**Key Moments in ‘Never Let Me Go’ by Kazuo Ishiguro**

**Key Moment 1: Tommy’s Fit in the Playing Field**

**Chapter** 1

**Quote**: “So I reached forward and put a hand on his arm. Afterwards, the others thought he’d meant to do it, but I was pretty sure it was unintentional. His arms were still flailing about, and he wasn’t to know I was about to put out my hand. Anyway, as he threw up his arm, he knocked my hand aside and hit the side of my face.”

**Notes:** Tommy's "wild furies" are one of his defining features as a character. In the beginning of his time at Hailsham, these furies are viewed—by students and those in positions of authority—as part of his immature state. Tommy, by the administrators' logic, is an aberration, a student who needs to be normalized to behave more quietly like the other Hailsham students. Kathy, however, seems to understand that Tommy's anguish runs deeper.

Tommy, in this instance, is not just mad that he has ruined his shirt, or that he has been made a fool of in the schoolyard. Kathy senses that Tommy's fits are in some way involuntary (particularly in their physical manifestations), and that he is actually upset by the constraints of the school itself—even if Tommy himself does not understand why Hailsham is such a hard place for him to live and study.

This behavior of Tommy's, his willingness to test, without exactly knowing why, the norms of his life, will induce in Kathy a desire to question some of the rules she lives by—and that society places on her and the other donors.

**Key Moment 2: Miss Lucy Reveals More**

**Chapter** 2

**Quote:** “Well . . . . The thing is, it might sound strange. It did to me at first. What she said was that if I didn’t want to be creative, if I really didn’t feel like it, that was perfectly all right. Nothing wrong with it, she said.”

**Notes:** At this point in the novel, Tommy has developed a willingness to discuss some of his more complex emotional states and problems with Kathy. Tommy's conversation with Miss Lucy—in which Lucy argues that Tommy doesn't have to be creative at Hailsham, despite an institutional emphasis on art classes—is one instance of an emotionally thorny and confusing episode. What is especially odd about the conversation between Lucy and Tommy is the fact that, as revealed later, Tommy really is creative. He is a talented cartoonist, and his "animals," as he and Kathy call them, are intricately modelled and imaginative representations of his inner life.

What Lucy appears to be telling Tommy, in a halting manner, is that Tommy, Kathy, and the other students have lives that are set out for them in advance. They do not have before them the kinds of choices that others must make as they mature. In some sense, this makes Hailsham a prep school that prepares its students for non-life—for organ donation and eventual death. It also means that Hailsham "classes" are, in a sense, just filler until the realities of the students' fates set in.

**Key Moment 3: Ruth’s Pencil Case**

**Chapters** 5 & 6

**Quote:** “Didn’t we all dream from time to time about one guardian or other bending the rules and doing something special for us? A spontaneous hug, secret letter, or a gift?” Ishiguro powerfully reminds us of all that has been denied to these “students” and how they are more like us than different.

**Notes:** Kathy recalls a moment where she tried to trap Ruth in one of her exaggerations. Ruth came to class one day with a new pencil case, and made it seem to the other students, without saying it directly, that the case had been a gift from Miss Geraldine. Kathy, however, realized that no guardian would “bend the rules” to give a student a special gift, and she realized that Ruth probably got the case from a sale. Kathy therefore found Ruth one day, later on, and implied that she (Kathy) had seen the log from the previous sale—although she hadn’t even looked—to judge if this made Ruth nervous.

Ruth, in fact, did respond with alarm—realizing that Kathy would have been able to know, from the log, that Ruth simply bought the case—but Kathy, realizing her pettiness in “bluffing” and making Ruth feel bad, tries to correct the situation by pretending to Ruth that she “saw nothing interesting” in the logs. Despite this effort, however, Ruth walks away from Kathy, clearly upset that her little lie about the case has been discovered.

Kathy immediately feels guilty about hurting Ruth’s feelings and exposing her lie. In the weeks following this incident, then, she does everything she can to make Ruth feel that Miss Geraldine *does* in fact treat her specially. Kathy makes comments around the other girls indicating that Ruth is Geraldine’s favorite, and also lets Ruth goes first into a doorway, in order to allow Ruth to walk alongside Geraldine for a time. One day, in art class with Mr. Rogers, Kathy even hints to another student, Midge, that the pencil case did in fact come from a secret source—a guardian—and that she, Kathy, cannot divulge that information to Midge. Ruth appreciates all of Kathy’s efforts, and the two become closer friends.

**Key Moment 4: The Judy Bridgewater Tape (Caught Dancing)**

**Chapter** 6

**Quote:** “But she just went on standing out there, sobbing and sobbing, staring at me through the doorway with that same look in her eyes she always had when she looked at us, like she was seeing something that gave her the creeps”.

**Notes:** Kathy describes her lost tape. The tape is called *Songs After Dark* and was put out by a singer named **Judy Bridgewater**. Kathy bought the tape at a sale, and found it to be of special value not only because she liked the music and the cover art—which displayed Judy Bridgewater in a dress—but because Bridgewater was smoking in the picture, and smoking was expressly banned at Hailsham.

Kathy returns to describing the tape, and one song in particular that she loved on it, called “**Never Let Me Go**.” Kathy imagines this song to be about “a woman who cannot have babies,” but who does miraculously manage to have one. The song, Kathy believes, is a love letter to this young baby, and Kathy used to mime holding a child to her chest while singing it to herself, taking great comfort in its music and lyrics.

One day, Kathy notes, she was doing exactly this—playing the song loudly, and dancing along, as though cradling a child to her chest—when Madame walked past her open door. Kathy was mortified, and noticed that Madame was watching her dance with tears in her eyes. Kathy didn’t understand why Madame didn’t discipline her—instead, Madame simply walked away, sobbing to herself.

Years later, when they were adolescents, Kathy told Tommy, and only Tommy, this story, and said at the time that she knew, at that point, that she and other students couldn’t have children. Kathy wondered whether Madame sympathized with her for this reason, and Tommy seemed to agree—but Kathy also noted that Madame would have no way of knowing that Kathy was dancing with a little invisible child, instead of interpreting the song the way it ought to have been—as a love letter between a woman and a lover who has left her. Tommy responds only that “Madame can read minds,” and the two laugh at the incident as teens, even though they are “unsettled” by it.

**Key Moment 5: Miss Lucy’s Outburst at the Pavilion**

**Chapter** 7

**Quote**: “You’re not like the actors you watch on your videos, you’re not even like me. You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided (…) If you’re to have decent lives , you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you, every one of you.”

**Notes:** Kathy remarks to the reader that, in some way, she considers her conversation with Tommy by the pond, when they were thirteen, to be the “marker” between eras at Hailsham. Before this time was a “golden period” when the worries of the world did not intrude, but afterward, Kathy and the other students began to realize that their lives were predetermined, and that their time after Hailsham would not be so idyllic as it was there.

Kathy states that Miss Lucy always seemed “a little different from the other guardians,” and a conversation between Lucy and a class of students, including Kathy, in the pavilion later on seemed to prove this point. The class is gathered there to avoid the rain, and Miss Lucy is the only guardian watching them; some of the students are discussing their dream jobs after Hailsham, and one says he’d like to move to America to pursue an acting career. But Lucy stops him before he can go any further, and tells the assembled students she has some things to say to them.

Lucy tells the students that none of them will be going to America, none will have acting careers: she tells them that, instead, their lives have one purpose, which is that their bodies will be used for the harvesting of organs, which they will donate until they die. Lucy then stops speaking after “revealing” this information, and tells the group they can go out and play in the fields.

Kathy and Tommy discuss this even much later, when Kathy is Tommy’s carer, and Tommy offers a theory for how Hailsham prepared its students for their fates. Tommy believes that Hailsham very carefully calibrated the revelation of information regarding the donation procedures, so that, in the back of their minds, the students always knew what was going to happen to them—perhaps even before they were of an age that would enable them to understand this information. This meant that Miss Lucy’s outburst could only remind the students of information with which they had already become comfortable.

**Key Moment 6: The Possible in Norfolk and the Deferrals**

**Chapters** 12 & 13

**Quote**: “What they were saying was that some Hailsham students, in the past, in special circumstances had managed to get a deferral. That this was something you could do if you were a Hailsham student. You could ask for your donations to be put back by three, even four years. It wasn't easy, but just sometimes they'd let you do it. so long as You could convince them. So long as you *qualified*.” (p.150)

**Notes:** Later on, during the first winter of their time at the Cottages, Ruth pulls Kathy aside and tells her, excitedly, that Chrissie and Rodney might have spotted a “possible” for Ruth while the two of them were on a short trip to the Norfolk coast. Kathy tells the reader that a “possible” is the slang word for a potential “clone parent” for one of the clones—meaning, in other words, the potential model from which the cloned DNA was originally taken.

Chrissie, Rodney, Ruth, Tommy, and Kathy decide to take a day-long fieldtrip to Norfolk in order to track down Ruth’s possible.In Norfolk, the friends go to a café for lunch. There, Chrissie and Rodney reveal what they have spent months talking about with each other—the possibility of a “deferral” of caring duties for Hailshamcouples who can “prove that they’re properly in love.” Ruth nods heatedly in assent, as though she knew all about this possibility from Hailsham, but Kathy and Tommy are confused, and Kathy realizes that Ruth is pretending to know about this supposed special Hailsham privilege. Tommy, however, soon speaks up and says to the table that he has no idea what Ruth is talking about, that no such deferral was ever mentioned at Hailsham. At this, Ruth snaps at Tommy, implying he was too slow for complex conversation at Hailsham, and the group soon ends their lunch and drives into town to look for Ruth’s double.

After getting caught looking into the office where Ruth’s possible works the students loiter on the street for a while. Tommy spots Ruth’s possible walking away down the High Street, and the group decides to follow her for a moment. The woman ducks into a small art gallery, and the group follows, getting a closer look at her, before the woman eventually leaves. After a time, the group walks outside, and at this point, Kathy notices a distinct change has come over them, since on further inspection, they realize that the woman looks very little like Ruth, and isn’t her possible after all.

**Key Moment 7: Miss Emily’s Chilling Truths**

**Chapter** 21

**Quote:** “In the early days, after the war, that’s largely all you were to most people. Shadowy objects in test tubes (…) However uncomfortable people were about your existence their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease.”

**Notes:** Kathy and Tommy meet Miss Emily so they can ask about the rumour to defer. Miss Emily says that it was “something for them to dream about, a little fantasy”. Kathy is calm at this point even though this revelation “should have crushed” her. Miss Emily explains that deferrals do not exist. Tommy wonders if deferrals had been true in the past, but Miss Emily denies it. He also asks if there was ever a gallery. Miss Emily affirms the gallery and Kathy asks her why they encouraged creativity so much in all of the clones. Miss Emily explains that it was to prove to the higher authorities, on whose sponsorship Hailsham depended, that the students had souls. Kathy and Tommy are puzzled by this, but Miss Emily refers to the other institutions where children were brought up in appalling conditions and reminds them of how privileged they were at Hailsham. Before Hailsham existed, clones existed to supply medical science: “In the early days, after the war, that’s largely all you were to most people. Shadowy objects in test tubes”. Kathy questions why students should be badly treated and Miss Emily opens up about the demand for donations and that people’s primary concerns were for the human population: “However uncomfortable people were about your existence their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease”.

As long as the world requires donations, Miss Emily argues, there will always be a “barrier” to recognising Kathy and Tommy as fully human. Miss Emily cannot change their destiny and the situation is hopeless- “Your life must run the course that’s been set for it”. Kathy asks her why Madame appeared to be afraid of them, the way people are afraid of spiders and things. Miss Emily is not irritated by the question; rather she explains that Madame did the very best for them. She admits all the guardians were afraid of them. She discloses that she even feels “revulsion” towards them but that she fights against her feelings in order to do her job at Hailsham.

**Key Moment 8: The Resolution – Kathy’s Memories**

**Chapter** 23

**Quote:** “I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shoreline of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I'd say it was Tommy, and heatwave , maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that - I didn't let it – and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't stopping or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be.

**Notes:** When Kathy hears that Tommy has completed, she drives up to Norfolk. She looks into a field. She notices the rubbish that is entangled in the fence and the plastic carrier bags that are caught in the trees. She compares this to the debris along the seashore. She is lost in thought. She expresses the hope that everything that was lost had “washed up” in Norfolk. Then she imagines the faint figures of Tommy and Ruth calling out to her. She refuses to let them come any closer as the tears roll down her face. Then, she drives off to “wherever it was I was supposed to be”.