

Born to donate

We were fifteen by then, already into our last year at Hailsham. Miss Lucy was the only guardian present. I suddenly realised things had gone quiet around us, and that Miss Lucy was speaking.

“No, no, I’m sorry, I’m going to have to interrupt you,” she was saying, and I could see she was talking to two boys sitting on the benches immediately in front of her. Her voice wasn’t exactly strange, but she was speaking very loudly, in the sort of voice she’d use to announce something to the lot of us, and that was why we’d all gone quiet. “No, Peter, I’m going to have to stop you. I can’t listen to you any more and keep silent.”

Then she raised her gaze to include the rest of us and took a deep breath. “All right, you can hear this, it’s for all of you. It’s time someone spelt it out. Boys, you must forgive me for listening. But you were right behind me, so I couldn’t help it. Peter, why don’t you tell the others what you were saying to Gordon just now?”

Peter J. looked bewildered and I could see him getting ready his injured innocence face. But then Miss Lucy said again, this time much more gently:

“Peter, go on. Please tell the others what you were just saying.”

Peter shrugged. “We were just talking about what it would feel like if we became actors. What sort of life it would be.”

“Yes,” Miss Lucy said, “and you were saying to Gordon you’d have to go to America to stand the best chance.”

Peter J. shrugged again and muttered quietly: “Yes, Miss Lucy.”

“I know you don’t mean any harm. But there’s just too much talk like this. I hear it all the time, it’s been allowed to go on, and it’s not right. If no one else will talk to you then I will. If you’re going to have decent lives, then you’ve got to know and know properly. None of you will go to America, none of you will be film stars. And none of you will be working in supermarkets as I heard some of you planning the other day. Your lives are set out for you. You’ll become adults, then before you’re old, before you’re even middle-aged, you’ll start to donate your vital organs. That’s what each of you was created to do. You’re not like the actors you watch on your videos, you’re not even like me. You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided. So you’re not to talk that way any more. You’ll be leaving Hailsham before long, and it’s not so far off, the day you’ll be preparing for your first donations. You need to remember that. If you’re to have decent lives, you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you, every one of you.”

Then she went silent, but my impression was that she was continuing to say things inside her head, because for some time her gaze kept roving over us, going from face to face just as if she were still speaking to us. We were all pretty relieved when she turned to look out over the playing field again.

“It’s not so bad now,” she said, even though the rain was as steady as ever. “Let’s just go out there. Then maybe the sun will come out too.”

I think that was all she said. A few years ago, when Tommy and I were going over it all again, and I reminded him of Miss Lucy’s “told and not told” idea, he came up with a theory.

Tommy thought it possible the guardians had, throughout all our years at Hailsham, timed very carefully and deliberately everything they told us, so that we were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information. But of course we’d take it in at some level, so that before long all this stuff was there in our heads without us ever having examined it properly.

It’s a bit too much like a conspiracy theory for me—I don’t think our guardians were that crafty—but there’s probably something in it. Certainly, it feels like I always knew about donations in some vague way, even as early as six or seven. And it’s curious, when we were older and the guardians were giving us those talks, nothing came as a complete surprise. It was like we’d heard everything somewhere before.

One thing that occurs to me now is that when the guardians first started giving us proper lectures about sex, they tended to run them together with talk about the donations. At that age it’s possible the guardians managed to smuggle into our heads a lot of the basic facts about our futures.

Now to be fair, it was probably natural to run these two subjects together. If, say, they were telling us how we’d have to be very careful to avoid diseases when we had sex, it would have been odd not to mention how much more important this was for us than for normal people outside. And that, of course, would bring us onto the donations.