

Chapter 20

The protagonist returns to his Oxford home after a summer abroad, finding it neglected and suffocating, with an atmosphere of decay. The house, filled with unopened mail and dust, mirrors his inner desolation. His travels through Europe, meticulously recorded in his diary, were devoid of joy or discovery, serving only as an escape from unresolved turmoil. Despite visiting iconic cities and landmarks, he felt no connection, realizing too late that his emotional burdens had followed him.

In Ravello, he sought solace in a quiet hotel, but peace remained elusive. His most poignant memory is of Rome, where he witnessed desperate women praying before Michelangelo's Pietà, their collective anguish a stark reflection of universal suffering. This image haunts him, underscoring his own isolation. Back in Oxford, the city feels unfamiliar and unwelcoming, its inhabitants distant and the atmosphere tense. His colleagues' indifference and Helena's cold dismissal deepen his sense of alienation.

Helena reveals unsettling rumors about dissidents opposing the government's "Quietus" policy, including plans to free convicts and challenge the Warden's rule. Theo dismisses these claims as absurd, but the conversation highlights the growing unrest beneath Oxford's stagnant surface. Helena's abrupt end to their call underscores her detachment, leaving Theo adrift in his loneliness. The chapter paints a bleak picture of a society fraying at the edges, with Theo caught in its unraveling.

A recurring nightmare intensifies Theo's unease, now featuring Luke accusing him of Julian's death. The dream's vivid horror leaves him paralyzed with guilt and fear, mirroring his waking helplessness. Despite his attempts to resume normalcy, he feels watched and isolated, though no overt surveillance appears. His decision to run to Binsey Church suggests a futile search for answers or redemption, hinting at deeper conflicts to come. The chapter closes with Theo trapped in a cycle of dread and inertia, his personal turmoil reflecting the broader decay of his world.