

Chapter 4: Four

The narrator, Kathy, reflects on her impending transition from being a carer, a role she has held for years, and her desire to revisit memories of her time at Hailsham, particularly those involving her friends Tommy and Ruth. She acknowledges how events at Hailsham profoundly shaped their later lives, including their curiosity about Madame, a mysterious figure who collected students' artwork. This curiosity, initially playful, grew into a significant preoccupation, though the students avoided probing too deeply, sensing the topic was fraught with unspoken complexities. The mention of Madame became rare, yet the idea of the "Gallery," where their art might be displayed, lingered in their minds.

The chapter delves into the "tokens controversy," a pivotal moment during their time at Hailsham when students began questioning the fairness of Madame taking their artwork without compensation. As the children grew older, they became more possessive of their creations, valuing them for their exchange value in tokens, the school's currency. The controversy erupted when students, led by Roy J., demanded tokens for artworks taken by Madame, sparking debates among both students and guardians. The guardians eventually compromised, offering minimal tokens, but the decision satisfied no one, highlighting the tension between honor and ownership.

During this period, Polly T. boldly asked Miss Lucy why Madame collected their artwork, breaking an unspoken taboo. Miss Lucy's cryptic response—that there was a "very important reason" beyond their current understanding—left the students both intrigued and unsettled. This moment, along with other hints, planted seeds of doubt and curiosity in Kathy's mind, which resurfaced years later during a conversation with Tommy. The chapter underscores how these early experiences at Hailsham were layered with unanswered questions, foreshadowing deeper revelations about their lives and purpose.

The chapter also touches on the students' "collections," personal treasures stored in wooden chests under their beds, which symbolized their growing attachment to material possessions. This shift in attitude contrasted with their earlier reverence for having artwork selected by Madame, reflecting their maturation and increasing awareness of value and loss. The tokens controversy and Miss Lucy's enigmatic words serve as early indicators of the larger mysteries surrounding Hailsham, setting the stage for the novel's exploration of identity, memory, and destiny.

