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Written by Dan Vyleta

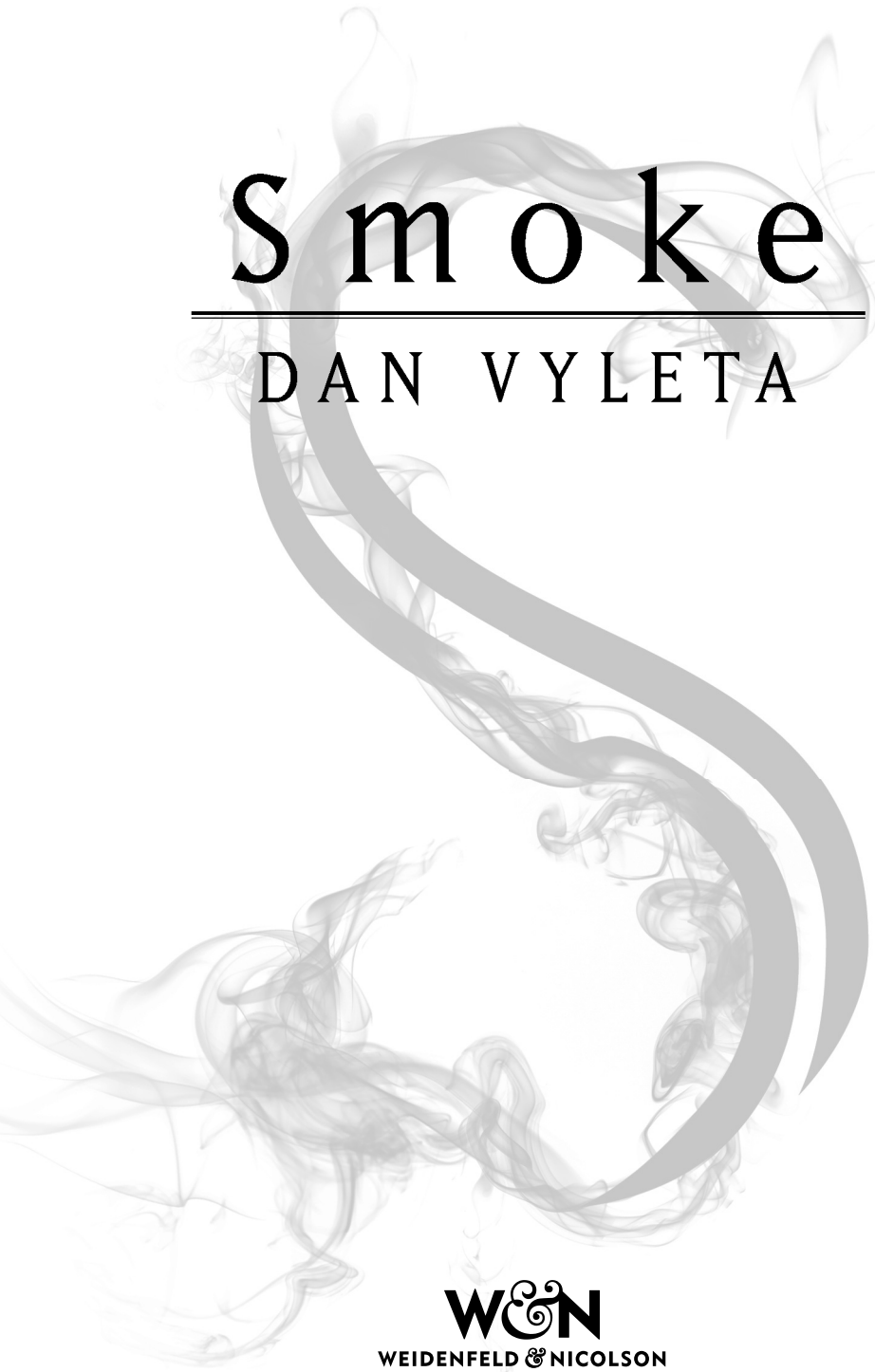
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Smoke

DAN VYLETA



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Part One

School

Those who study the physical sciences, and bring them to bear upon the health of Man, tell us that if the noxious particles that rise from vitiated air were palpable to the sight, we should see them lowering in a dense black cloud above such haunts, and rolling slowly on to corrupt the better portion of a town. But if the moral pestilence that rises with them . . . could be made discernible too, how terrible the revelation!

Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (1848)

Examination

'Thomas, Thomas! Wake up!'

The first thing he does upon waking is to search his nightshirt, his bedding for soiling. He does so quickly, mechanically, still more than half asleep: runs a palm over his skin feeling for the telltale grit of Soot.

Only then does he wonder what time it is, and who it is that has woken him.

It is Charlie, of course. His face keeps changing in the light of the candle he is holding. One moment it is steady, carved into plains of white and shadow. Then it buckles: eyes, nose, lips go roaming, rearrange themselves; and the light of the flame leaps into his reddish hair.

'Charlie? What time?'

'Late. Well, early. I heard a boy say it was two. Though the devil knows how he'd know.'

Charlie leans down to whisper. The candle swoops down with him, chasing shadows across the bed.

'It's Julius. He says everyone is to assemble. In the toilets. Now.'

There is movement all around the dormitory. Pale figures stretching, rising, whispering in groups. Haste wrestles with reluctance. There are only a handful of candles; moonlight on the snow outside the windows, their panes milky with its ghostly glow. Soon the boys move in procession, out the twin doors. Nobody wants to be first, or last: not Charlie, not Thomas, not even the handful of boys who hold special favour. Best to be lost in the crowd.

Φ

The bathroom tiles are cold under their feet. It's a large room flanked by sinks, square white porcelain sinks, their surfaces crisscrossed by a spider's web of fissures, too fine to be traced by your fingers and as though drawn with a fine pencil. Toilet stalls line the far end; beyond them, in a long, narrow annexe, hulks a row of bathtubs,

square and tiled with pale green tiles. The bathroom floor slopes, very slightly so, towards the middle. It's something you learn when you spill water there. It forms rivulets, heads for the low ground. At the lowest point, the room's centre, there is a drain, not large, scum-covered, its square metal grille half clogged with hair and lint.

This is where he has placed the chair. Julius. The boys of the lower school call him 'Caesar', pronouncing the *C* as a *K* like the Latin teacher taught them: *Key-sar*. It means emperor-designate. The one who will rule next. He alone is dressed in all the room: wears pressed trousers, his half boots polished to a shine. A waistcoat, but no jacket, to draw attention to the shirt: the sleeves so lily-white it startles the eye. When he moves his arms, the starched linen makes a sound, something between a rustle and a sort of clapping, depending on how quickly he moves. You can even *hear* how clean it is. And, by extension, he. No evil has touched him. Julius is the closest the school has to a saint.

He places both hands on the back of the chair and watches the ripple of fear spread through the boys. Thomas feels it, too. It's not a matter of courage, he thinks, but a physical force. Like feeling the wind on your face on a stormy day. You cannot opt out.

'We shall have a lottery,' says Julius, not loudly, dispensing with a greeting, and one of his cronies, eighteen and bulky in the shoulders, steps forward with pencil stubs, a stack of paper squares and a large gunny sack. The type you might use to carry potatoes in; to fashion a scarecrow's face. The kind you slip over someone's head when you lead them to their hanging. But that's just being fanciful, Thomas tells himself, as he accepts a piece of paper and a pencil, and marks down his name. Thomas Argyle. He omits his title. The papers go back in the sack.

Thomas does not know how Julius cheats, but cheat he must. Perhaps he has marked the papers somehow, or perhaps he simply pretends to read off the name he has picked out of the sack and substitutes it for one of his choice. The only person to vouch for the proceedings is that same loyal crony who passed out the papers. Julius has turned up his shirt sleeve to rummage in the sack, as though he were digging for sin at the bottom of a murky pond. As though it were important not to get soiled.

The first name is a surprise. Collingwood. One of his own, a 'guardian', as they like to call themselves, a fellow prefect, who holds

the keys to the dorm and the trust of the teachers. For a moment his choice confuses Thomas. Then he understands. It demonstrates justice, brings home the fact that nobody is above the rules. That there is no one who has nothing to fear.

'Collingwood,' Julius calls a second time, just that, no first name. That's what they are to one another here. Your first name is for friends, to be used only in private. And for Julius, who is everybody's friend.

He has to call a third time before Collingwood moves. It's not that he's planning to resist. He simply cannot believe his ears, looks about himself for explanation. But the boys around him have long peeled away; avoid his eyes as though even his gaze carries some disease. So he steps out at last, hugging himself around the chest: a tall, gawky lad, his breath always sour from catarrh.

Seated on the chair, his nightshirt hikes up to about mid-thigh. He tries a smile. Julius returns it easily, not showing any teeth, then turns away and walks the length of the room, boys parting for him like the Red Sea. There, perching on one of the bathtubs like some cast-iron crow, is a heavy trainman's lantern, the hooded kind that shines only to one side. He opens it, lights a match, reaches inside to put its flame to the wick. A turn of a valve, the hiss of match meeting oil, and a focused beam of rich, yellow light shoots forth, rectangular, like a window to another world.

When Julius takes the handle and walks it across, the swing of the lamp catches bodies, tense little faces, pulling them out of the gloom and isolating them from their peers. Thomas, too, feels the beam of the lamp on him and shrinks before it; sees his shadow dart from out his boots as though looking for a place to hide. It comes to him that Julius had no need to deposit the lamp so far from the chair, that everything – his walk across to it, the act of lighting, the stately return – is part of a performance planned well in advance. As is his drawing himself up to his full height to hang the lamp from a metal hook that just happens to be hammered into the ceiling there, two steps from the chair. Julius leaves a hand on it, angles it, so that Collingwood sits in a parallelogram of light, its edges drawn as though with a ruler. The light nearly strips him, seems to flood through the cotton of his nightshirt: one can make out the dark of his nipples and the bent struts of his narrow rib cage. Collingwood's face is tense but calm. For a moment Thomas admires him,

at whose hand he has so often been punished. It must take tremendous self-possession to bear the glare of that lamp. It is so bright, it seems to separate Collingwood's skin from his freckles: they hover a quarter inch above his cheeks.

'Shall we begin, then?'

It takes Collingwood a moment to collect his voice. He answers with the ritual phrase.

'Please, sir. Examine me.'

'You submit willingly?'

'I do. May my sins be revealed.'

'That they will and that they must. We thank the Smoke.'

'We thank the Smoke.'

And then, in chorus: 'We thank the Smoke.'

Even Thomas mouths it, that hateful little phrase. He only learned it upon coming to the school, not six weeks ago, but already it has found time to grow into him, taken a leasehold on his tongue. It may be it can only be excised with a knife.

The interrogation begins. Julius's voice rings clear in the large room. His is a pleasant voice, precise, rhythmic, sonorous. When he wants to, he can sound like your favourite uncle. Like your brother. Like a friend.

'You're a prefect, Collingwood,' he begins. It is like Julius to begin there. Somewhere harmless. It makes you lower your guard. 'How long has it been now since you earned the badge?'

'A year and a term, sir.'

'A year and a term. And you are pleased with the position?'

'I am pleased to serve.'

'You are pleased to serve. An excellent answer. You discharge your duties faithfully, I take it?'

'I endeavour to, sir.'

'And how do you think of those boys of whom you have been put in charge?'

'Think of them. Sir? With . . . with fondness. With affection.'

'Yes, very good. Though they are perfect little brutes sometimes, are they not?'

'I trust, sir, they are as good as they can be, sir.'

'One "sir" will do, Collingwood.'

Julius waits out the momentary titter that races through the room. His face, standing to the side of the lamp, is in darkness. All the

world is reduced to one boy, one chair. When Collingwood fidgets, his nightshirt rides up higher on his legs and he has to pull it down with his hands. He does so clumsily. His hands have formed fists he has difficulty unclenching.

'But you like to punish them, don't you, your little charges who are as good as they can be? Sometimes, you punish them quite severely, I believe. Just yesterday, many a boy here saw you administer a caning. Twenty-one strokes. Good ones, too. The school nurse had to treat the welts.'

Collingwood is sweating, but he is equal to this line of questioning.

'What I do,' he says, 'I do only to improve them.' And adds, with a touch of boldness: 'The punishment hurts me more than them.'

'You love them then, these boys.'

Collingwood hesitates. It is a strong word, love. Then settles on: 'I love them like a father.'

'Very good.'

There has, thus far, been not so much as a wisp of Smoke. Collingwood's shirt remains clean, his collar pristine, his armpits sweat-soaked but unsoiled. And yet there is not one amongst the boys simple enough to conclude that Collingwood has spoken the exact truth. The laws of Smoke are complex. Not every lie will trigger it. A fleeting thought of evil may pass unseen; a fib, an excuse, a piece of flattery. Sometimes you can lie quite outrageously and find yourself spared. Everyone knows the feeling, knows it from childhood: of being questioned by your mother, or your governess, by the house tutor; of articulating a lie, pushing it carefully past the threshold of your lips, your palms sweaty, your guts coiled into knots, your chin raised in false confidence; and then, the sweet balm of relief when the Smoke does not come. At other times, the Smoke is conjured by transgressions so trifling you are hardly aware of them at all: you reach for the biscuits before they've been offered; you smirk as a footman slips on the freshly polished stairs. Next thing you know its smell is in your nose. There is no more hateful smell in the world than the smell of Smoke.

But for now Collingwood remains free of it. He has passed his examination with flying colours. Only, he isn't finished yet: Julius. Still he stands, angling the lamp. It is as though his voice pours out along with the light.

'Your brother died not long ago, did he not?'

The question takes Collingwood by surprise. For the first time he appears hurt rather than afraid. He answers quietly.

'Yes.'

'What was he called, your brother?'

'Luke.'

'Luke. Yes. I remember your telling me about him. How you played as little boys.' Julius watches Collingwood squirm. 'Remind me. How did Luke die?'

There is no mistaking the resentment in the answer. Still it comes.

'He drowned. He fell out of a boat.'

'I see. A tragedy. How old was he?'

'Ten.'

'Ten? So young. How long to his eleventh birthday?'

'Three and a half weeks.'

'That is unfortunate.'

Collingwood nods and begins to cry.

Thomas understands the tears. Children are born in sin. Most babies turn black with Smoke and Soot within minutes of being born, and every birthing bed and every infant crib is surrounded by the dark plume of shame. The gentlefolk and all commoners who can afford it employ nurses and attendants to look after the child until Good begins to ripen in it, at age three or four. Sometimes they make a point of barring the child from all family intercourse until it is six or seven: from love, and so they will not grow to despise it. Smoke is tolerated to the eleventh year: the Holy Book itself suggests the threshold before which grace is only achieved by saints. If you die before eleven, you die in sin and go to hell. But (thank the Virgin) it is a lesser hell than those reserved for adults: a children's hell. In picture books it is often depicted as a kind of hospital or school, with long, long corridors and endless rows of prim, white beds. Thomas owned such a book when he was growing up and drew in it: drew colour, people, strange walking birds that trailed long feathers like bridal trains. It is the tradition in many of the older families to hire a bond servant when a child turns ten whose only task is to guard the young one's life. If the bond servant fails, he is put to death. One calls them rooks, these bond servants, for they dress all in black and often trail their own Smoke like a curse.

Julius has given the boys time to digest all this, the weight of little

Luke's death. That lamp whose beam he is steadying must be heavy in his hand, and hot. But he is patient.

'Was Luke alone? In the boat, I mean.'

Collingwood speaks but his answer is inaudible. His tears have ceased now. Even though he still wears his nightshirt, he has been stripped of something these last few minutes, some protective layer that we carry on our skins.

'Come, come, man. Out with it. Who was it? Who was in the boat with your ten-year-old brother when he drowned?'

But Collingwood has clamped up and no word will pass his trembling lips.

'It appears you have forgotten. I shall help you, then. Is it not true that it was your father who was in the boat? And is it not also true that he was drunk and slept through the drowning, and only woke when the servants found the boat stuck amongst reeds in a riverbank three miles down the stream?'

'Yes,' says Collingwood, having refound his tongue. He almost shouts it, in fact, his voice an octave higher than it was but a minute ago.

'And,' asks Julius, matching the shout with a whisper, 'do you love your father as the Holy Book instructs us to?'

Collingwood need not answer. The Smoke does it for him. One notices it at the shoulders first, and where the sweat has plastered the nightshirt to his skin: a black, viscous blot, no bigger than a penny. It's like he's bleeding ink. Then the first wisps of Smoke appear, stream from these dark little spots, leaving gritty Soot behind.

Collingwood hangs his head, and trembles.

'You must learn to master yourself,' says Julius, says it very gently, angling away the light. 'You may go now. It is well.'

Φ

There is no punishment, or rather none that Julius need administer. The stains on Collingwood's shirt can be washed out only by soaking them for hours in concentrated lye. The only lye in the whole school is held by the school laundry and is tightly guarded. When he hands over his linen the next morning, as he must, the shirt will be identified by his monogram; his name taken down. The Master of Smoke and Ethics will have a conversation with Collingwood, not entirely dissimilar in nature to the proceedings of this late-night

court. A report will be written and sent to his parents, and sanctions imposed upon him. Perhaps he will lose his badge and the privileges of a prefect; perhaps he will be sent to scrub the teachers' lavatory, or spend his free time in the library cataloguing books. Perhaps he won't be allowed to join the other schoolboys on the Trip. He shows no anger as he stands up trembling from the chair, and his look at Julius is like a dog's that has been beaten. It wants to know if it's still loved.

Thomas gazes after him longer than most as Collingwood slinks from the room. If he was free to go he would go after him; would sit with him, though not speak. He wouldn't find the words. Charlie might: he's good with words, and more than that. He has a special talent, a gentleness of the heart. It allows him to feel what others feel and speak to them frankly, as an equal. Thomas turns to his friend, but Charlie's eyes are on Julius. More boys are to be examined tonight. A second piece of paper is about to be picked from the sack; a second name about to be read.

Φ

They call him Hum-Slow, though his real name is Hounslow, the ninth Viscount of. He can't be twelve yet if he's a day. One of the youngest boarders, thin but chubby-faced, the way the young ones sometimes are. As he arrives at the chair and turns to sit down on it, his fear wrests wind from his bowels, long and protracted, like it will never stop. Imagine it: the endless growl of a fart, in a room full of schoolboys. There are some giggles yet hardly a jeer. One does not need Charlie's talent to feel sorry for Hounslow. His body shakes so, he can barely manage his opening line.

'Please, sir. Examine me.'

His voice, not yet broken, tends towards a squeal. When he tries to 'thank the Smoke', he mangles it so badly that tears of frustration roll down his plump cheeks. Thomas starts forward, but Charlie stops him, gently, unobtrusively, takes hold of him by the arm. They exchange looks. Charlie has a peculiar way of looking: so simple, so honest, you forget to hide behind your own little lies. For what would Thomas do, if Charlie let him go? To interfere with the examination would be tantamount to rebelling against the Smoke itself. But Smoke is real: you can see and smell it every day, if you like. How do you rebel against a fact? And so Thomas must stay and watch

Hounslow be thrown to the wolves. Though this wolf wears white and angles a lamp into which the child blinks blindly.

'Tell me,' Julius begins, 'have you been a good boy?'

Hounslow shakes his head in terror, and a sound runs through the room very close to a moan.

But, strange to say, the little boy survives the procedure without a single wisp. He answers all questions, answers them slowly, though his tongue seems to have gone thick with fear, and sticks out of his mouth in between answers.

Does he love his teachers?

Yes, he does.

Love his peers, his books, his dormitory bed?

Oh yes, he does, he does, and school most of all.

What sins, then, weigh on his conscience?

Sins too great and numerous to name.

But name them he does, taking upon himself all the weight of guilt he can conceive of, until he is quite flattened. If he has failed his Latin test this Monday past, it is because he is 'indolent' and 'stupid'. If he has fought in the school yard with a classmate called Watson, it is because he, Hounslow, is 'vicious' and a 'little brute'. If he has wet his bed, it is because he is 'vile' and has been so from birth, his mother says so herself. He is a criminal, a retrograde, a beast. 'I am dirt,' Hounslow shouts, near-hysterical, 'dirt', and all the while his nightshirt stays clean, its little lace ruffles free of all Soot.

It's done in under ten minutes. Julius lowers the lamp and kisses the boy's head, right on the crown, like they have seen the bishop do with the school chaplain. And when he gets up, there is something more that shows in Hounslow's face other than relief. A note of triumph. Today, this night, he has become one of the elect. He has abased himself, admitted to all he's ever hidden in his conscience (and some more besides), and the Smoke has judged him pure. If he gives Watson a bloody nose on the morrow, it will be with the sense of administering justice. Julius looks after him with proud amusement. Then he digs within the sack. And reads a third name, the last one. It won't be Cooper, Charlie's last name. Charlie is a future earl, one of the highest in the land. The powerful, Thomas has been given to understand, are rarely chosen for examination.

'Argyle,' Julius reads, slowly and diligently, not without pleasure.

Argyle.

Thomas's name.

It would be false to say he did not expect it.

As though split by an oar, the sea of boys now parts for him. Charlie's hand squeezes his arm, then he's walking. He'll wonder at it later, this undue haste, the absence of any real will to resist, and will berate himself for cowardice. But it isn't cowardice that shows on his face but the opposite: he's itching to do battle. From the way he raises his chin into the light, you would have thought he was climbing into a boxing ring. Julius notices it too.

And smiles.

Φ

The light is blinding. Behind it, the room ceases to exist. He cannot look to Charlie for guidance or assurance, for Charlie is lost in the darkness while he, Thomas, is bathed in yellow light. Even Julius, who stands not two steps away, is but a shadow from the world beyond.

There is something else Thomas realises. The light makes him feel naked. Not exposed, or vulnerable, but quite literally parted from his clothing, every stitch so flimsy it has turned into thin air. In itself it might not have meant that much to him. At home, he stripped many times to swim the river with his friends, and when he changes every night into his nightshirt, he does so with little thought to modesty. This is different though. The light singles him out. He is naked in a room full of people who are not. He is not prepared for how angry it makes him.

'Start,' he growls, because Julius doesn't, he just stands there, waiting, steadying the lamp. 'Go on. I submit to the exam. And thank the Smoke. Now: ask me a question.' The chair, Thomas realises, slopes under his bottom. His feet have to push into the ground to keep himself stable.

Julius greets his outburst calmly.

'Impatient, are we? Though you were tardy enough about coming to school. And are slow enough about learning your lessons.'

He unhooks the lamp and carries it closer, stands over him, bathing him in the beam.

'You know,' Julius mouths, so quietly only Thomas can hear, 'I think I can see your Smoke even now. Steaming out of every little pore. It's disgusting.

'But if you are so very impatient,' he goes on, louder again, his orator's voice self-possessed and supple, 'very well. I will make it easy for you. Your examination will be a single question. Does that suit you?'

Thomas nods, bracing himself, like you do when you expect to be punched. It is Charlie who later explains to him that it is better to unclench, absorb the hit like water.

'Go ahead, then. Ask.'

'Well, well.'

Julius makes to speak, stops, interrupts himself; turns the lamp around for a brief moment and lets its beam dance over the faces of the boys. Thomas sees Charlie for half a second; not long enough to read his expression. Then the beam is back in his eyes.

'You see,' Julius resumes, 'the question I want to ask is not mine. It belongs to everyone. The whole school is asking it. Every boy who is in this room. Even the teachers have been asking it. Even your friend over there, though he mightn't admit it. It is this: What is it that is so filthy about you, so unspeakably foul, that it made your parents ignore all custom and common sense and hide you away until your sixteenth year?

'Or,' he adds, more slowly yet, articulating every syllable, 'is it that there is something vile, disgusting about *them* that they were afraid you'd disclose and spread?'

The question hits its mark: as an insult (to him, his family, the things he holds sacred) but more so as a truth, a spectre that has haunted half his life. It punctures his defences and goes to his core; wakes fear and anger and shame. The Smoke is there long before he can account for it. It is as though he is burning, burning alive without reason. Then he knows what it marks: he has hatred, murder in his heart.

Another boy would crumple with shame. Thomas leaps. Hits Julius, headfirst, sends the lamp crashing to the floor. Its flame, unextinguished, lights their struggle from one side. To the boys who are watching they are a single shadow projected ceiling-high against the wall, two-headed and monstrous. But to them, close to the lamp, everything is crystal clear. Thomas is smoking like a wet ember. His hands are fists, raining down on Julius. Insults stream from his mouth.

'You are nothing,' he keeps on saying, 'nothing. A dog, a filthy dog, nothing.'

His fist hits Julius in the chin and something comes loose from his mouth, a tooth, apparently, a black, rotten molar that jumps from his lips like a coughed-up sweet. There is blood, too, and more Smoke, Smoke that pours from Julius's skin, so black and pure it stoppers Thomas's anger.

Immediately, Julius gains the upper hand. More than two years older, stronger, he flips the shorter boy. But rather than hitting him, he bears down with his whole body, embraces him, clings to him, rolls him into the lamp until it tips and smothers its own light. All at once Thomas realises what Julius is doing. He is rubbing his Smoke into Thomas, and Thomas's into himself. Later, he will claim he was sullied by his attacker; that he himself remained pristine all through their fight. Now, in the darkness, he takes Thomas's throat and squeezes it until Thomas thinks that surely he must die.

Julius lets go, judiciously, the moment the other boys have stepped close enough to get a better picture. He gets up, wipes at his shirt, and makes a show of his composure. Thomas, crumpled, remains on the floor. Only Charlie bends down to him, soothes him, and helps him back to the dorm.