

Chapter 16: Sixteen

After returning from their Norfolk trip, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy avoid discussing it, leaving others to speculate. Ruth remains silent, possibly due to embarrassment or a desire to maintain mystery, and the others follow her lead. This secrecy allows Kathy to hide the fact that Tommy bought her a Judy Bridgewater tape, though she occasionally wishes to share it with Ruth. The tape becomes a guilty secret, and its eventual discovery by Ruth happens at an unfortunate time, adding to the tension between them.

As spring arrives, more veterans leave the Cottages to begin training, creating a mix of envy and unease among those who remain. The departures of Alice F. and Gordon C., both from Hailsham, mark a shift in the atmosphere, making the reality of their futures more palpable. Rumors about deferrals for couples in love resurface, but the group who went to Norfolk, including Chrissie and Rodney, now avoid such discussions. The "Norfolk effect" lingers, even affecting Kathy and Tommy's conversations about his Gallery theory.

One exception occurs when Tommy shows Kathy his intricate drawings of imaginary animals in the dilapidated goosehouse. The drawings, far more detailed than Kathy expected, reveal Tommy's creativity and vulnerability. Though she struggles to offer wholehearted praise, she is drawn to the creatures, sensing Tommy's underlying worries about their impracticality. The mention of Madame, a figure from Hailsham, creates an awkward moment, hinting at unresolved tensions about their past and future.

Tommy contemplates whether to keep his artwork private or share it more openly, as other veterans do with their creative pursuits. Kathy's hesitation to praise him reflects her uncertainty about the drawings' significance and her concern for Tommy's emotional state. The chapter underscores the growing unease among the characters

as they grapple with their identities, relationships, and the looming inevitability of their roles in society.

