

"Kath, I'll tell you about it. I'll be down at the pond after lunch. If you come down there, I'll tell you."

I gave him a reproachful look and walked off without responding, but already, I suppose, I'd begun to entertain the possibility that he wasn't, after all, making it up about Miss Lucy. And by the time I sat down with my friends, I was trying to figure out how I could sneak off afterwards down to the pond without getting everyone curious.

## Chapter Three

The pond lay to the south of the house. To get there you went out the back entrance, and down the narrow twisting path, pushing past the overgrown bracken that, in the early autumn, would still be blocking your way. Or if there were no guardians around, you could take a short cut through the rhubarb patch. Anyway, once you came out to the pond, you'd find a tranquil atmosphere waiting, with ducks and bulrushes and pond-weed. It wasn't, though, a good place for a discreet conversation—not nearly as good as the lunch queue. For a start you could be clearly seen from the house. And the way the sound travelled across the water was hard to predict; if people wanted to eavesdrop, it was the easiest thing to walk down the outer path and crouch in the bushes on the other side of the pond. But since it had been me that had cut him off in the lunch queue, I supposed I had to make the best of it. It was well into October by then, but the sun was out that day and I decided I could just about make out I'd gone strolling aimlessly down there and happened to come across Tommy.

Maybe because I was keen to keep up this impression—though I'd no idea if anyone was actually watching—I didn't try and sit down when I eventually found him seated on a large flat rock not far from the water's edge. It must have been a Friday or a weekend, because I remember we had on our own clothes. I don't remember exactly what Tommy was wearing—probably one of the raggy football shirts he wore even when the weather was chilly—but I definitely had on the maroon track suit top that zipped up the front, which I'd got at a Sale in Senior 1. I walked round him and stood with my back to the water, facing the house, so that I'd see if people started gathering at the windows. Then for a few minutes we talked about nothing in particular, just like the lunch-queue business hadn't happened. I'm not sure if it was for Tommy's benefit, or for any onlookers', but I'd kept my posture looking very provisional, and at one point made a move to carry on with my stroll. I saw a kind of panic cross Tommy's face then, and I immediately felt sorry to have teased him, even though I hadn't