Barrow Brothers, Fine Jewellery and Watches est. 1820

by Orchidae

Summary

After the sudden death of his father, Thomas Barrow and his siblings are taken in by a kindly uncle. But why have they never heard of him before?

Things start looking a lot better for Thomas as he wins a scholarship to a prestigious Grammar School, gets scouted for the Lancashire Cricket team and still somehow manages to encounter some familiar faces along the way.
The watchmaker’s shop on Oldham Street was well situated, being only a short walk from both Market Street and Smithfield Market. The original Barrow Brothers had been well known in the area as makers of quality timepieces, and their work had become quite collectable among certain circles. Unfortunately, the prevalence of factory-made watches from the continent and a series of poor financial decisions had put considerable strain on the business and after four generations of Barrows, the shop and the area surrounding it had gone into considerable decline.

Manchester 1900

“...And so you see the bad news is, I’m afraid your father, God rest his soul, didn’t own the shop. He was merely managing it while your uncle was overseas,” said the solicitor that Thomas had already forgotten the name of. Until that morning, Thomas hadn’t even known he’d had an uncle, and now this Jonathan Barrow was apparently going to swoop in, sell the shop and throw them all out into the street.

“In fact, your father had very little in the way of assets, and quite a few debts.”

“How much debt?” his sister, Agnes, asked. At fourteen she was the eldest of the three Barrow children, Thomas was the middle child and would be turning eleven in a few months, and David was eight but was still treated as the baby of the family.

“Well, I wouldn’t worry about that, Miss. Your uncle sent a telegram this morning, he’ll be travelling to England at the next available opportunity. He’ll be making all the necessary arrangements once he gets here.”

“He’s coming here?” Thomas blurted out. Great, not only was he going to turf them out, but he was coming here to see to it personally. Thomas wondered how they would survive once they were homeless. He still had to finish school, but he supposed no one would notice if he dropped out early. Perhaps he and Agnes could get jobs in one of the factories, the pay was terrible but it might be enough to rent a room for them somewhere.

“Well of course, he’s now your legal guardian. Forgive me, but he’s your closest living relative that isn’t well...” the man stopped himself, but Thomas knew he was going to say ‘institutionalised.’ If dad were here, he would have smacked him so hard his spectacles would have broken. But then, if dad were here then they wouldn’t be in this situation. He felt Phyllis hug him a little tighter around the middle while David, his little brother, clutched at his hand.

When the policeman had knocked on their door yesterday morning, Thomas had thought it was because of him playing truant from school to go lifting with some of the older boys at Smithfield
Market. He had been so frightened that he barely heard the man when he told him that they’d found his dad drowned in a canal. Then he’d been so shocked, he’s barely listened to the rest.

“Now, Miss Baxter has kindly agreed to stay and look after you all until he arrives, so there’s no need for you to worry,” the lawyer continued. Easy for him to say, Thomas thought angrily.

Phyllis thanked the man and saw him out, the pair walking down the narrow staircase that led to the shopfront on the ground floor. He was glad to have a familiar face around at least, and although she couldn’t have been that much older than Agnes, Phyllis Baxter had always seemed like a proper grown up. Her family had lived next door and run a tailor’s shop before they had fallen on hard times, and Thomas had fond memories of her looking after him and David when they were little in the shop’s workroom where they would play with the dressmaker’s dummies and draw pictures in chalk on the floorboards. Now she worked as a shopgirl at Kendals in ladies’ fashion and accessories and didn’t have the time to see them as often, but she would still come to take them to church on Sundays and then to Victoria Park afterwards while dad slept off the previous night’s drinking.

Would she still come round once their uncle arrived? What was he like? Would he knock him about like dad had done? Thomas was prepared for the worst. The thing with dad was that he had learned how to manage him. When to stay out of the way, when to be on his best behaviour, when to keep his mouth shut. Of course, there were times when he just couldn’t do anything right, and those times made him want to wait until Agnes and David were out at school and set the whole damned shop on fire. But instead, he would steal cigarettes and smoke them under the railway bridge behind the glassworks. Now he’d have to figure it out all over again.

At least he’d known dad was on his side, no matter what happened at home. He might have called him a pansy on a regular basis, but if anyone else said anything like that he would have decked them. Tom Barrow senior had been Thomas’s harshest critic, but also the only adult who seemed to truly give a shit about him, and it had left him all turned around. Now they were to be at the mercy of his dad’s older brother, that they’d never even heard about before but apparently owned the roof over their heads. What if he took one look at them and changed his mind? What if he had a family of his own and would only see them as extra mouths to feed? A nuisance, to be tolerated until they were old enough to find gainful employment. He was supposed to start his apprenticeship properly when he turned twelve, but what if he had an older, more experienced cousin somewhere who would steal the job right from under his nose. Well if that was how it was going to be, he would have to start looking at his options.

Later that evening, Thomas lay awake in the bed he and David shared, under a patchwork quilt made from scraps of suiting fabric, a Christmas present from the Baxters some years ago. The wool squares were itchy, but it was warm in winter and Thomas liked to imagine that when he was grown up and had made his fortune he would own a suit made from each of the different fabrics Phyllis had used.

“Tommy? Do you know anything about uncle Jonathan?” he heard David whisper in the dark. So, he hadn’t been able to sleep either, then.

“No. Go back to sleep.”

“I hope he’s nice.”

“Yeah. Me too.”
Jonathan Barrow’s watch, made in 1870 upon the completion of his apprenticeship, was a thing of beauty. The front of the case was made from rock crystal set in silver with the front carved into an elaborate design of scrolled leaves and violets. Jonathan once explained that he had been inspired by some early examples of German pocket watches he had once seen at an auction at Christie’s where a case had been carved out of a solid emerald. The same floral design was mirrored on both the engraved silver of the back of the case and the enamelled watch face with gilded Roman numerals around its border and was complimented by the Fleur de Lys motif of its hour and minute hands. Inside was a manual, three quarter plate movement with seventeen sapphire jewel bearings. The movement on its own was rather standard, Thomas’s father had always been more skilled in that department, but the artistry of design, the showcasing of the techniques required to make it, the references to the watch designs of the seventeenth century combined with a contemporary sensibility of the Arts and Crafts movement truly made the piece a work of art…

“I thought perhaps we could skip church today, don’t you think?” Phyllis said at breakfast the next morning, in that quiet, slightly dreamy tone of voice she used when she was thinking to herself and not necessarily looking for a reply. She had let them sleep in a little longer than usual and fried them some sausages to go with their usual tea and toast. While Thomas was touched by the gesture, he didn’t feel like eating and by the looks of it neither did anyone else. Agnes was red-eyed and weepy, and after a night of tossing and turning, David looked as though he was about to fall asleep at the kitchen table. “Besides, we’ll have to give this place a good cleaning before your uncle arrives. Clear out your dad’s room…”

“Why bother, it’s not like we owe him owt.” Thomas said angrily. “We don’t even know who he is!”

“Thomas…”

“No, I don’t want to hear it. You’re just going to leave us here with a perfect stranger and we’re supposed to just let him take dad’s room.”

“Well there’s not much else we can do, Thomas. It’s already been settled.”

“It’s ghoulish is what it is. His bed’s not even cold yet.”

“Thomas! Don’t be horrible.” Agnes said sanctimoniously. She was such a suck-up it made him sick.

“Oh, do one, will yer,” he snapped. Perhaps it wasn’t the right time to be antagonising his sister, but she’d taken umbrage with him since the day he was born, so why break the habit of a lifetime.

“You do one!” his sister shouted. Glad to know he could still get a rise out of her, even if she did act all high and mighty.

“Listen!” Phyllis said. She didn’t raise her voice exactly, she was the kind of girl who wouldn’t say
boo to a goose, but something about her tone made them realise there was no room for arguing. “I know this is all very sudden and I know you’re upset, but this needs to be done. You boys beat the rugs and scrub the floors. Agnes, I want you to do the dusting and clean the kitchen. Then I want you all to tidy your rooms. I’ll get the washing started and get his room ready.”

After an hour of taking his frustration out on the carpets in the tiny walled yard behind the shop, Thomas’s anger dispersed like so many clouds of dust. He had been deliberately ignoring Phyllis as she wrestled with the washing dolly over a steaming tub of soapy water.

“I’m sorry I said what I did. I didn’t mean nothin’ by it.” He said finally.

“I know. I’m just sorry I can’t do anything more to help.”

“I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

“No, you shouldn’t have. But I accept your apology.”

“Do you know anything? About this uncle, I mean.”

“Just what Mr Foster told me, I’m afraid. He’s your dad’s older brother and they were supposed run the shop together, but about twenty years ago they had some sort of falling out and he’s been working in Paris ever since.”

“But why would he leave if he owns the building?”

“I really don’t know, Thomas. I expect he’ll be arriving in a few days since he needs to be here for the inquest and to arrange the funeral.”

“Inquest?”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be mentioning these sorts of things.”

“No. I want to know.”

“Well, the police were fairly sure it was an accident, but they still need to have one.”

“Oh.” He wasn’t going to cry. Crying didn’t get you anywhere. He wished he could sneak out for a smoke, but from the looks of things, Phyllis was planning on keeping him as busy as possible.

“You know, you can always come and find me if you want to talk. You know that, don’t you?” Phyllis said.

“Yeah,” Thomas said, knowing he probably wouldn’t. She had enough of her own problems as it was, and what could he tell her anyway? That he felt devastated and relieved at the same time? That a part of him was glad dad was dead? That he was ashamed that only a week before he had wished for something exactly like this to happen and now he felt this was all his fault somehow? Those kinds of thoughts were too wicked for the likes of Phyllis Baxter, and he suspected she wouldn’t be nearly as kind to him if she knew.

“I’m just sorry I can’t do more.”
“S’not your fault.” By now she had finished rinsing the first tub of laundry and had begun to run one of his shirts through the mangle. He pulls the rugs off the washing line and went back inside.

Jonathan Barrow arrived two days later on the afternoon train and was already drinking tea with Agnes in the kitchen when Thomas and David got home from school. Bold as brass, as though he owned the place. Well, technically he did own the place, but that wasn’t the point. If mum had been there she would have had a cob on about them not using the guest parlour, which before the Mr Foster incident, had sat empty for almost a year. But if he was really planning on staying then why should he get any special treatment?

The vague idea that he might have been some sort of imposter or conman quickly dissipated when Thomas realised just how strong their family resemblance was. Perhaps it was the fact that both Agnes and David took after mum so much, with their auburn hair and an embarrassment of freckles, and because up until now he had never met anyone from his dad’s side of the family. Jonathan was a little thinner than his dad, a fair bit older and greying at the temples, and had a surprisingly neat moustache, but there was no mistaking they were related.

“Ah, the prodigal sons have returned,” he said and stood to greet them and, to his surprise, shook his hand. “Now, now, don’t tell me. You must be Thomas...”
The Waterlogged Watch

Chapter Summary

Time waits for no man.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for your lovely comments. <3

The double hunter case skeleton pocket watch belonging to the elder Thomas Barrow had always kept perfect time. The movement, comprised of over two hundred and fifty parts, was adjusted to six positions with three complications including a chronograph, a perpetual calendar, and a minute repeater. The watch had taken two years to design and assemble.

For his whole life, short though it was, Thomas had felt as though he didn’t fit in. He’d been told once that he’d been born breach and had almost died and killed his mother in the process, and since then everything about him seemed backwards. He was naturally left handed but his dad and school masters had knocked it out of him leaving him functionally ambidextrous. He was always too sensitive, too prone to dark thoughts, too quick to lash out and say things he later regretted.

Unlike David, who was gregarious and almost universally loved by everyone who met him, or even Agnes, who might have been a wet blanket but still had a small group of equally dull girls she went to church events with, Thomas struggled to make friends. Looking at the funeral service at St Michael’s and All Angels, he realised he might have had more in common with his father than he previously thought as aside from the family the only people who had shown up were Phyllis and her ailing mother, and Mr Horsham the pub landlord flanked by a couple of regulars from The Cross Keys. Considering that he had been the recipient of most of his father’s earnings, it would have been rude if Horsham hadn’t come and paid his respects.

The family tomb was at St Michael’s church and was the final resting place for every Barrow since Thomas’s great-grandfather. Old Joseph Barrow must have had a sense of humour as the grave monument had a clock face carved into it with the epitaph ‘Time waits for no man’. The church and its grounds had seen better days, surrounded by miles of slums and industrial wasteland and directly downwind of the stench from the River Irk. But to think that the Barrows of generations past had been able to build such a monument and own their own building while their descendants could
barely put food on the table was tragic to say the least.

The outcome of the inquest had been death by drowning through an accident or misadventure. Aside from some minor post-mortem injuries there were no wounds inflicted. They had found money, keys, and a silver watch in his pockets suggesting that nothing had been stolen, and the testimony from Mr Horsham revealed that he had been heavily intoxicated upon leaving the Cross Keys where he was last seen alive. Thomas hadn’t been allowed to attend the hearing but had listened with his ear to the parlour door as Mr Foster explained everything to Jonathan.

Back at home, they had stopped all the clocks, which for a clockmaker’s was no mean feat, and covered the mirrors. The parlour was nicer than the other rooms in the house which had grown shabby with constant use, but even the lace doilies and patterned wallpaper seemed drab and old fashioned. Agnes had made cheese scones which were as hard as rocks, Phyllis had brought a fruitcake from the bakers, soaked in brandy, and everyone had been given a funeral biscuit wrapped in wax paper and tied with black ribbon sealed with a black wax seal. Thomas sipped his tea in a brooding silence, adding so much sugar it gave him a headache as Jonathan regaled everyone with stories of his father’s boyhood. A particularly fond story involved how they would sneak out to meet Thomas’s mother and her friends to go to dances or to see shows at the music hall. He had barely been in town a week and he was already the life of the party.

How could everyone just accept him like that when they didn’t even know him? David wouldn’t stop going on about the man, chatting late into the night about how funny uncle Jonathan was while idly kicking him in the kidneys if he dosed off. Even Agnes was charmed by the man, he didn’t think she even knew what charm was and yet there they were, thick as thieves. She had even made him a hotpot, which was disgusting, but still, she’d never put that kind of effort into her cooking before. A little over a year ago when their mum had fallen ill, dad had pulled Agnes out of school to keep house for them and mind the shop, a job she neither liked nor was very good at being both too timid to deal with customers and a terrible cook.

Jonathan was even nice to Thomas. Relentlessly nice. What kind of game was he playing? Eventually he had snapped when the three of them were out of the house, the two boys heading off for school and Agnes to the meat market.

“How can you both carry on as though nothing’s happened?” he had accused.

“I miss dad too, Thomas. You’re not the only one who’s grieving, you know.” Agnes had sighed. “We all have to deal with this, and if we acted like it was the end of the world all the time we’d never get anything done.” Then she’d shoved their sandwiches at him and gone on her way.

Admittedly, Jonathan seemed to have done well for himself during his years in Paris, and more importantly he was happy to spend his money on the family. The funeral for instance was all his doing, with a satin lined casket complete with brass handles. He had even bought them all new Sunday clothes after seeing the state of the old ones and had more than doubled the household food budget. Agnes had been overjoyed and for the first time in what felt like years they had eaten real cuts of meat for dinner instead of their usual tripe or beef dripping.

After everyone had left Thomas had gone down to the workshop, partially to be alone for a moment and partially because he knew dad kept his woodbines in the top draw of his workbench. He had been stealing them occasionally for the past year, not enough to get noticed just the odd one every now and then. But now there was no one to notice, or at least there wouldn’t have been if Jonathan hadn’t chosen that exact moment to follow him downstairs.

“Alright, our kid! Goodness, this place hasn’t changed a bit.” He said jovially looking around the gloomy workshop. “Your dad always did like to surround himself with organised chaos.”
“Nothing wrong with that,” Thomas protested.

“No, of course not. Give us one of those, will yer?” Jonathan said and reached for the cigarettes when Thomas was too stunned to pass him one. He lit one after producing a book of matches from his pocket and had a look at the trading card inside the pack. He was met with a caricature of Archie Maclaren, the captain of Lancashire cricket team. Thomas already had one of him. “Thanks, lad. Just for the record, like, this is a filthy habit.”

“I wasn’t-“

“Like hell you wasn’t. Thing is, right, what you do is your business, but it’ll be coming from your own pocket, and you’ll do it outside from now on. I’ll let you off this time, in light of today’s events. Fair?”

“Alright.” Thomas said after a wary pause and lit his own cigarette. They both sat in silence for a while, and Thomas realised this was probably the longest he’d been in the older man’s presence.

“I just can’t believe he’s gone.” Jonathan said suddenly. “I should have tried harder to make things right, I should never have stopped writing to him. I didn’t realise…I didn’t realise how bad things had gone. Christ, you look just like him.”

“Why did you leave?” Thomas asked, curiosity getting the better of him since Jonathan had always evaded this particular subject when questioned about it.

“I did something that was against the law, a long time ago, and when your dad found out he wanted nothing to do with me anymore. Now don’t go askin’ me what I did, it’s best if you don’t know-” Jonathan added hastily as he tried to interrupt. “Our father had left me the shop, but Tom was the better clockmaker of the pair of us so I thought this place would be in safe hands. How wrong I was.” He reached into his inner pocket and produced a plain silver watch which Thomas recognised as his father’s, only the crystal of the dial was fogged with condensation. “Anyhow, this rightfully belongs to you. They managed to save it from the canal but it looks like some water got into the movement there. How would you fix this to stop it rusting, do you reckon?”

“Oh, er, remove the movement from the case, disassemble it and make sure all the individual parts are dried, cleaned and re-greased before putting it back together.” Thomas stammered, realising that it was a test question.

“Not bad, but easier said than done, especially with one of your dad’s pieces. He was always thinking up madcap designs, once drew up a plan for an automaton clock with twenty-one complications. Never got round to making it, but still, complicated man, complicated clocks.”

“Will you show me how to fix it?” Thomas asked meekly. He really wanted that watch. He’d always admired it, even when he was an infant on his dad’s knee.

“It would be an honour.”
Things with dad had come in cycles. Life would be uneventful, and they’d get on with things, then business would slow down, then dad’s drinking would get worse, then Thomas would do or say something stupid and get a beating for it. Sometimes he’d get a beating regardless of being good or bad. Sometimes, if it looked as though dad was about to turn on David or Agnes, he’d provoke him on purpose. Dad would always cry afterwards, sometimes more than Thomas. He’d say he was sorry and take him on some outing, just the two of them, to a fair or a cricket match or a football game if they had the money. If they couldn’t afford it, they’d take the train to Salford and go to Peel Park to play with the old bat and ball they owned. The invitation was never extended to Agnes or David. Thomas would focus all his anger into his shot. He might have been small for his age, but he was fast and stronger than he looked and could deliver a flawless square cut. Dad would be impressed, he had played for Lancashire when he was young. Thomas always felt better by the time they got home and then the cycle would begin again.

Weeks had passed, and the Barrow children gradually settled into a new routine with Jonathan. Almost immediately, Jonathan had set his mind on reopening the shop which apparently involved redecorating the whole building and roping them all into helping. The wood panelling of the shop had been stripped and washed with sugar soap and was ready for painting. The glass display cabinets were replaced with more modern designs and the window displays had been taken down and the glass covered with newspaper in preparation for the grand reopening. Jonathan had even hired a professional sign painter to design the outside.

“Ah, it’s finally here.” Jonathan cried as he signed for the large crate that had been delivered to the shop after he and the two delivery men managed to wrangle the thing off the hand trolley and onto the shop floor.

“What’s here?” Thomas asked from his spot on the floor where he and David had been re-painting the skirting boards.

“I arranged for my assistant to send the rest of my things over from Paris.” His uncle explained as he fetched a crowbar from the workshop and began to pry open the top. Instead of the personal items Thomas had been expecting, the crate contained a jeweller’s workbench complete with boxes and boxes of tools for soldering, casting and gem faceting. “I thought we could do with some newer equipment and...” he unlocked one of the cases to reveal rows upon rows of intricately crafted jewellery, enamelled dragonflies and pearl flowers, each piece more breath-taking than the last. “...some new stock.”
“Did you make all of these?” David cried as he dropped his paintbrush and rushed over.

“I certainly did.”

“Where did you learn to do that then?”

“I got accepted to study jewellery design at the Birmingham School of Art before I left. I suppose the place had become a little small for both your dad and I, once he got married and everything. From there I began working for a silversmith to support myself and won some design competitions and, well, one thing led to another and I ended up at la Place Gaillon working for René Lalique.”

“Who’s that, then?” David said happily, even though Thomas suspected he had no idea where Birmingham even was, let alone the Place Gaillon.

“He’s a very successful designer.”

“Why would you go to Paris if things were going well for you over here?” Thomas interjected.

“It seemed like the best place for me to be at the time,” Jonathan replied, cautiously.

“Is it still the best place for you?” Thomas asked hesitantly. “I mean, would you rather be back there?”

“I do miss it, but I’ve missed this place too. It feels good to be home.” Thomas must have looked unconvinced because for a moment Jonathan looked so sad he didn’t know what to say. It was only for a moment, but Thomas noticed it.

“You didn’t…leave anyone behind, did you?” he asked, “A sweetheart or something.”

“No. There’s no one waiting for me in Paris, Thomas. Not anymore at least.” he sighed "This could be a new beginning for all of us, lad. Maybe we can finally do this place justice."

Thomas had been tense, both unsettled by all the changes that were occurring and from waiting for the day that his uncle’s goodwill would wear out. That was how things went, after all. However, after the first month, it began to seem as though that day would never come. Jonathan was so even-tempered, so endlessly patient, especially with David who followed him around like an eager puppy. He never became angry when Thomas felt like he was drifting away from himself, just concerned. In the evenings after dinner, they would continue the arduous task of fixing his father’s watch which had more parts than he’d ever seen before. They had taken it apart, going over each part, learning its name and function within the movement.

That was until the next day at school when his teacher Mr Meredith gave him a letter to take home. He couldn’t breathe. What could he have done wrong that would merit a letter? The teachers normally took punishments into their own hands, so it must have been something serious. Had he found out about the stealing? That was probably the last time he had done something bad. He hadn’t played truant in weeks, but someone might have grassed him up.

The worst thing was that he liked Mr Meredith. He was young, perhaps in his mid-twenties with fair hair and wire-rimmed spectacles and an enthusiasm for learning that Thomas hadn’t really seen
before. He explained things in a way that made them easy to understand and talked to his class as though they were adults, and never used a cane to discipline the children. He had a habit of laughing at his own jokes and whenever he did, it made Thomas feel strange, as though his heart was in his throat. He’d felt the same way the year before when they’d gone to see a wrestling match when the fair was in town but had decided that those feelings were best left ignored.

He thought about opening the letter or just throwing it away but knew that would only make things worse in the long run. He was weighing his options for running away when he met David waiting at the school gates.

“What took you so long?” the younger boy asked.

“Meredith wants to meet uncle Jonathan about something,” Thomas replied.

“It’s not about the thieving, is it? I thought you’d stopped.”

“I have! I don’t know what it’s about.” Thomas said, exasperated and stormed ahead as they began their walk home.

The school was crowded and underfunded and located next to a cigarette factory, but the faculty did their best to teach the children of Angel Meadow and Ancoats, although almost all of them left as soon as they were old enough to work. From the gates, Thomas could see the spire of St Michael’s Church and he marvelled at how they had buried his father less than a month ago. With all the changes that had taken place, it felt like a thousand years ago.

“He won’t be angry, whatever it is,” David said, running to keep up. “and even if he is, he won’t… you know.”

“Oh, and you’re such an expert, are you?” Thomas said angrily, feeling out of breath as though he’d just come back from a cross country run.

“I’m just saying…”

“Just leave it alone, Davey,” Thomas shouted and instantly regretted it. “I’m sorry. I just…”

“I know,” David said. "It'll be alright." Of course, he knew. They shared a room after all. He knew all of Thomas’s nervous turns and black moods and bruises and loved him all the same. For that reason, Thomas would have done anything for him, taken any number of beatings and humiliations if it led to David’s happiness.
High Master Patton first noticed the young Thomas Barrow when he volunteered to take part in a demonstration by the Manchester Grammar School cricket team. The young lad then proceeded to keep an impressive batting average against boys up to five years his senior. Perhaps he was a little biased since the team hadn’t won anything in a while, but he made sure to remember the boy’s face.

“Ah Thomas, I trust we’re meeting now, then.” Mr Meredith said as he came across Thomas waiting outside the school building, then noticed that he wasn’t alone. “Oh, good afternoon, David.”

“Afternoon, sir,” David said and tipped his cap.

“He should be here soon,” Thomas replied. He’d handed the letter over in the end, expecting the worst. The note had requested a meeting after school at their ‘earliest convenience’ but Mr Meredith had neglected to give a reason for the meeting other than ‘to discuss Thomas’s academic future’. Jonathan has just chuckled and told him not to worry and that he’d been a dunce at school too. Thomas felt like his stomach acid was dissolving him from the inside out. Mr Meredith didn’t look angry at least, but Thomas had never seen him angry before. Perhaps he would expel him and still have a smile on his face. For a moment he hoped that Jonathan had forgotten they were supposed to meet today but was disappointed when he saw the familiar figure of his uncle ambling up the road. He looked out of place in the dirty street, his suit was too nice, his tie too brightly coloured.

“Mr Barrow, how do you do?” said Mr Meredith once he saw Jonathan approach and offered his hand. Jonathan paused for a moment as though something had surprised him, before shaking the schoolmaster’s hand a little longer than was proper.

“How do you do,” Jonathan replied, finally and the group made their way back to Thomas’s classroom.

“David, why don’t you pick a book to read while you wait.” Mr Meredith gestured to the ‘library corner’ he’d put together at the back of his classroom which consisted of two shelves of books, a table and chairs and a handsome collection of houseplants. Mr Meredith led Thomas and Jonathan into a small office adjacent to the classroom that doubled as a supply cupboard. “Please, take a seat. Allow me to introduce myself, I’m Richard Meredith, Thomas’s form teacher. Firstly, I’d like to offer you both my deepest condolences.”

“Well, that’s very kind of you,” said Jonathan.

“The reason I’ve asked to meet with you is that to comply with some planned education reforms, Manchester Grammar school are trialling state-subsidised tuition for boys aged eleven to sixteen. What this means is that working-class students in the area who are academically gifted will be able to apply for a scholarship to attend the school. I believe that Thomas would be an ideal candidate.”

“Our Thomas?” Jonathan said once the reality of the situation hit him.

“Well, yes.”

“You’ve kept this quiet, kid,” his uncle said, turning to him and giving him an affectionate nudge.
“I didn’t…wait, you what?” What was happening? Thomas had never been an ideal anything, let alone a candidate for a posh boys school.

“Despite any difficulties he might have experienced, Thomas has remained an excellent student when he’s been able to apply himself. This month alone his work has improved exponentially. I honestly believe he would be the best candidate. It truly is a wonderful school, I happen to be an old Mancunian myself.”

“Well, you’re hardly old, Mr Meredith.” Jonathan joked, and Mr Meredith laughed in that silly, delighted way that made Thomas’s heart skip a beat.

“That’s just the name they give to the school’s alumni. But if you decide to apply, I will do everything I can to help. We could have some study sessions after school to help you prepare for the entrance exam.”

“Well, Thomas, what do you think?” Jonathan asked.

“But I thought- I thought I was supposed to start working at the shop,” Thomas said. Being considered academically gifted was one thing, but that didn’t mean he would be allowed to apply.

“Well I’m delighted that you’re interested in the business, lad, but there’s no hurry. I’d much rather you finished school first.”

“But what if I don’t get in?”

“There’d be no harm done. It’s much better to try and fail than to not try at all.”

The thought was frightening. What would he do at another school? What if he couldn’t make any friends? What if everyone looked down on him for being lower class? What if he didn’t get in at all and everyone saw him as the failure that he was? He couldn’t breathe.

“Your uncle’s right, Thomas.” Mr Meredith said softly, as though he understood how panicked Thomas felt. “It’s an incredible opportunity. One that’s worth trying for. They have new science laboratories and a school orchestra, and real sports teams. I know how much you like cricket, and the MGS team are really rather good.”

“I- Yes, yes I’ll try,” he said, finally. Whether he was good enough or not, the thought of spending an extra hour or so with Mr Meredith after school was extremely appealing.

“I’m very glad to hear that. Come and see me after school tomorrow and we’ll go over the application process in more detail. And if you’re both available on Friday afternoon the school will be holding a Conversazione, it’s an open day for parents and prospective students.” He handed Thomas a flyer with event’s programme on it. “Now if you don’t mind waiting outside for a moment with your brother, I’d like to talk with your uncle in private.”

“Uh…Alright,” Thomas muttered, feeling a little overwhelmed as he got up to leave. Of all the things he had been expecting, that certainly wasn’t it.

“Tommy, what are you doing?” David looked up from a battered copy of the blue fairy book as Thomas shut the door behind him and immediately crouched down to listen at the keyhole.

“Shut up, I’m trying to listen,” he whispered.

“Mad. That’s what you are.” David grumbled and went back to his reading.
“I just wanted to say that Thomas has really been doing much better these past few weeks, and I can only put it down to your influence.” Thomas heard Mr Meredith say, his voiced muffled through the door.

“Oh? Well, that’s good,” he heard Jonathan reply, “Honestly, I have no idea what I’m doing half the time. I never thought I would be the sort to have children, you see, and now I’ve ended up with three at once. Don’t get me wrong, they’re smashing kids, like. Only I don’t half feel out of my depth.”

“I don’t know if it’s my place to say but, Thomas was having a lot of trouble before. He did well in lessons but there were other problems like un-explained absences, not engaging with the other children, problems paying attention, that sort of thing. He would always seem to have some injury or other and have some innocuous excuse for it but one time there was a bruise in the shape of a man’s hand on his neck.” He remembered that incident when dad had choked him until he passed out. Mrs Wilkes the school nurse, who was a tyrant with the nit comb and force fed them cod liver oil every morning, had scolded him for not washing his neck. Then she’d had a closer look at it, and for once was rendered speechless.

“Yes, Agnes, our eldest, told me about everything that had been happening. I loved my brother very much, even after he broke contact with me, but I don’t know if I can forgive him for this. I really don’t know what I should do. Thomas is so quiet and, I don’t know, so on edge, so nervous. I wish I knew how to make things better.”

“I think you are making things better. But I’ve seen these things before and it takes a long time to heal from it. You must be patient. And I think a new school might do him some good. A new beginning, as it were, to build up his confidence.”

“But really? Manchester Grammar? Didn’t Thomas de Quincey run away from that place?”

“Yes, I believe he escaped out a window. But I assure you, the majority of its students have a positive experience there. I’m afraid the scholarship would only qualify Thomas for the modern curriculum. That is to say, a greater focus on the sciences, mathematics and modern languages as opposed to the classical curriculum which spends more time on, well, classics.” Meredith chuckled.

“Well, probably better for the job market and everything. But personally, I always felt I could’ve learned a lot from the Ancient Greeks.”

“Oh! Truly? I confess it’s been a while since I… studied that subject.”

“I see. Would it be too forward of me to ask you to join me for some… further reading one day?”

“Further reading?” Meredith laughed again, although Thomas didn’t understand why he found the comment so funny. In fact, he’d lost track of what they were discussing as it seemed as though they were talking in some sort of code.

Good god, what if they knew he was listening? Suddenly paranoid, he scurried away from the door, too rattled from what he’d heard. They knew. They both knew everything. The shame of it hit him like a ton of bricks. He wanted to kill Agnes, or himself, he wasn’t sure which.

“You look like you heard something you didn’t want to hear.” David muttered, “Almost as though you shouldn’t have gone listening to things that weren’t your business.”

“Yeah, alright, leave off.”

“What’s this?” David asked, plucking the programme from Thomas’s hands. “The Manchester Grammar School Conversazione, held in the school buildings. What’s that when it’s at home?”
“It’s like an open day for new students.”

“Then why didn’t they just say that then?” David sighed. “Does this mean you’re moving schools.”

“Maybe. I have to sit an exam to get in.”

“Looks dead posh.” David sniffed. “Do you want to go?”

“I don’t know, do I? They both looked so happy, I just went along with it.”

“It would be alright if you did, you know.” David went on, “Nothing wrong with wanting something better for yourself. Look they have a real cricket team and everything.”

“So everyone keeps saying.”

* 

His first after-school session with Mr Meredith had been a lot harder than he’d expected and there had been so much for him to remember that he’d barely had time to enjoy the tea and biscuits that had been laid out or his teacher’s company. He hadn’t been the only boy that had been asked to attend but the others needed to start working to support their families. He also suspected that if the scholarship been open to girls then Marceline Morton would have been there in his place since she beat him in every subject and took great pleasure in letting him know about it.

He would have to take an English exam and an arithmetic exam as well as be interviewed by members of the faculty. Mr Meredith was as kind and patient as always, and without the disruption of the rest of the class, they were able to cover a lot of material in the comfortable library corner. Thomas wished that school could always be like that, informal and interesting, challenging and fun.

When the evening of the Conversazione rolled around, Jonathan picked Thomas up from school and the pair made their way to Long Millgate on foot. The ancient street was once of the oldest in the city, with timber-framed buildings that bowed and bent at odd angles. The school was Gothic and imposing and at least three times the size of the Parish school he was used to with leafy quadrangles and oak trees. Thomas wished he had a cigarette, but he’d burned through the last of his pack the week before and didn’t have any money. Jonathan gave his shoulder a squeeze and Thomas’s nerves settled a little. If this was how he was going to feel on a visit, how was he going to feel if he started going here? The inside was no different, and although most days the classrooms weren’t that different from any other classroom, today they were decorated with displays from every subject and school club. Everyone was so well dressed, the gentlemen in fine woollen suits and the ladies in pearls and furs. Thomas wished David could be there, he would have gotten a real kick out of all this, especially the concert put on by the glee society, and perhaps Thomas wouldn’t have felt so alone and out of place amongst the sons of the middle classes.

That was until they came upon a group of boys in cricket whites in the yard giving a demonstration of bowling and batting techniques to a small crowd of onlookers, sometimes inviting guests to take a turn. Among them was a golden-haired boy a little older than Thomas with eyes as blue as cornflowers. Before he even took a moment to think about it, Thomas’s hand was already in the air to volunteer.

“Have you played before?” The boy asked when they had finished, sounding rather impressed. Thomas had played well even on damp grass and had probably lingered a little longer than was polite instead of letting someone else take a turn.
“With my dad, but never with a proper team,” Thomas replied as he untied the shin guards they had lent him and shrugged on his jacket.

“Will you be joining the school then?” The boy pressed.

“If they’ll have me.” Funny, he was ambivalent about the whole thing a few minutes ago and now he talking as though it were a done deal. Was it wise to make important life decisions based on a pair of eyes?

“For the sake of the team, I hope they do. I’m Matthew by the way, Matthew Crawley,” said Matthew and offered his hand in a way that seemed much more adult than his years would suggest.

“Thomas Barrow,” Thomas said and shook it.

“Well, Barrow, I hope you’ll stay for the play this evening. They’re doing Doctor Faustus this year.”

As Thomas made his way back to the school building he began to think that a new school might not be so bad after all.
The fob watch given to Isobel Crawley before her departure for the Cape of Good Hope was small and practical with a plain open-faced silver case. The movement was adjusted to three positions as well as being able to keep time in both hot and cold temperatures. Dr Crawley requested to have the back engraved with the words: ‘Love is the shortest distance between hearts.’ It was the last watch made by Thomas Barrow Sr.

“Are you excited about the shop reopening?” Mr Meredith asked once their lesson had come to a close. The exam was only a month away and Thomas was caught between wishing he could get it over with so he wouldn’t feel so nervous and wishing he had more time. This was because he felt underprepared and because once the exam was over he would have no reason to stay after school anymore.

“How did you know about that, sir?” Thomas packed up his school bag, now considerably heavier with loaned books, and went to help tidy away the mismatched tea set.

“There was an ad in the paper,” his teacher explained without missing a beat. This was true of course, but Thomas suspected that he had heard the information first hand from a certain uncle of his. Shortly after the pair of them had met Jonathan had started going out every now and then when he hadn’t before. Thomas had lain awake into the small hours of the morning, petrified that his uncle would return home drunk even though he had never seen him have more than a finger of whiskey. Instead, he heard the back door click and Jonathan quietly climb the stairs to bed. In the morning at breakfast, he acted as though nothing had happened.

However, later that day, Thomas had spied an old abridged edition of Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English lexicon that had appeared mysteriously in the workshop among the small collection of books and manuals they kept. The inside cover had a stamp from the Manchester Grammar School Library with the words ‘To a fellow scholar. I found this on a visit to my parent’s house. They seemed concerned when I burst out laughing. – R’ scribbled in pencil underneath. He’d seen that handwriting before in the margins of his exercise books.

Thomas felt strangely betrayed although he couldn’t figure out why. Perhaps it was because he worked himself up over nothing. Perhaps he felt jealous. If the pair of them had become friends, then why hadn’t either of them told him? Why all the secrecy? And perhaps he felt a little rejected since he had considered Mr Meredith a friend but was jarringly reminded that the older man probably only saw him as one of his students. He had felt so stupid then. What would a grown up want with a little scrote like him anyway?

“I think it’ll go well. You wouldn’t recognise the place, it looks better than the jewellery counter at Lewis’s,” Thomas said.
“Well, I’m glad it’s all going well. I happen to own a Barrow Brothers watch myself and I must say it’s always kept perfect time.” he produced an open-faced watch in yellow gold from his waistcoat pocket.

“Looks like one of my grandad’s,” Thomas said.

“Really? How can you tell?”

“Well look at the hallmarks. The rose symbol means it was assayed in Sheffield, the crown and the 375 number mean it’s 9 carat gold, the queen’s head is the duty mark, and the letter A here means it was hallmarked in 1868. Since my great uncle James Joseph Barrow died in 1866 I think it’s safe to assume my grandfather made it.” Thomas explained, preening a little at the opportunity to show off.

“Well, I never. I had no idea you could learn all that from a hallmark. Only 9 carats, you say?”

“I’m afraid so, sir.”

“Well, I’d never think to sell it, so it doesn’t really matter. It was my fathers, you see. He gave it to me when I left for Oxford.”

“You went to Oxford, sir? Then why are you teaching here? I mean if you don’t mind me asking.” Thomas blurted out in surprised and blushed when he realised how rude the question was.

“Oh, not at all. It isn’t all that exciting a story, though. I should explain that only a couple of Manchester Grammar students a year get into Oxford and Cambridge. A few more get into the London colleges and the rest usually study locally or go straight into work. I was the only boy in my year to get accepted. I was originally intending to become a priest but, well, I don’t think it would have suited me. Then, after I left university I was employed in a great house for two years as a tutor for Lord Ashton’s son. The poor boy was an invalid, you see, and they believed that sending him to school would only make his health worse. I think I was mostly there to keep him company, he must have read everything in the library at least twice. He really was astoundingly intelligent.” He paused.

“What happened?” Thomas pressed.

“Well, once he turned eighteen there wasn’t any reason for me to stay there,” Meredith continued although Thomas suspected he had left out a large portion of the story. He certainly hadn’t expected his former pupil to be so old, initially picturing a boy closer to David’s age with a crutch like Tiny Tim. “Honestly it was so lonely in that house, being too lowly to dine with the family and not enough of a servant to associate with the staff I felt as though I couldn’t leave my room. So once my employment there ended I was eager to find a job where I would have my work cut out for me. Where I could help people who really needed it. What could be more work than an inner-city school?”

Thomas had never seen a great house before and couldn’t even imagine what one would be like. His mother had worked in service before she had married his dad, but that was in the suburbs for a banker and his family and they had only employed two maids and a cook-housekeeper. He wondered what it would be like to work in such a place.

“Well you come to the opening tomorrow?” Thomas said. So what if Jonathan had become friends with his teacher, he thought, it was a free country and it wasn’t as though his uncle knew many people in Manchester. Why shouldn’t they see one another socially? And if Thomas got to see his teacher more often as a result, then all the better. “If you come before closing time we’ll be having a tea to celebrate. Just the family and the Baxters. You don’t know them, but they’re nice.”
“I would be delighted to stop by, Thomas, if your uncle doesn’t mind of course.” Was he blushing?

“I’m sure he won’t mind,” Thomas said, reaching for his cap and jacket.

That night, Thomas dreamed that he was in a huge manor house surrounded by dark moors. Each room was more beautiful than the last with crystal chandeliers and deep oriental carpets. The more he explored the more he began to realise that he was alone and lost and that there was no way out... He awoke to the darkness of his bedroom with only the soft sound of David’s snoring to pull him back to reality.

For the first time in his life, Thomas felt as though he had goals to work towards, so many in fact that he had to compartmentalise them. Short term goals: Fix dad’s watch, help get the shop ready for the ‘grand reopening.’ Admittedly his role in both these things was a relatively minor one, he had learned to clean and the re-grease the individual watch parts but for the taking and apart and reassembly he had been relegated to watching and learning as Jonathan painstakingly put the thing back together like an intricate puzzle. Mid-term goals: Do his best on the Manchester Grammar entrance exam. Studying for this took up almost all his spare time. With both the study sessions after school and the mountain of extra work Mr Meredith would send him home with afterwards, the rest of the family had barely seen him all week.

Then his plans split in different directions depending on which outcome lay ahead. If he failed, he would continue at the Parish school and begin his apprenticeship in the afternoons. Jonathan had already agreed to take him on at weekends for tuppence and hour once the shop reopened. If he won the scholarship, then he would seize the opportunity, it would be foolish not to. Going to such a school could lead to a good job, in an office or as a clerk. He might even be able to attend university to study law or medicine or any of the other impressive jobs belonging to the professional classes. His more personal secret goal, if he was accepted at the school was to join the cricket team and make Matthew Crawley his friend. If he would have him as a friend of course. It would hardly be fair to force the issue.

Saturday arrived in a whirl of activity and for once the shop, which for the past few years had had barely any customers, was packed with people. The newspaper ads must have really worked. The little shop had seemed old fashioned and out of place, crammed as it was between more modern buildings, a haberdasher on one side and a sweet shop on the other where Thomas would steal toffees under the nose of the famously sour Mrs Weekes. It had been so dark and dusty that passers-by on the street didn’t notice it was there at all and those who did always assumed they were closed. Now, after a thorough paint job and redecorated shop front, the place seemed bright and airy, the morning light twinkling off the diamonds and silver. Above the shop window in handsome lettering were the words ‘Barrow Brothers, Fine Jewellery and Watches est. 1820’. Of course, the fine jewellery aspect was entirely new, and no one was sure on the exact year the shop had first opened and 1820 was an educated guess, but nobody needed to know that.

Not only was the shop unrecognisable but Jonathan was unrecognisable. The professional façade his uncle put on had him losing his thick Mancunian accent, talking like some grand gentleman and occasionally slipping into flawless French when explaining a technique or type of design. The revelation surprised Thomas, then he felt like an idiot because of course, he could speak French, he’d lived in Paris for almost twenty years. It was Thomas’s first day on the job and he’d been relegated to wrapping parcels and writing their sales in the ledger. He had been kept a lot busier than he’d
expected. It was spring and there were plenty of engaged couples eager to pick out their wedding rings or gentlemen looking for a perfect proposal gift.

“Oh, it’s you.” He heard a familiar voice from the other side of the counter. Thomas looked up and came face to face with Matthew Crawley, his eyes bright with excitement. He was with a very distinguished looking man with a greying beard that Thomas assumed was his father.

“I know it said Barrow on the door, but I only just made the connection. Father, this is Thomas Barrow the boy I was telling you about. Thomas, I’d like to introduce my father, Dr Reginald Crawley” Matthew carried on. Had Thomas really made that much of an impression in the half-hour or so they had played together? Had Matthew been thinking about their meeting as much as Thomas had?

“How do you do, sir,” Thomas said nervously. Dr Crawley cut an imposing figure in his dark suit and bowler hat and carried himself with the sort of reassuring authority that all doctors seemed to have.

“How do you do.” Dr Crawley replied.

“Perhaps you could help us. Mother is leaving soon for Cape Town to join the war effort and we were thinking of buying her a going-away present.” Matthew explained, but the situation he was describing seemed so bizarre that Thomas thought he was imagining things.

“Cape Town?” he stammered. He heard about the war, from listening to other people’s conversations and skimming articles in the newspaper, but he would have been hard-pressed to remember what was going on over there, it all seemed very distant.

“Yes, to join the army nursing service reserve.” Dr Crawley explained, “It’ll be an adjustment, but we’re both very proud of her sacrifice. I only wish the hospital could spare me or I’d go myself.”

“Well, we have some ladies watches that might be nice. They’re practical and you can pin them onto a belt or a pocket. This one is made with an alloy that helps it keep time in hot temperatures.” Thomas said, although he half hoped they wouldn’t choose the one he was pointing to. It was the last piece his dad had finished.

“Really? How ingenious.” Dr Crawley exclaimed. “Yes, I think she would appreciate this far more than a pair of earrings. What do you think, Matthew?”

“I think it’s perfect,” Matthew said, and Thomas felt the blush that began to colour his cheeks.

“Tell me, do you offer personalised engravings?” Dr Crawley asked.

“We do,” Thomas nodded “If you have a word with my uncle over there he’ll be able to help you.”

“Thank you. And best of luck with your exam, young man.” The doctor said with a warm smile, and the pair took their leave.

Thomas felt flushed with pride knowing that his recommendation had been useful and that he’d helped to make a sale. The pieces, especially the watches, were not cheap and it amazed him that the Crawleys had that sort of money to spend on a Saturday. He knew doctors made good money, but Dr Crawley didn’t look like just any doctor. He was probably some sort of specialist or senior physician. It occurred to Thomas that since the good doctor had paid extra to have the watch engraved he would have to come back to pick it up. Perhaps he would bring Matthew with him again and perhaps they would have another chance to talk. Thomas tried to not get his hopes up, but it had been so long since he’d met a boy his own age who didn’t ignore him at best or bully him at
worst, whether it was because he was small and a sissy or because his mum was in the madhouse or because of his drunk dad (now drunk, dead dad). Perhaps Matthew was just generally nice to everyone he met, but he had remembered him and had been talking about him so perhaps there was hope after all.

The day seemed to flash past and before he knew it, it was close to closing time. Agnes and David and come downstairs to help them tidy up and Phyllis and Mrs Baxter had popped into the shop with a basket of Eccles cakes from the bakers. They rarely came in through the shop entrance but were curious to see what all the fuss was about and cooed and gasped over how beautiful everything was.

“It’s like Aladdin’s cave!” Phyllis exclaimed, gazing longingly at a display of necklaces.

“Why don’t you try some of them on?” Jonathan suggested and unlocked the display case and brought out the velvet-lined trays of trinkets for them to have a closer look. “A lovely locket for a lovely girl?”

“Oh, Mr Barrow, you know I could never afford anything here,” she giggled.

“Then try them on for fun.”

Mrs Baxter helped to fasten the pendant around Phyllis’s neck and she admired herself in the small oval mirror that stood on the counter. It was far too fine to go with the rumpled Kendal’s uniform she was wearing that consisted of a white shirtwaist, black twill skirt and purple grosgrain belt, but Phyllis had a natural sense of style and the modest locket with a chased design of swirling lily of the valley stems complimented her perfectly.

“It’s…beautiful,” Phyllis said sadly knowing she could never buy it.

“Perhaps you might be able to save up for it if you take that interview.” Mrs Baxter urged.

“Mam, we discussed this.” Phyllis scolded.

“What sort of interview?” Agnes asked.

“Lady Balniel came to the store yesterday and was so impressed with our Phyllis’s styling that she asked her to interview her for a lady’s maid position then and there.” Mrs Baxter pressed, as though nothing could have made her prouder.

“I’m only nineteen, no one would ever take me seriously as a lady’s maid.” Phyllis protested as she put the locked back in its tray.

“Lady Balniel is also very young, don’t you think she’d want to employ someone her own age? Someone who knows the current fashions? Love, you’ve been sewing since you were born, you know everything there is to know about beauty products and I know you do all the other girls’ hair at the store.”

Phyllis was about to argue when there was a timid knock on the door, and Mr Meredith waved awkwardly through the glass.
“I’m not too late I hope,” he said apologetically when Thomas unlocked the door.

“Richard, good evening!” Jonathan said with surprise. Damn it all, in between getting the shop ready and all the extra work he had to do, Thomas had completely forgotten to tell his uncle that he had invited the other man.

“I would have come earlier but I was stuck marking a mountain of history projects,” the teacher explained. “I do hope I’m not intruding only Thomas invited me the other day.”

“Oh no of course not. All are welcome at the Barrow house.” Jonathan laughed. “Agnes, why don’t you take our guests to the parlour while Thomas and I lock up. We’ll be with you in a moment.”

“Of course,” Agnes said. To Thomas’s disgust, he realised that she was gawking openly at his teacher. Did she have to be so obvious? Yes, Mr Meredith was handsome in a bookish sort of way and kind and funny and handsome and clever and handsome… but this was just embarrassing.

Once everyone had left Thomas felt like he was about to have a heart attack.

“Oh don’t look like that, lad. I know you’ve had a lot on your plate.” Jonathan said and ruffled Thomas’s hair. He pulled the metal shutters into place and locked them and went to move their day’s takings and the more valuable pieces into the safe. “Maybe give me a little warning next time, eh?”

“Right,” Thomas said, weakly.

“My dad was hard on me too, you know,” Jonathan said suddenly. “It’s a terrible thing. They love you more than anything and protect you, and you love them back and all you want is for them to be proud of you, but they’re also the person that’s hurting you. It messes with your head, that sort of thing. All those conflicting messages. After a while, you lose track of what’s real and who’s good and who’s bad.”

Thomas didn’t know what to say to that, but he thought he understood.
The Birthday

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your lovely comments. I'm trying to move on a little in the plot so expect some time jumps in the coming chapters.

Thomas’s mother, Rosalyn Barrow nee Connor, never received an engagement ring. Instead her husband made her a miniature pendant watch with a case in the shape of a rose in bloom in silver and inlaid with fragments of rose quartz. It was a departure from Tom Barrow’s style which valued simple designs that concealed the deeply sophisticated mechanisms that worked inside.

July 1900

“Even if you don’t get in today, Thomas. I want you to know that you’ve done so well these past months. You should be proud of yourself either way.” Jonathan said as he slid an extra bacon rasher onto Thomas’s plate. It was the last day of the summer term and the excitement of the holidays had been put on hold with the arrival of a letter from Manchester Grammar School.

“Oh, er…thank you.” Thomas said, and was about to start eating when he realised that everyone was staring at him expectantly and at the envelope that stood propped up against his tea cup. The MGS crest, printed in blue on the top flap, its owls staring at him as intensely as his family. It seemed that he couldn’t put it off any longer.

“Well open it, then. Don’t leave us on tenterhooks.” Agnes nagged.

The letter had arrived with the morning post and Thomas needed a cigarette. The entrance exam had seemed straightforward at the time, but Thomas had been second guessing his answers ever since it had ended. Then there had been his disastrous interview, where he had made a complete tit of himself. When he had been asked about his interests, he had babbled on about how he’d been learning to fix watches and how Lancashire had a shot at winning the County Championship that year and how he wished he could bat as well as Johnny Tyldesley. The school master interviewing him had smiled indulgently, and Thomas’s heart had sunk. He should have talked about reading, he liked to read, and it seemed like a more acceptable thing to be interested in.

“I’m just going to go outside.” He said and snatched the letter on his way out the back door. It was early summer but it was still cloudy outside and the mornings still had a chill in the air.
After the shop reopened, they had spent a pleasant evening tea with Mr Meredith and the Baxters. By the time his teacher left, both Phyllis and Agnes were sighing over him like lovesick schoolgirls. He had encouraged his sister to go back to school and Phyllis to apply for the lady’s maid position at Haigh Hall and had a great deal more success in convincing them than anyone else. To Thomas’s disappointment, his teacher had not returned to the shop since. Perhaps he had been mistaken that he was friendly with Jonathan after all, although his uncle still went out occasionally of an evening. Life had become uneventful since the entrance exam, he went to school, he worked at the shop, he read books from the Free Library and all the while he waited nervously for the school to reply. His after-school lessons had come to an end and while he enjoyed having more free time he also missed them terribly. Phyllis had moved to Wigan after a successful interview to serve Lady Balniel and her mother had moved in with her niece in Stockport to help her with her new baby. As a result, their Sundays had become far quieter although Phyllis still wrote to his sister regularly.

Thomas stashed the letter under his armpit and fumbled with his matchbook and cigarettes. He lit one and inhaled slowly, taking a moment to calm himself. It was futile as he could feel his heartbeat pounding in his head. Holding the cigarette between his middle and ring finger he finally steeled himself and opened the letter.

When he staggered back into the cramped kitchen, there were tears in his eyes. Everyone jumped up, fearing the worst. Thomas took a deep breath and steadied himself.

“I got in!” he cried with disbelief.

“I knew you could do it. You’re dead clever, you are.” David said on their walk to school. Thomas’s last day, he realised. “I’ll miss seeing you at school though.”

“Well you’ll still see me the rest of the time, and I’ll still walk you there on my way and pick you up if you like.” Thomas offered.

“I’m old enough to walk to school on my own.” David sniffed. “But that would be nice.”

They separated when it was time to go to their respective classrooms. The last day was always more relaxed than usual with even the sternest teacher being willing to pass around some games or drawing pencils for their students. Thomas’s class, under the instruction of Mr Meredith had built a working replica of the rigid airship that had just been tested in Germany using a helium balloon, a balsa wood propeller, and some rubber bands. It hadn’t flown very far and had eventually floated up to the ceiling. At the end of the day, once the other children had left, Thomas showed his teacher the acceptance letter.

“What wonderful news!” Mr Meredith said delightedly. “I’m so proud you.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you, sir.”

“That’s very flattering but I have to respectfully disagree. You’re a very capable young man, I believe you’ll be able to do anything you put your mind to.”

“What if I don’t fit in? What if I - ” Thomas stammered in a panic. Why did everyone think he was
ready for this when he felt like such a mess inside.

“It won’t be easy. But I know you’ll be able to make a go of it. And if you ever need anything, then you’re welcome to drop by here or write me a letter and I’ll do my best to help you.”

“I’m going to miss you, sir.” He was fighting back tears now. It didn’t matter if he went to best school in the world, he knew he would never find a better teacher.

“I’ll miss you too, Thomas, and please send my regards to your family.”

As he stepped out into the corridor, Thomas was surprised to come face to face with Marceline Morton, the girl who had been making fun of him for practically his entire time at school. She had already hit a growth spurt and had ended up being the tallest in their class and wore her dark brown hair in a heavy braid that reached her waist. One time he had tied it to the back of her chair out of spite and later on she’d kicked him in the balls so hard that he threw up on the pavement.

“So you got in to that fancy school, did you?” she said, leaning against the doorframe.

“How did you know that?”

“Your brother won’t stop yammering about it. Anyone would think he was the one going.” Thomas smiled at his brother’s enthusiasm. “Of course, if they let girls in, I would have enjoyed beating you to it.” Thomas’s face fell but to his complete shock, she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek before skipping away. “Good luck, Barrow. You’ll need it.”

“You lucky tosser.” David laughed when he told him about the strange encounter during their walk home. Thomas wondered where he learned that word.

“I thought she hated me,” Thomas said, bewildered.

“Who knows what girls are thinking,” his brother said sagely “Still, what I wouldn’t give for a kiss from Marcie Morton.”

“Oh, give over. You are far too young to be thinking of such things, David Barrow.”

“You sound like Agnes. The heart wants what it wants, Tommy.”

Thomas touched the spot on his cheek where Marceline had kissed him and felt it burn red hot with embarrassment. It hadn’t been unpleasant exactly, but he couldn’t see why anyone would want such a thing. He just felt relieved she hadn’t kissed him on the mouth, or he wouldn’t have known what to do.

The summer holidays were uneventful. Thomas had decided to work at the shop full time for the duration of the summer and had become good enough at doing basic repairs that Jonathan had started delegating most of the factory models to him since their parts were standardized and easily replaced. The work was fiddly and repetitive but it required his full attention and was better than being left
alone with his thoughts. He had been so absorbed in the work that he had emerged from the
workshop to find the family waiting for him and the kitchen table decked out with tea, sandwiches
and a sponge cake and a small pile of gifts and letters. With a shock, Thomas realised he had
forgotten his own birthday.

“Happy Birthday!” David cried excitedly.

“You kept that quiet, lad. I wouldn’t have known if your brother and sister hadn’t told me.” Jonathan
laughed and pulled out a chair for him.

“I honestly forgot. I was so busy with everything that I just didn’t think of it.”

“So, you’re a Cancer,” his uncle speculated, “No wonder you’re so crabby, eh??” Jonathan laughed
but Thomas didn’t understand what he was talking about.

“Well, open them then,” David said, growing impatient.

Birthdays had always been a modest affair in the Barrow household, with a few handmade gifts and
currant buns for tea if they were lucky. Last year dad had forgotten his birthday entirely and
somehow made it feel like Thomas’s fault for not speaking up for himself.

Slowly, he opened each present wrapped in brown paper. Agnes had knitted him a scarf which he
had caught glimpses of when she had rushed to hide her work every time he went looking for her in
her bedroom. It was dark blue, and the wool was itchy but warm.

“I know winter’s a long way off, but you can never have too many warm clothes. It’s in your new
school colours.”

“Thank you. It’s wonderful.”

David had given him a bag of marbles which he had won at school and a bag of toffees. Phyllis had
even sent him a parcel from Haigh Hall containing a set of handkerchiefs with his initials
embroidered on them, also in MGS blue, and Mrs Baxter had sent him a pair of hand-knitted socks
like she did every year. A parcel from Mr Meredith was also among the gifts and contained a worn
copy of Tom Brown’s School Days. Something warm twisted in Thomas’s stomach, his former
teacher had lent him plenty of books to further his studies but had never given him one to keep. He
noticed that there hadn’t been an address written on the package or a stamp, which meant he had
either dropped the gift off himself or, he looked over at his uncle searching for some sort of clue, he
had given it to Jonathan to pass on.

There, at the bottom of the pile, was a letter postmarked from Cheadle. Thomas decided he didn’t
want to read it in front of everyone so he folded it up and put it in his pocket. Cheadle Hospital was
where mum was and it unsettled him. She’d never written to him before, not personally at least and
to his knowledge, she hadn’t contacted them since dad died. Perhaps she didn’t even know he was
dead. Dad had said that the staff there read people’s letters and decided whether they were
appropriate to pass on or not. Was she angry at him? It was his fault she’d ended up in that place. All
his fault.

“That was nice of Mr M, wasn’t it?” Agnes said, snapping him out of his thoughts as she skimmed
the first few pages of the book and admiring the illustrations. “He gave me a whole list of books to
take out of the library so I’m caught up for next term.”

“Yeah, I’ll be missing his classes, that’s a fact.” Thomas agreed, trying to not let the letter affect him.
“Thank you. This was- this was a lovely surprise.”
“Well it’s not over yet, you haven’t had my present,” Jonathan said and got up to fetch something from the workshop. Jonathan took the silver pocket watch from the large velvet-lined box he had taken from the safe in the workshop. There were seven in total, each made by a member of the Barrow family. They had been examination pieces of sorts. It had become something of a family tradition in the Barrow household that they end their apprenticeship by designing and assembling a silver watch that was worthy of being sold, if it was found satisfactory then they could keep it as their own and set about working for the business full time. It was his dad’s watch, fixed and good as new.

“I’m sorry it took me so long. The bloody thing was just plain baffling if I’m honest. Drove me barmy, it did,” his uncle said, “Now, I know I don’t need to tell you to be careful with it. But keep it safe, I don’t want to fix it again if I can help it.”

“You got it working again!” Thomas felt like he was going to cry. He popped the case open to see the movement ticking away behind the glass, steady and elegant, as perfect as a beating heart. To his surprise, there was something else inside the case, a folded scrap of paper. He unfolded it and found that it was a train ticket for Old Trafford. “This is for tomorrow,” he said, stunned.

“Yes.”

“The Rose Match is tomorrow.” Not just a Rose Match, the Rose Match. The game that would probably be the deciding factor on whether Lancashire or Yorkshire won the championship. Truthfully, Lancashire had the odds against them, Yorkshire had been unbeaten all season while Lancashire had already lost two games. Still, a win could improve their chances.

“Why else would we go to Old Trafford?”

“But it’s Friday, we have to work.”

“Well, I won’t tell the boss if you don’t.” Jonathan laughed.

“Are we all going?” Thomas asked.

“Well, actually, I’m more of a football man myself,” David said. “I mean, I tried to like it because you and dad liked it so much, but by ‘eck is it boring. Who plays a game for three days?”

“I…don’t understand anything about that game,” Agnes confessed. “And I probably never will.”

“Looks like it’s just you and me, lad.” Jonathan chuckled.

*  

Dearest Thomas,

Many happy returns. I can barely believe you are almost a young man when it seems like it was only yesterday that I was cradling you in my arms.

They tell me that I am well enough to receive visitors and hope that you will all come and see me if you are able.

I can’t tell you how sorry I am for what I did. I was weak and had lost my faith, but I
understand now that I was unwell and not thinking clearly. I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you then, and it destroys me that I can’t protect you now. When I heard about what had happened to your father my heart broke in two, even more so because I knew I was powerless to do anything.

Be good for your uncle but do not let him become a bad influence on you. Please write to me if there are any problems.

Love as always,

Mum

Thomas put the letter down and sighed. He had purposefully delayed reading it until after the match but it had haunted his thoughts nonetheless. The first day of the match had been disappointing with Yorkshire taking a lead of seven runs. To make things worse it had begun raining as they had ridden the train home and hadn’t let up since, so there hardly seemed to be any point in going back tomorrow. Still, there had been a large turnout, and the cricket grounds had almost been at full capacity. Rose matches were always popular as the ancient animosity between York and Lancaster had trickled down into a friendly sporting rivalry.

“Hmm, not good news I take it.” Jonathan said from his workbench, spotting the letter.

“She wants to see me.”

“Oh, well, do you want to? It’s not a problem, I can take you.”

“Why does she think you’re a bad influence?”

“Excuse me?” Jonathan paled.

Thomas handed him the letter. “It says so, there. Why has nobody ever mentioned you? What could you have possibly done that was so bad?”

Jonathan finished reading the letter and looked visibly devastated.

“After everything my brother did to you, after what she tried to do, I’m the bad influence,” he muttered “I don’t know what I was expecting. I didn’t do anything, Thomas. I’m just different from them, and people don’t like things that are different.”

“You heard about what happened then?” Thomas said hesitantly.

“Well, I had to take over paying her hospital bills, didn’t I?”

“It’s my fault she’s there.”

“Thomas, you didn’t do anything wrong. She’s in a safe place, with people who’ll help her. I’ve visited Cheadle, it has a good reputation.” Jonathan said although Thomas had a hard time believing him.

“I don’t think I want to go and see her,” Thomas said decisively. He wasn’t entirely sure what was different about uncle Jonathan, but he knew what it felt like to be treated as such and he remembered all too vividly what his mother had done to him though he tried his best to forget about it, or at least
put it away somewhere in the more disagreeable corners of his mind.

“Are you sure?”

“I…just can’t. I know she’s my mum and I should forgive her but-”

“Well, that’s alright too.”
The Owls of Manchester Grammar

The school had been founded in 1515 and stood between Manchester Cathedral and Cheetham’s School, the home of the oldest English public library. The school had modernised considerably in recent years with a new building which housed the science block and gymnasium. The school had also introduced a prefect system to keep order and invested heavily in extracurricular activities and sports.

Thomas had built Manchester Grammar up in his mind as some sort of unobtainable dream, but upon becoming a student there, he realised that one school was very much like another. There were differences, of course. It was an all-boys school which he liked but made him feel uneasy, as though the homogeneity made it even clearer that he didn’t fit in. Most of the boys were fee-paying students whose families were considerably better off than his; the sons of doctors and lawyers, bankers and businessmen, and the occasional distant relative of a lord. Thomas was hardly the only working-class student though, at least twenty percent had been sponsored by the school’s trust and ten boys from the area including Thomas had been admitted through state funding.

This had caused a degree of trouble as it had created an ‘us and them’ situation in their form. The MGS boys had all known each other since they were five and already had long established friendships and cliques. The scholarship boys had all been selected from the surrounding schools and, apart from two lads from Moss Side, didn’t know one another but stuck together out of necessity. They were viewed with a mixture of curiosity, hostility and fear from the rest of their form, where they were outnumbered two to one.

“It’ll settle down in no time.” His uncle had reassured him “It’s awful being new but soon enough you’ll all be friends and won’t remember a time when you weren’t.”

Thomas hadn’t stood out as much as he had expected, in fact he had miraculously gone through his first week without incident. The only ‘uniform’ the school required was the school cap which had stripes in sky and navy blue with a silver owl pin. It made him look like a right wally, but it was easily concealed on the walk home even if taking it off was against the rules. At school, his clothes were a little shabbier than the other boys but respectable enough. Phyllis, in the absence of their mother, had taught him and his siblings how to take care of their clothes properly, how to wash and iron their shirts and underwear on wash day, how to prepare spot solutions to remove stains, and how to make repairs that were invisible at first glance. Boys being boys, even his wealthier classmates still had stains and rips in their clothing, so overall, he had been able to blend in.

A few days before the start of term, Jonathan had taken him to the barbers for the first time, when he previously had to endure his sister’s doomed haircutting attempts with a pudding bowl. The man they went to was Italian although he had learned English with a Mancunian accent. To his surprise, the gentleman had greeted Jonathan with a kiss on each cheek as though they were old friends. His uncle explained later that that was how they did things in Europe, but Thomas was sceptical. Still, the barber made swift work on him with his scissors and straight razor and somehow made an ordinary short back and sides look like the latest thing in fashion. For once, he thought he looked half decent, more grown up.
Although he struggled to make friends, much like before, the other scholarship boys had considered him a part of their group. It was nice to be included even if his fellow members were exactly the type who would give him a beating after school in any other situation. For now, he was one of them and their small group stuck together at dinner and morning break, where Thomas did his best to keep his head down and be as invisible as possible.

Social worries aside, Thomas had to admit that MGS was indeed a good school. The lessons were challenging and covered a wider variety of subjects than his last school which concentrated mainly on the three Rs and only devoted an hour or two each day to science or the humanities. Here, each subject had its own teacher and his form had to move to different classrooms for each lesson. Thomas’s form spent much of their time in the science labs and the mathematics classroom. They focused on learning French and German with only a basic introduction to Latin and were exempt from learning Greek. Thomas found French to be the most difficult but luckily uncle Jonathan was always on hand to help, although he struggled to answer why the French and Germans had to assign a seemingly random gender to everything.

Unlike his old school, MGS provided hot dinners. Perhaps to most of the students, it was a simple fare of lamb stew, liver and onions, Lancashire hotpot, and the like, always served with potatoes and cabbage and some sort of stodgy suet pudding for dessert, supposedly just the thing for growing boys. To Thomas and his comrades, it was an unexpected luxury, and he had to restrain himself from wolfing everything down and going back for seconds.

Then there were the clubs that took place at lunchtimes or after school. If you could think of it there was probably a club for it. At the end of his first week, the signup sheets had been organised. To Thomas’s dismay, when he went to check the noticeboard at the end of the day, he found that cricket was not due to start until the Lent term, and the only team sports on offer during the autumn were Lacrosse and Association Football. He signed up to try out for football, not knowing exactly what Lacrosse even was and figuring it was better to go for a game he knew the rules to. There wasn’t much else he was interested in. The music clubs were out of the question as he could barely carry a tune and had never so much as touched a musical instrument. Photography club looked interesting, but the material fees were too steep. The Dramatic Society sounded too dramatic, Junior Debate Society, too political, Literary Society, maybe.

“What are you thinking?” said a familiar voice behind him. He turned to see Matthew Crawley watching him deliberate. Since arriving at the school, he had seen the older boy once or twice at dinnertime but hadn’t been brave enough to approach him. He was in a higher year than him and a fee-paying student and therefore the pair of them had little reason to talk to one another.

“I don’t know.” Thomas replied, “What would you recommend?”

“Well, the debate lads are alright. But I suppose I’m a little biased.” Crawley laughed. “I’m their secretary this year. Perhaps you could join the model engineering club? They’ve been known to build a few clocks in their time.”

“No thanks, I get enough of that at home,” Thomas said. He had worked non-stop over the summer and had saved a princely sum of almost two pounds and ten shillings. He had also become confident enough in servicing watches that he could work on them without supervision.

“Mother loved the watch you picked out, by the way,” Crawley said, as earnestly as if Thomas had designed the thing himself.

“Did she, now? I’m glad to hear it. How’s she doing?”

“Putting a brave face on things, but I think she’s finding it quite difficult over there. I know they keep
the civilian volunteers away from the fighting, but I can’t help but worry.”

“Oh.”

“And to make things worse, Whittaker spread the rumour that I was lying about the whole thing and that she’d really run off with a fancy man.” He scoffed, “As though a woman working is so implausible. I don’t understand what his problem is. I stupidly invited him to my birthday party a few years ago and he saw my collection of insect specimens and to this day everyone still calls me Creepy Crawley.”

“At least it’s a clever nickname, usually they just call me a ponce.” Thomas offered, feeling a little uncomfortable that Crawley was offering up such personal information and also because he was reminded of his own mother, rotting away at Cheadle Royal and waiting for him to write. He had been wracked with guilt all summer, but every time he sat down to write her a letter he froze up and couldn’t put pen to paper. “You shouldn’t let it bother you. Just be happy she’s alright.”

“I suppose.”

Thomas had been no stranger to bullying in his old school, and honestly, Crawley’s complaints sounded like small potatoes compared to what he’d been through. This year was going to be different. After everything that had happened with dad, he was less inclined to put up with that sort of nonsense, although he would defend himself if he had to. He might not have been able to stand up to a grown man but there was no way in hell he was going to take it from some little posh git.

Before he had been consumed with getting back at the people who hurt him, Marcie Morton episode included, but thinking that way had only made him even more miserable. He had taken to stealing from the other children purely for the vindictive pleasure of it, a marble here or a handful of mint humbugs there, although he always stopped short of taking money. Once he had stolen a crown from their teacher Mrs Gallagher’s purse and planted it on a boy who had been particularly vile to him. She had made them all turn out their pockets and despite the boy’s protests of not knowing where it came from the old woman had caned his palm so hard that it started bleeding. Thomas had thought that he would have felt better at seeing it, but it had left him shaken and ashamed.

“I might join the Harriers,” Thomas suggested, mostly to change the subject to something more upbeat.

“Are you joking? They make you train at six in the morning.”

“Well, I live nearby, so it wouldn’t be too bad,” Thomas replied, knowing he was normally too restless to sleep in anyway. Besides if he was going to settle for football that winter he would need to build up his stamina and cross-country running would do exactly that.

“Better you than me.”

“What clubs are you in, then?”

“Debate, obviously, and I’m also in Chess Club and the Literary society.”

“I was thinking about that one, actually.” He had thought about chess as well, he remembered how to play, but his dad had never had the patience to teach him properly and their games had usually ended in him losing his temper and storming off.

“You enjoy reading? I know the modern school doesn’t study literature in as much detail as we do, so it would make up for that if it was something you were interested in. They’ve also put together a reader’s library that you can borrow from if you become a member.”
“Well, who could say no to that?” Thomas said and put his name down. “So that’s football, running, and literature.” That was probably enough. The Literature Society only met on Fridays in the break after dinnertime, but the other two were more of a commitment with the Harriers meeting before school every morning and football practice taking place twice a week after school at the Salford recreation ground.

“You’re trying out for football too?” Crawley asked. “So am I, but only because my father insisted. I doubt I’ll get on the team.”

“Well, you never know. I might not either.”

“Either way, I live right next to the playing field. Would you like to come around for tea after the tryouts?”

“Only if you show me your insect collection.” Thomas joked.

“Well, I suppose I’ll have to.” Matthew laughed.

“Alright then. I’ll have to ask my uncle, mind, but he probably won’t object.” Thomas decided, and let Matthew write his address in his notebook. He couldn’t stop smiling as he left the school building and all through his walk home. For the first time in his life, Thomas Barrow had been invited to a friend’s house.
Matthew Crawley used one of his father's old watches. It was open faced with a chronometer and pulse register with a slightly dented silver case.

For all his bravado, Thomas had made a shaky start with the Harriers, starting with a three-mile run that took him over half an hour. Even some of the boys who were running five miles had finished before him. By the time he made it to the end, his chest was on fire and his legs were unsteady.

“Well, you made it to the end without stopping, at least. Not everyone can do that on their first try.” Mr Haddington, the gym teacher had told him. He was a grizzled man with a barrel chest and the only teacher that spoke with an accent. He had played football for Newton Heath when the club had first started. “I take it you're a smoker, er…which one are you again?”

“Barrow, sir.” How could he tell? Did he smell or something? Did the yellow stain on his finger give him away?

“Barrow. Right. Well, boys who smoke never get very far in athletics. I’d pick one or the other if I were you.”

“Right. I mean, yes, sir.”

“We’ll try the same again tomorrow and see if you can beat your time.”

He had felt a little embarrassed that Mr Haddington had taken him down a peg and felt even worse when he reached the Gymnasium changing rooms. He felt woefully inadequate compared to the other boys who already had whiskers and had grown tall and muscular. Granted he was the youngest of the group, but it still stung that he was small and skinny with a smoker’s cough. He fought the urge to sneak out for a fag before the morning assembly started, partly because getting caught was a sure-fire way of getting a week of detention and partly because Mr Haddington might have had a point. He had never felt so rotten after running about before he had taken up the habit, and now he was wheezing away like an old man.

“I won’t be back for tea on Friday,” Thomas announced that evening as they all ate at the kitchen table. Jonathan had cooked some sort of French stew with beef shin and onions and red wine. It was the most delicious thing he’d ever tasted. With Agnes back at school, at least in the mornings, they had all needed to pitch in more around the house and if Thomas had known his uncle was so good at cooking he would have suggested the change much sooner.
“Do you think your football thing’ll go on that long?” his brother asked.

“Actually, I’ve been invited to a friend’s house,” Thomas said, trying not to smile.

“A friend, eh?” Jonathan chuckled. “And where might this friend live?”

Thomas passed him the torn page from his jotter where Matthew had written his address.

“The Cliff?” his uncle exclaimed. “You really have gone up in the world.”

“It’s not like that. It’s Matthew Crawley.” Thomas protested. He hadn’t considered that when Matthew said he lived near the playing field, he had really meant that he lived in Broughton, one of the more fashionable suburbs for the upper middle classes where the height of the cliff kept a safe distance from the dirty city and even dirtier masses below.

“Oh, the doctor’s son. Well, good for you. I’ll come and pick you up at eight, yeah? It’s a bit of a way and I don’t want you wandering about after dark.” Jonathan continued and ruffled his hair. “Don’t want the Crawley’s thinking you’re some sort of feral urchin, do we?”

To his surprise, Thomas didn’t flinch at the contact like he usually did when someone touched him unexpectedly. Jonathan was always kind and fair with him and his siblings, but he rarely displayed much in the way of physical affection and his touches were always perfunctory like holding their hands to cross a busy road or carrying David up to their bedroom after he fell asleep in the workshop. His dad had been a terror, but he had been just as likely to embrace them as deliver a blow, even more so when mum was still around. Thomas had been so preoccupied with getting used to their new living situation, that it hadn’t occurred to him that Jonathan might have been struggling with the same thing. He was simply a single man with the responsibility of a family suddenly thrust upon him with no idea what he was supposed to do as he had once told Mr Meredith all those months ago.

Friday soon arrived, and Thomas was packing his school bag when his sister cornered him in the kitchen.

“Best make sure you wash before you go and wear your best collar and short trousers, or they’ll think we’re common.” Agnes nagged, and Thomas rolled his eyes. They were common, and no amount of gold and jewels on the shop floor would change that.

“You sound like mum,” Thomas said without thinking, and immediately regretted it. “I mean, how particular she always was.”

“I’m going to see her on Sunday.” His sister announced.

“What? On your own?”

“No, Jonathan’s taking me. You should come with us.” Of course, Agnes would have agreed to visit, always putting duty first and letting everyone know what a martyr she was.

“What about David?”
“We’ll send him to a friend’s house for the day. I don’t want him seeing that place.”

“I can’t.”

“She keeps asking after you in her letters, I think it might help.”

“I just can’t. I don’t want to talk about it.” Thomas shouted and rushed to leave the shop without eating breakfast.

Once he reached the school for the Harrier’s meeting, Thomas focused everything he was feeling into pushing himself. His anger, his sadness, his nightmares, his desperate craving for a cigarette, all spurred him on down roads and around the park until he finished on a personal best of twenty minutes and finished third out of the boys running the three-mile circuit.

“Now we’re talking, Barrow. Keep it up and we’ll try bumping you up to five miles.” Mr Haddington said encouragingly.

Thomas proceeded to throw himself into his schoolwork, and not even Whittaker’s clowning could distract him. The boy was older than him but had been kept back a year, and Thomas suspected, the only reason he hadn’t been expelled was that his mother was an heiress to the Aerated Bread Company fortune and had given a generous endowment to the school’s trust.

Still, all the work in the world couldn’t calm his thoughts. He would have to face his mother sooner or later. He needed to talk to someone who wasn’t embroiled in the whole situation. Jonathan was clearly reluctant about the visit even though he hadn’t forbidden them from going. He had no idea how Agnes truly felt on the matter, but she clearly believed it was the right thing to do. It was the Christian thing to do, wasn’t it? To forgive.

He remembered that Mr Meredith had once been set to join the church, perhaps he could help. That would certainly be preferable to talking to Reverend Gainsborough who seemed to take exceptional pleasure in putting the fear of God into young children. He worked out that if he missed dinner he would be able to make it to his old school to talk to him during midday break and be back in time for the afternoon’s lessons. He would have to skip the Literary Society meeting, but he was sure that this would be more important. Really, only the prefects were allowed to leave the school during break times, but if he was sneaky about it, he could be there and back without getting caught. He patted his dad’s silver watch in his pocket. With perfect time on his side, he knew he could make it.

“Thomas? Not that it isn’t delightful to see you again, but shouldn’t you be at school?” his former teacher exclaimed, looking up from his marking as Thomas knocked on his classroom door, there was a half-eaten cheese sandwich on waxed paper and an apple on his desk.

“I slipped out at dinnertime, I can’t stay long.” Thomas explained, “It’s only that I wanted to ask you something, sir.”
“Of course. And please, I’m not your teacher anymore, you can call me Richard.”

“I don’t know about that, sir. Only if someone hurt you and you knew that they weren’t…themselves when it happened, should you forgive them?”

“Well, that would depend on the situation, Thomas. Why? Has something happened?” Mr Meredith, or rather, Richard said looking concerned.

“No. It’s nothing really.”

“Because if something’s wrong, you know you can talk to me about it. Consider this classroom a safe haven.” His former teacher continued.

“I appreciate that, sir. Say, forgiving this person might help them get better, would it be best to just say you’d forgiven them even though you didn’t mean it? Or would that be lying?”

“Is this about your mother?” Richard cut in, suddenly looking very serious.

“How do you know about that? Did Jonathan tell you about that?” Thomas cried.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“A few months ago.” So, they were friends...

“Well, what did he say?”

“He thinks seeing her will only upset you. He also gave me the impression that she was trying to manipulate you into seeing her. Although, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention that I told you that.”

“Oh, but is she getting better? My sister wants me to see her this weekend. Really laid it on thick and everything.”

“From what I’ve read about your mother’s condition, people don’t get better, and there is no cure. All they can do is make sure she’s safe and protected. Besides, you’re a child, her wellbeing isn’t your responsibility.” his former teacher sighed, “Remember, it’s your decision. If you think it’ll help with your peace of mind, then you should go. If you’d rather put it behind you, then don’t.”

“I really don’t know.”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with needing more time to think it over. Tell your sister you’re not ready yet, I’m sure she’ll understand.”

“Thanks Mr M.”

“Any time.”

“Sir, if you’re friends with my uncle then why don’t you come and visit?”

“He likes to keep some things private. As far as you’re concerned, I’m a passing acquaintance.”

“But that’s silly.”

“Oh, I quite agree. But it’s his decision, I suppose.” Richard said sadly.
"I should head back."

"Yes, of course. I hope I was of some help, at least. And feel free to drop in, although perhaps not in the middle of a school day next time."

"Where were you earlier? You missed a reading of Heart of Darkness." Crawley asked as they left the playing fields. Thomas had played decently although there were plenty who did better. Still, he had made it onto the under 14’s team as goalkeeper while Matthew hadn’t made the cut.

"I forgot my boots, I needed to run home and fetch them." Thomas lied.

"That’s too bad. It was really interesting."

They walked up the steep road that ran parallel to the edge of the Cliff leading to handsome tree-lined roads of new and expensive houses. It was so quiet and green, Thomas could hardly believe they were still in the city. It felt as though they were in a quiet village in the country, not in the middle of Salford. Crawley’s house was the grandest Thomas had ever seen with a large garden full of apple trees. They employed a cook and a maid and had a gardener who came once a week. The place was airy and modern with Morris and Co curtains and deep oriental rugs offset slightly by a strange collection of anatomical drawings and models, botanical illustrations and taxidermy specimens which adorned the shelves and walls. Thomas was afraid to touch anything lest he broke something of value. The place was like a museum and just as quiet, compared to the cramped living conditions above the shop where the thin walls and creaky floors meant he could hear everything his family was doing at all times, and his only moments of true privacy were in the toilet in the back yard.

"Father works late most days, so it’ll probably just be us." Matthew said. "Are you hungry at all?"

Thomas’s stomach rumbled in response and he remembered that he hadn’t eaten that day.

"I’m starving."

"I usually eat at six, but I can ask for some sandwiches or something."

Thomas checked his watch, it was already five o’clock. “It’s alright, I can wait,” he replied remembering his manners, even though he was ravenous.

"I say, what a beautiful watch," Matthew exclaimed.

"Thanks, it belonged to my father," Thomas explained. "He passed away quite recently."

"I’m so sorry. And your mother?"

"Sorry?" the question rattled him since his mother seemed to be a prime topic of conversation today.

"You live with your uncle, correct. So, I assume she’s no longer with us."

"She’s not with us, no," Thomas said and although it wasn’t technically a lie he hated himself for it anyway. His first friend and he was already keeping secrets.
“That’s dreadful,” Matthew said with a kind of pity that Thomas didn’t feel comfortable with. Luckily, they were interrupted by a shrill barking from down the corridor and an elderly border terrier shuffled into the room.

“Hello, who’s this?” Thomas said, grateful for an opportunity to change the subject.

“That’s Scamp. He probably needs a walk if you’re up for it.”

“I’d love to,” Thomas said.
Thomas had imagined that upon arriving at Manchester Grammar, Matthew Crawley would be the Scud East to his Tom Brown, but after properly getting to know the other boy he realised that Crawley had more in common with George Arthur in the sense that although he was kind and intelligent, he was perhaps a little too sensitive for his own good. Thomas put it down to him being an only child, and that he might have developed a thicker skin if he had a sister like Agnes to boss him around and fight with him.

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At first Thomas felt uneasy being in the Crawley house. It was too grand and too quiet. Compared to the shop, it was like a house from the future with gas lights and hot running water and an indoor bathroom. Thomas had been under the impression that Matthew saw him as some sort of charity case, but as the afternoon went on in that oppressive quiet he realised that the other boy was probably just lonely. Neither of them really had any close friends, but Thomas at least had the advantage of having a family to come home to. With Matthew’s mother helping with the war effort in South Africa and his father working long hours at the Royal Infirmary, Matthew only had their two servants, Edna and Mrs Reed, for company. The three of them would eat their evening meals in the kitchen, four of them now that Thomas was invited, and although the two women saw to his every need and included him in their mealtime conversations, they were both far too busy with the running of the household to offer any significant company.

“You’re the watchmaker’s son, aren’t you?” Edna the maid said to him as they sat down to a supper of oxtail and macaroni soup and bread pudding with custard.

“That’s right, miss.” The food was so delicious, and Thomas was so hungry that he had to force himself to eat slowly lest he came across as some sort of starving street urchin.
“I love the new shop front, it looks like it should be a boutique in Paris not on Oldham Street.”

“And what would you know about Paris? You’ve never been south of Macclesfield.” Mrs Reed, the cook-housekeeper said, rolling her eyes.

“Well, it’s what I imagine Paris to be like from the magazines.”

“If you didn’t stay up all night reading those magazines, maybe you’d be up for work on time.”

“You used to go to St Michaels with our Marcie, didn’t you Thomas.”

“You’re a Morton?”

“Yeah, I’m her older sister.” Now that she’d pointed it out, Thomas did notice a family resemblance.

“I’m… sorry?” Thomas said, turning red as a beetroot.

“Oh, she’ll get over it, it were only a crush.”

“Oh leave him alone, Edna. This is hardly appropriate talk for the dinner table.” Mrs Reed scolded.

“I didn’t know you had a girl,” Matthew said after they had finished eating and gone back upstairs.

“I don’t. She never said anything. In fact, she was a right piece of work. I’m not a mind reader, how was I supposed to know.” Thomas babbled feeling like he was about to die of shame. Trust him to visit the very house where Marcie Morton’s sister worked. Although there were so many children in that family that he was certain to run into one of them eventually.

“Alright. No need to get defensive,” Matthew laughed. “I envy you for going to a mixed school, the only chance we get to talk to girls at MGS is when we have to host a dance every year for the Manchester High School for Girls. It’s so intimidating, they group together in packs and laugh at anyone who asks one of them to dance.”

“Well you haven’t missed much.” Thomas sniffed. The conversation made him feel awkward for some reason, the same way he always felt when there was talk about going out with girls, as though everyone else knew something he didn’t.

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Jonathan came to collect him at eight o’clock as promised and by the time he made it downstairs, he had managed to charm Edna when she answered the door and had her gushing over the diamond rings in the shop window.

“Ah, there you are. Are you ready to go? Do you have all your things?” His uncle asked when he saw him on the landing.

“Yes.”

“Well, miss, thank you for looking out for the lad. I hope he behaved himself.”

“He was good as gold, Mr Barrow.”
“Thank you for inviting me,” Thomas said to Matthew, remembering his manners. “Thank you, Edna.”

They said their goodbyes and Thomas fell into step with his uncle as they began their walk down the hill back towards the city centre. The sun had already set and the streetlamps flickered with gaslight.

“So, did you have a good time?” Jonathan asked.

“Yeah, it was nice. Well, Matthew was nice, that house was like a mausoleum.”

“You could invite him to ours, next time. Not that there’s much to do, mind, but you could take him around town.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“How was football?”

“You’re looking at the new goalie for the lower school team.”

“Am I now? Well, this calls for a celebration. Do you fancy some chips?”

“Yes please, I’m starving. I didn’t eat all day and then I didn’t want to be rude and ask Mrs Reed for seconds.”

“Well then, we’ll have to fix that.”

When they reached Deansgate, Jonathan bought them a portion each, wrapped in old newspapers and soaked in malt vinegar. They sat on the steps of the Albert Memorial in front of the town hall and watched the last of the workers and shopkeepers head home for the night. Thomas felt the heat of the food in his lap warding off the early autumn chill in the air.

“Will it be alright though?” he asked tentatively.

“Will what?”

“I’ll have to buy a new kit and, the jersey alone is eight shillings, and I’ll need proper boots for it. And some of the matches are on Saturdays, what will I do about work?”

Jonathan chuckled and shook his head.

“Don’t worry about the kit, kid. I’ll take care of it. And as far as the shop’s concerned, well, don’t let it get in the way of your childhood, Thomas. I started working in that place when I was nine. I know plenty of people had it a lot worse than me, but I felt trapped like everything was predetermined for me, and I was going to be stuck fixing watches and getting smacked around by my dad for the rest of my life. Sound familiar?”

Thomas cringed, he knew that feeling all too well.

“Really?”

“Oh yes. I was a mess, for years, even after he died. In Paris, I was successful and…didn’t have to worry about certain things, but on the inside, I was a lost soul. I did some stupid things. I was unkind to people who didn’t deserve it.”

“What changed?”
"A second chance." Jonathan smiled and something warm rose up in Thomas’s chest.

“What if I’m a lost soul?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Mum always said so. She always said I had the devil in me. She thought I’d died when I was born, and he’d taken the opportunity to jump into a vacant body. I know that were just the illness talking, but I can’t help but wonder whether she were right sometimes.”

“Funny, she used to say similar things about me.” Jonathan laughed. “Do I seem particularly devilish to you?”

“Well, you do have that moustache.” Thomas joked.

“What’s wrong with my moustache?”

“You look like a theatre villain.”

“Yeah, alright, don’t make a man self-conscious.” Jonathan laughed and threw a chip at him. Thomas quickly dodged it in a fit of giggles. “I was trying to say there were nought wrong with you, but it turns out you’re a judgemental little bastard. Seems like you’re not a real Barrow unless you have a bit of the Devil in you.” He sighed “I’m serious, when I first met you, you were all closed off, sometimes it felt like you weren’t even there. And little by little I’ve watched you come back to life, and honestly, I couldn’t be prouder. You’re not lost, Thomas, you’re finding your way.”

“Everything’s so different now. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I worry that this is all a dream.” Thomas thought aloud. He didn’t want to mention that he had a recurring nightmare where he would get home from school and see a trail of wet footprints leading to the workshop and just know in his gut that his dad had managed to climb out of the canal, returned from a watery grave. Just before he woke up in a cold sweat, he knew, without even opening the door that he was furious with him.

“Well, I’m not going anywhere,” Jonathan reassured him. “I want us to be a real family, Thomas. The kind that looks out for one another. I want to give the three of you a chance at a better life. I want you all to finish school and have choices that I never had. I want to be your second chance because God knows the three of you were mine.”

Thomas could feel his eyes well with tears, but he’d be damned if he was going to start crying in the street. He wiped his nose on his sleeve and crumpled the greasy newspaper in his lap into a ball. “It’s getting late. They’ll be wondering what’s happened to us.”


Sunday came, and Thomas’s good mood quickly evaporated as Jonathan and Agnes left for the hospital after they returned from church. Jonathan looked visibly nervous at the prospect of seeing his sister in law again, and from the few details his uncle had confided in him, he probably had good reason to be. Agnes hadn’t argued when he said he wasn’t ready to go with them, perhaps Jonathan had had a word with her about it, but her resignation had somehow made him feel even more wretched if that was even possible.
He was down to his last cigarette but was saving it for an emergency. He had been rationing what was left of the pack deciding that once it was finished he wouldn’t be buying any more. It was dirty, it literally burned through his wages and worst of all it made him out of breath. When he felt anxious in the future, he would just have to think of something else to calm him down, perhaps callisthenics or jigsaw puzzles. For the time being, after enlisting David’s help, he spent the day scrubbing the floors, beat the carpets and scoured the pots and pans and kept the range fire going before sitting down to tea and bread and jam.

“Why would Agnes even want to go and see her?” David grumbled. Thomas looked up sharply. They had done their best to shield David from everything that happened but there were still rumours floating around and he wasn’t sure how much he knew.

“She’s still our mum.” Thomas said, “and she’s not well.”

“No excuse for what she did.”

“David, what do you know exactly?” Thomas asked.

“More than you all think I do. I know she tried to kill herself and tried to take you along with her.” David replied. Perhaps it was natural that he would be angry, Thomas had some distant memories of their mother being present and relatively well, but David had been so neglected by her that as an infant he had thought Phyllis Baxter was his mother.

“That’s not quite what happened,” Thomas said. “Or at least, I don’t think that were her intention.”

“Then what…?”

“Who knows what she were thinking. She thought God were talking to her and all sorts.”

“It’s still horrible. Stop making excuses for her, and for dad.” David was openly crying now. “I don’t care if it makes me a sinner, I’m glad he’s dead and good riddance to him.”

“You mustn’t say things like that,” Thomas said worriedly, as though somehow speaking ill of the dead would summon him back again to give them both the belt.

“I’ll say as I please,” David scowled, “I hate what he did to you and I hate that I couldn’t do nothing.”

“You did more than you think,” Thomas said. “You’re my best friend, do you know that?”

“Well, now that you have more than one friend I can actually take that as a compliment.” David smiled, wiping his eyes with a dirty handkerchief. Thomas kicked him playfully under the table.

After they returned home that evening, something seemed off between Agnes and Jonathan. Both seemed visibly upset and Agnes went straight to her room without even telling them how the visit went. At first, Thomas had thought something might have been wrong with their mother, that perhaps her health had taken a turn for the worse and Agnes was just worried for her. However, when he asked, Jonathan assured him that his mother was doing perfectly well given the circumstances and had her own bedroom and enjoyed attending chapel services and growing
vegetables in the hospital’s communal gardens.

Still, Agnes’s mood continued, and Thomas could hear them arguing downstairs as he lay in bed the following night, kept wide awake with anxiety and nicotine cravings. He severely regretted quitting, since the withdrawals made it hard to fall asleep, his nerves were rattled and he couldn't stop eating. The frosty atmosphere at home refused to go away, as much as Thomas tried to drown it out with schoolwork, football, and running, (he was down to seventeen minutes). Jonathan was usually able to bring out something resembling a sense of humour in his sister but in the days that followed the hospital visit, she had hardly said two words to him and did her best to avoid him at all costs. Jonathan, to his credit, was attempting to carry on as normal but seemed preoccupied when they were in the workshop.

All of this came to a head at the beginning of October when a letter came for her in the afternoon post. The paper was far nicer than anything her friends used, and their address was written in a neat and unfamiliar hand.

“What’s this when it’s at home?” he asked as he handed it over.

Agnes eagerly opened the letter and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Agnes, who’s it from?"

“I’ve been offered a job and I’m going to accept it.”

“A job? Why would you be applying for jobs?”

“It’s for a housemaid position at Haigh Hall. I went for an interview on Monday. Phyllis put in a good word for me.”

“But you’ve only just gone back to school. Why would you go into service?” Surely the whole point of finishing school was to find something better than service.

“There’s nothing wrong with service. It’s good honest work. Besides, I can’t stay here no more. Not with him.”

“Agnes, what are you talking about?”

“Thomas, have you noticed anything… strange about our Jonathan?”

“You mean more than usual?”

“Mum told me all about him and the company he keeps. It’s disgusting. We’ll all be condemned by association.” She was so striking in her conviction that her eyes had darkened from hazel to almost black. Thomas was reminded of their mother when she had one of her raving episodes and he struggled to stave off the panic that welled up in him. Company? Honestly, Thomas had no idea what sort of company Jonathan kept aside from Mr Meredith, and he was practically the opposite of bad company.

“I don’t understand. If you would only tell me what’s wrong…”

“It would be wrong to even talk about it, Thomas. I can’t live under the same roof as him another second, knowing what I know. Now, I’d never ask you to leave that school, if any of us can go on to better things, it's you. But you can’t trust him, Thomas. You’d be wise to leave here as soon as you’re able and to take David with you.” Without explaining anything more, she went upstairs, presumably to her room to start packing, leaving Thomas alone and confused in the kitchen.
He rushed through to the workshop where Jonathan was busy melting a crucible of gold with a blow lamp.

“Did you know about this?” he shouted over the din.

Jonathan stopped what he was doing and removed his goggles. “Don’t you know it’s dangerous to startle a man when he’s handling molten metal. What’s the matter?”

“Agnes. Did you know she’s leaving?”

“I’m afraid so. I tried to talk her out of it but she’s very determined.”

“But you can’t just let her go. She’s not thinking right.” Thomas cried. Had the whole world gone entirely insane? Why wasn't he stopping her?

“I can’t force her to stay if she don’t want to be here. There are worse places to go than Haigh Hall. At least she’ll have Miss Baxter to look out for her, and I’ve made it clear she’s welcome back whenever she wants or if she runs into any trouble. Hopefully, she'll listen.”

“But why? Why does she think you’re so bad? What did mum tell her?”

“She told her enough, son. There was an incident twenty or so years ago, just after your grandad died, involving a raid on a masquerade ball in which I narrowly avoided getting myself arrested. What she failed to mention was that when she and your dad found out about it they gave me my marching orders or else they’d call the police themselves. Then, when they realised that your grandad had left the shop to me instead of giving the two of us an equal share, they tried to blackmail me into handing it over.”

“Well, did you tell her your side?”

“Of course, but it doesn’t change what I’ve done.”

Thomas was shocked that his parents would even attempt something so horrible. What could his uncle have possibly done that would make them behave in such a way? His father, in particular, had believed there was nothing worse than being 'a filthy little grass' and yet he had been fully prepared to turn his own brother in.

“Jonathan…did you kill someone?” Thomas asked nervously. Jonathan rolled his eyes.

“No, lad, I didn't. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to melt this lot again.” Jonathan told him, making it clear that he wasn't going to discuss the matter any further as he lit the blow lamp again, the sound of the blue flame drowning out any of Thomas's further questions.
The First Train to Wigan

Shortly after leaving home for the first time, Agnes Barrow discovered a jewellery box stashed in her luggage. Inside was a delicate chatelain in white metal complete with scissors, a miniature sewing kit, a keychain, and a Barrow Brothers watch with the initials A.B. engraved in swirling letters on its case. As her tears fell on the fine chased work, the gravity of her decision finally hit her.

Agnes sent a telegram accepting the job offer and left for Wigan the next day on the first train. She hugged David close before heading out the door but gave Jonathan the cold shoulder when he tried to say goodbye. Since Manchester Victoria was close to the school, Thomas accompanied her to the station, carrying her carpet bag in one hand and his school satchel in the other. It was beginning to grow cold and Thomas shivered in his running drawers.

“You know you don’t have to do this, don’t you?” he said once they reached the train platform.

“Oh, don’t you start,” Agnes grumbled.

“I’m serious.”

“You’ll understand when you’re older,” his sister said vaguely, “Besides, it’ll do me good to get out on my own, be independent.”

“You’ll be doing exactly what you’re doing now but with no school and no time off!” Thomas snapped.

“I’ll not argue with you, Thomas. Not when we’re saying goodbye.” Agnes said, unhappily.

“Alright. Just promise me you’ll come home if you run into any trouble.”

The call came from the platform attendant and with a final hug, Agnes boarded the third-class carriage.

“I’ll write,” she called from the open window as the train slowly departed. “Take care of David.”

Thomas fought back tears during his morning run when he reached the school, feeling as though all his troubles were just behind him. He and his sister might have fought often but that didn’t mean that he didn’t love her and wouldn’t miss her terribly now that she was gone. He knew he had not given Agnes enough credit in the past. Their parents had never raised a hand to her, but he knew she had been hurt in other ways, even if he had felt bitter about it at the time. With their mother’s illness, she had been forced to act as both nurse and housewife from an early age. Dad had pulled her out of school and she had slaved away keeping house for him on her own. Their father had insulted and belittled her so much during that time that the bright young girl who had put on puppet shows for him with her dolls and made princess costumes with Phyllis had all but disappeared leaving a grey and irritable husk. Perhaps going off on her own would be good for her even if her chosen profession would curse her to further drudgery. Perhaps being independent was exactly what she had wanted.
He finished his run in under seventeen minutes. Mr Haddington clapped him on the back, declaring that he was ready to try running five miles next time. His fellow students thought their games teacher was a harsh taskmaster, but he was popular nonetheless. He was the only working-class member of the faculty, although he and his family lived quite comfortably from his professional footballing days and current teacher’s salary. He was a good laugh and had some rather eccentric ideas about health, swearing by green vegetables, cold baths, bracing runs through the Pennines, and abstaining from alcohol and tobacco. Thomas rather agreed with the alcohol part. In fact, if he had any sort of power he would have banned the stuff. As the boys in his form turned twelve one by one and could legally buy alcohol their public house exploits were passed around for bragging rights. Whittaker, in particular, would regale his friends and anyone who’d listen about his beery misadventures. Meanwhile, Thomas and Matthew had joined the Band of Hope, the youth branch of the Temperance Movement, although they had joined more for the free tea parties and picnics than any religious conviction.

Life at the Barrow household was a little lonelier with Agnes gone. As the weeks passed and she showed no intention of coming home, David eventually moved into her old room in the attic. In the beginning, Thomas thought it was nice to have the bed to himself and a modicum of privacy but after the novelty had worn off he began to miss their midnight conversations and the warmth of an extra body as the winter drew in. He even missed the snoring. He might have been an insomniac before, but somehow being alone in the quiet made it worse. He would have dreams where he was drowning in dark waters and could feel the grip of fingers in his hair, forcing him further into the depths. He would wake up in a cold sweat, heart bursting out of his chest.

Why had he thought giving up smoking was a good idea? Although the headaches and bad moods had stopped after a few days of giving up cigarettes the cravings refused to go away. Thomas would chew his way through pencils and toothpicks without even realising it but if he kept himself busy then it wasn’t so bad. His days were filled with sport and schoolwork, chores and clocks, and keeping David out of trouble until he barely had any time for idleness. If he did, he read anything he could get his hands on, whether it was books borrowed from the free library or the literary society, the newspaper or at a stretch his dad’s old copies of The Horological Journal.

Jonathan started walking David to school and, provided he didn’t have football practice, Thomas would meet him at the end of the day and the pair would walk home together. An added benefit of this arrangement was that they would sometimes run into Mr Meredith at the schoolyard who was always interested in how Thomas was doing and would even occasionally offer them a cup of tea in his empty classroom.

With his other responsibilities encroaching so much on his time, Thomas usually only worked in the shop on Saturdays unless he had a match on. he was still interested in taking an apprenticeship, perhaps more out of family loyalty than anything else, but he felt he had hit a wall in his development and his lack of working hours wasn’t helping. Perhaps Jonathan was right, and he would find something he would rather be doing. Unfortunately, the only thing that had taken his interest so far was cricket, and he wouldn’t have an opportunity to play until the summer. While he knew that there were professional players, it seemed like an impossible dream to the likes of him.

Thomas often found himself invited over to Matthew’s house after football practice most Tuesdays and Fridays. Sometimes he was invited to stay the night and slept on a folding camp bed in Matthew’s room. He was uneasy about sleeping in such a fine house and lay awake long after his friend had fallen asleep, afraid that the slightest creak of his cot would wake him. Matthew always looked so peaceful in his sleep with his golden hair across his pillow and his thick eyelashes casting spidery shadows beneath his eyes. Thomas felt bad about staring, but he couldn’t help himself. In
those stolen moments he thought Crawley was the most beautiful person in the world.

During their days together, they would take Scamp for walks, do their homework, and play in the garden if the weather was nice. Matthew taught him to play croquet and bowls. Alternatively, they would practice with Matthew’s cricket set or put up a makeshift net between the apple trees with a length of string and play lawn tennis. As the days grew shorter with the approach of winter they opted for cards and board games when the cold drove them indoors. Thomas had yet to invite Matthew back to the shop, even though he lived closer to school. It was stupid since the other boy had already seen the place, but the shop front was far nicer than the lodgings above it, and Thomas was too embarrassed to show off his humble living conditions.

During his visits to Salford, Thomas had seen Dr Crawley no more than three times. He had run into him one evening as he was heading out the door and once at breakfast after he had stayed the night. He had found the man quite intimidating at first, he realised that he found most older men intimidating perhaps for obvious reasons, but the doctor was perfectly welcoming and seemed pleased that Matthew had someone close to his own age to keep him company.

Agnes wrote regularly, and she and Phyllis often sent their letters together to save on stamps. Thomas replied with what was happening at school and what he and David had been up to. Agnes in turn mostly wrote about the daily goings on at Haigh Hall, how beautiful the house was, how beautiful Lady Balniel was, and what the staff were squabbling about that week. It all sounded extremely boring, but Thomas supposed his sister wasn’t especially interested in his descriptions of his football matches, but he wrote about them anyway. He had proved himself as a decent goalkeeper with his quick reaction times and, so far, the under-14s team had tied one all with Macclesfield Grammar and beaten North Manchester School two nil.

There was a silent understanding that he shouldn’t write to his sister about Jonathan unless it was absolutely necessary. His uncle had written to her a few times but had not received a reply and Thomas worried that she would stop writing to him as well if he pressed the issue. It made him feel frustrated and angry that things had broken down so horribly and no one would even explain why. He had been trying to figure it out for weeks. Once Agnes had mentioned it, he had begun noticing things about Jonathan that did seem a little strange. She had said something about the company he kept so he had paid more attention to the people his uncle spoke to. Occasionally, some strange customers would come to the shop, most notably two flamboyantly dressed gentlemen (Thomas learned much later that they were music hall actors) named Ernest and Frank who sounded as though they were speaking in a code or a made-up language. To his surprise, Jonathan replied in kind and the trio chatted as though they were old friends.

Then there was the fact that he still didn’t know where Jonathan went at night. It could have been perfectly innocent, and he was just meeting friends for a few pints. After all his dad had gone out far more frequently back in the day and drank considerably more than his uncle ever did. But what if Jonathan was up to something else during these night-time outings. Thomas thought about following him but was afraid of getting caught and even more afraid of going out alone at night.

Instead, he had waited for his uncle to leave the house one Friday night and took the chance to search his uncle’s room. Of course, once he had decided to do such a thing it had felt like an eternity of waiting in his room to hear the familiar sound of footsteps on the stairs and the back door opening and shutting. To make things worse, Jonathan hadn’t felt like leaving the house since Agnes had left and it had taken weeks of waiting for an opportunity to arise. Once he had his hand on the door handle, Thomas had begun to have second thoughts. It was wrong of him to sneak around someone’s private space without their permission, the fact that he was invading his uncle’s privacy when the other man had been so good to him made him feel a shame that burned like acid in his throat. But how else would he find any answers?
With his mind made up, Thomas turned the handle and opened the door. In the dim light of his
candle, the bedroom was almost exactly the same as it had always been. His parent’s few belongings
had been packed away and replaced with Jonathan’s clothes, comb and hair pomade. A few library
books were stacked on his mother’s old bureau with a few collections of letters tied together with
string.

Thomas put down his candlestick, sat at the small desk and examined the correspondence. One of the
smaller bundles was from Phyllis Baxter as her handwriting was all too familiar, another that looked
like they were from Mr Meredith and a much larger collection from an unknown hand addressed to
his uncle’s old apartment in Paris with French stamps on the envelopes. Thomas’s French was
improving but he knew he wouldn’t be able to understand the third collection of letters. He also
knew he wouldn’t have enough time to read everything. Luckily the letters had been organised by
date and with trembling hands, he opened the most recent note from the second bundle:

My dear Jonny,

I hadn’t heard from you in so long that I thought you were still angry at me. I’m so
sorry to hear about Agnes, she’s very much missed by Miss Daniels and her
schoolmates. I wish I could have been able to talk to her and try to convince her to stay,
but alas one mustn’t speak of such things. I believe you did the right thing, painful
though it must have been, as you wouldn’t be able to do much for anyone if she had
carried out her threats. Let’s hope that she keeps her promise in return. I know things
look bleak but try to stay in good spirits.

R

Thomas replaced the letter in its envelope, his mind reeling. Had Agnes threatened their uncle with
something, perhaps if he didn’t let her go? Was that why Jonathan had let her leave instead of putting
his foot down? Thomas opened the next letter.

Jonny

You’re right of course, it was none of my business and I apologise, but I couldn’t stand
by and feign ignorance when the boy was clearly in turmoil. And I didn’t tell him
anything, although he did guess a few things. I’m afraid Thomas is far more observant
than we give him credit for, but I suppose that’s further evidence of his gifts. The truth is
I’m very fond of all the young Barrows and it hurts that I must keep my distance in this
way. Yes, I know that it’s a necessary precaution, but to love you is to love all of you
and it pains me to think that your children will never know of us and that I will never be
able to bring you home to meet my family. You must think me awfully silly, fantasising
as I do about the five of us moving to a cottage somewhere with roses around the door
and three dogs and four cats and seven chickens. I know we must make do with what
we have but a girl can dream…
Please tell me how things went with Mrs B. I keep having nightmares about her escaping the asylum and coming after you.

All my love

R

Thomas dropped the letter as though he had been burned. He knew he shouldn’t continue but he was already unfolding the next letter.

Dearest Jonny,

Firstly, I must apologise for my drunken rambling and must thank you for seeing me home safely and putting me to bed. It was very decent of you considering the circumstances. I’m afraid I might have worried you with all my talk the other night, especially if you think that our situation is anything like what I described to you. The fact that you are worried at all means that you are nothing like S. and have more decency in your little finger than he has in his entire body. All I can say is that you are most certainly not too old for me and that I am old enough now to know my own mind and make my own choices regardless of any past mistakes. So, I’m afraid you’re stuck with me.

Thinking of you,

R

And the next,

Jonny,

Was that a hint of jealousy I detected in your last letter? I assure you, you have nothing to worry about. A. has quite forgotten about me now that he has a large inheritance and all the distractions of London at his disposal. And besides, I could never take up with a student, former or current. I’ll admit that I was flattered by his infatuation with me at the time, but to take advantage of such a thing would be far worse than any agony of unrequited love. I know from experience how such an abuse of power can hurt a person, especially when they are still young and finding their way in the world. I cannot bring myself to write it all down but if you still wish to meet on Friday I can explain better.

As always, my heart belongs to you.

R
He knew this had been a bad idea and he had done it anyway and now he had seen too much. He carefully returned the notes to their envelopes, put them in the correct order and re-tied the parcel string around the bundle of letters, doing his best to leave everything as he had found it but he was so nervous he couldn’t be sure if he had done it right. He rushed back across the landing to his own bedroom, blew out his candle and climbed back into bed. What had he done? He had invaded the privacy of someone he cared about, two people in fact, and now he felt wretched.

The letters were clearly from Mr Meredith, they couldn’t be from anyone else with all the references to the school and what he assumed was the conversation they had had that day he had snuck away from school. He had no idea who S was but the A in the last letter sounded like it could have been the boy Richard had tutored before he returned to Manchester. Thomas was positive that his former teacher was the author of those letters, yet he wrote as though he was writing to a sweetheart. Images of the pair of them flashed through his mind’s eye. Holding hands under a rose archway in front of the cottage the letter had described. The two of them kissing, Jonathan carrying Mr Meredith to bed. Thomas’s stomach lurched. Was it disgust he felt, or envy? Jonathan was so old, what could Mr Meredith possibly see in him? No, that was unfair, his uncle was a good man and could charm the birds from the trees, and come to think of it, Thomas didn’t really know how old he was. To his horror, Thomas realised that he had been the one to introduce them. God, what a mess!

He might have been innocent in the ways of the world, but he had been to enough of Reverend Gainsborough’s sermons to know that that sort of thing was a sin. Come to think of it, Reverend Gainsborough certainly liked to bang on about carnal sins. Vile, he had called it, and unnatural. But Thomas couldn’t see anything vile in what he had read. The vile thing was that he had read them at all, the vile thing was what he had done that night.
Hiya, I'm posting an early chapter as the next one might be delayed a bit because of work. Hope you enjoy.

Warnings: Depictions of a PTSD trigger and referenced (past) child abuse. Some references to period typical homophobia.

Jonathan had given up on love long before he returned to England. In Paris, he had been free to do as he pleased if he kept his affairs private, but his problems had run far deeper than he’d realised. It was as though everything he touched turned to ashes and every man he ever loved was eventually driven away by his troubled spirit. Meeting Thomas was like looking through a window at his own past. He saw the weight of generations of abuse on the poor boy’s shoulders and knew that he had to do something. Not only for the boy and his siblings but also for himself. He needed to stop being selfish, to break away from the past, to move on. Easier said than done of course, but shortly after making this decision he met a young teacher who was trying to do the same thing.

Thomas lay awake long into the early hours of the morning. He had so many questions, but they would have to go unanswered as he had resolved to never go looking into things that didn’t concern him ever again. Subsequently, he had decided that it would be best if he carried on as normal and pretended that he hadn’t found out about Jonathan and his…. What could he even call it? Association? Relationship? Affair? Still, he couldn’t help but wonder about the situation. Was it the same as being married to a lady or was it different? Why was it meant to be so bad when what he’d read had seemed so ordinary? Aside from the fact that they were both men, the letters seemed no different than what any other couple might write to one another. What did they talk about? If his uncle and Mr Meredith were both that way, then how many others were there? No, it was best not to think about it. Best to forget about the whole thing.

He didn’t remember falling asleep, but he must have done so eventually since he was startled awake by a knock on his bedroom door. He glanced at his father’s watch. It was almost nine o’clock, two hours after he was supposed to get up and they were supposed to open the shop in a few minutes.

“Heello?” he said groggily.

“It’s me. Can I come in?” he heard Jonathan call, his voice muffled from behind the door.

“Yes.” Thomas squeaked in a panic. The door swung open and Thomas was horribly aware of how tall Jonathan looked in the crooked doorframe.

“You alright there, lad. You’re not coming down with something are you?” his uncle said, noticing that Thomas was still in bed.
“No, I’m fine. I’m just tired.”

“I see. Well, I got home last night and some of my things weren’t where I left them.” Funny, Thomas hadn’t heard him come home, and he had stayed up pretty late.

“Why would you think that?” Thomas asked nervously, wondering whether he could get away with lying or if he should confess and get it over with.

“My desk chair was pulled out.” Well, shit, of all the things he could have forgotten to put back. So much for feigning ignorance, and so much for pretending last night never happened. “Do you have something you want to tell me?” Jonathan pressed. Thomas didn’t say anything, couldn’t even look him in the eye, and that was enough of an answer. “That was a rotten thing to do, kid. How would you feel if I rifled through your things?”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done it. But Agnes just left out of nowhere, and you wouldn’t tell me nothin’ and…” Thomas sobbed, his voice trembling.

“No. I don’t want to hear it!” Jonathan cut him off, “You betrayed my trust. And I’m not obliged to tell you anything, by the way. I don’t owe you any explanations and you’re just going to have to accept that.” He hadn’t even raised his voice, but at that moment, towering over him, Jonathan’s tone sounded so much like his father that Thomas couldn’t stop shaking. He suddenly lurched sideways and, with a horrible retch, vomited into the empty chamber pot he kept by his bed.

“Fuckin’ hell!” Thomas heard Jonathan curse, sounding almost as panicked as he was. He realised he’d never really heard his uncle swear before. Everything felt unreal, as though he was drifting away.

“There, now. You’re alright, lad, you’re alright.” Jonathan whispered, gently rubbing Thomas’s back as he slowly stopped trembling and came back to himself. He handed Thomas a handkerchief to wipe his mouth. “You’re safe now, I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I’m so sorry.” Thomas sobbed.

“I know. I’m sorry I lost my temper. I didn’t realise you were going to…” Jonathan said awkwardly and sighed. “I’m sorry. Why don’t you stay in bed for today and we’ll talk about it later, I’ll just get this cleaned up,” He picked up the chamber pot and left. Thomas collapsed against his pillow, drained and mortified. At least he hadn’t made too much of a mess.

Thomas slept fitfully through the morning and awoke to David bringing him up a tray of tea with some bread and cheese for lunch.

“Hope it’s not catching.” His brother teased as he set the food down. Jonathan must have told him that he wasn’t feeling well.

After he had eaten a few bites, Thomas finished his homework for Monday and whiled away the rest of the afternoon reading. He got most of the way through the copy of Three Men and a Boat he had borrowed from the library, trying to distract himself until his uncle came back for their inevitable conversation. Unfortunately, not even the humorous prose of Jerome K. Jerome could distract him. He was too tired to worry about what he was going to say to Jonathan when he came back, and
honestly, he had been running himself ragged for weeks and it was nice to spend a day in bed. Keeping busy was one thing, but Thomas hadn’t had a day to himself in months.

Before long as the evening drew in, he heard David climb the narrow stairs on his way to bed and about half an hour later there were heavier footsteps on the stairs and a knock on his door.

“How are you feeling? I brought you some soup if you can manage it.” Jonathan said as he came in carrying another tray and closing the door with his foot.

“Better, thank you,” Thomas said, and gingerly ate a spoonful of the vegetable soup. It was rich with beef broth, potatoes, and leeks. Jonathan’s cooking was part of the reason why he had filled out a little that year and was no longer skin and bone. For a long time, when money had been tight, it had felt as though the family had lived on bread, bread and jam, bread and dripping, bread and bacon, bread and condensed milk from a tin. Now the combination of an improved diet and Haddington’s strict training regimen had made him strong and healthy.

“What happened this morning? Where did you go?” Jonathan asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“What do you mean?”

“You looked like you were having some sort of nervous fit this morning. Like you were somewhere else.”

“I- I don’t know. I panicked. You…looked a bit like dad when you were angry.”

“You know I’d never raise a hand to you, Thomas.” Jonathan sighed. “I promise that’ll never happen.”

“I know.”

“But you understand why I’m angry, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re not going to do it again, are you?”

“No.”

“Then it’s settled.”

“I read your letters.” Thomas blurted out. Jonathan tensed but didn’t seem surprised.

“Yeah?” his uncle said cagily, “How much did you read?”

“Enough.”

“That was private. You had no right to do that.” Jonathan sighed “But, now you know.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done it.”

“Well, it’s too for that late now, ain’t it.”

“So, the two of you are…?”

“Yes. We’re… well, there ain’t a polite word for what we are.”
“Together?” Thomas suggested.

“I suppose so, yes,” Jonathan said, relaxing a little. Perhaps he was expecting a different reaction.

“But you’re so old...” Thomas commented.

“Leave off, lad, I’m forty-three!” his uncle huffed.

“Exactly.” Thomas laughed.

“You’re taking this surprisingly well if that’s the thing you have a problem with.” Jonathan marvelled. “But, this is serious, Thomas. It’s against the law for a man to take up with another man. If we get caught, then, that’s two years hard labour at least. Richard will never be allowed to teach again, and you and David will be on your own. Do you want that to happen?” Thomas shook his head, vehemently. “Then you can’t tell anyone, Thomas, not even your brother, not even if someone tells you they already know, not under any circumstances. You know nothing. Do you understand?” Thomas nodded. “Good. Now, do you have any questions?”

“Is that why Agnes left? Because of you and Mr M?” Thomas asked.

“She doesn’t know about him,” Jonathan explained. “You’re the only one who knows about that. But your mother knows what sort of man I am and was happy to tell anyone who would listen when we visited her. Luckily, she’s been accusing people at the hospital of all sorts of outlandish things and the staff just took it with a grain of salt, but your sister took it seriously.” Thomas didn’t think lucky was quite the word he’d use.

“Why didn’t you just deny it, then?”

“I don’t know. I suppose I hoped she’d understand. I thought we were friends.”

“I can’t believe she’d just leave us like that. After everything we’ve been through.” Thomas said. “I don’t see what’s so wrong about it, you’re not hurting no one.” He could think of far worse things, like hurting your own children. Why wasn’t that a sin?

“You’re a good lad, Thomas. There’s plenty of people who aren’t nearly as understanding.” Jonathan smiled.

“What happens now?”

“I think it’s best if we carry on as normal and pretend this never happened,” Jonathan said. “I know it isn’t honest to be keeping secrets, but it’s a necessary evil, I’m afraid. Can you keep a secret, Thomas?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then we’ll say no more about it.” Thomas was a little put out that his uncle clearly wasn’t prepared to discuss the issue further. He had so many more questions but after the dressing down he’d had that day he knew he would be pushing his luck. Jonathan was right, he didn’t owe him any explanations.
Carrying on as though nothing had happened was easier said than done. For a start, he had to see his uncle’s lover every time he picked David up from school. He had felt so awkward about it that he could barely look the older man in the eye. He couldn’t be sure, but he assumed that Jonathan had probably told Mr Meredith all about their little confrontation. They both knew, and they both knew that the other one knew, and they couldn’t say anything about it. The whole situation sounded like a stupid play. His former teacher didn’t treat him any differently since David was normally present during their conversations and Thomas tried his best to do the same, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the letters. The more time went by the easier it was to put it from his mind. So what Jonathan if had taken up with Mr M? It didn’t change anything, didn’t affect his life in any way, and if he was honest he preferred it to the prospect of his uncle looking for a wife and bringing a strange woman home to meet them.

As always, Thomas focused on school and his training schedule and his football games and steeplechases. During these events he noticed that Mr Meredith would attend, sitting with the other Old Mancunians and cheering loudly when he crossed the finish line or made a save. Had he always attended school events, or was this a new development? On these days, the schoolmaster would congratulate him afterwards with a pat on the back (or offer his commiserations if their team had lost), then he and Jonathan would exchange pleasantries, shake hands, and part ways, just like passing acquaintances. If one was paying attention then they would notice how their handshake lingered a beat or two longer than usual, the double meaning to most of their small talk or the look of longing between the two men. Now Thomas began noticing these details, and the reality of their situation weighed heavily on him. To love someone and never be allowed to tell anyone or show it publicly. That sounded like a special kind of torture.

* 

On the last day of Michaelmas term, Thomas and Matthew exchanged presents. Matthew had given him a black leather-bound journal with his initials embossed on the cover, the lambskin as soft as butter with thick cream coloured pages. It was so beautiful that Thomas felt a little embarrassed by his own gift.

“I thought you could use it for the Literary Society,” Matthew said. Once they had found out that the Philosophical Society had started their own magazine, Owens, the club president, had moved that the Literary Society should do the same. Unlike the school’s official magazine, Ulula, or ‘The Owl’ which was primarily for the benefit of parents and Old Mancunians, theirs would be more like a literary journal, with essays, book reviews and original poetry and fiction. So far, they were still arguing about what to call it, torn between The Hoot, The Plume and To Wit to Who. They had all been tasked with writing something over the Christmas holidays, and since they had been discussing Heart of Darkness they had decided the first edition should have the theme of ‘Distant Lands’. Their contributions would then be edited and painstakingly copied on a battered typewriter one of the old boys had donated last year.

“It’s perfect.” Thomas maravelled. He wasn’t sure if anything he wrote could do the notebook justice. “I love it.”

Thomas had made his friend an Albert Chain, cobbled together from stray findings he had found in the workshop. Jonathan would occasionally buy old and broken jewellery at their metal value for scrap. Most of the pieces were melted down for other things but while rummaging through the collection for ideas, Thomas had discovered a tiny brass compass that was the perfect size for a fob
charm. Jonathan had helped him solder the broken bail connector and between them, they had made the chain look halfway decent.

“Sorry, it’s not very good,” Thomas said as Crawley unwrapped the gift.

Matthew opened the box and gasped. “Did you make this?” he asked.

“I put it together.” Thomas shrugged. Adding a jump ring to some chain wasn’t exactly high art but Matthew seemed delighted.

“Thomas, this is wonderful. No one’s ever made me anything before, save Mrs Reed’s birthday cakes.”

“My sister knits things for me. She’s getting better, barely any holes. Perhaps I could ask her to make you something and all.” Thomas teased.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to impose.” Matthew laughed.

“You really like it then?” Thomas asked, self-consciously.

“It’s the best gift I’ve ever received,” Matthew said, and Thomas’s heart skipped a beat.

Perhaps it was just because he was a bit sheltered, but Crawley always seemed delighted by everything Thomas did. Everything that had marked Thomas out as a bad seed in his old school was suddenly interesting, perhaps even admirable. His accent, his blasé attitude to school rules, his tendency to be a smart alec, his sarcasm and dark sense of humour, all seemed endlessly entertaining to his friend. It wasn’t only Matthew. As the term had progressed and the under 14s football team had a successful season, Thomas was getting noticed at school, particularly among the lower forms as something of a dark horse. Once in the dining hall, Whittaker had made fun of Barrow Brothers within Thomas’s earshot, saying it was all cheap ugly tat. Thomas had turned around and asked how he would know since the only thing that had less taste than him was the Aerated Bread his grandfather had invented. Even Whittaker’s cronies had laughed. It might have made Thomas a new target for the other boy’s ire, but it was worth it. Sometimes, Thomas’s jokes about the other boys or their schoolmasters would get a little too mean and Matthew would admonish him with a nervous ‘Come on now, he’s not that bad’ but Thomas could tell from the way his mouth twitched that he had found it funny.

“I’m afraid it’ll be lonely Christmas this year without mother.” His friend continued snapping Thomas out of his daydream. Thomas could sympathise. Last Christmas, his father had still been alive. It hadn’t been the happiest Christmas. Mum was gone, they hadn’t been able to afford much in the way of dinner and gifts, and Dad had drunk whiskey until he passed out at the kitchen table and Phyllis and Mrs Baxter had needed to carry him upstairs. This year would certainly be a happier day, but with only the three of them, it was bound to be a quiet affair.

“We were all going to go to the theatre on boxing day. My uncle said I could invite you along if you’d like to come.”

“I’ll have to ask father, but I’d love to.” Matthew said, face visibly brightening.

“And, well you don’t have to, but I was wondering if you might like to spend the night at ours afterwards.” He was nervous, he still hadn’t invited Matthew to the shop and at this point, he was worried that he was beginning to take advantage of the Crawley’s hospitality with the amount of time he spent at their house. But in the end, there wasn’t anything to be ashamed of. Matthew knew enough about his family to know what to expect. Despite not having a woman in the house they had
managed to keep the place clean and respectable, although they had started sending their washing out to the Chinese laundry on Portland Street, but who had the time to do laundry?

“I wouldn’t want to intrude,” Matthew said.

“It’s no bother. It’s a bit more basic than you’re used to, like, but there’s not wrong with it. But if you’d rather not we can take you home.” Thomas huffed. Honestly, the problem with posh people was that they were so polite, they never let on about what they were really thinking.

“That’s not what I meant. Of course, I’d love to stay with you. Oh dear, I’ve offended you, haven’t I. Only you’ve never invited me round before, and you hardly ever talk about your home life...I thought it might have been something you weren’t comfortable with.” Matthew placated, and honestly, he had made a fair assumption.

“Well, I’m inviting you now,” Thomas said, feeling a little embarrassed.

“Then, I’d be delighted.”

Christmas drew near, and Thomas had hoped that Agnes might have been able to come home for Christmas Day. He had written to her about it, inviting her to come home. His sister had promptly responded, telling him that Christmas was one of the busiest times of the year for servants, which made him feel like an idiot because of course it would be. The only real day off his sister had was Mothering Sunday which was months away, and she would most likely use that day to visit Cheadle Royal.

The brothers had helped Jonathan decorate the shop window with a small Christmas tree but instead of ornaments, they had hung the branches with strings of pearls and diamond earrings that twinkled in the gaslight. The business had been doing well in the lead up to the festive season and their uncle had received a substantial commission from Haigh Hall for Lady Crawford and Lady Balniel, a necklace and earring set and a sapphire bracelet, probably on the recommendation of Phyllis Baxter. If they were pleased with the pieces, then perhaps it would lead to more business from the nobility. Once they had closed up the shop on Christmas Eve, they had taken the tree and the sprigs of holly and ivy and reused them to decorate the parlour. David had cut angels and snowflakes out of scraps of paper

When Christmas Day arrived the three Barrow men spent a quiet evening in front of the fire after a fine meal of roast ham and potatoes, pease pottage, buttered cabbage and gravy. They hadn’t thought to make a pudding but had bought a Christmas cake and mince pies from the bakery which had been just as good, and David had stuffed his face with marzipan and pastry until he was too full to move. Agnes had always been nervous around fires and had struggled with their old Yorkshire range as though it were a stubborn mule but keeping the cast iron stove hot came second nature to Jonathan. He explained that after his mother, Thomas’s grandmother, had died bringing his stillborn sister into the world, most of the domestic work had fallen on him. He had a talent with flavours, always diligently investing in herbs and spices that could turn even the simplest meal into a culinary tour de force. Thomas thought that in another life his uncle could have been a chef in a fancy hotel.

Thomas had bought a small box of chocolates for David and a new reservoir pen for Jonathan. He had initially bought it as a joke because of the letters but felt embarrassed about it on the day. If his
uncle had made the connection, he didn’t say anything about it, just smiled and thanked him. He had also copied out the story he had written for the Literary Society and given it to Mr Meredith when he had gone to pick up David on the last day of term, thinking the teacher would find it more interesting than some trinket from the market. He had taken some of the anecdotes Jonathan had told him about living in Paris and turned it into a fictionalised account where the unnamed protagonist dines out with a group of artists, experiments with absinthe, and watches the Eiffel Tower being built in the distance. His comrades complain about the structure destroying the landscape but the protagonist admires the tower, contemplating a new and better future.

Thomas’s gifts that year had been particularly impressive. Agnes had sent him, and David knitted winter gloves as gifts, Thomas’s in a navy blue that matched his scarf and David’s in a rich burgundy. The boys, in turn, had clubbed together and sent her and Phyllis some cold cream and lavender soap. Thomas had also received a set of brass coat buttons that Phyllis had found at the flea market. When he had sewn them on to his old coat, the garment had been transformed into something far more handsome than anything else in his wardrobe. Phyllis just had an eye for things like that and with the right trimmings could probably turn a potato sack into a ballgown. David had given him a bag of mint humbugs and a gingerbread man. Mr Meredith had sent him a copy of Three Men on the Bummel after Thomas had raved about Three Men in a Boat. The sequel saw the three companions from the first book go on a cycling holiday through the Black Forest. Mr M had written a note in pencil on the inside cover which read:

‘To Thomas, have a merry Christmas and may 1901 be the best year yet. Let this book be a clue to what your next gift will be. – R’

After he had read the note, Jonathan sent the two boys to go down to the workshop where two second-hand safety bicycles were waiting for them, festive ribbons tied around their handlebars. Thomas had almost cried. It was all too much. The next day, they had taken their new bikes to the park and Jonathan taught them how to ride them. It had been a bit of a wobbly start and perhaps cycling on the frosty path was a bad idea, but Thomas had quickly got the hang of it and was soon helping David with his balance.

Matthew had arrived at the shop at dusk. David had quickly given him the run around with a barrage of questions. How long had he been at MGS? Did he like sports? What was his favourite school subject? They had eaten cold ham and fried the leftover vegetables before they set out for the Palace Theatre. A light snow was falling as they made their way down Oxford Street and made the gloomy city streets seem magical as though they had been dusted with icing sugar. To Thomas’s surprise, they ran into Mr Meredith outside the theatre. He thought for a moment what a coincidence it was that they were going to see the same show, then he realised it wasn’t a coincidence at all. It was a bit of risk for them to be out so openly together, but it was Christmas and they must have missed one another the day before.

The two men had gone through the motions ‘Fancy seeing you here.’ ‘What a lovely surprise.’ ‘Well since we’re all here, would you like to sit with us?’ and in the low lights of the balcony, as Cheerful Charlie Grigg performed the opening act of the variety show, Thomas swore he saw them holding hands.
“Who was that man you were talking to earlier?” Matthew asked, lying on his side in the bed.

After the show, the three boys had stayed up late in Thomas’s room, eating sweets and talking. Thomas had offered Matthew the attic room to himself, but both his new friend and his brother had seemed to be set on them all staying together. This had led to David making up a bed for himself on the floor which was more of a nest of cushions and blankets and had dozed off early on. It was amazing how soundly his brother could sleep, presumably any place at any time. Thomas and Matthew had been left sharing the bed. Thomas felt nervous at being so close to the other boy, the bed wasn’t quite big enough for the both of them and he could feel Matthew’s breath on his face and smell the scent of fresh laundry, soap, and peppermints that hung around him. He didn’t know why he felt so funny, he had never had a problem sharing before.

“Oh, he’s a teacher at my old school,” Thomas explained. “He was the one who helped me get into MGS.”

“That’s so nice that you’ve stayed in touch.”

“Well, he’ll be teaching David next year,” Thomas said warily. Had Matthew noticed something strange about their interaction? “But yeah, he’s been very kind to me. He noticed I was in trouble last year when no one else did.”

“What sort of trouble?” Matthew asked.

“Me dad was troubled when he were alive, with the drink and all that, and he took it out on me.”

“What? You never said…”

“It’s not really something you want to talk about, is it?” Thomas said. “He drowned in the end, and I’ll never know if it were an accident or if he…meant to do it. All that time I thought he hated me, that it were all my fault, but now I think he hated himself and he hurt people because he didn’t know how to deal with it because that’s how I feel sometimes.”

“I’ve never seen you hurt anyone,” Matthew whispered. His eyes looked wet, as though he was on the verge of crying.

“I’m trying not to.” Thomas murmured, feeling as though perhaps he had shared too much. “It’s late, I’m going to try and get some sleep. Goodnight Matthew.” He said, rolling over to face the wall and closing his eyes. Behind him, he could hear Crawley settle down under the bedsheets and did his best to fall asleep.
The Return of Isobel Crawley

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings - Period-typical attitudes to mental health and homophobia. Some medical stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Isobel Crawley loved the art and philosophy of the Arts and Crafts Movement. There were many wonderful things about the modern world, advances in science and medicine that would have seemed like magic when she was a girl, but in the march of progress, it seemed as though artistry had fallen by the wayside. She had decked the house with William Morris wallpaper and fabrics and was keen to collect items that shared that aesthetic sensibility, a carved antique chair here, a hand-painted tea service there.

It was natural that she would love Barrow Brothers. She had paid the shop a visit once she had returned home, curious about the living situation of Matthew’s new friend. There was a lot of typhus about in the slums of Ancoats and she had been worried that her son might be exposed to any number of diseases. Instead, she was delighted that the old timber-framed building looked like a relic from another time that the city had sprung up around and felt glad that they had never expanded the business and industrialised.

She admired Mr Barrow’s eye for design and skill with a chasing hammer. She also found his bohemian manner rather charming, although she couldn’t be sure if he was an invert or a particularly dangerous type of ladies’ man. The man had moved in the same circles as the late Edward Burne-Jones in Birmingham and the post-impressionists of Paris and his stories reminded her of her and her husband’s wilder days in London with the Fabian Society. In the war, a dying officer she had nursed had given her a rough diamond from Kimberly the size of her thumbnail. She had sewn it into the hem of her dress for safekeeping but had a feeling that Mr Barrow would know exactly what to do with it.

Manchester 1902

Thomas was thirteen and the youngest member of the MGS second eleven in twenty years. As it was a popular sport at the school, there were three teams, the first, second, and lower school. The latter two only played against other schools but the first eleven were a cut above the rest, the best in the whole school, and competed against universities, youth clubs and even some of the minor counties.

Back in his first year during the try-outs, they had been making their way to the cricket grounds
through the park when Whittaker had snatched his father’s watch from him, said it would be better off with its original owner and tried to throw it in the lake. Thomas didn’t even think, didn’t pause to feel hurt, didn’t even wonder until much later about how the other boy had found out about his father. He just dropped his satchel and ran faster than he had ever run before, eyes never moving from the glint of silver against the blue sky and made the greatest running catch of his life. The watch fell into his waiting hand. He stumbled on the edge of the lake and fell in. There was a moment of panic as the sudden cold hit him, the shallow water soaking him to the skin and staining his cricket whites a dull brown, but his hand stayed aloft. Some of the boys laughed, others cheered, but the watch was safe.

To Thomas’s dismay, Mr Haddington had seen the whole thing, but instead of yelling at him he offered him a hand and said: “That’s you on midwicket then.” He had fully expected to be put in the lower school team, but the incident had secured him a place in the second eleven and Whittaker a week of detention.

To his delight, he and Matthew were on the same team that year. His friend might not have been able to kick a ball to save his life, but his true strengths lay in cricket and tennis and when they were in partnership they dominated the batting side. Their styles complimented one another nicely, Thomas was an aggressive strokeplayer while Matthew had a more defensive style. They were so in tune when it came to calling runs that it sometimes seemed as though there were of one mind. When they were fielding, Thomas usually took the infield but Matthew was a good all-rounder and a decent off-spinner when he bowled.

When Thomas played, he was confident, in his element, fully focused. He began to get noticed at school, suddenly becoming a person to know. He finally had a growth spurt and filled out a little, for the first time he was able to look in the mirror and like what he saw. Thomas treasured his memories of those summers, would always remember the weather being perfect, the smell of freshly cut grass, Matthew’s smile. He would look back on it and idealise that time as a brief respite when he was truly carefree, where the horrors of his childhood were behind him and just before the harsh realities of life appeared on the horizon.

The letters arrived the same day that Matthew’s mother was due to return home. The first was from Cheadle Royal saying there had been some sort of Typhoid fever outbreak at the hospital and that his mother was very unwell. The second letter was from his sister arrived in the afternoon post. Agnes had been granted a day off to visit her the next day and, true to form wrote that she would never forgive him if he didn’t meet her there.

“Harsh words indeed,” David said after reading the letter. His brother was eleven now and had started working with him in the shop that summer. Although he hadn’t got high enough marks in school to apply to MGS, he had taken to watchmaking like a duck to water and had a natural talent for drawing.

“Will you go in with me?” Thomas asked. He felt pathetic asking his little brother for moral support, but he couldn’t face going alone.

“Why can’t Jonathan go?”

“Mum doesn’t like seeing him, she thinks he’s possessed.”

“She thinks everything’s possessed.”
Please.”

“Alright.” David sighed, “But I’m going because you asked, not her. I’m sick of Agnes guilting us about this sort of thing when she never even comes to visit”

“It’s different this time. I think mum might actually be dying.”

The official story was that Agnes had missed Phyllis, so when a housemaid position came up in the same house she had applied on a whim a decided it was too big of an opportunity to pass up when she was offered the job. Thomas hated lying to his brother, but he couldn’t betray his uncle again by revealing his secret. Agnes hadn’t been back to the shop in over two years and instead insisted that they meet her in Haigh every month or so during her half-day which required them to take two trains and walk an extra mile to St David’s Church in time for Sunday service (there were no excuses for missing Sunday service). Afterwards, they would usually wander around the village or have an early lunch at the small tea room or the Balcarres Arms before Agnes had to hurry back to work.

Sometimes Phyllis would join them if she could be spared for the morning and Thomas was always grateful for her presence. When she was around, Agnes was less likely to scold them or interrogate them on whether they were being led on a path to sin. It didn’t take a genius to work out what that ‘sin’ was and who was leading them. Thomas hated those conversations, wished that he could just tell her to leave off, tell her that Jonathan was a better parent than mum and dad put together and the only sin he had encouraged was letting them sleep in on Sundays. Missing church was probably the only sin worse than sodomy in Agnes’ books, so instead, he just had to feign ignorance.

Haigh was a beautiful place, like something out of a storybook with its stone bridges and windmill and tiny cottages. Sometimes, when the weather was nice, the boys would stay a little longer and take a walk up to the top of Winter Hill or through the moors. It was a rare luxury to be out in the countryside and Thomas savoured the fresh air. David was going through an insect faze and between them, they had spotted thirty-five native butterfly species in the past year. David would sometimes bring his drawing pencils and sketch the landscape and the village. He wasn’t the most technically proficient artist, but he always managed to capture the mood of a scene perfectly or the character of a figure, he had drawn an especially good likeness of an old man and his dog they would see at the pub.

Thomas knew Cheadle would be far less pleasant. He hadn’t been able to face seeing his mother, another thing his sister always argued with him about, but now that there was a strong possibility that she wasn’t long for this world he felt tremendously guilty for not seeing her sooner. He wished he could take his bike over to Matthew’s house and talk about it, but his friend was having a celebratory dinner with his mum and Dr Crawley and his uncle, Dr Turnbull, who had travelled up from London. The welcome home party seemed to be family only and besides, Matthew was under the impression that Rosalyn Barrow was already dead in the ground and Thomas wasn’t sure how he could tell the truth.

The train ride to Heald Green was passed in tense silence. Agnes had told them in her letter that she’d meet them at the hospital and had given them directions from the station. It was hard to miss the imposing building at the top of the road with its neatly maintained box hedges. They were led to the women’s infirmary by a stern-looking nurse. The halls of the hospital were spartan and cold but not without light. Thomas didn’t see any of the straightjackets or padded cells that he had imagined.
Instead, the patients walked around freely, in identical grey dresses. They walked past what seemed to be a common room where a group of women were knitting under the watchful eye of a second nurse and didn’t pay the new visitors much attention.

“Dr Mould is a great believer in occupational therapies. Lessons, painting, gardening, that sort of thing.” the nurse explained. “We’ve seen some encouraging results.”

Agnes was already in the infirmary when they arrived, openly weeping in a way that seemed a little unnecessary, mum wasn’t dead yet as far as he knew. She was seventeen and getting a little old for such public histrionics. But he supposed girls weren’t judged for crying like boys were. There was a man with her, thin, tweedy, fresh out of medical school judging by how young he looked. He turned and greeted them

“You must be the brothers. I’m Dr Peterson.” He said. “I was just explaining everything to Miss Barrow here.”

“What’s happening?” Thomas asked, looking to Agnes then back to the doctor when she showed no signs of explaining anything.

“The outbreak was likely to have originated from the water supply for the gardens being contaminated.” Dr Peterson explained. “Normally this wouldn’t be a problem since it’s separate from the drinking water, but it was a hot day and your mother and several other women looking after the vegetable garden ended up drinking some of it. They were first to show symptoms a few weeks ago. At first, we thought it was a summer chill, but it just got worse from there. A few of the patients have made a full recovery, but I’m afraid your mother has developed some complications including pneumonia and mild swelling of the brain.”

“She loves gardening.” Agnes sobbed.

“The good news is she’s responding to the strychnine nitrate and creosote carbonate we’ve been giving her, and if this continues it looks as though her fever might break in the next day or so.”

“Strychnine? Isn’t that poisonous?” Thomas asked.

“It is, but in small enough doses it can be very beneficial for stimulating the heart.”

“So, do you think she might get better?” David asked timidly.

“I really can’t say, but we are hopeful. My concern is that if she does make it, she could well be in for a slow recovery, especially if the brain is damaged. Patients with this kind of swelling can suffer memory loss, impeded speech, sometimes paralysis. It would likely be a very long and difficult recovery.” He was interrupted by a wail from Agnes. “We have another site in Colwyn Bay, it’s used mostly as a convalescent home for our elderly and infirm patients. If your mother’s condition improves, I would strongly recommend transferring her there at least for the duration of her recovery.”

“Where’s Colwyn Bay?” David whispered.

“It’s in Wales, Davey. By the seaside.” Thomas whispered back.

“Don’t you see? Even if she gets better, she’ll be too far away. I won’t be able to visit anymore, not without staying overnight, and I’ll never have the money or time off.” Agnes whimpered.

“Well, hang on a minute,” Thomas said, awkwardly putting an arm around her. “We don’t know what’s going to happen. Let’s just cross that bridge when we come to it, yeah?”
“Yes, perhaps I was getting ahead of myself. I do apologise” Dr Peterson stammered. Thomas didn’t think he had anything to apologise for. He was candid and explained things in a way they would all understand. He suspected that they trained doctors to deal with patients and their families like that as Dr Crawley usually explained medical things in much the same way. In fact, it was likely that Dr Peterson had trained under Dr Crawley, at least partially, if he had studied locally.

“May we see her?” he asked.

“She’s sleeping but you can sit with her as long as you’re quiet. She might be a little confused if she wakes up. She’s still infectious so make sure to wash your hands thoroughly when you leave.” The nurse instructed.

The three of them sat by their mother’s bedside as she lay in a restless sleep. Thomas decided to take it as a good sign as she probably wouldn’t be moving so much if she was dying. She was pallid and her hair was a lot greyer than he remembered and the weeks of fever had withered her like the mummies on display in the museum. He wondered what she was dreaming of, fire and brimstone stuff probably. He wished he had brought something to read with him. He wished Agnes would stop sniffling in the chair next to him.

“I’m just going to see if I can find a newspaper.” He whispered.

“Thomas!” Agnes hissed “Don’t you dare.”

“I won’t be a moment. I’ll bring something for you and all.” Thomas placated as he scrubbed his hands with carbolic soap. It burned a small cut on his finger and made his skin feel dry.

Once he was out of the ward, he tried to find the room with the knitting circle as he thought he’d seen some papers and magazines in there. He must have taken a wrong turn as he ended up walking through seemingly endless corridors until he found himself outside on the grounds. The gardens were lush and green and exceptionally well cared for. There were a fair few patients out enjoying the sun, some accompanied by nurses or orderlies, others in groups. The trouble was, they were all men which meant he had accidentally wandered all the way to the opposite side of the building to the men’s wards.

“Are you lost? You seem a little young to be a patient here.” Thomas turned around to see a man looking at him. He was in his mid-forties, short, round and had a strong Liverpudlian accent and a moustache that made him look like a friendly walrus. Thomas had seen that face before, at Old Trafford and in his cigarette card collection. Lancashire’s former star bowler, the first to take a hundred wickets in Test cricket was standing in front of him in his shirtsleeves with a cigarette in his mouth and a newspaper under his arm.

“You’re Billy Barratt!” Thomas blurted out.

“That’s right. What’s your name?” Billy chuckled, seemingly delighted to be recognised.

“I’m Thomas. I’m here visiting my mum.”

“That’s nice. Not many people get visitors in here.”

“I were only looking for a paper and I got lost.”

“Well, take mine, I’m finished with it.” The older man handed it over. It was yesterday’s Manchester Evening News.

“Thanks. I heard you were ill…”
“I am ill. I keep having these seizures.”

“And that’s enough to end up in a madhouse?” Thomas asked, then realised that he was being extremely rude.

“It is if you try to top yourself.” Billy shrugged sheepishly.

“Oh.” Thomas “You’ve been missed on the team this season. I saw you play at the rose match two years ago, you were brilliant.”

“Well, that’s very kind of you. I’m just sorry we couldn’t finish the match. You like cricket then?”

“Very much, and I play for my school.”

“Are you any good?”

“I’m the best batsman on the team.” Maybe that was an exaggeration, he was only the best on the second team, but this was a living legend he was talking to. Of course, he was going to talk himself up.

“Nice one, lar. I admit I miss it. I tried to get a team going here but they won’t let us use any equipment. They think we’ll use the bats as weapons.” Billy grumbled. “But you’re not here to listen to my troubles, where do you need to get to?”

“The infirmary?” Thomas said, although on any other day he’d happily listen to Barratt’s troubles.

“Go back the way you came, turn right at the end of the corridor then it should be one of the wards on the left.”

“Thanks, Mr Barratt.”

“Ta-ra, lad.”

Thomas found his way back to the ward, still feeling a little star-struck. It was selfish of him, but he decided that if mum pulled through, he would have to visit more often. Maybe he could bring his cricket set if they’d let him. As he approached the others, he realised that their mother had awoken and seemed to be quite distressed. She took one look at him and grabbed his wrist.

“Tom! I was so worried. I thought you’d drowned,” she cried.

A thousand thoughts ran through Thomas’s mind. Was she talking about that day at the house? But she’d never called him Tom before, no one did. Was she confused and had mistaken him for his father? He knew the resemblance was striking, especially now that he’d grown a little, but he was still only a boy. Before he could say anything, she let out a horrible wheezing cough, bringing up a bloody, rust-coloured sputum. As if on instinct, and despite his sister’s rising panic, Thomas grabbed his handkerchief and began to clean her up.

“There now, I’m alright. We’re all going to be alright.” He soothed, “Agnes, could you calm down for five seconds, please.”

He was sorry that his handkerchief was now ruined. It was one of the monogrammed ones Phyllis had made him for his birthday and he would miss it. The nurse had noticed their predicament and quickly taken over, shooing them out of the ward. It was nearly four o’clock and the three of them made their way back to the station a took the next train back into town. When they arrived at London Road, they walked with Agnes for part of the way to Victoria station where she was to catch her
next train. It was still busy out as it was a beautiful day and the world and his wife seemed to be out window shopping. At the corner of Piccadilly and Oldham Street, Thomas spoke up.

"Why don’t you come home for a bit and have some tea?" he suggested, "It’s been one heck of a day, I’m sure no one will mind if you stay a little longer."

"You know I can’t do that," Agnes said, not even hiding her disgust.

"Why not?" David whined. "You never come and see us."

"I’m sorry, Davey, but I have to be getting back." Their sister replied and made to leave.

"What was that all about?" David frowned as he watched her walk away and blend into the crowd of pedestrians, her straw hat becoming her only identifying feature.

"Listen, Agnes," Thomas called out after a moment jogging to catch up to his sister.

"What?"

"If mum starts getting better, I’ll go back and see her, yeah? So, you don’t have to worry." Thomas offered. Doing a good thing for selfish reasons was still a good thing, right?

Agnes nodded "Thanks, Thomas. That means a lot."

They parted ways and the boys turned the corner onto their street. Jonathan was working on some designs when Thomas found him when they got in, his propelling pencil scratching at an impossibly detailed drawing of a brooch in the shape of an acacia branch.

"So, how is she?" his uncle said cautiously.

"Still holding on," Thomas said. "They think she could go either way. If the worst happens then, at least we had a chance to say goodbye."

"I’m sorry, I should have come with you."

"No, not with Agnes about. I invited her back here for tea and she looked like I’d suggested we commit a murder." Thomas said sadly. "You know David’s noticed something’s wrong. What are we going to tell him?"

"I know, I don’t like lying to him either. But what can I say exactly? He’s too young to know the truth."

"I was his age when I found out." Thomas pointed out.

"That was an entirely different set of circumstances." Jonathan countered, "Anyway, you had a visitor while you were out."

"Really?"

"Yes, young Matthew and Mrs Crawley. They were sorry to have missed you and would like you to join them for tea tomorrow at three o’clock. They also gave me this." He held up what looked like a small pebble but when Thomas gave it a closer look, he realised it was a raw gemstone. "Looted from the diamond mines of Kimberly I would imagine."
Thomas couldn’t sleep that night and, judging from the creak of the stairs and the tap on his door, neither could David.

“Can I sleep in here tonight?” his brother asked as he poked his head around the door. Thomas moved over to the far side of the bed, giving him room to lie down. It was a little cramped since they’d both grown considerably since David had moved up to the attic, but if Thomas was going to lie awake in the dark all night, he’d prefer to have some company.

“You alright?” Thomas asked. “That was pretty horrible, wasn’t it? I should never have asked you to come.”

“No, I think it was a good thing. I used to be so frightened of her when we were little, shut up in that room all day shouting at things that weren’t there.”

“And now?” Thomas asked.

“I felt sorry for her. She can’t help being the way she is. And now with all this fever business.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“How did you know what to do back there?”

“You what?”

“With mum, you just cleaned her up and calmed her down without even thinking about it.”

“I didn’t know what I was doing. I just… needed to do something.” Truth be told, Thomas had been taking care of his own wounds for years, although now they were mostly cuts and grazes from playing sports instead of wounds of a more violent nature.

“Have you thought about becoming a doctor?”

“Leave off.”

“I’m serious. You’re so clever, I know you’d just get bored running the shop for the rest of your life.”

“I wouldn’t mind it.” Thomas protested. “If the two of us ran it together.”

“But you wouldn’t love it.” David rolled over to look at him. “Do you think mum’s going to die?”

“I don’t know, but I suppose no news is good news.”

“Why did you agree to go back there?”

“People in that place don’t get many visitors. Their families just abandon them there to fend for themselves.” Thomas said. “And yeah, maybe mum’s not the nicest person, even on a good day, but she deserves a familiar face. And it’ll keep the peace with Agnes.”

“Why won’t she come home?” David asked.

“She and Jonathan had a bit of a… disagreement,” Thomas didn’t know what to say so he started off
“Oh,” his brother said, “Is it because he likes men?”

“How did you know that?”

“I saw him kissing Mr M in the yard once.”

“Oh,” Thomas said and briefly wondered what kissing a man would feel like. He’d been having those sorts of thoughts more and more these days. He had been able to push them away in the past, but they were getting harder to ignore “You can’t tell anyone.”

“I know that. I’m not stupid.” David rolled his eyes.

“You’ll never guess who I met at the hospital today,” Thomas said, changing the subject.

“I give up, who did you meet?”

“Billy Barratt. The cricketer.”

“What, the one that looks like a walrus?”

“He’s really nice. I thought I’d swing by and visit him too if he wants to see me.”

“Ah, I knew you wanting to go back couldn’t be entirely altruistic.”


“Where were you yesterday? I was hoping to introduce you to mother.” Matthew asked the next day. Thomas had cycled up to the cliff, all the while feeling a sense of trepidation. Mrs Crawley sounded like a force to be reckoned with.

“Oh, I hope you didn’t go out of your way,” Thomas said.

“Not at all, we were in town anyway and thought we’d drop in. It’s just a shame we missed you, that’s all.”

“There was a family emergency,” Thomas said, hating himself for not having the strength to explain things properly. He wished he could tell Matthew how conflicted he was feeling, and how awful yesterday had been. He wished he could tell him about Billy Barratt. He wished he could tell him how his heart twisted in knots every time he saw him. But when he tried to get the words out he was gripped with fear.

“Oh dear, I hope it was nothing serious.”

“Well, we’re still waiting on some news.”

“Well, let’s hope it’s good news,” Matthew said, patting his shoulder. Thomas forgot to breathe for a moment. “Come on, let’s go through. Mrs Reed made a sponge cake.”

Thomas was led into the drawing-room where Dr and Mrs Crawley and Dr Turnbull were already seated. Matthew introduced him to everyone, and they joined them for tea and a selection of
sandwiches, biscuits and the promised sponge cake. Thomas felt as though he had been called into the headmaster’s office at school. Mrs Crawley was a handsome woman and seemed to be remarkably upbeat for someone who had spent the last two years in a war zone. Her brother, Dr Turnbull, shared a resemblance to her and to Matthew, particularly striking with their fair hair and complexion.

“You must be happy to be home, Mrs Crawley,” Thomas said, doing his best to mind his manners.

“Yes, it’s been a great relief. My passage back to England kept getting postponed. For a while, it felt as though I’d never make it.” Mrs Crawley replied.

“I see, that must have been very…frustrating,” Thomas said awkwardly.

“I hear your quite the sportsman, Thomas.” Dr Turnbull said, “What do you play?”

“Association football and cross-country in the winter. Cricket and athletics in the summer.” Thomas listed off.

“I say, that’s quite the commitment. I was a rugby player myself, but I was never especially good at it.”

“I must say, your family’s shop is absolutely charming. Tell me, do you plan to follow in your uncle’s footsteps?” Mrs Crawley asked.

“Well it’s an option, but I think my brother would probably be more suitable for carrying on the business, he’s very talented.”

“Then what are your aspirations?”

“Well, perhaps I could ask for your advice. You see, I was wondering how someone becomes a doctor?”

“Oh, is that something you would be interested in, Thomas?” Dr Crawley said. He hadn’t seemed especially interested in joining the conversation, but Thomas’s question instantly perked him up.

“It’s just something my brother said. I mean…yes, I suppose I am interested.”

“Well, it’s very hard work, but since you’re already studying the sciences, you’d have an advantage. You’ll need to get a bachelors of medicine and bachelors of surgery to be a practising physician, that will take five years. Then you’ll need another three years to become a doctor of medicine.” Dr Crawley said.

“That is hard work,” Thomas said, feeling a little deflated. How on earth would he be able to pay for such a thing?

“There are grants that you can apply for if you’re worried about the cost of such a venture. I can certainly ask my colleagues at the school of medicine what the requirements are and Eddy here knows some people at St Bart’s if you’re interested in studying in London, and there’s Edinburgh of course.” Dr Crawley added, as though he had read his mind. “So future doctor Barrow, is there any area of medicine you’d like to specialise in?”

“I don’t know. What did you specialise in?”

“Paediatrics. It was euphoric and soul-crushing in equal measure. You’re welcome to look through my medical journals when you’re here if you like.”
“Thank you, sir. That’s very kind of you.” Thomas said, and sipped his tea.

Chapter End Notes

Some historical notes:

-The character of Billy Barratt is fictional but is heavily inspired by the real Lancashire cricketer Johnny Briggs who played professionally between 1879 and 1900 and was one of the most successful bowlers at the time. Unfortunately, he was confined to Cheadle Royal in 1900 due to what was probably clinical depression as well as suffering from epilepsy.

-Medicine before antibiotics was pretty crazy.
The Last Rose of Summer

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: Period typical homophobia and period typical attitudes to mental health. Mentions of past suicide attempts and self-harm. Mentions of past child abuse.

David Barrow had always been scolded for daydreaming. His teachers had figured out long ago to not assign him a desk by a window or he’d never get anything done for staring out of it. David was an expert in imagining he was somewhere else, conjuring complex and epic stories in his mind. Sometimes he would draw them or write them down. Sometimes he would tell them to Thomas when he was feeling low. He was beginning to grow out of it, mainly because reality was no longer something that needed escaping from. He liked school, in the past because it was better than being home and later because all his friends were there, but the lessons were so dull.

When he didn’t understand things, his teachers always made out that he was just stupid instead of considering that they hadn’t explained something properly. He always understood things when Thomas explained them. Then, when he started in Mr M’s form, he hardly had any trouble understanding things either, and when he did the young schoolmaster would always take the time to go over things with him.

The margins of his schoolbooks were always covered with doodles which he also got into trouble for. He had foolishly left his sketchbook open on a particularly detailed portrait of Marcie Morton that he planned to give her for her birthday in the hopes that she would remember that he existed. He had been working on it in a lesson and feared that he would be condemned to a breaktime of writing lines. Instead, Mr M casually flipped through its pages, closed it, and set it back on the desk. “David,” he said, “This is wonderful.”

* *

Seemingly against all odds, Rosalyn Barrow’s fever broke. She was expected to make a full recovery, or as full a recovery as one could make when diagnosed with mania. Thomas spent the rest of the summer visiting the hospital twice a week. He felt guilty for thinking it, but he liked her a lot more when she was too feeble to do anything. The infection had left her weak and disorientated and although Dr Peterson said the memory loss would likely pass, Thomas almost preferred it when she didn’t recognise him.

David had been right, the things about mum that had seemed so frightening when they were little were now just tragic. On her bad days, she forgot who he was entirely. On her less bad days, she was tortured by terrifying voices only she could hear. On her good days, she remembered everything that had happened and couldn’t stop crying. Thomas could forgive her for still being upset over dad, despite their shared troubles the pair of them had undoubtedly been in love, but to his annoyance, she seemed more upset that he was in the clutches of his immoral uncle than the fact that she had
attacked him during one of her more violent episodes. Sometimes she became confused and thought he was his dad, which was always horrible, she was always so upset when she realised her mistake. Sometimes, he didn’t bother correcting her. Thomas would read to her and feed her broth and listen patiently as she told him how the nurses were all whores and how the doctors could listen to her thoughts. It was harrowing to witness and the whole time he wished he could be somewhere else.

After paying his respects on his first visit on his own, he had dropped in on Mr Barratt to see if he felt well enough to receive visitors. He had lied and told the staff he was a friend of the family in his best received pronunciation. Barratt must have caught on to his ruse and confirmed his story, or perhaps he had just been bored, but Thomas was invited in nonetheless and the pair of them took tea together in the men’s dining hall.

During that first visit, Barratt noticed how red he was around the eyes where he had been crying and silently offered him one of his cigarettes. After a moment’s hesitation, Thomas accepted it and on the first inhale he wondered why he had ever stopped. Nothing calmed his nerves quite like a cigarette.

“It’s very good of you to see your ma when she’s so ill,” Barratt said, “and it’s good of you to think of me as well, but this is no place for a young lad such as yourself.”

“I’m not disturbing you, am I, sir?” Thomas said, realising, now that his boyish enthusiasm had dissipated, that his companion might not want a fan hanging around him.

“Ah, none of that! You’ll call me Billy, like everyone else.” Billy said, dismissing the formality with a wave of his cigarette, the smoke creating a thin arch between them that dissipated into the muggy air. “I’m glad to have the company. I only meant that if being here upsets you, you shouldn’t feel obliged to come back.”

“I promised my sister I’d visit.” Thomas explained, “I left everything to her for so long because I was too cowardly to come here.”

“That’s fair, I wouldn’t want to come here either,” Billy said with a shrug.

Over his next few visits, they would smoke and drink tea together and if it wasn’t raining (after a clement July had seeped into an unseasonably cold and wet August), they would practice bowling techniques in the gardens. To his shame, Thomas found himself counting down the minutes until he could leave his mother’s bedside. Somehow, they had been given permission to use Thomas’s kit if they played away from the other patients and didn’t disturb anyone. Dr Peterson had seemed genuinely pleased that his patient had taken an interest in something as Barratt was notorious for skipping occupational therapy and refused to participate in talking sessions, instead opting to just spend his days smoking and reading the papers.

Barratt was an excellent coach. He had been playing professionally since he was Thomas’s age and all that experience had made him a force to be reckoned with. He was famous for his fast bowl delivery, earning him the nickname Bouncer Barratt, partly for his style and partly because of his excitable personality. Ultimately there wasn’t much he couldn’t do, although he had always been too impulsive to be consistent as a batsman.

He seemed a different person when he played or when he talked about the game, as though his sorrows were temporarily forgotten. As depressing as Cheadle was on the inside, it’s garden and grounds were surprisingly beautiful with large manicured lawns, colourful flower beds and rose bushes, and a walled vegetable garden overflowing with broad beans and marrows. Billy was a fountain of knowledge and Thomas would listen enraptured as he regaled him with tales from his glory days. Still, it was clear that the subject also upset him, and Thomas felt awkward about asking him too many questions.
Billy didn’t seem the type of person who would be prone to melancholy. He joked, he laughed, he flirted with the nurses, and whistled Irish folk tunes as he sauntered across the lawn. One had to look very hard for signs of Barratt’s unhappiness, even in the dismal atmosphere of Cheadle Royal, but they were there if one knew where to look. Thomas had learned that the older man had been admitted to the asylum nearly two years ago, shortly after Lancashire cricket club had announced his retirement. It didn’t take a genius to guess what had happened.

“How can you always be so cheerful?” Thomas had asked him once.

“I’m not always cheerful,” was his answer. “This is just me when I’m entertaining.”

“Oh. Well, you don’t have to.”

“Young Peterson over there thinks that if I act jolly on the outside, I’ll start to feel it on the inside,” he said, flicking the ash off his cigarette derisively in Dr Peterson’s direction where he was talking to one of the ward matrons.

“Does it work?” Thomas asked.

“I’ve been doing it all my life and can confirm that it does not.”

“You had my hopes up there.”

“Everyone gets the Blue Devils from time to time, Thomas me lad. It’s the people who claim they don’t that you have to worry about.” Billy had whispered conspiratorially.

On one visit it had rained the night before and the lawn was drying in the noonday sun, and Barratt was eager to show him how to bowl in such difficult conditions.

“If you’re serious about playing, lad, professionally like, then you have to one: be versatile. It’s great if you’re a specialist batsman, but what are you going to do on the next innings? Two: be consistent, because all those gentlemen on the team for a lark are good for is showing off and it’ll be up to the players, the actual players, to pick up the slack. Three: expect the unexpected. I remember when we were in Sydney in ’95. By the end of day two, the Australians looked like they were a dead cert. Everyone had given up by that point. Peel and Corrigan and I, well, we’d had a fair few bevvies if you know what I mean. We were fucking steaming. Fuming and steaming. Then it got to about three o’clock, right? It starts raining. It’s a bloody miracle and when the sun came out that morning, the wicket was like a pot of glue. We had to put Peel under a cold shower to sober him up. ‘This is our chance’, we thought with our drunken logic, Aussies don’t get rain like we do, they’re not used to it. The ground was like a gooseberry jelly, the ball was going every which way.” He paused for effect. “And we fucking destroyed them, total batting collapse. We were unplayable…and we did it all with massive hangovers.”

Thomas laughed. He delighted in the fact that Billy talked so coarsely, cursing and swearing like a scouse dock worker and openly giving his opinions on other players, good and bad in equal measure. He liked his theatrical anecdotes and turns of phrase. He liked his accent, with its fricative Ks, turning ‘slack’ into an almost German-sounding ‘slach’.

“I’ve gone off on a tangent here, but if you can bowl on a sticky wicket, you’re at a real advantage. If you can bat on one, well, you’ve got a long career ahead of you. Look at Victor Trumper, he’s the best batsman in the world right now, and why? Because he can literally deal with anything that’s thrown at him. They call him the Trump card!” That was another thing Thomas liked, that after seeing him play, even in a limited capacity, he had begun talking about Thomas’s ‘future career’ as though it was all decided, and he already had a contract lined up with a club.
“He was in London for the Ashes last week,” Thomas added. “I wish I could have gone.” He had clipped a picture of Australia’s new star player from a newspaper and pinned it to the wall beside his bed. He had a handsome jaw and cut a fine figure in his cricket whites. Thomas found himself looking at it. A lot.

“I’m sure you’ll see him one day.” Billy chuckled “Who knows, you might even play against him.”

“What’s it like in Australia?” Thomas asked when they had finished playing. Thomas had missed more balls than he’d hit but had slowly learned how to judge the line and had shown some improvement.

“Oh, absolutely beautiful. Sun, beaches, terrifying wildlife. What’s not to love?” He sighed. “I should have gone back before I…. or maybe instead of…”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, it’s my own stupid fault I’m here.”

“How did you do it?”

“How do you do it?” Thomas nodded, realising that Billy had never once rolled up his shirt sleeves, even in the summer heat. Barratt unbuttoned them at the cuffs and pulled them up to reveal scars going all the way up to his elbow, Thomas counted seven of them, pink and raised against his pale skin. The size and anger of them shocked him, how could someone hurt themselves like that and keep going six more times? He felt ashamed for asking for a look, like some sort of morbid tourist.

“The cricket club didn’t want a scandal, so they paid for me to stay here instead of letting me go to prison.” Billy explained, rolling his sleeves back down, “Thing is, I’d have been let out by now if I’d done my time but instead, I’ll probably be here until I die. I should have told them to go fuck themselves.”

“Then ran away to Australia?”

“Exactly.”

“Mum tried to poison herself with laudanum.” Thomas heard himself blurt out. “But she was already taking too much, and she’d built up a resistance to it.” He should have left it there and kept his big mouth shut, but the sight of Billy’s scars had rattled him, and he couldn’t stop himself. “We were alone in the house, and the lad who did the bread deliveries had called round. I was nine. I didn’t even realise I was doing anything wrong, but she noticed the way I looked at him and the rest is just…nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

“She said I looked at him like I wanted him.”

“Oh,” for once, Billy seemed at a loss for words. “Oh, no.”

“Mrs Baxter, our neighbour, found us. I was told that she had beaten me and tried to drown me the laundry tub, then, perhaps when she had realised what she’d done, she tried to kill herself. I was in the hospital for weeks and the police were involved and there was a whole inquiry into whether she was insane or if it was deliberate. I didn’t remember any of it until much later. She told my dad about how I’d started it. He said he didn’t believe what she’d said but I think he always blamed me for getting her sent away.” He blinked his tears away.
“Jesus.”

“I’ve never told anyone that before,” Thomas whispered.

“Why would you want to visit someone who did that to you?”

“It’s not about wanting, it’s about doing what’s right.”

“There ain’t nothing right about any of what you just told me!” Billy said, his voice reduced to an angry sob. “Fuck, you were just a child. You still are a child. How could someone do that to a child? How could a child know anything about... that, let alone...? It’s absurd. It’s- It’s fucking monstrous—“

He sounded as though he was having trouble talking and without warning, he collapsed back onto the soft ground of the lawn. Thomas had never seen him have convulsions in all the times he’d visited although once or twice he had arrived at the hospital to find him still out of sorts from one. Out of curiosity, he had tried to search for information about them in Dr Crawley’s collection of medical textbooks as he and Matthew had been sitting around with nothing to do one wet afternoon at the Cliff. The available articles were complicated to say the least with their ‘discharges of grey matter’ and potassium bromide salts. Thomas took off his jacket and folded it to use as a pillow and took out his father’s watch to use the chronometer to time the length of the seizure, before calling for help.

After two minutes and forty-seven seconds, Billy was conscious again and Thomas and Dr Peterson helped him walk back to his room on the men’s ward. As the cricketer changed out of his muddy clothes, Dr Peterson pulled Thomas aside in the gloomy hallway.

“Don’t worry,” the doctor said, a little condescendingly, “I know they can be frightening but you did very well to stay so calm.”

“Thank you.”

“How did you know to time it?”

“I read that you were supposed to log them.”

“Oh, are you interested in medicine?”

“I suppose so.”

“Then I hope you understand that Mr Barratt needs rest. I thought practising cricket might cheer him up a little but perhaps it was too strenuous. It’s a shame, he really was showing some improvement.” The doctor mused. Thomas was struck by guilt. Cricket seemed to be the only thing that cheered Billy up and now it was to be taken away again all because of Thomas’s stupidity.

“I wasn’t the cricket, it was—” Thomas protested then stopped himself, not wanting to repeat the conversation that had lead up to it, “something else.”

“Well, it probably didn’t help.” Dr Peterson said, “I’ll let you say goodbye, and then I think it would be best if you went home.”

“Yeah, alright.”

Thomas knocked on Billy’s door which swung open to reveal the older man already in his pyjamas. He was still pallid from the seizure and looked as though all the life had been drained out of him.
“Gave you your marching orders, did he?” Billy joked.

“Yeah, I need to get going.”

“Well, take care of yourself, lad.”

Thomas made to leave but doubled back. It didn’t feel right leaving things as they were.

“She didn’t set out to drown me. I think— I don’t know, I think she was trying to wash the sin off me.” Thomas tried to explain, but realised he just sounded ridiculous. Billy had seemed certain that a child couldn’t know about such things. Thomas disagreed, although he couldn’t bring himself to voice it. His feelings might have been innocent at the time, as he admired the boy’s curly hair and a slight trace of a German accent, but they were a portent of things to come.

Billy rolled his eyes. “Well, I’m pretty sure murder is a sin too.” He sat down on the edge of his bed. “And a far worse one that anything she saw you doing.”

“Do you really think that?”

“It takes all sorts to make a world, Thomas.”

“They’re moving her soon. To the sanatorium in Colwyn Bay.” Thomas said, “Sunday will be my last visit. I’ll still come and see you though if you want me to.” Thomas quickly added.

“Don’t worry about me, lad,” Billy replied. “It’s been sound, but I’d feel better knowing you were away from here. If I were you, I wouldn’t even bother with Sunday, I’d just get out now and never look back.”

“It’s not that easy though, is it?”

“No, I suppose not.” Billy sighed. “Giz your address, yeah? I don’t want to see you back here again, but I’d love to hear how you’re doing, and I can tell you about all the stupid things Peterson says in therapy.”

Thomas wrote down his address and left the hospital feeling as though he’d torn himself apart. Billy’s words ‘I’ll probably be here until I die,’ had shaken him to the core, and he thought about his mother and all the other patients, many of whom didn’t seem all that mad, suffering the same fate.

* 

“That’s a bad sign,” Jonathan said as he caught Thomas smoking out by the back door behind the shop.

“I’m fine,” Thomas mumbled.

“You’re miserable,” His uncle said. “Now put that out and have some dinner.”

Thomas stubbed his cigarette out on the red brick of the windowsill and followed him inside.

“Wash your hands, please.” Jonathan directed pausing as he noticed David was still working on a sketch at the kitchen table, his fingers black with graphite. “That means both of you.”
Jonathan had made baked potatoes with a tomato salad and tinned sardines. Thomas pushed his food around the plate, he hadn’t felt like eating in days. It was a Saturday and the shop had been busier than usual that morning, but he had been banished to the workshop when Jonathan accused him of ‘scaring away customers with his mardy old face’.

“So, tomorrow’s your last visit?” Jonathan said, more as a statement than a question.

“Yeah.”

“How do you feel?”

“I don’t know.” Thomas sighed. “I don’t feel well.”

“You’re not ill, are you?”

“No, I mean I feel wrung out.”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t go.”

“You’re not the first person who’s told me that this week,” Thomas commented.

“Well, perhaps they have a point.”

“It’s only one more visit,” Thomas said. “And, I need to say goodbye.”

Jonathan sighed but didn’t argue. “Why don’t you take the afternoon off, go and see Matthew or something,” he suggested, probably trying to take Thomas’s mind off things.

“He’s on some sort of cycling holiday with his family this weekend.” Thomas told him, “They’re in Penrith.”

“Oh,” Jonathan said, taken aback, “I’m surprised they didn’t invite you along.” Thomas and Matthew had gone cycling together fairly regularly over the past two years, usually around Broughton or the Pennine Bridleway if they went further afield.

“They did, I told them I couldn’t make it.”

“Well, wouldn’t you rather go to Penrith than mope around the house all day and make yourself upset over your mum?”

“I just can’t.”

“They’re going to take me away,” Rosalyn said out of nowhere. Thomas looked up from his paper. Today was going to be a lucid day, it seemed. She had been asleep when he arrived and must have awoken while he was reading. He had really hoped that she would sleep through his last visit so that he could avoid having this conversation.

“Yes.” Thomas replied, “I hear it’s a nice place, like a little village. You’ll have your own cottage and you’ll be able to take walks on the beach.”
“It’s so far away.”

“I know. But it’s for the best.”

“Thank you for seeing me. I know it wasn’t easy for you,” his mother said, “I don’t expect you to forgive me.”

“Well, that’s good, because I don’t.” Thomas scowled, his forced bedside manner falling to the wayside. “And I don’t expect you to forgive me for never seeing you again.”

“This is Jonathan’s influence,” Rosalyn said. “Of course, you’d abandon your family, you’re just like him.”

“He never abandoned anyone, you threw him out.” Thomas almost shouted.

“He abandoned us by turning to sin,” she carried on, “And so have you.”

“Goodbye, mum.”

Thomas got up and left, ignoring the insults she hurled at him. He felt as though he had been trapped in a cell all summer long and with a click of the lock he had been freed and was able to see the sun again. He had to see Billy one last time, as he practically sprinted to the men’s ward. Had to tell him what he’d done and how everything would get better, then maybe smuggle the other man out of the hospital and help him escape to Australia.

“Is Billy about?” he asked one of the nurses as he jogged up the front steps of the building.

“Are you Thomas?” she asked.

“That’s right.”

“I’m so sorry, Mr Barratt passed away last night.”

“What?” Thomas felt as though the wind had been knocked out of him.

“It was very sudden, but we think he might have had a seizure in his sleep.”

“I just spoke to him a few days ago.”

“I’m sorry you had to find out this way. It’s been quite a shock for everyone,” the nurse said, “Are you all right? Do you need to sit down for a moment?”

“No, I-I have to go.” Thomas stammered and left the building.

![Image]

The last few days of the summer holiday passed in a blur, and Thomas had barely left his room all week. He knew he should be out enjoying his last few days of freedom before school started again but he just didn’t seem to have the energy anymore. Although he had only known Billy for a few weeks, his loss had blindsided him. The unlikely friendship they had struck up had meant so much to him, their practice sessions, their talks all reminded him of the better times he’d had with his father and in some ways his death had taken him back to the morning he’d learned his father had died. He
hadn’t thought about that day in months but suddenly there it was, the pain as fresh as ever. He had been sent an invitation to the funeral but was unsure if he would be welcome.

There was a knock at his bedroom door.

“Who is it?” he called, and the door clicked open.

“You have a visitor.” He heard Jonathan say from the landing, and Matthew appeared on the threshold, looking far too clean and orderly to fit in with his surroundings.

“Matthew. What brings you here?” Thomas said, wiping his eyes with his handkerchief.

“I was in town and thought I’d drop in.” Matthew said, “Your uncle told me you weren’t feeling well.”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

“I am worried. I’ve barely seen you all summer and when I do you’ve been so distracted it’s like you’re somewhere else,” his friend said angrily, or as angrily as Matthew could manage which looked more like he was upset and about to cry. “Is it something I’ve done?”

“No, you haven’t done anything,” Thomas said.

“Then, I wish you’d tell me what’s wrong.” Matthew said, “Perhaps I could help.”

“There’s not much that can be done I’m afraid.”

“Then perhaps I could just listen. It might feel better to have someone to talk to.” Matthew took off his shoes and jacket and lay down next to him on the bed on top of his wool quilt. Thomas’s heart skipped a beat. The best and worst part about being friends with Matthew was that it made him want to be a better person than he was. Good in the sense that he strove to do good things, but bad because he felt that he had to omit the darker parts of himself and hence never be his true self in front of him. Letting the other boy see him this way was already a big step, he had languished like this for days and probably smelled terrible and his hair was out of place and greasy. Matthew smelled like soap and fresh laundry and everything Thomas wasn’t.

“You know my mother?”

“I thought you told me she was dead.”

“Yeah, well I lied about that,” Thomas said and told him the series of events that had happened to him that summer, about his mother being in the hospital (although he couldn’t bring himself to tell Matthew the reason why), about the typhoid outbreak, about meeting Billy Barratt. To his surprise, he did feel better for having told his story.

“That’s quite a story,” Matthew said when he had finished.

“I’m sorry I never told you, I was…ashamed of her I suppose.”

“I understand,” Matthew nodded “But you shouldn’t be. People brand the insane as morally deficient in some way, but it isn’t true. Father says the mind is just as susceptible to illness as the body.”

“Yeah. He’s probably right.”

“I can’t believe you were privately coached by Billy Barratt and you didn’t even tell me!” Matthew laughed.
“I wanted to! Believe me.” Thomas protested. “His funeral’s tomorrow. His brother invited me. Must have found my address in with his things.”

“Are you going to go?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Thomas sighed. “Do you want to come with me? I think the rest of the Lancashire team will be there.”

“Of course.” Matthew said, “I’ll be there. If you want me.” ‘I’ll always want you.’ Thomas thought.

Matthew came back the next morning on his bicycle and the two of them took the train to Widnes where Barratt’s funeral was being held. As Thomas predicted, the whole Lancashire cricket club had attended and even a few players from other teams had stopped by to pay their respects. Although it was a solemn occasion, it was clear that Billy had left a mark on a lot of people. The thought warmed Thomas’s heart, but the feeling was bittersweet. How could someone with so many friends get into such a terrible situation? How cruel it was that Billy was beginning to escape the ‘Blue Devils’ as he called them only to be struck down without warning. After the Rite of Committal, everyone slowly made their way to the church hall.

A man who looked like an older version of Billy, with a beard instead of a walrus moustache, shook their hands outside the doorway.

“Thank you so much for coming. I take it one of you must be Thomas Barrow.”

“I am, sir,” Thomas said bashfully.

“Bobby Barratt. I’m pleased to meet you.” the man said. Billy and Bobby Barratt, they sounded like something out of a storybook, like Tweedled Dum and Tweedled Dee.

“We’re so sorry for your loss,” Matthew added.

“Thank you, thank you.” Bobby said, “My brother wrote to me about you. Your visits were a great comfort to him.”

“I could say the same for him,” Thomas said, feeling a little embarrassed.

“I thought you should have this...To remember him by,” Bobby said, taking something out of his pocket. He unfolded it to reveal a white cricket cap with the red rose of Lancaster embroidered on the front. Billy’s team cap.
Matthew is leaving for university soon and Thomas is having all sorts of feelings.

Manchester 1905

Jonathan couldn’t believe how much the boys had grown. The tiny rooms above the shop now seemed too small for the three of them with a constant risk of them hitting their heads on the doorframes or knocking things off tables with gangly limbs. The pair of them ate like a pack of ravenous wolves, Jonathan couldn’t remember the last time they had leftovers or even food in the cupboard that didn’t immediately go missing. They were always coming and going without telling him where they would be, always leaving a mess. Had he been this way when he was a youth? Probably.

Still, he loved them with the ferocity of a lioness for her cubs. David with his easy smiles and good humour and artistic talent that shone so brightly. He took after Rosalyn with his dark auburn hair and freckled skin but there was something of the Barrow physiognomy appearing as he grew older in the line of his jaw and the shape of his eyes. At thirteen he had already shown great promise as a watchmaker and silversmith and had amassed an impressive portfolio of work for a boy his age. They were beginning to think about him applying to the Manchester School of Design once he finished school the following year. Then it would just be a matter of getting him a membership with the British Horological Institute and the business would be in safe hands for the next generation.

Then there was Thomas. Beautiful, complicated Thomas, with a mind as sharp as a razor blade and a temperament to match. Thomas, who had transformed into a man almost overnight, who was disciplined in his work and athleticism to hide his inner turmoil, and who used a privileged education and perfectly groomed good looks to hide his deep insecurities. From the outside, Thomas didn’t seem especially likeable. He was guarded, caustic, and acerbic. He walked the thin line between being wickedly funny and just plain wicked. Jonathan knew from experience that it was all a shield to protect himself; it didn’t bother him and even David could give as good as he got when the pair of them butted heads, but many potential friends had been warded off with that acid tongue.

If anyone was trusted enough to look inside his carefully crafted shell, they would catch a glimpse of a heart more beautiful than any pearl. Young Matthew Crawley had become a particularly close confidant, but Jonathan worried about the depth of Thomas’s feelings for the other boy. He hoped that he was mistaken, but how was he to know when Thomas barely talked about his worries as it was and adolescence had only exacerbated the problem. He rarely looked to anyone for emotional support and would retreat inside himself, shutting everyone out. Most of the time he would come out of his black moods on his own, and Jonathan would just have to be patient and hope that the boy wasn’t in any serious trouble. Sometimes he would have to coax the problem out of him if he was really upset.
Knowing this, one could have knocked Jonathan over with a feather when the boy came home one
evening from a school dance, white as a sheet and declared, without any preamble “I kissed
Matthew.”

Thomas was almost sixteen and found himself in need of an evening suit for the MGS summer ball.
Normally he wouldn’t have bothered going but since Matthew was head boy and head of the
planning committee, he had been roped into helping and would have to at least make a token
appearance. Going to even the most reasonable tailors, like Boydell Brothers or Schneider and Sons,
would cost him a large chunk of his savings and the ones at Kendals weren’t much better, and all for
a suit he would only wear twice at most.

“Why don’t you just borrow mine?” Jonathan had said when Thomas had complained about the
discriminatory dress code and proceeded to take him upstairs to rummage through the wardrobe in
his bedroom. Thomas hadn’t been in there since he had broken in and read his uncle’s letters, and the
memory of the deed sent a rush of shame through him, especially since he noticed that the letters
were nowhere to be found, either moved to a better hiding place or destroyed entirely.

“When did you get a dinner suit?” Thomas asked incredulously.

“When I started getting invited to dinners.” His uncle replied sarcastically and found what he was
looking for.

The suit in question was at least twenty years old and smelled strongly of mothballs, but it was still in
good condition and, although Thomas was hardly an expert in such things, it looked much finer than
anything in his planned price range. It was made of black worsted wool with satin lapels and
complimented with a white piqué waistcoat. The trousers were a little long on him when Thomas
tried it on, but otherwise, it was a decent fit if a little stiff and uncomfortable with its heavily starched
shirt front and poke collar. It was so different from anything he’d worn before that he felt a little
ridiculous wearing it.

“I look like a waiter.” he sighed.

“Nonsense, you look very handsome,” Jonathan reassured him. “You just need to wear it with
confidence. Now try these on and see if they fit.” He handed him a pair of patent leather shoes, that
were too big for him but acceptable if he wore thick socks.

“You seem more excited about this thing than I am,” Thomas noted.

“Oh, you’ll have fun once you get there. Until then, consider me your fairy godmother.”

“Where did you even get something like this?”

“Paris.”

“Yeah, I worked that out, I mean how could you afford it? I thought you were a starving artist.”

“A starving artist with a wealthy benefactor.”

“Oh?”
“A friend of a friend owns one of the larger fashion houses over there. He hired me to do some work for him, some jewelled buckles and the like. This was a thank you gift.” Jonathan explained. It seemed a bit much for just doing a job. Thomas couldn’t help wondering what else Jonathan had done to receive such an extravagant gift, and sincerely hoped he had had the suit cleaned afterwards.

“Jonathan, when did you know that you were...the way you are?” Thomas asked cautiously. His uncle’s proclivities were now an open secret in the Barrow household, and he suspected among the Crawleys and Baxters as well, but they almost never discussed it, even in private.

“What? Artistically inclined, you mean? Jonathan raised an eyebrow. “I suppose I’ve always known, ever since I was a little boy.”

Thomas was afraid he was going to say something like that. For a long time, he had been evading his own feelings, channelling his energy into work, studying, and sports. Now circumstances and puberty had caught up with him and he realised that ignoring it wouldn’t make it go away. He wondered if it was hereditary in some way, that perhaps some Barrow of the past had passed it down to the both of them just like their grey eyes and dark hair. Of all the things to inherit, why that?

“How did you know Richard felt the same way?” Thomas asked. As far as he knew, his uncle and Mr. Meredith were still seeing each other. He didn’t have as many reasons to see his old schoolmaster anymore now that David was no longer in his form but his presence was still felt in the family, even if he was notable by his absence.

“You learn to pick up on the signs,” Jonathan said, and as per usual, quickly changed the subject. “Maybe you should keep the suit. I’ll certainly never fit into it again and you’ll probably get more use out of it.”

Thomas’s third year at MGS had marked a turning point for him. After his time visiting Cheadle Royal, Thomas had become dead set on going to medical school. There were so many new discoveries happening every year and so many things about the human mind and body that were not yet understood. So many problems without solutions, like curing infections and finding the cause of epilepsy. Thomas had made a real effort with his schoolwork and had gone from floating somewhere in the middle of the class to becoming top of the science third form and remaining at the top ever since. His report card that year had been so glowing that Jonathan had joked about getting it framed.

He also knew he wanted to play cricket. Billy Barratt had believed in him and had taught him so much, so he owed it to the man’s memory to carry on. Before, he had grown his reputation at school as one of the sports set. He was a decent cross-country runner but had never placed higher than fifth in the Manchester Under 16s Steeplechase and had managed to come fourth in the open mile event during the school’s Sports Day. As far as football was concerned, he performed well but was nothing special. Thomas didn’t mind much, running was just for keeping fit and football was just a means of passing the time until the spring. However, when the Lent term rolled around, Thomas had a chance to showcase everything Billy had taught him.

The MGS second eleven had gone undefeated for the whole season, the longest winning streak the school had ever seen, with the majority of runs scored by Thomas and Matthew as openers. Mr Haddington had decided that he wasn’t being challenged and the following year both Thomas and Matthew were moved up to the first eleven. From then on, the work was harder, but the standards of
play were far higher than anything Thomas had encountered before. The first team was almost exclusively made up of boys from the sixth form with Thomas and Matthew being rare exceptions. It had its own coach, a former Lancashire player named Mr Phythian who ran a sporting goods shop in Deansgate. He was no Billy Barratt, in fact, he was a very sober and methodical type of person, but what he lacked in extraversion he made up for in knowledge and strategy. Thomas had struggled to keep up in the beginning, being the youngest on the team by two years, but it had been fun and exciting, and it felt like he was improving more and more every week.

Even though they had become friendly with the rest of the team, Thomas and Matthew had remained inseparable and were regular fixtures at each other’s houses on weekends, holidays and most afternoons after school.

Thomas had plenty of reasons to be happy. He was doing well, he had good prospects, he had a family who loved him, he had friends, even his antagonistic relationship with Whittaker had simmered down into a half-hearted rivalry as they got older. Even with all this, Thomas was miserable, because he was in love with his best friend and would never be able to tell him.

“Now, we have the program for the school orchestra finalised. I thought we could do away with quadrilles and just alternate between the waltz and the two-step.” Matthew explained as they began to make their way home after cricket practice. His friend had sacrificed yet another dinner break to a school council meeting and from the looks of things he was going to talk Thomas’s ear off about it for the whole evening. Normally, Thomas would have been annoyed by this, but Matthew was in his element and seemed so happy that Thomas was willing to endure the boredom. With the summer term almost over and Matthew leaving for university soon, Thomas had become painfully aware of how little time they had left together. It didn't help that Matthew was Head Boy, Cricket Captain, and President of the Debate Society leaving him very little time for socialising.

“We can have the programs and the dance cards for the girls ready from the printers the day before. Would you mind picking them up with me?” Matthew said once they had arrived at his house. They dismounted and locked their bicycles in the garden shed.

“Fine.”

“I’m afraid people will be too shy to dance. So, I’m afraid we’ll have to stand up and lead by example. I know you don’t know anyone at Manchester High but some friends of my parents have two daughters who are going. I’ll introduce you.”

“Matthew, there’s a major flaw in your plan that I think you’ve overlooked. I don’t know how to dance.” Thomas said, suddenly realising what was being asked of him.

“Don’t you worry, I’ve planned for every eventuality,” Matthew said as he unlocked the front door.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll see. Come on.” Matthew said, obviously excited. Thomas followed him into the drawing-
room where a gramophone now stood in the corner, its large brass horn dominating the room.

“Isn’t it amazing! We just had it delivered.” Matthew cried.

“It certainly is big.” Thomas laughed “How does it sound?”

“Really loud, we had to stuff it with an old blanket just so the neighbours would stop complaining,” Matthew said and began to look through the small collection of shellac records they had bought. Finally, he picked out a copy of the Blue Danube Waltz by Strauss and I Love a Lassie by Harry Lauder. “Right, help me move this table, would you?”

“What for?”

“What do you mean, what for? So, we can roll the carpet up.”

“I don’t follow.”

“So I can show how to dance, you daft apeth.”

“Oh!” Thomas said, his heart hammering in his chest at the prospect. “Right. Yes.”

Once they had cleared enough space in the middle of the room, Matthew took the time to show him the correct hold and some basic steps. It was a lot easier than Thomas had thought, but the fact that he had his hand on Matthew’s waist was very distracting and he often forgot that he was supposed to lead.

“See, you’re a natural,” Matthew said after Thomas had got the hang of it and they had danced the waltz without making any mistakes. It was beautiful, more than Thomas had ever hoped for. He would think of that waltz for years to come, and every time he would dance with a girl he would remember that moment, relive it, treasure it.

“I don’t know, maybe we should try it again,” Thomas said, mainly because he didn’t want the moment to end. Unfortunately, they were interrupted when Mrs Crawley came home. Thomas sprang away from Matthew as though he’d been burned.

“Goodness, what on earth have you boys been up to?” she exclaimed, noticing the state of the room and the gramophone still playing a cheerful tune.

“I was showing Thomas how to waltz, mother, for the dance next week.”

“Well, make sure you clean up after yourselves. I’m hosting a WSPU meeting tomorrow. We’re going to protest Mr Churchill’s speech on Thursday and need to come up with some slogans for our banners.”

“What about ‘A government where only half the populace can vote does not represent its people.’” Thomas suggested.

“Oh, that’s rather good.” Isobel said, “I’ll have to write that down. Would you like to stay for dinner, Thomas?”

“I can’t stay long, I’m afraid, but thank you,” Thomas replied.

“Has Matthew told you about the Fischer’s yet?”

“Who?”
“Christina and Elaine Fischer, the girls we’re meeting at the dance.” Matthew clarified. Thomas was beginning to think he was being set up.

“Oh! He did but he neglected to tell me their names.”

“Well, the younger sister, Elaine, is about your age. I think you’ll like her, she’s…unconventional.”

The night of the dance rolled around, and Thomas was impeccably dressed, trousers re-hemmed, shoes shined, hair brushed and parted. Jonathan had lent him a set of links and studs from the shop, they were silver and inlaid with mother of pearl.

“You look like a magician,” David said looking up from his English homework.

“Oh, give over,” Thomas said and swatted the back of his brother’s head with a rolled-up newspaper.

“Who’s this girl you’re seeing anyway?”

“Elaine, and I’m not seeing her, I haven’t even met her yet.”

“Ah, so Crawley’s playing matchmaker.”

“He probably just wanted to go with the older sister and needed to find someone to escort the other one.” Thomas sniffed. Truthfully, he couldn’t stop thinking about Christina, the mysterious girl Matthew wanted to step out with. What was she like? What did Matthew see in her? Had they been together all this time, and no one had bothered to tell him? “Mrs Crawley said she was unconventional, what does that even mean?” He needed a cigarette to calm his nerves. Perhaps he could stop for some on the way.

“Knowing Mrs Crawley, that means she’s probably one of those women’s suffrage activists.” David chuckled, “Or a bluestocking at the very least.”

Thomas didn’t care whether Elaine was clever or pretty or unconventional or kind or all of those things. He knew that he wouldn’t be interested in her. He might have had the vague hope that he would meet a girl’s eyes across a crowded room and suddenly all his sinful feelings would evaporate, and he would magically become a normal man with normal desires, but the cynic in him knew those hopes were for nought. All the other boys he knew had started noticing girls years ago while his eye had wandered in the opposite direction. If he wasn’t attracted to the female form by now, he probably never would be. Still, there was no way of getting out of it now as he put on his coat and walked back to the school. He would have to be polite, ask Elaine to dance a couple of times and do his best not to give her the wrong impression. Perhaps he would bore her by telling her about the latest cricket season, just to make sure.

When he arrived at the school the trees and box hedges of the front courtyard had been strung with paper lanterns and the assembly hall had become unrecognisable with large and intricate flower arrangements and soft lamplight. It was hard to believe that that very morning High Master Patton had given them all a long boring talk about upholding the respectability of the school on the stage where the school orchestra was now setting up. The atmosphere was electric as the Manchester High School students arrived for an evening of heavily chaperoned dancing. While the MGS boys looked
more or less identical in their black wool evening suits the girls wore every colour of the rainbow with ruffled necklines and flowing trained skirts and waists so heavily corseted it was a wonder they hadn’t all suffocated. For many of them, this was their first ball, perhaps their first social event with mixed company, a debut of sorts into society, or middle-class society at least.

Upon being introduced to Elaine Fischer when he arrived at the school hall, Thomas had concluded that she was definitely part of the women’s suffrage movement. For a start, she was in aesthetic dress, which looked like a long straight shift of embroidered velvet in midnight blue. Her hair was red and styled in a simple chignon. She looked like a print of a Rosetti painting they had framed in the guest parlour. To his horror, he realised that Matthew and Christina had already disappeared somewhere and left him.

“I…like your dress. It’s…er…very modern.” Thomas said awkwardly.

“Thank you, it’s from Liberty.” Elaine replied, “You look how I feel.”

“How do I look?”

“Like you’re about to be marched to the gallows.” Elaine clarified “Don’t worry, I’m only here because Chris needed a chaperone.”

“Not one for social events?”

“Not really. I do enjoy the odd political rally, though.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“Do you disapprove?”

“On the contrary, women pay taxes, they’re subject to the same laws as men are and are affected by the same government decisions, it makes sense for them to get the vote.”

“Good answer. Mrs Crawley said you were planning on studying medicine, is that correct?”

“If I can get the grant money.”

“Where would you go?”

“Well Edinburgh would be the obvious choice, but there’s also London.”

“So you could be with Matthew?”

“I suppose,” Thomas said, anxious at how easily she’d seen through his choice. Matthew was planning to attend Kings College in the autumn, reading law. If he could get accepted at St Bart’s and get enough funding, then perhaps the two of them could get a flat together. It was an unlikely fantasy, but it kept him going.

“I was considering teaching myself, but my father only agreed to let me go to college if I stay in Manchester and live at home. I suppose it’s a fair compromise. I wouldn’t trust me on my own either.”

“Maybe he’s afraid you’ll get arrested like the women at that rally yesterday.”

“Yes, he probably is.” Elaine sighed and watched Christina and Matthew as they danced. They were both exceptionally beautiful, golden-haired and rosy-cheeked, a matching set.
“Would you like to dance?” Thomas asked cautiously.

“Not until I’ve had a few drinks,” Elaine replied and opened her purse to show him a pair of metal drinking flasks. One of the rules of the dance was that alcohol was strictly forbidden, so naturally, everyone had brought their own. Thomas knew nothing good could come from it, but he was feeling raw and upset and perhaps what Elaine had would take the edge off. He fetched two glasses of fruit punch and the pair of them snuck outside.

“Where’s the best place to smoke?”

“The bicycle sheds, that’s where I usually go.” If they were caught, they would both be in a world of trouble but luckily they didn’t run into anyone. He handed her a glass and reached into his jacket pocket for his cigarettes.

“Gin or Brandy?” the girl asked.

“I don’t know, I’ve never had a drink before.”

“You’re not in the Band of Hope, are you?” she laughed as she topped up his punch with the gin. It tasted disgusting but he drank it anyway.

“I was, years ago.” Thomas laughed. If his younger self could see him now, he’d probably be disappointed.

“That explains a lot.”

“What do you mean?” Thomas asked, offering her a cigarette and lighting it for her.

“Why you’re so repressed.”

“I am not.”

“Well, you’re repressing something.” Elaine shrugged and took a deep drag.

Thomas wasn’t sure how he ended up back in the hall dancing the polka, or how he had even learned the polka, or how he was so good at it. Maybe the alcohol just made him think he was good at it, but he was having too much fun to think about it too deeply. Despite his best efforts, he realised that actually did like Elaine, as a friend at least. She was worldlier than him and strong-minded. They had worked their way through the gin and most of the brandy when she had announced that she was ready to dance. They had danced the next two dances, then he had danced the waltz with Christina, who to his sick satisfaction seemed quite taken with him, then he had danced with a brunette girl whose name he couldn’t remember, then back to Elaine again. He hadn’t expected to, but he had enjoyed himself.

When the evening had come to a close and Thomas and Matthew had sent the girls home safely in a hansom cab, Matthew rounded on him.

“What were you thinking? If Elaine’s parents find out you got her drunk, they’re going to blame me and I’ll be persona non grata at the Fischer house.”
“Hey, if anything, she got me drunk,” Thomas grumbled. He didn’t feel well.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Why do you care so much anyway?”

“Listen here, I happen to like Christina very much and I’d like to see her again. I thought you of all people would be able to keep Elaine under control, but apparently I was mistaken.”

“Under control? She’s not a dog. Besides, Christina’s a fribpertigibbet. You’re better off out of it.”

“How dare you!”

“No, how dare you for springing something like this on me!” Thomas shouted, “This was supposed to be our last school event together before you go away.”

“You’ll see me before I leave.”

“It’s not the same. You’re not even coming on the camping trip this year.” He was almost crying now. “I’m sorry, I just felt left out. I know it’s stupid, but I don’t know what I’ll do without you next year.”

“Hey now. Don’t- it’s alright.” Matthew said, a little shocked by Thomas’s outburst.

“No, everything’s wrong.” Thomas sobbed, “I feel all wrong.”

“That’s probably just the brandy.” Matthew said, “Come on, I’ll take you home. We’ll walk, it’ll clear your head.”

They walked, rather unsteadily on Thomas’s part, back to Oldham Street, via the alleyway that led to the back of the shop.

“I’m sorry,” Thomas said, feeling miserable.

“No, I’m sorry. I was being unfair.” Matthew whispered. “Did you have a good time at least.”

“Yes, it was nice.”

“Good, I’m glad.” Matthew smiled and Thomas thought about leaning in and kissing him.

Except that no sooner had the thought crossed his mind, his body began to move seemingly of its own accord and suddenly he was pressing his lips against Matthew’s. Only instead of the magical moment, he had imagined in his head where Matthew kissed him back, the other boy froze completely. Realising what he had done, Thomas sprang backwards so fast he almost fell over. He was mortified, what had he even been thinking. His first kiss and he’d ruined it. He’d ruined everything.

“Matthew I-“

“I… should really be getting home.” Matthew said suddenly, “Goodnight.” And he practically sprinted down the darkened alley and into the street beyond.
Matthew had needed to return to the school hall the following morning to take down the decorations from the dance. He had barely slept and given the choice would have stayed in bed for the rest of the day feeling sorry for himself. He thought he had known Thomas, that after five years the pair of them had the measure of one another. How wrong he was. Matthew was aware of sexual inversion in an abstract sense, although to his knowledge he had never met anyone of that persuasion. Some years ago, a colleague of his father’s, a Dr Ellis, had written an entire textbook on the subject arguing that it was not immorality or disease but instead a natural occurrence, although it had been banned in England as soon as it had been published. The subject had come up at dinner once where his father had argued that criminalising such acts only served to make people vulnerable to blackmail and other abuses with no recourse.

He thought of Thomas being hurt in such a way with no one to turn to and felt wretched. He shouldn’t have run away, but he had been taken by surprise and had panicked. He knew he needed to go back to the shop as soon as possible if only to say that Thomas’s secret was safe with him. He decided to visit the shop just after closing time, not wanting to interrupt Thomas’s work. Instead of seeing his friend, he was met by Thomas’s younger brother at the back door.

“Oh, you just missed him,” David said apologetically when Matthew asked if Thomas was home. The boy looked like a more impish version of his brother and looked as though he could easily play Peter Pan on the stage. “He went out with uncle Jonathan.”

“I’ll come by tomorrow, then,” Matthew replied.

“Sorry, he’s visiting our Agnes tomorrow,” David told him.

Damn it all, if Thomas was gone all of Sunday and leaving for the school camping trip on Monday morning then Matthew wouldn’t get a chance to speak to him for a whole week. It would look like he was avoiding him. Or, perhaps Thomas was feeling equally embarrassed, or even angry that he had run away without saying anything like a coward and was avoiding him back. Perhaps he had sent David in his stead to tell him to get lost. A week wasn’t that long. He could use it to figure out what he wanted to say. A week then.

“Well, thank you anyway,” Matthew said and tipped his cap.

“I kissed Matthew.” Thomas stammered. He had come in to find Jonathan tidying the kitchen and pretending that he wasn’t waiting up for him.

“What?”
“Just now, outside.”

“Didn’t go well I take it?” his uncle said, looking him up and down and correctly assuming he was in a sorry state.

“Well, he weren’t exactly thrilled. Couldn’t see him for dust, he couldn’t get away fast enough.”

“Hey now, it can’t be as bad as all that. Tell me what happened. Wait. Have you been drinking?”

“There may have been some contraband at the dance. There were these sisters, and Matthew fancies one of them but the other one’s a lot more fun, and there was dancing and then Matthew and I had a fight and we made up again and apparently alcohol makes you stupid because I just went and kissed him like a big stupid….I’m going to be sick.”

“Nervous sick or drunk sick.”

“Both,” Thomas called behind him as he rushed out the back door to the outdoor toilet.

“Mind the suit!” he heard Jonathan call after him as he emptied the contents of his stomach into the bowl. He was never going to drink again. The fleeting happiness he had felt was not worth the consequences. He flushed the toilet and went back inside to wash his mouth out with dental powder. He had been teased for being vain for brushing his teeth with expensive brands like Jewsbury and Brown’s when bicarbonate of soda supposedly worked just as well but Thomas had never had a cavity, so who was laughing now? When he made it back to the kitchen, Jonathan had made them a pot of peppermint tea.

“It could have been a lot worse, you know,” Jonathan said, after a long pause.

“Worse? How could this possibly be any worse?” Thomas had fully sobered up now and the gravity of what he had done felt like a stone on his chest.

“Well, some men don’t react so calmly. I know some blokes who got killed for less.”

“What if he goes to the police?” Thomas whispered.

“He won’t. This is Matthew we’re talking about. He’s a decent lad, and his family are very liberal. Worst case scenario, he’ll just stop talking to you.” Thomas sobbed loudly and Jonathan quickly backpedalled. “But I don’t think he’d do that either. You’re still his best friend.”

“What should I do?”

“Well, I’d start by apologising.” His uncle sighed “But tell me, is it just Matthew you’ve had these feelings for, or have there been others? Other boys I mean.”

“It’s only ever been boys.”

“This is all my fault, I suspected something like this would happen.”

“You knew?”

“You’re not subtle, Thomas.” Jonathan rolled his eyes. “I should have talked to you about this a long time ago. I suppose a part of me was hoping I wouldn’t have to, that I was mistaken, and you could go on and have a normal life.”

“Are you angry?”
“No! No, I’m glad you felt you could tell me. I won’t lie, it’s difficult, but it’s a little easier if you can
find someone you can talk to. I never had that growing up and it—” he cut himself off. “I don’t want it
to be like that for you, do you understand? I don’t want you to feel that you have to keep it all bottled
up. Not with me, at least. Truth is, I love you, Thomas. I never wanted to replace your dad or
anything, but I love you as though you were my own son and I’ll be damned if I let anything happen
to you.”

The outburst surprised him. Thomas had never doubted that his uncle loved him, loved all of them in
fact despite not hearing from Agnes for years, but he had always demonstrated it through his actions
rather than openly saying anything.

“Listen, I’m seeing Richard tomorrow evening. Why don’t you come along?” Jonathan suggested.

“I wouldn’t want to intrude.” Thomas protested “I know you don’t get to see each other that often.”

“Nonsense, he’ll be delighted to see you,” Jonathan said, “Now, why don’t you get some sleep and
we can talk about things properly tomorrow.”

Thomas did his best to sleep, trying hard not to think about what he had done, but the look on
Matthew’s face haunted him so, shock and disbelief. He would have preferred his anger, would
rather he had punched him the face. He must have fallen asleep because when he opened his eyes it
was morning. The sunlight hurt his eyes and his head throbbed. He understood why his father would
spend so many of his Sunday mornings in bed.

He came downstairs late for breakfast, although the thought of eating turned his stomach.

“Good night then?” David asked, looking up from the paper.

“Don’t even get me started,” Thomas grumbled as he sat down and poured himself a cup of tea.

“Did she let you kiss her?”

“Trust me, nobody wanted to kiss me in the state I was in,” Thomas said sadly. “I did end up
dancing with her, I wasn’t bad at it.”

“Nice one.”

“Get that down you, lad. I promise it’ll make you feel better.” Jonathan said, passing him a plate of
freshly grilled toast. Yes, toast was palatable.

There was a letter addressed to him on the table, and judging from the handwriting, Thomas guessed
it was from Agnes. That was strange, she had barely contacted them since their mother had been
transferred to Colwyn Bay. They were lucky to get a Christmas card these days. He tore the
envelope open with his butter knife and read the note inside.

“What does she want?” David groaned.

“She wants us to go and see her tomorrow for Sunday service.”

“No. Not going to happen.”

“Oh come on, I don’t want to go on my own. Why not?”

“Because I have repairs to finish,” David said, “and also because I don’t want to go. You shouldn’t
have to either. Just write back and say we’re busy.”
“What if she’s in trouble or something?”

“Do what you want, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” David sighed.

Thomas started work but Jonathan took pity on him when looking through the magnifying glass on his workbench made his headache worse. After almost five years working in the shop on weekends and holidays, Thomas was confident with the mechanics of watchmaking, but it quickly became apparent that he was not destined to become a designer. It had rankled him at first that his brother could just create things as though it were second nature, but he realised that he was being silly. Thomas had spent so much of his childhood with the expectation that he would take over the business looming over him that sometimes it was difficult to let go of the idea. In reality, David was a far better fit. He was talented, had a good head for business, and to top it off, he enjoyed his work in a way Thomas never had.

Thomas spent the rest of the day minding the shop front and dealing with customers. Every time the bell above the door rang, he jumped, hoping that it might be Matthew dropping in to see him, but before long closing time was fast approaching and his friend had not made an appearance.

“Davey, I’m going to take Thomas out for a bit. Are you alright closing for us?” He overheard Jonathan say as he was about to check in on the workshop.

“Of course, what’s wrong? He’s had a cob on all day.” David replied.

“Oh, you know, Thomas things,” their uncle said, “Why don’t you go out and get yourself something nice for tea.”

“Thomas things?” Thomas repeated once they had left the shop and made their way through the shopping district.

“Well, I had to say something.”

Thomas hadn’t given much thought about where they would be meeting Mr Meredith. He had assumed they would go and visit him at his house since they would be discussing such a sensitive subject, but instead, Jonathan took him to a delicatessen on Cheetham Hill Road.

“I thought we could get some food first. The owner’s a friend.” Jonathan explained.

The establishment was dark and run down and they were the only customers, but the food looked delicious and the man behind the counter greeted them warmly in heavily accented English. The menu on the blackboard was in a language Thomas didn’t recognise but Jonathan ordered them some stuffed cabbage leaves and potato dumplings and a salad of pickled beets. Mr M was already there waiting for them at a table in the upstairs dining room. Thomas couldn’t remember the last time he had seen the other man and felt a stab of guilt for keeping his distance. It struck him that if Richard were a woman, he would most likely have married Jonathan by now and come to live with them but instead, they been cursed with five years of clandestine meetings and secret rendezvous. It wasn’t fair.

“Thomas? Good heavens, how wonderful to see you.” Richard said and stood up to shake both their hands, it was clear that Thomas’s presence had caught him off guard. “What’s wrong?”

“Young Thomas here has revealed himself to be at the blue end of the spectrum.” Jonathan declared as he sat next to him. Thomas took the seat opposite them, wondering what on earth he was talking about.

“Is that so?” Mr M said, clearly startled.
“Just so.”

“Good lord. Two in one family, how very strange.” The teacher marvelled.

“As though one wasn’t trouble enough.” Jonathan chuckled, “And I’m afraid this filly is in sore need of training.”

“I-I don’t understand.” Thomas interrupted.

“What your uncle is getting at, Thomas, is that since I was your teacher once, that somehow makes me more qualified to tell you about the birds and the bees,” Richard said sarcastically. “However, I would put forward the counterargument that he is perfectly capable of doing it himself but is too embarrassed. So, we’ll just have to compromise and make it a joint effort.”

“Are you sure we can talk about this here?” Thomas asked, noticing that the man from downstairs had brought their food up.

“Don’t you worry, he’s more afraid of the police than we are since the Russians ran him out. We give him our business, leave him decent tips and he leaves us alone.” Jonathan told him. They ate mostly in silence. The food was hearty and spiced with paprika and more exotic than anything Thomas had ever eaten before.

“How did all this come about, anyway?” Richard asked.

“He declared his feelings for the lovely Miss Crawley, but she rejected his advances,” Jonathan explained before Thomas could say anything. He realised that the strange way his uncle talked sometimes, with the likes of Ernest and Frank and the various other characters that stopped by the shop was a sort of code. It was unsurprising, given the sort of things they were probably talking about, that they would use female pronouns when referring to men.

“Oh, well, who among us hasn’t fallen for our best friend at some point. I too was a victim of unrequited love while I was at Oxford. It led to quite a crisis of faith for me, and some very bad decisions.”

“That’s right, you mustn’t do anything rash when you’re heartbroken.”

“Can I tempt you gentlemen with a nightcap?” Richard asked once they had paid the bill.

“Maybe some tea if you have it,” Thomas asked, he was still feeling a little delicate and was reluctant to have another drink.

“What sort of host would I be if I didn’t?”

“The boy had his first hangover today.”

“Goodness, it’s been a real week of firsts for you, hasn’t it?” Mr M laughed. “I hope you learned something from the experience, namely that things are best enjoyed in moderation.”

“Including moderation, in your case.”

“Oh hush, you.”

They walked back towards Ancoats, the sun was beginning to set and the evening had turned chilly after an overcast day. To Thomas’s surprise, Mr Meredith only lived down the road from them in one of the new tenement buildings on Oldham Road. The new development had been designed to house
the families of factory workers, but a combination of high rents and a general distrust of apartment buildings meant that the block was mostly occupied by young professionals, clerks, office workers, a handful of students from Victoria University, the majority of which were bachelors. The place had a young and disorderly feel to it, the sort of place where people were often coming and going, and leases were temporary. Mr M rented one of the single units on the third floor which was made up of two rooms and was the size of a matchbox. It was clean but cluttered with books and papers. He had a food cupboard and small kitchen in one corner with his own gas meter but had to share a W.C with his neighbour which sounded unpleasant. Richard prepared a pot of tea as Thomas sat awkwardly on an old sofa in the cramped living room. The space felt strangely nostalgic as though he was back at St Michael’s in the library corner, preparing for his entrance exam.

“I didn’t realise you lived so close,” Thomas said conversationally.

“Well, it suits my needs and it’s close to the school,” Richard said. “Actually, I’m glad you’re here, Thomas since I have a little announcement to make. When I attended the Old Mancunians dinner a few weeks ago, High Master Patton sought me out personally to tell me they had an opening for an English teacher in the upper school next year and that he would be personally devastated if I didn’t apply for the position. I didn’t even think he remembered me, but that man must keep tabs on all his former students. Anyway, the salary increase was very tempting, and I thought I’d done as much as I could at St Michael’s so…why not?”

“You got the job?”

“I most certainly did.”

“Congratulations! This calls for more than tea.” Jonathan cried and fetched a bottle of sherry and some glasses from a shelf and poured two glasses after Thomas refused.

“So, you’ll be at MGS next year?” Thomas said.

“I will. You might even be in one of my classes.” The thought cheered him. With Matthew gone next year, he would at least have someone he could talk to even if it meant looking like a swot. It was a shame that he only had two English lessons a week. Mr M served the tea with a plate of rich tea biscuits and sat in an old threadbare armchair.

“So, you’re one of us.” The teacher said. Thomas nodded. “And you’re absolutely sure of this.”

“I think so, yes.”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly wish this sort of life on someone, but I’m glad you know yourself well enough to be certain. I didn’t realise until I was all of twenty. I know people who were married for decades before they even entertained the thought of it. They didn’t even know it was possible.”

“I suppose I had an advantage, growing up with Jonathan and everything.”

“Not many people would see it that way but yes, I suppose you did.” Richard said, “And this boy, do you think he’ll tell anyone.”

“I don’t know. I’d like to think that he won’t.”

“Well, I hope you’re right. In the future, I would recommend keeping your private life separate and not letting it cross over into school or work. Once a man is outed, even if it’s only a rumour, that’s it, there’s no way to recover from it. That might sound harsh, but it’s the way things are.”

“I know that!” Thomas said defensively, “I never set out to kiss him, it just happened.”
“Calm down, lad. We’re not ganging up on you.” Jonathan chimed in, “But he’s right, you need to be more careful in the future.”

“What about you two? You’d just met, and you blatantly started flirting with one another in a school classroom.” Thomas retorted.

“I’m surprised you remember that,” his uncle said.

“Well, it made an impression on me.”

“You’re right, it was reckless. I had just returned from Paris, things are a little more relaxed over there. But I had also seen Richard over at the Lock the week before, so I assumed he was a safe bet.”

“You never told me that,” Richard commented.

“What’s the Lock?” Thomas asked.

“It’s a pub, and no I’m not taking you there, before you ask, not until you’re older at least.”

“Another safe place?”

“In a sense. It’s a bit naff though.”

“Naff?”

“It’s just a bad place to be.” Jonathan clarified. “If something’s nice, it’s dolly, and if something’s really good, it’s fantabulosa. You’ll pick it up eventually.”

“So, you use a secret language, so people won’t understand what you’re talking about,” Thomas said.

“You hit the nail on the head.”

“It’s quite fascinating, really.” Richard added, “I think it came from the gipsies, but there’s some Italian in there and a few Yiddish words, words spelt backwards, that sort of thing.”

“I love that you find linguistics fascinating,” Jonathan said fondly.

The three of them talked long into the night, the older men patiently answering Thomas’s questions. By the time they said their goodbyes just after midnight, Thomas was exhausted, and his head was reeling.

“Are you feeling better, lad?” Jonathan asked him.

“You know what? I am.”

“And you know you can talk to either of us, yeah?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Good, I’m glad.”

Thomas went to bed feeling far happier than he had that morning, even if he hadn’t heard from Matthew yet and would have to face Agnes the next day. At least he wasn’t alone.
The next morning, Thomas took a later train to Haigh. He would be damned if he was going to get up at five in the morning just to sit through a boring church service. He had timed his journey so that he would arrive in the village just as it was ending and soon found Agnes walking back towards the great house.

“You missed the service. I thought you weren’t coming,” she grumbled when he caught up to her.

“Well, be sure to send God my apologies.”

“Every time I see you, you become more unpleasant,” his sister sniffed, “Where’s David.”

“He had to work today.”

“Unbelievable.”

“Will lunch make up for it?” Thomas offered. He hadn’t seen her in a while and after the weekend he’d had, he didn’t have the energy to get into a fight with her.

“Fine.” She conceded and they began meander towards the Balcarres Arms.

“So, what’s so urgent that it merits a personal visit?” Thomas asked.

“Well, I’m engaged.”

“What? To who?”

“What? To the Reverend Kildare.”

“What? The Vicar?” Kildare was easily the most boring man to ever stand on a pulpit and was so unremarkable that Thomas just remembered his face as a beige oval.

“Yes, that’s why I told you to come to the service so I could introduce you.”

“Why are you marrying the vicar?”

“Because he asked me.”

“He’s old enough to be your dad.”

“He’s a good man. He’ll take care of me.”

“Agnes, you’re nineteen. If you’re sick of working in service, then just come home. There’s no need to settle for Mr Collins over there.”

“I will do no such thing,” Agnes snapped, “I happen to respect Henry a great deal. I feel honoured that he asked me to marry him even though I’m just a chambermaid.”

“Henry? Good God.” Thomas sighed, “And there’s no changing your mind on this?”

“No.”

When they reached the pub, Thomas ordered them a steak and kidney pie to share and they sat at their usual table by the window.
“Anyway, I asked you here because I want you to give me away at the wedding.” Agnes continued.

“When is it?”

“The 28th of June.” That was less than a month away.

“So soon.”

“Well, Phyllis is leaving at the end of the month and I wanted her to be there.”

“What do you mean Phyllis is leaving? What happened?”

“Didn’t you hear? Lady Crawford died, and since Mrs Gibson, her lady’s maid, had seniority, the family decided to keep her on as Lady Balniel’s maid and let Phyllis go.”

“That doesn’t seem fair.”

“Oh, I don’t think anyone was happy with the situation. Mrs Gibson’s an old witch and Lady Balniel hates her, but she was determined to stay at the house one way or another.”

“Is Phyllis going to be alright?”

“She’ll be fine. She already has a new position lined up with Lady Benton. I’ve asked her to be my bridesmaid and I was going to ask David to be the usher, but you’ll have to ask him for me. Will you come?”

“You’re positive that this is what you want.”

“I want this, Thomas. I think we could be happy together.”

“Well, what sort of man would I be to get in the way of someone’s happiness?” Thomas sighed, “I’ll give you away, but I have conditions.”

“What conditions.”

“I want you to invite Jonathan, I want you to be civil to him, and I want you to at least try to make amends,” Thomas said,

“If you knew what kind of man he was, you wouldn’t ask that of me.”

“I know exactly what kind of man he is. He’s a good man. I’m tired of this, Agnes. Either we all come or none of us come. It’s up to you.” He could practically hear the wheels turning in her head as she considered her options. He suspected that she wouldn’t risk the humiliation of being snubbed by her own family at her wedding. Finally, her shoulders drooped in defeat.

“Fine, bring him.”

Thomas had left for the camping trip to Grasmere the following morning, still with no word from Matthew. He began to suspect that it truly was the end for them. He was despondent for the whole week and no amount of hiking or fell running or learning about the Lake Poets at Dove Cottage
could cheer him up. Worse still, he had been assigned to share a tent with Whittaker. Alan fucking Whittaker, of all people. He had been all set to share with Rhodes, a sixth former from the cricket team that he was vaguely friendly with, but his old foe knew exactly how to push his buttons.

“Has Crawley abandoned you, then?” the boy said as they were setting up camp. “Trouble in paradise?”

That was it. Either he suspected something, or he was just making a crude joke, but the implication had been made and Thomas would have to defend himself or risk being labelled a pansy for the rest of his school career.

“He’s organising Speech Day.” Thomas tried to deflect.

“By the way, I had no idea you were both such good dancers. Did the two of you practise together? Take turns to dance the ladies’ part? Did you get lost in his eyes?” The other boys were watching them, some were beginning to snigger. Thomas would have to act quickly.

“That’s very specific, Whit. How long have you been entertaining that wank fantasy?” What was he saying? He felt like he was having an out of body experience, but it worked, he had turned the accusation around much to the amusement of the crowd.

“You’d love that, wouldn’t you?” Whittaker tried the same tactic. but it wasn’t enough.

“I don’t know, I’m not the one always getting their knob out in the changing rooms and daring people to look at it.” Thomas doubled down. “You make people uncomfortable.” He had won the approval of the group. Nobody liked Whittaker’s changing room antics.

“You looked.”

“We all looked, it was so small no one could find it.” Thomas retorted, triumphant. That was when Whittaker punched him in the face.

That was how he had ended up in this ridiculous situation. After Mr Haddington had wrenched them apart, Thomas with a bloody nose and Whittaker with a split lip, he had made them stay together until they could learn to get along and any further fights would result in them being put on the next train home. Most of the week had passed in stony silence on Thomas’s part. Thursday was orienteering day, where the group split into pairs attempted to find the fastest route between a series of points on a map. It seemed the only thing worse than being stuck in a tent with Whittaker was being lost in the woods with Whittaker. He had lost their compass and with it any chance of winning.

“I thought your watch had a compass on it,” Whittaker said, reaching for the silver timepiece in Thomas’s hand.

“It doesn’t,” Thomas seethed, snatching it away, “Don’t even think about it.”

“Oh, you’re not still angry about the lake thing, are you?” the other boy laughed. “Come on, that was years ago, and to be quite honest it ended with you becoming the cricket team’s golden boy, so really, you should be thanking me for throwing that thing in the lake.”

They continued downhill and found the tree line and the sparkling waters of Grasmere Lake beyond, the trouble was they were on the wrong side.

“Well, at least we know where we are now.” Thomas sighed.

“There’s no way we can finish this thing without a compass, I say we give up and go for a swim.”
“Swim? But I didn’t bring a bathing suit.” Thomas said, shuddering at the prospect.

“Neither did I, genius, we’re on a hike.” The other boy taunted. “I was just going to go in my birthday suit. Unless my knob makes you uncomfortable, of course.”

“I can’t swim,” Thomas confessed.

“What? Not at all?”

“No. In fact, water makes me nervous. So, don’t start.”

“Oh, well I can teach you if you like.” The other boy offered.

“Why would you do that?”

“Because I like swimming.” Whittaker shrugged.

Thomas never imagined that he would end up naked in a lake with the boy who had tormented him for most of his school days. It seemed as though all his nightmares had combined. The lake was colder than he expected, and he shivered while Whittaker tried in vain to show him how to tread water.

“You won’t get anywhere if you keep panicking.” The other boy said. “Maybe you should try floating on your back.”

“I don’t think I can,” Thomas said and yelped when Whittaker slipped a hand under his knees and lifted him bridal style so that he was lying on the surface of the water.

“Remember that you’re safe and that the water isn’t too deep. Keep your legs straight and put your arms out at a right angle. I’ll catch you if you start sinking.” It took him a few tries but eventually, Thomas learned to float on his own without panicking. In fact, the feeling of gently floating on the surface, the sound of the water, and the feeling of Whittaker’s hands keeping him steady were surprisingly nice.

“We should head back to the camp,” Thomas said eventually once they had dried off in the sun and got dressed. “Or they’ll think we’ve murdered each other.”

“There’s still time.” Whittaker laughed, pulling his jersey over his head. “But really, I’m sorry I was such a bastard to you, and for hitting you.”

“I’m sorry too.”

* *

When the camping group arrived back in Manchester on the four o’clock train that Friday, Whittaker shook Thomas’s hand and said his goodbyes.

“Is that Crawley over there?” the other boy said, noticing a figure with a bicycle waiting by the ticket office. “See, he does love you.” He sauntered off before Thomas could say anything.

Thomas slung his bag over his shoulder and approached Matthew with a nervous wave.

“When did you become friends with Whittaker?” Matthew asked.
“It’s a long story,” Thomas replied.

“Can we talk?” his friend said.

“Come to mine?”

“All right.”

They walked to the shop, Thomas carrying his duffle bag and Matthew pushing his bike. Thomas greeted his family then led the other boy up to his room.

“I’m sorry I ran away.” Matthew started, sitting on the edge of the bed. “That was a dreadful thing to do. I was just…taken by surprise, although that’s no excuse.”

“Don’t apologise, I should be the one apologising. I should never have done that.” Thomas said, “I feel like I’ve ruined everything.”

“Thomas, I don’t think I can give you what you want, but I still care for you very much. This doesn’t have to change anything. I’ll always be your friend if that’s enough.”

Thomas should have felt like his heart had been torn in two but after spending a week torturing himself with uncertainty, it was a relief to know where he stood. Matthew knew what he was and cared for him regardless, that was better than anything he had expected.

“It’s enough.” Thomas sobbed.
Chapter Summary

Thomas makes a new friend, but is that all they are?

Henry and Agnes Kildare’s wedding had been a rushed affair. Phyllis had been touched that they would speed up their plans purely so that she could attend. One of Henry’s colleagues from a neighbouring Parish had performed the ceremony and the whole house staff had been given the morning off to attend. The Earl of Crawford and his son, Lord Balniel and his wife, also attended, as had most of the village. The gap in the couple’s ages and social status had been controversial but it was proper for a congregation to celebrate a vicar’s wedding and Agnes had a reputation as a good and pious girl who would likely do well as the wife of a clergyman.

Phyllis had made the wedding gown out of an old day dress Lady Balniel had given her made of soft blue cotton poplin with a black velvet collar and cuffs. The gigantic leg of mutton sleeves were no longer in fashion so she had removed them and cut the pattern pieces down into a more contemporary shape and added some lace from her collection of remnants to the front of the bodice to make it more in keeping with modern styles. She used the offcuts of the dress fabric to make tiny rosebuds that she attached to Agnes’s best hat. All in all, she was very pleased with her work.

It was good to see her mother and Agnes’s family at the ceremony. She hadn’t seen Mr Barrow in nearly five years and was glad to see that he was well and had even gifted the couple a pair of plain gold wedding bands. The older man kissed her hand and complimented her on her pompadour hairstyle. How sweet of him to notice. She had been able to make an educated guess as to why Agnes and her uncle had fallen out, although her friend had never discussed the details. Personally, she didn’t understand what all the fuss was all about. Lord Crawford’s valet was that way and there had been a gentleman on the Kendal’s staff in the menswear department who had been rumoured to offer more than an inside leg measurement, but both of them were perfectly nice and far more agreeable than the other men she had to work with. But Agnes was very religious and perhaps a little sheltered, and although the late Mr Barrow had always been kind to her and her mother, she knew that things had not been well in that family.

Thomas and David were also in attendance, the elder walking his sister up the aisle as the ceremony began. Phyllis almost didn’t recognise him, he had grown so much. The scrawny boy she had once known had practically transformed overnight into a strapping young man. He was so handsome that he had the younger housemaids giggling and whispering in the pews. He looked worried. Phyllis felt the same way. Mr Kildare seemed nice enough, but he was so much older than Agnes and she couldn’t help being concerned. At the altar, he looked more like her father than a bridegroom. She wished she didn’t have to leave, she had made so many friends at Haigh Hall and would miss them all terribly including Lady Balniel who felt more like a close confidant than a mistress. While the prospect of moving to a new job in London was exciting, she was acutely aware of how alone she would be once she got there.
“I don’t know, it was all very strange. Kildare seemed harmless enough, but it felt as though she was rushing into it.”

“Well, she’s a grown woman, she can do as she pleases.” Matthew commented, “And vicars lead quite comfortable lives, it must have been very tempting after five years in service.”

“I feel terrible for not seeing her for so long.” Thomas lamented, “And I hate that it took this long to get her to talk to uncle Jonathan again.”

In the summer holidays before his final year at MGS, Thomas and Matthew spent every spare moment together as the countdown to the latter’s departure for London loomed ever closer. It had been decided that Matthew would be staying with his uncle, Dr Turnbull, and his wife for his first year at Kings College. This was partly to save money and partly because Mrs Crawley, in a fit of overprotectiveness was afraid of him being alone in a large city.

Thomas had been worried that things would be awkward between them after the whole kissing incident, but to his credit, Matthew was doing his best to treat him the same way he always did. However, they hadn’t really talked about things since that day and Thomas got the distinct impression that Matthew just wanted to forget about the whole thing. It stung but it was understandable. Thomas couldn’t help being a little heartbroken, but he felt better now that he knew where he stood. Like all things, this would pass.

Since their birthdays were only two weeks apart, Matthew had floated the idea of them having a joint party. Thomas was reluctant, he had never had a birthday party before, nor did he really have enough friends to constitute a party. It sounded as though it would primarily be Matthew’s party and Thomas would be some sort of weird afterthought, like a poor relation.

“I invited them both to the party if that’s alright?” Thomas added.

“Of course, I’m surprised you haven’t invited more people.” So far Thomas had only invited David and Jonathan, and because he was feeling bold, he had also invited Mr M.

“They probably won’t come.” Thomas added, “And you’re sure your parents don’t mind organising this thing?”

“Don’t mind? They were the ones who suggested it. Honestly, sometimes I think they like you more than me.”

“What makes you think that?”

“You’re so driven and hardworking and you want to be a doctor. I always felt as though I’d disappointed them when I decided I didn’t want to go into medicine.”

“That is absolute nonsense. Your parents love you so much it’s disgusting.”

“I suppose I’m just being silly, and perhaps I’m a little jealous.”

“What on earth would you be jealous about?”

“Well, look at you.” Matthew gestured in his general direction. “You practically had the whole of Manchester High School queueing up to dance with you.”

“Did I?”

“Yes, and you didn’t even notice! In a way, I’m glad you’re not interested in girls. Otherwise, I’d
never stand a chance.”

“Oh, is that so?” Thomas laughed. This was the first time Matthew had acknowledged what he was, and that fact that was joking about it broke the tension a little. Thomas couldn't help but blush a little at knowing that Matthew considered him to be attractive, even it was only in an envious way. Thomas wasn’t usually one to be modest, but compliments from Matthew always meant the world to him. He knew what he looked like, running every morning had left him with an impressive physique. David always joked about how vain he was, and yes, maybe he spent too much time on his hair but what was wrong with looking nice?

“I'm inviting the Fischers, by the way,” Matthew added. “Please don’t encourage them.”

“I'll be on my best behaviour,” Thomas said rolling his eyes.

“And, well, I thought perhaps, since the two of you are friends now, that you might want to invite Whittaker.” Matthew continued cautiously. Thomas was beset by recollections of Whit’s muscular arms and gleaming sunshine on the lake and thanking any higher power that would listen that the water was cold enough to stop him getting hard. He was having a hard time not thinking about that day, especially in the evenings when he was trying to sleep.

“I think friends is a strong word for what we are,” he stammered.

“Oh, well you see, I still have his address and…”

“You've already invited him, haven’t you?”

“I'm sorry.”

“Matthew! Why would you do that? I thought you didn’t like him because you had a falling out and he started the whole ‘Creepy Crawley’ business.” Thomas screeched. He could feel his face turning red and hoped that Matthew didn’t notice.

“I don’t like him, but that was a long time ago, and we were only children. If I’m honest, I didn’t treat him very well back then either.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s obvious he doesn’t have the best home life. And I think he has some sort of learning problem, he had a terrible time learning to read and write,” Matthew explained, "I used to help him with homework and things, and we managed to hide it for a while, but then he asked me to give him the answers in an exam. I knew it was against the rules, but I did it anyway. We got caught, had to sit through weeks of detention and Whit ended up getting held back a year. My parents convinced me to stop talking to him after that. I didn’t understand back then but he must have seen it as a betrayal and lashed out.”

The story sounded plausible. Whit’s marks were abysmal, particularly in English and languages and Thomas had always wondered why the other boy had been held back a year just as his form had progressed to the upper school. It was also unusual for a student from such a wealthy family to be studying the science curriculum when it was far more respectable to have a classical education. Perhaps his trouble with reading had something to do with it.
It was Thomas’s sixteenth birthday, his actual birthday not the day of the party, and he was stuck running the shop on his own while Jonathan and David were in London. An auction house was selling a collection of early Barrow Brothers clocks and watches and they had asked Jonathan to contribute to the catalogue. His uncle had decided it would be a prime opportunity to take David to meet his diamond broker in Hatton Garden. It had been a slow day. Outside, people inspected the window displays, the fashionably attired mannequins, the tables crammed with books, sweets in every colour of the rainbow. The shop opposite them had recently reopened as an exotic pet shop and the whole exterior was alive with caged parrots and songbirds. Children dragged their parents and nannies to watch the colourful creatures. Some were delighted, some were upset to see them trapped in cages, Thomas was just annoyed by the noise they made.

The bell above the door jingled and Thomas looked up to greet the new customer. To his surprise, he saw Whittaker in the doorway carrying two parcels.

“So this is the cave of wonders, is it?” the other boy said, eyeing the display cases filled with gold and precious stones. "Not bad."

"I thought you said this place was tacky?"

"Did I?"

“What are you doing here, Whit?” Thomas said bristling a little as he immediately recalled the angles of Whittaker’s chest.

Whit pulled a card from his jacket pocket and dropped it on the counter between them. It was his invitation for the party in Matthew’s best calligraphy.

“As much as I’d like to watch the two of you exchange marriage vows, I’m busy that day.”

“Haha, doing what?”

“I’ll think of something.” Whit chuckled, “Forgive me, but dozing off while listening to Dr Crawley talk about public health reforms is a waste of a Saturday in my opinion, so I’m planning to double book myself. I’d ask you to tag along, but I think it’s bad form to not show up to your own party.” Something about the suggestion made Thomas feel that an unscheduled day out with Whit would be a lot more fun than entertaining the Fischer sisters at the party. “Anyway, I thought I’d drop these off in the meantime.”

“Drop what off?”

“Your present, genius.”

Thomas opened the gifts; the first box was from a French bakery on Market Street where Thomas and David had lingered over the window displays but could never justify buying anything. Inside was a small individual cake decorated with chocolate curls and fresh strawberries. Inside the second package was a men’s knitted bathing suit in navy blue wool.

“This is a bit much don’t you think?” Thomas said, wondering if this sudden act of generosity was some sort of practical joke.

“Well, you were starting to get the hang of it the other week. I thought you might like to carry on. Then I thought if I bought you a suit, you’d have fewer excuses to scrike off.”
“I do no scrike off.” Thomas said indignantly.

“Prove it. Greengate Baths, tomorrow, four o’clock.” Whit said and was out the door before Thomas could protest.

“Wait! I have to work tomorrow!” Thomas called after him. “Damn it!” It wasn’t until a few hours later that he wondered how Whit had learned when his birthday was.

Thomas had debated eating the whole cake and disposing of the evidence, but in the end, he decided to share it with Jonathan and David when they got home. He also tried on the bathing suit, which looked similar to his combination underwear, with short sleeves and legs that reached just above the knee, but when he put it on it was so tight it left nothing to the imagination. Lord give him strength.

“So, you went skinny dipping with him and now he’s buying you expensive pastries and inviting you to a bathhouse.” Jonathan summarised when Thomas had told him about the strange encounter later that evening when they were alone. “Sounds keen, in my opinion.”

“It’s not a bathhouse, it’s a swimming pool that happens to have a Turkish bath.”

“I’m only saying that men don’t usually do those sorts of things for people unless they’re keen.”

“But he’s so… No, there’s no way. He probably just really likes swimming.”

“No one likes swimming that much,” Jonathan said with a raised eyebrow. “Thomas, you’re at an advantage because in the future, with the way you’re going, a great deal of men are going to want to sleep with you. What you have to do is figure out whether they are trustworthy and whether they are worth your time. What does your gut say about this lad?”

“I don’t know. He’s a bully, he has a lot of problems but he’s brighter than he lets on, he’s not the sort of person I’d see myself being interested in. On the other hand, he looks like that statue we saw in the art gallery, the one with the snake.”

“Athlete Wrestling with a Python?”

“That’s the one. His body is ridiculous, he must exercise every hour of the day, and now that I’ve seen it, I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Then, I suppose there’s no harm in just enjoying the view,” Jonathan suggested. “Just don’t let yourself get pressured into something you’re not ready for.”

Contrary to Jonathan’s predictions, their outing to Greengate Baths really had only been for a swimming lesson. Thomas wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed after spending a whole night worrying about it. Whittaker had handed him a spare towel and paid for both of them to use the first-class pool which was elegantly tiled with classical style mosaics, filled with natural light from its glass roof and decorated with potted palms. It felt as though they were in some sort of exotic greenhouse. Aside from a few fathers taking their children out for the day, the place was filled with young men, swimming laps or having a lark with their mates, all tanned legs and biceps and wet hair.
Maybe swimming wouldn’t so bad after all. They all paled in comparison to Whittaker. His features were quite irregular, with a cruelly turned mouth, a nose that was crooked from when he had broken it some years ago and a heavy brow that had given him a gormless, simian look as a child. Somehow, over the years, they had arranged themselves in such a way that made him into a paragon of masculine beauty, the brooding anti-hero the Brontë sisters could only dream about (until he opened his mouth, that is). The heated pool had been much nicer than he had expected, and Thomas had been able to swim a tentative breaststroke in the shallow end.

“See, now you’re getting it.” Whit encouraged, as he became more confident and picked up some speed, “Before you know it, I’ll have you diving from the top board.”

Thomas glanced at the diving board at the other end of the pool and shuddered. “There is no way in hell that’s ever going to happen,” he declared.

“We’ll see about that.”

Thomas was about to protest further when he felt a sudden shooting pain in his left leg and cried out at the intensity of it. He’d had cramps before when he had been sloppy with his warm-up exercises, but never like this. He stopped abruptly and clung to the edge of the pool.

“What’s wrong?” Whit asked.

“Cramp! Oh God it’s a bad one!” Thomas groaned as he struggled to get out and hobble to the nearest bench.

“Did you eat before you came here?” Whit said as he followed.

“Yeah, why?”

“Bad idea, Barrow. You need to wait an hour at least.” The other boy lectured as he sat next to him. “Where does it hurt?”

“Well, how was I supposed to know that?” Thomas said angrily, pointing to the spot on his calf.

“Everyone knows that.”

To Thomas’s surprise, Whittaker grabbed his leg so that his foot was in his lap and started massaging his calf muscle.

“What the hell are you doing? Ow!”

“Don’t be such a baby,” Whit said, slapping him lightly on the leg to stop him squirming. The cramp eventually passed and soon Thomas was left with the rough pressure of Whit’s fingers. “Better?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Take a break. I’m going to practise my diving,” the other boy ordered and went off towards the diving platform.

After having a fun but reserved joint birthday party together eating finger sandwiches and playing
croquet against Elaine and Christina Fischer, Matthew had been swept up in moving preparations and family holidays and before Thomas knew it, he was waving him off at the train station. With Matthew in London, Thomas started his final year at Manchester Grammar feeling adrift and out of touch. There were groups he was friendly with, the sporting crowd and most of the boys in the science sixth, but there was no individual that he was particularly close with. It felt particularly strange that the person he now spent most of his time with was Alan Whittaker. They had carried on meeting at the pool over the summer and by the time school started again in September, Thomas had learned to swim fairly well, although he would never be truly confident about putting his head beneath the water.

Even six months earlier, Thomas would have scoffed at the idea of associating with Whit, but it made a strange sort of sense. They were often in close proximity. As well as being in the same form, they both went running every morning with the Harriers, they were both on the first football team and later in the year, they would both be playing cricket in the first eleven. Thomas wasn’t sure where they stood exactly, but their bitter rivalry had softened into a good-natured but competitive friendship, but they rarely saw each other outside of school and sports. He had never invited Thomas back to his house or introduced him to his family, but from the way he talked about them, they didn’t seem worth meeting.

It was nothing like his friendship with Matthew. Their relationship had a manic, unstable quality to it that Thomas had never experienced before. They would get into fights over nothing and reconcile just as quickly, get into a series of ridiculous dares and wagers sometimes bordering on the dangerous. They were always trying to outdo one another, their morning runs turning into fierce races with some stupid forfeit on the line. Loser gets a round in. Loser buys the cigarettes. Loser has to eat an earthworm. It was puerile, but it thrilled Thomas to his very core. He would fantasize about the other boy demanding a completely different forfeit from him as he masturbated furiously alone in his room. Loser gets down on his knees…

They were alike in many ways. They both loved sports and were extremely active. Whit, in particular, played a different sport every day of the week. Rugby club on Mondays, Lacrosse on Tuesdays, Boxing on Wednesdays, Water Polo on Thursdays and Football or Cricket on Fridays. Where he found the time or the energy Thomas would never know, but then again, if Whit wasn’t occupied with something physical at all times, he would get bored and start acting out. They both felt out of place at the school, Whittaker coming from one of the wealthiest families in the city while Thomas had never shaken his working-class roots. They had both been abused by their parents. They both had alcoholic fathers. They both had strained relationships with their older siblings. The difference was that Thomas’s family troubles were distant enough to just be an unpleasant memory, but Whittaker was still trapped in the thick of it. Perhaps another reason for all his activities was that he was avoiding being at home.

Thomas could never be sure if Whit was attracted to him or whether that was just the way he behaved with everyone. The cricket team were more reserved in their male bonding but perhaps that wasn’t the case for other sports. Surely Whit wouldn’t be so open about it if he felt he had something to be ashamed of, would he? He had no sense of personal space, always slapping Thomas on the arse in the cloakrooms or starting impromptu wrestling matches with him. It was all very confusing, not to mention frustrating since he was the one stuck watching Whit’s arse as he jogged in front of him, knowing that he would have to buy him a pint later. He didn’t even like beer.

The incident with Matthew had made him doubt himself and left him shy of making the first move. Instead, he waited for some sign, some sort of signal that Whit was interested, but what if Whit was waiting for the same thing? Did Thomas even want him? Physically, it was a no-brainer, if the other boy would only ask, Thomas would say yes, yes, a thousand times, yes, but a part of him felt conflicted about having such carnal feelings for someone who had bullied him for most of his school
Even now, Whit’s teasing had a mean streak to it. David had been friendly with Matthew and had even tagged along with them on some of their cycling excursions, but after meeting Whit he would always make himself scarce when the other boy called in on the shop. Thomas wasn’t sure what had put him off and was a little afraid to ask. Jonathan also wasn’t impressed, saying that he understood why Thomas liked him but that he could probably do better. The only person who had anything vaguely positive to say about him was Mr M, who had the benefit of knowing Whit a little better from teaching him. “He’s a nice boy really, he’s just…troubled,” the older man had said. “He reminds me a little of you when you first joined my form.” Thomas had been horrified by the comment. Was that what had drawn him in? Had he stuck around because he was trying to save some alternate version of himself? Did Whit’s mood swings remind him of his father? Was he just overthinking things? Either way, he was in for one hell of a sixth year.
Last Man Jack

Chapter Notes

Hey, sorry for the delay, I took a week off to visit my parents. So I'm currently winding down this section of the story and I'm thinking of ending it in the next few chapters and starting the next part as a series. The next story in this universe would probably jump forward to 1912 around where the TV show would have begun. What do you guys think?

Content Warning - Mentions of physical abuse

David Barrow couldn’t tell you anything about the Franco-Prussian war, or where the Ganges took its source or the rain cycle. Not that he was unintelligent by any means, but none of the things he studied in school interested him. Instead, he could tell you the melting point of every precious metal, the name and chemical composition of every gemstone, how to precisely cut and file the wheels of a pocket watch. Uncle Jonathan said that he had ‘the eye’, some sort of inherent ability to create beautiful things. David wasn’t so sure about that. He had hardly started out that way and he had only got this far through years of practice.

He was working on his first pocket watch. He had put together movements from factory parts before and made cases and painted dials, but this would be his first time designing a timepiece from start to finish, and his first time making all the parts by himself. He was a little nervous, but he had planned the piece in excruciating detail, made countless sketches. It would be fully skeletonised, much like the one his father had made, but in a tribute to Jonathan, he had decided that each individual part would be hand engraved from bridge plate to escapement, a melding of beauty and function. It would take him a year to finish at least, maybe even two years.

It was a Friday and Jonathan had left the shop early, probably to go and see Mr M, they usually met on Friday or Saturday evenings. Thomas was at an interview in Leeds for medical school and wasn’t due home for another hour or so. He was about to close early when the door jingled to announce a new customer. He made his way to the shop front to find that girl Thomas was keen on. He had met her once at some tea party the Crawleys had thrown where he had felt thoroughly out of place since he was the youngest one there and barely knew anyone. Even Thomas had seemed more at ease, and he hated parties. Elaine, that was it. She was tall, slender and had the loveliest red hair David had ever seen, part Lizzie Siddal, part Gibson Girl. To his surprise and amusement, she was wearing tweed cycling bloomers and knee-high boots. His brother certainly knew how to pick them.

“Good afternoon, miss. How can I help you?” He wasn’t sure how formal he was supposed to be since they had already been introduced

“I was wondering if Thomas was about.”

“He won’t be back until this evening, I’m afraid, but he’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Oh, well, I just wanted to invite him to a demonstration we’re having at Albert Square next week.”
She handed him a WSPU leaflet detailing a march for the vote. “A few of us will probably go out for tea afterwards and he’s welcome to come along. You’re welcome to come too, of course.”

“I have to work on Saturdays but thank you. I’ll let him know.”

“Thank you, er…David? Isn’t it?” Elaine said. Like many people who wandered into Barrow Brothers, she had become distracted by the displays. A small pendant had caught her eye, a cluster of silver violets set with amethyst and tourmaline for the petals and leaves, with a tiny pearl at the centre of each flower. “How much is that one?”

“Ten shillings, miss. Would you like to try it on? You can also take the chain off and wear it as a brooch.” This girl tried it on both ways and seemed pleased.

“I don’t have enough money on me at the moment, so I’ll have to come back for it.”

“Well, I can keep it aside for you until tomorrow, if you’d like.”

“Thank you, that would be lovely. Was it intentionally made with WSPU colours?”

“I couldn’t say, miss, my uncle made it.”

“Well, there’s certainly a demand for it. People want to show their support and if they can be stylish about it then all the better.”

David made a mental note to buy more amethysts.

1906

It was the second half of Lent term and Thomas had been summoned to the small office by the gymnasium that Mr Phythian and Mr Haddington shared. The former invited him inside and offered him a seat.

“Good morning, Barrow.” Phythian said, “I hope you had a good holiday.”

“Yes, sir.” It had been quite a lonely half term. Matthew had visited over Christmas but would not be able to make it back until the Easter holiday. His friend had secured a summer job in Manchester as a legal secretary and would be home after his first-year examinations had concluded. During his half term, Thomas had interviewed for the Victoria University School of Medicine, the Liverpool University School of Medicine and the Leeds School of Medicine. He had also applied to Edinburgh and St Thomas, but the former had been unable to offer him a full grant and the latter had put him on a waiting list to interview. The more local universities had been more encouraging, and all three of them had written to him within the week, offering him full grant to study with them. He had enjoyed his brief outings to all three institutions, and certainly wouldn’t have minded visiting Liverpool again, but his heart told him to stay in Manchester. It was his third choice overall, but he planned to accept his offer from Victoria, mainly because he would still be able to live at home while he was studying.

“Now, this will be your third year with the first eleven, which is an excellent achievement in itself, but I think what we need to do from this point on is to make sure you have the ability to progress further. With that in mind, I think it would be a good idea to offer you the position of team captain so
you can focus on tactics and leadership skills. Does that sound like something you would be interested in?"

“I- Yes! Yes, absolutely.”

“Well, Captain, I’d like to hear your thoughts on the new team.”

“Well, Carter and Feldmann are both good choices for a wicketkeeper. Woods, Robinson, Hall, and I are all decent attack batsmen while Yates and Molloy are good blockers. Garvey and Evans can both bowl well,” he went through all the strengths and weaknesses of each player.

They were all sixth formers and were all new to the team except for Evans and himself. Still, he had played against most of them in practise matches and had seen what they could do. When he got to Whit he paused, the older boy had a lot of potential, had had flashes of brilliance on the pitch last year, but he was very unreliable and easily distracted. That might have been why he hadn’t made it onto the first team until now, and he still stood out as an anomaly in the group that would otherwise be a very standard team. “and Whittaker… Whittaker is a good all-rounder if he’s focused but he’s unpredictable. He needs to be kept occupied if he’s to be any good, which is why I think he would work best as a bowler. He can hit a ball all right too, but he’s too impulsive and can’t call runs to save his life, so I would also recommend letting him bat on the tail end where he can be as aggressive as he likes and maybe score us a few extra runs in the process.”

Phythian nodded pensively. “I was thinking the same thing. He is a bit of a wild card, but I thought the same thing about you when you first joined the team.”

“Well, I’m glad that you took a chance on me, sir.”

“That’s good to hear, but I can’t help but feel that you have outgrown us here. You’re already playing at a far higher standard than the rest of the team and a fair number of our opponents.” It was true. Last year, Thomas had scored the lion’s share of runs for the team, sometimes reaching eighty or even ninety in one innings. “If you’re serious about playing, I’ve been thinking about contacting Lancashire Cricket Club. They’re seeking new talent at the moment and if we can get you a membership, I’ll be able to sponsor you for a trial on one of the borough teams or even for the minor counties.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“I’m not saying it’ll be easy, of course, but I think you’ll have a decent chance.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Well, have a think about it. Even if they take you on as an amateur, it’ll be a big commitment.” Phythian suggested. “We can discuss things after practise on Friday and you can tell me if you’ve made a decision.

Thomas left the Gym, his head reeling. He had English with Mr M before his dinner break and was anxious to tell him the good news, so he decided to go to his classroom early. When he reached the English classrooms, he realised that his teacher was already talking to someone.

“Well, the points you made were very good, but I’m afraid spelling and grammar also need to be graded and you’ve lost a lot of marks here.” Mr M said. “And you keep on making the same mistakes, even after we’ve gone over them.”

“I know, sir. I know this sounds stupid, but every time I read something back it looks like the letters are all moving around, and it gives me a headache.” The unknown student revealed himself to be
Alan Whittaker. Thomas knew that Richard had been working with him outside of lessons to get his written work up to scratch, with limited results. Both teacher and student were growing increasingly frustrated with their lack of progress.

“Have you been for an eye test?”

“Yes, sir. They said my vision was fine.”

“Well, there must be some way to make things easier for you. I think we should abandon writing in cursive for now and use print letters instead. Maybe, typing your homework will yield better results. Do you have a typewriter at home?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, perhaps we can see about loaning you one, and please tell me I you have any problems. I’m here to help you.”

Thomas decided against knocking and made the decision to come back later.

“What do you think of Meredith?” Whit asked him when they made their way to the dining hall. They had both been made prefects that year, although Thomas had no idea why anyone would bestow the two of them with that sort of responsibility. Their privileges included their own common room, where Whittaker ruled with an iron fist, and being able to leave the school grounds during their break times. Whit would occasionally try to convince him to have dinner at the White Lion or some tea room somewhere, even offering to pay for the both of them. Thomas was always too proud to accept and only agreed when he knew he could afford it. This was not one of those days.

“He used to teach at my old school.” Thomas said.

“But what do you think of him?”

“He’s a good teacher.”

“Bit of a nancy boy, though, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Barrow, come on. It’s obvious.” Whit said and rolled his eyes. “Poor sod probably fancies me. That’s why he’s always wanting to speak with me after lessons.” It was times like these that made Thomas sick with anxiety. It didn’t help that he never knew if Whit was being serious or making an off-colour joke, and whether his comments were supposed to be hateful or if they came from something else entirely.

“That’s a very serious accusation, Whit. He’s paying attention to you because you need help. That’s his job, so I suggest you drop it.”

“Christ, I was only joking. Besides, if I had to choose someone on the faculty, he’d win hands down compared to some of the dinosaurs they have working here.”

“I have some news.” Thomas said once they had sat down and the kitchen staff had served everyone,
wanting to quickly change the subject before anyone overheard them.

“Oh?”

“Phythian made me cricket captain.”

“About bloody time. You should have been captain last year.” Whit said, slapping him roughly on the back. “So come on, who’s playing what?”

“I made a push for you to bowl,” Thomas said after he had gone through his proposed fielding positions.

“And the batting order?” Whit asked, “I’m low, aren’t I? I can tell by your face. How low? Last? Last Man Jack?”

“Well, we can always change the order. The way I see it, you’ll either be out on your first go or you’ll be a nasty surprise for the other team. A sting in the tail, if you will.”

“Well, thanks for putting in a good word for me.” Whit said through a mouthful of potatoes. “I happen to have some news myself.” He proudly dropped a letter onto the table. Thomas looked it over, it was an acceptance letter to read chemical engineering from the Technical Institute. Although it was conditional on him getting satisfactory marks for the year, Whit had actually managed to get a place at a university.

“Whit, this is incredible.” Thomas said, “No wonder Meredith wants you to succeed this year.”

“Never mind that, this means I’ll be able to leave home. You see, my grandfather left my mother a generous inheritance, but I’ll be getting the bulk of his fortune when I turn twenty-one. He didn’t trust my father, you see, his will was ironclad. But, there’s a caveat in it that I would be able to access an allowance for school tuition and for living expenses should I attend university. I’m going to speak to the trustees about it and if they agree then I’ll be out of that place before you can say Jack Robinson.”

“Well then you’d better get your head down this year.” Thomas said shaking his head. Oh, to be rich.

“I won’t need much, just a room in the halls or perhaps a flat somewhere.” Whit mused, “Congratulations, by the way. You seem to have more offers than you know what to do with, Dr Barrow.”

“Well, there is something else.” Thomas replied thoughtfully, “I’ve decided to stay in Manchester as well. Phythian wants me to try out for Lancashire this summer. If I get on one of their teams, well, it’ll be good stay nearby, don’t you think?” He had spent nearly three years with the goal of getting into medical school, but if he was honest, if someone presented him with an opportunity to play professional cricket, he would snap off their hand. He could study medicine later, this was a once in a lifetime chance.

“Well then,” Whit said, impressed. “This calls for a celebration, I’ll meet you at the White Lion after school.” Thomas might have been imagining it, but he thought he looked pleased.
Friday came and with it the new cricket team’s first afternoon of training. Thomas had barely slept, he was so excited and terrified at the same time. He was worried about his new responsibilities as team captain, at heart he still felt like the new boy, the awkward kid he had been in first form. That was just his nerves talking, he had been on the team longer than anyone else, knew the game inside out, knew their opponents and their tactics, had been coached by Billy bloody Barratt for Pete’s sake. He could do this.

The day had gotten off to a rough start when he arrived early at the Harrier’s meeting that morning. Whit was already there with the beginnings of a black eye. There was an angry cut near his left cheekbone, still sore and weeping. In his running drawers, he looked like a defeated boxer.

“Christ, what happened to you?”

“Got into a fight. You should have seen the other fellow.” Thomas gave him an incredulous look.

“Fine, I got into a fight with my father about the whole Tech business.”

“Have you gone to see the nurse?” Thomas asked.

“I’m fine.”

“You need a cold compress, it’ll help with the swelling.” Almost without thinking he reached up to touch the other boy’s face.

“Get off! You’re not a doctor yet, Barrow.” Whit snarled, slapping his hand away.

“I’ll have you know I took the junior first aid course last year.”

“Ah tewk the jiunyer ferst ayed curse last yurr.” Whit taunted in an exaggerated impression of Thomas’s accent. He was lashing out as he often did when these things happened, the same way Thomas used to lash out, but it stung nonetheless.

“You’re such a prick!” Thomas snapped, “Fine, we’ll do this your way. We’ll race for the best time on five miles. If I win, you have to go and see the nurse. If you win, then… I don’t know, take your pick. Deal?” Whit thought about it for a moment and shook his hand.

“Deal.”

Thomas knew this was a risky move, Whit was bigger than him and considerably more athletic, but he was counting on his friend being in too much pain to bother with the whole run and concede defeat. Whit was more stubborn than he expected and Thomas found himself running the most gruelling five miles of his life. The circuit began at Salford Crescent and involved repeatedly jogging around the perimeter of Peel Park. The place was usually empty that early in the morning save for the occasional dog walker and the pale morning light made the frosty ground glimmer like Jonathan’s diamonds. Thomas was close to finishing his final circuit. He was ahead but Whit was fast on his heels and as they sprinted through the trees. The end was almost in sight until something, or rather someone, knocked into him and he came crashing down on the gravel path only to see Whittaker speeding away in front of him.

“Whit, you bastard!” Thomas yelled after him as he struggled to his feet, grazed but otherwise unharmed.

“I take it this means you owe me a favour.” Whit crowed when Thomas finally caught up with him.

“You cheated.”
“We never set out any rules.”

“Fine, what do you want?”

“I think its best if I don’t go home just yet, and I need a place to stay. I’ll even let you fuss over me with your cold compresses and whathaveyou.”

“Jesus, Whit, you could have just asked.”

“Well, where’s the fun in that?” Whit said patting Thomas on the back.

Perhaps realising that Thomas’s patience was beginning to wear thin, Whittaker conceded and stopped in at the nurse’s office. Thomas was in turmoil. What was so terrible that Whit felt the need to leave home? How was he going to cope with Whit staying at the shop? How long did he plan on staying for? Where would they even put him? What was he going to tell Jonathan? At least worrying about Whit distracted him from worrying about cricket and by the time the day was over he forgot why he was ever worried in the first place. For the first time in his life, his classmates were interested in what he had to say, looked at him with respect. He really didn’t know how to react to it. Once the session had ended, he and Whit helped Mr Phythian tidy away the equipment and carry it back to the school.

“You did well today.”

“Thank you, sir.” Thomas said “I’ve been thinking about what you said about Lancashire. I want to go for it.”

“You’re sure?”

“It’s always been my dream.”

“I was hoping you would say that.” Phythian chuckled, “And I think this is the best possible time. Johnson, one of the professional batsmen for the second eleven, has announced that he will be moving to Staffordshire at the end of the season. They’ll be recruiting his replacement in August, that gives us five months to get you up to standard. There are no guarantees of course, these things usually get quite competitive, but I have a good feeling about this. Do you have any other commitments outside of school?”

“I usually have to work on weekends.”

“Well I coach at Cheetham Hill on Tuesdays and Thursdays at five o’clock. I think you would benefit from coming along.”

“Won’t I be in the way, sir?”

“Of course not, everyone’s welcome.” Mr Phythian said, “My sons stop along all the time.”

“He’ll be there, sir.” Whit interrupted, rolling his eyes.

“Well, that’s great. You’re welcome too of course, Whittaker, if you can keep yourself out of trouble.”

“I’ll take a look at my calendar, sir.” Whit smirked. They said their goodbyes once they reached the school and the two boys made their way on through Withy Grove, past the Printworks and the furniture store and towards Oldham Street.
“Wait, you actually live here?” Whit said with disbelief as they reached the back door. Thomas realised that Whit had never seen their cramped lodgings above the shop and suddenly felt self-conscious.

“Where else would I live?” Thomas said.

“I don’t know, I just assumed the three of you would have found somewhere bigger after the shop started getting successful.”

“Listen, you were the one who wanted to stay here. I don’t see why you haven’t found a hotel or something. Lord knows you can afford it.” Thomas snapped.

“Steady on, I didn’t mean anything by it.” Whit said. “You know what your problem is? You always think someone’s out to get you. I can practically see your hackles raise.”

“What are we going to tell my uncle?”

“The truth I suppose.” Whit shrugged.

* 

Thomas didn’t know how he had ended up in this situation. Jonathan had agreed to let Whit stay for the night and although he hid it well, Thomas could tell that he wasn’t entirely happy with having an unexpected guest thrust upon him. David had been unusually quiet all through dinner and had disappeared up to his room at the first available opportunity. Now Thomas had to deal with having Alan Whittaker in his bedroom, looking over his things and seeming far too big for the tiny space.

“It isn’t much I’m afraid.” Thomas apologised. “I can stay in the parlour if you’d prefer. It has an armchair I can sleep in.”

“Don’t be stupid, I’m sure we can make do.” Whit said, he had already stripped down to his vest and underwear. Thomas balked at the prospect of sharing a bed with the other boy. He had felt nervous about sharing with Matthew back in the day but those were more innocent times and he didn’t think Whit would take too kindly to being rudely awakened by Thomas’s straining erection against his leg first thing in the morning. He would have to make sure he woke up first, then probably douse himself with cold water.

“You really are obsessed with cricket, aren’t you?” Whit commented, snapping Thomas out of his reverie. Over the years, Thomas’s wall had become a collage of cigarette cards, old ticket stubs and pictures clipped out of newspapers and magazines. Billy Barratt’s cap hung on a picture hook at the centre. His small bookshelf was crammed with his trophies and old copies of the Wisden Almanack.

“Maybe a little.” Thomas said as he got into bed.

“Where did you get the cap from?”

“Billy Barratt.”

“Wait a second, you met Billy Barratt? What was he like?”

“He certainly was a character.”

“You certainly have hidden depths, Barrow.” Whit said as he slipped under Thomas’s woollen quilt.

“What will you do tomorrow. Do you think you’ll be safe going home?”
“Oh, I’m sure it’ll be fine. My father needs time to calm down and so do I.”

“Oh.”

“The worst part is that I could easily fight back. I’m bigger than him now, stronger. But I know if I ever raise a hand to him, he’ll have me arrested.”

“Do you really think that? His own son?”

“I’m just an obstacle to him. He’s in a lot of debt and has been trying to find a reason to contest my grandfather’s will for as long as I can remember. He tried to have me declared as mentally incompetent when I was eleven.”

“Jesus.”

“Naturally, I try to stay out of the house. Why do you think I joined so many clubs? Do you really think I would get up at five every morning to go to Harriers meetings if I had a happy home life?” Thomas thought of his own motivations for running every morning and had to agree. “It’s only a few more months. I can survive that long. Then I’ll discover a new chemical that cures cancer or something and become disgustingly rich.”


“Then once I’ve amassed my enormous fortune, I’ll give it all away to charity and make my family watch.” By now they were both laughing, Thomas was finding it hard to stay quiet.

“Well, I hope you manage it, Whit.”

“You know, they’ve opened a new swimming bath just up the road.” Whit said, “Why don’t we go in the morning.”

“I promised I’d go to this march for the women’s vote tomorrow.” Thomas groaned.

“Promised who? Your girl?” Whittaker asked tentatively.

“No, my friend Elaine.”

“The professor’s daughter? The one with the bloomers?” Thomas didn’t know why, but the other boy looked relieved. He was surprised that Whit even knew of her.

“Yeah, that’s her.” Thomas said, “She thinks it might get a little rowdy. People were throwing bottles last time.”

“Well, now you’re talking. Let’s go to that instead.”

“I didn’t know you cared about women’s suffrage.”

“I don’t care one way or another, but if there’s a fight on the cards, I don’t want to miss it.”