

Chapter 2: Two

The chapter begins with Kathy recalling an encounter with Tommy at Hailsham, a boarding school, where she approaches him as part of a self-imposed challenge. Their interaction occurs during a medical examination day, and Tommy apologizes for accidentally hitting her earlier. Despite Kathy's initial irritation, their brief conversation on the stairs marks the start of her growing interest in Tommy's struggles. The scene highlights the social dynamics among the students, particularly the pressure to conform to expected behaviors as they grow older.

Tommy's subsequent difficulties at Hailsham become a focal point. He faces frequent bullying and isolation, such as being excluded from running partners or having pranks played on him, some of which are cruel. Though physically strong, Tommy's temper and social awkwardness make him a target. Kathy observes these incidents but notes that no one intervenes, suggesting a collective indifference to his plight. This sets the stage for her deeper involvement in Tommy's life and the underlying social hierarchies at the school.

The chapter then delves into the importance of the Exchanges, a quarterly event where students trade artwork for tokens. These events shape social standing, as creativity is highly valued. Ruth, Kathy's friend, implies that Tommy's exclusion stems from his lack of participation in the Exchanges. The system reinforces peer validation, where artistic output determines respect and belonging. Kathy reflects on how this culture influenced their relationships, revealing the subtle pressures of conformity and the emotional weight placed on creative expression.

In the final section, Kathy and Ruth later reminisce about the Exchanges, acknowledging their significance in shaping Hailsham's unique environment. They discuss how even trivial creations, like poorly spelled poems, were treasured, highlighting the school's emphasis on art and mutual appreciation. However, Kathy

questions the logic behind valuing such items, hinting at deeper ambiguities in their upbringing. This reflection underscores the chapter's exploration of memory, social norms, and the lasting impact of Hailsham's culture on its students.

