

The Metamorphosis of Tom Wire

Chapter 1

Tom Wire was in the habit of wandering the streets of Folkestone after school hours, often with a sketch pad, and always with his head bowed. Children sniggered as the short, slight, red-headed figure set up his sketching equipment nearby where they played. Cruelty comes naturally to children at the best of times; but for someone like Tom, who was not physically attractive and lacked social skills, it was inevitable that he would be the victim of much mockery.

Receiving little encouragement at home, sketching was a method of evasion for Tom: whenever he put pencil to paper, all of his anxieties were forgotten, and he was able to be happy. He was not limited in the work he produced; indeed his sketchbook consisted of an array of two-dimensional replicas of a whole variety of objects he had found in Folkestone. Nevertheless, he particularly relished sketching buildings.

He didn't own much else, not even a door key, as his old mother refused to trust him, but he did own a watch, and unlike most of his belongings, it did, in fact, work. This was because he was required to meet his mother in the same place at the same time every weeknight. For the sake of his own personal comfort, he thought it best to keep track of the time.

Tom pulled up the sleeve of his grey tweed blazer. Six-fifty. It was about time that he began to make his way to the bingo hall. Although his mother was rarely violent, she could be incredibly spiteful when it suited her, and consequently Tom feared being late. Closing his tattered-looking sketchbook, he began to run through the streets, towards Dover Road.

As he ran down the final hill, people had already begun filing out of the bingo hall. Without so much as a care for his safety, Tom darted across the busy main road, head down, free arm pumping. Striking the curb with his left foot he flew onto the pavement, losing grip on his sketchbook as he did so. For a moment, he remained paralysed on the cold, damp, littered ground, his arms and legs sprawled out in all directions. Tom's countenance turned a deep crimson.

Just then, and most inconveniently for poor Tom, his mother appeared on the pavement before him and, enraged by a loss at bingo, stomped heavily over to her son.

"Get off the floor, maggot!" she shrieked, unmindful of who saw or heard.

Tom quickly jumped to his feet and brushed all the cigarette ends and grit that he had accumulated off his uniform. He glanced fearfully at sketch pad, which was lying by the steps of the bingo hall. Following Tom's gaze, his mother snatched it up. "What is *this*?" she asked. Tom gulped. "I said: what is THIS?" she repeated, pulling Tom's ear.

"Sketchbook, mum," he mumbled, avoiding her gaze.

"And what did I say about *sketchbooks*?" she growled. Tom was silent. "I said they belong to daft artists who are never going to earn enough money to live! Seeing as you didn't listen, I'll have to get rid of it myself."

At that, the crooked woman ripped out page after page of his sketchbook, oblivious to the exquisite sketches contained within each page. Tom stood on and watched in horror, the blood rising in his cheeks. In a few moments, his mother had shredded every page of his sketchbook, and had thrown the shreds to the floor.

"Right, let's go home," his mother said on completing her task.

Tom knew it was never wise to contradict his mother, but the raging fury now within him compelled him to disobey his mother on this instance. Scrambling to pick up the precious pieces of his beloved sketchbook,

he replied: "No, mother, I am not coming!" And as she stood dumbfounded, Tom ran away in the direction of the harbour, clutching his fragmented artwork; tears streamed down his face.

Tom did not cease from running until he had reached his favourite bench in the harbour, next to the old red telephone booth. There he laid out the remnants of his much-prized work before him on the floor, in attempt to reconcile pieces of the same sketch and regain some order, sobbing as he did so.

Just then, a scrawny-looking young man with sunken cheekbones and a pale complexion stopped in front of him and looked down at the shreds of paper at Tom's feet.

"Are these sketches yours?" the man asked, a tone of amazement in his voice.

"Yes," Tom spluttered, shielding his eyes from the evening light. "Why?"

"Because they're extremely good!" the scrawny man replied. "That one there - the one of Holy Trinity - that's amazing! The mood you've created there is something that could only find its equal among the work of the top classical artists!"

Tom was rather shocked by this sudden excitement, and leant back to observe the stranger.

"Sorry, but who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Mike Lawrence," the man replied, taking a seat next to Tom on the bench. "Have you heard of me?"

"Erm..." Tom searched the reaches of his mind, for he was certain that he had heard the name before.

"Are you one of them artists from the town?" he managed finally.

"Yes, I am!" he exclaimed, seemingly overjoyed at the thought that he might possibly be something of a local celebrity.

"Yeah, I come and look in the studio windows and that while I'm waiting for my mum to finish bingo," Tom explained. "And my name's Tom, by the way."

"If you don't mind me asking, Tom," the man now established as Mike began, "Why is your sketchbook in pieces?"

Tom sighed deeply as thoughts of the recent episode resurfaced in his mind.

"My mum don't like me doing art," he explained. "Says you can't earn a living out of art unless you've got friends in high places, so there's no point trying. But I like to - it's relaxing."

"How terrible!" the artist exclaimed after a short pause. "Well, I can tell you that your mother is positively wrong to make you think that you have no talent! I know many people who call themselves artists and have won awards, and yet they would never, even after decades of practice, be able to replicate some of these sketches of yours!"

A smile flickered across Tom's face: never had he received such encouragement. Rapidly gathering up his scraps of artwork to prevent them being trampled on by the seagulls that had begun to crowd the bench, he asked, "Should I carry on with art then, even though my mum says not to?"

"Definitely!" Mike replied. "If you ever need any help or advice, or even somewhere to work, away from your mother, just come to my studio - you know where it is I presume?"

"Yes...thank you!" Tom beamed.

"Come on, I'll buy you some cockles before the barrows close," Mike said, beginning to move off.

Tom was delighted: not only had his hopes been raised, but he had also acquired a tub of cockles - and a large one at that. Cockles were a delicacy that he had only had the pleasure of tasting twice before in his entire life - once when he was out at the sandy beach with a friend's family at around the age of five, and once when, constrained by the memory of their delicious taste, he had swiped a handful from the tub of a drunken man who was sat outside one of the public houses along the seafront. Having obtained a plastic bag to hold the remnants of his sketchbook, he eagerly doused his cockles in vinegar. The pair then walked along the quay, towards the sandy beach.

"I'm just embarking on a little project of my own at the moment, a new sort of thing for me," Mike began, between mouthfuls. "Have you heard of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition?" Tom shook his head. "Well, it's a big art exhibition in London and members of the public are invited to enter. Of course, there's no guarantee that your work will be exhibited, but it's certainly worth a try. If your artwork does get exhibited, it is highly likely that you'll not only sell your work, but you'll make a name for yourself and have work for the future! There are also special prizes given out to outstanding pieces, if I have been informed correctly."

Gradually, an idea began to form in Tom's mind. Surely, if this exhibition was open to the public, there would be nothing hindering *him* from entering, providing he kept it secret from his mother. He thanked Mike for the cockles and said that he really ought to go home now. Mike agreed and repeated that Tom would always be welcome in his studio.

On reaching his home, Tom was surprised to find that his mother had not yet arrived. He thought initially that she might have gone looking for him, but was soon convinced that she must have gone to the off-licence, her second favourite haunt, after the bingo hall. Sighting an open window, he climbed up onto the gable, still clutching his plastic bag, and slid inside.

Exhausted, yet full of renewed hope and joy, he sank onto his bed and fell asleep; in that state he remained until the sound of smashing glass resonating through the empty, unadorned hallways announced the return of his mother. Tom pulled his pillow over his ears, in order to conceal the great clamour. He closed his eyes tightly and prayed for morning.

Soon, morning had arrived and Tom's mother was battering his bedroom door.

"TOM!" she bellowed. "You're late for school!"

Tom rolled over on his mattress, still wearing his school uniform. "It's Saturday!" he grumbled back.

"Oh... then I'm going back to bed!" she uttered, her voice slowly dying away as she returned to her own bedroom.

Tom looked at the clock: it was eight thirty-seven. The library opened at nine o'clock, and he wanted to be there as soon as it opened, so he changed speedily and tried to flatten his hair. After eating a piece of toast, spread simply with butter, he grabbed his notepad and pencil from his room and departed for the library. It was only a short journey to the library; in fact, he lived in the road directly behind it, and merely had to climb a set of stairs in order to reach his destination.

At eight fifty-four, he reached the library; the window sill and bench were already taken by regulars, so he was forced to stand. Like Tom, the regulars all waited to use the computer facilities, rather than to browse for books. One of them, a large balding fellow with a vacant stare acknowledged Tom with a nod. Tom returned the nod and advanced to stand by the railings that separated the pavement from the road. At exactly nine o'clock, the great oak doors of the library were opened and those who had been waiting filed neatly in to find their computers.

Tom sat down to computer number three, next to the balding man, and opened his notepad to find his library card number and password. Having done this, he accepted the terms and conditions of the library and waited excitedly for the machine to load.

When all the icons had appeared on the screen, he double-clicked on the internet explorer icon and navigated himself to the Google homepage. There he typed in: 'royul academy of art summer exhibition', which was met with the suggestion: *Did you mean 'Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition'?* Tom affirmed that this was his intention, and followed a link to the Royal Academy website. He got himself ready to write, and scanned the page for information.

Tom was not the most educated of boys, and thus, this task took was burdensome. Notwithstanding, he

finally managed, and wrote down what he found most important: 'Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, Piccadilly, £50 entrance fee, take work up on 5th April, no age limit'. Then he researched the type of works that had featured in previous years: it seemed as though a whole variety of pieces by a whole variety of people were exhibited annually.

Then he found his way to the National Rail website's journey planner and typed in that he wanted a return ticket from Folkestone Central to Piccadilly. To his dismay, he ascertained that the trip would cost him almost twenty pounds. Fifty pounds entrance fee, plus twenty pounds for a train ticket! Tom closed his notebook and leaned back on his swivel chair. Where on earth would he be able to get seventy pounds from?

Chapter 2

After leaving the library, Tom ambled absentmindedly along Foord Road. It was then, Tom always reported, that chance came into play. Seeing two young men washing cars on the opposite side of the road, he crossed over and approached them.

"Don't s'pose you've got any jobs have you?" he asked, in the politest terms possible. The young men ceased from their scrubbing and looked up at Tom.

"Boss!" one of them shouted, "a boy's here about a job!"

At that, a middle-aged man emerged from what appeared to be a small mobile building. He put his hand on Tom's shoulder and wheeled him into the curious structure.

"What can I do for you, son?" he asked, in a rather over-friendly tone of voice.

"Um...I'd like to know if you've got any jobs?" Tom faltered.

The boss scratched his head. "Well, you're in luck, son!" he exclaimed. "You've saved me the trouble of advertising in the local rag!" Tom stared on in disbelief.

"Thank you, sir!" Tom said, appreciatively. "What will I do, and how much will I get paid?" he asked, excitedly.

The boss chuckled. "How about you come over here all day on weekends and two other evenings in the week and clean cars with the boys? May I just ask how old you are?"

"Fourteen," Tom replied. The boss made an odd noise, releasing air through his tightly-clenched teeth.

"Well, I can't legally employ you," he said; Tom's head sank and he let out a great sigh. However, seeing Tom's discomfort moved the boss: "I won't tell if you don't!" he whispered. "You'll earn two-pound-fifty an hour, and you can start tomorrow!"

Tom repeated his thanks and walked merrily off towards his home. When inside, he opened up his notepad and, rather cautiously, calculated his earnings for one full day. It amounted to twenty-four pounds. "Well, it shouldn't take long to save up enough money," he thought.

The next day, Tom laboured hard from nine to five o'clock, pausing only for ten minutes at midday to eat his lunch. The boss was greatly impressed and, as a result, granted him an extra five pounds. Tom was ecstatic and, when his work was concluded, he ran all the way to the Old High Street to tell his newly-acquired friend, Mike, about his good fortune.

Tom explained to Mike his plan to enter the Exhibition and how he would now be able to obtain sufficient funds to achieve it. Mike, being ever-supportive, reiterated his willingness to help. That evening, both worked on ideas, Mike stressing that a pencil drawing of a prominent building would be Tom's best choice.

Full of excitement, Tom agreed, and stated that he would search for the perfect building the following day

after school, while waiting for his mother to finish bingo. "Thank you for all your help, Mike!" he said. "Probably be back tomorrow if it's okay."

"Of course! I look forward to it!" Mike replied, showing Tom out of his studio. "Oh, before you go, Tom, I've got a little something for you," he said, suddenly stopping Tom. He handed Tom a brand new sketchbook. "Thank you!" he squealed, running off down the Old High Street in a frenzy of total jubilation.

As promised, following school on Monday, Tom began searching for a building to sketch for the Exhibition; he had brought his new sketchbook with him, in order to make some small thumbnail sketches to aid his decision.

First, he walked towards the harbour and sketched the Hotel Burstin with all the derelict buildings behind it. Then he ascended the many steps to the Bayle and sketched the old, sinister-looking house, 'Shangri-La'. He also proceeded to sketch St. Eanswythe's church, Number 1 the Leas and Holy Trinity church; each one captured something of the uniqueness of Folkestone, but he remained unsure of which would be most appropriate.

On discussing this with Mike, Tom came to the conclusion that although a detailed drawing of the Hotel Burstin would best portray the ludicrousness of how such an elegant building is set in such a deprived, deteriorating area, a sketch of Holy Trinity at sunset would show something of the hidden beauty of Folkestone.

Each night that week, between his scheduled working hours and meeting his mother outside the bingo hall, Tom worked busily on his pencil drawing in Mike's studio. Simultaneously, Mike worked on his own piece of artwork, an abstract political montage. As the 5th of April loomed closer, Tom grew more dedicated, both in his secular work and in his artwork. Finally, the 4th of April arrived, and Tom and Mike agreed that they would meet at Mike's studio at six o'clock the following morning. Mike would have both pieces of artwork packaged, ready to transport.

However, on returning home that night, Tom discovered, to his absolute horror, that the plan would not go as smoothly as he had anticipated.

"Boy!" his mother yelled as he passed through the front door, "I know you're up to summin', so you're grounded! No school tomorrow! No nothing! You can stay locked in your room!"

Automatically, Tom's hopes were demolished. A feeling of helplessness swamped him: his dreams were ruined; his mother had succeeded in proving that he could never amount to anything as an artist. All night, he lay on his bed awake, thinking of what might have been.

Chapter 3

The next morning at ten-to-six, Mike sensed there was something wrong. Surely, in all his anticipation and enthusiasm, Tom would have arrived sooner. Deducing that Tom's mother was causing a problem, he set off towards Foord Road South, clinging tightly to the two precious pieces of artwork, which he had had framed.

Reaching Tom's house, he threw a stone up at his window. Tom's face appeared at the glass. He appeared haggard and pale. "Are you coming?" Mike asked.

Promptly assessing his situation, Tom concluded that the wrath of his mother could be endured for the

delight he would have if his work was to be exhibited. Sliding his hard-earned money into his pocket, Tom unfastened his window and climbed down to the ground.

Within twenty minutes, the pair was on the rather busy 6.40 train to London St. Pancras. Tom was extremely grateful that the service was high-speed, for the cramped nature of the train did not please him. In fact, he felt incredibly ill. There was hardly space to move with all the commuters making their way to their London jobs, so Tom, reluctantly resorted to storing his artwork on the shelf above his seat.

Unfortunately for Tom, the underground was no better; he was glad to finally get into the fresh air. However, the weather had changed significantly since embarking on their first train journey. The morning had been mild and the skies clear. Now however, a harsh northerly wind blew huge, heavy raindrops to the ground.

It was immediately evident that the queue to enter the exhibition was exceptionally lengthy. Tom sighed: "Great, now we have to wait in this stupid queue in the rain for hours."

"Think positively!" Mike replied, cheerily. "Just think of what you could have if your work does get exhibited!"

"S'pose," Tom uttered. "How far is it 'til the front of the queue anyway?"

"I'd say we're about one mile from the entrance, so prepare to get very wet!"

Tom laughed. "Well at least we've got these plastic things over the art - it would be a disaster if not - all that work for nothing!"

Looking about himself, Tom noticed all different styles and sizes of artwork: there were small browsers and large weighty canvases; oil, acrylic, and a variety of other media. Fear abruptly overcame Tom. With the immense diversity of the individual pieces of artwork, Tom was suddenly left devoid of all confidence: he realised that he was just one boy of the many thousands of competitors striving to achieve the same goal.

"I'm scared," he gulped. "I don't think I should enter my work - it won't get accepted anyway!" Mike stared at his younger counterpart with incredulity.

"You want to give up now, after all the work you've put into this?"

Looking around at all the other aspiring artists in the queue, with a hint of exasperation in his voice, Tom replied: "But there's all these other people. Their work's miles better!"

"Look Tom, you have just as much chance as any of these other people. It's only natural to perceive other people's work as being better than your own. Don't worry yourself!" Mike encouraged.

Tom felt slightly more at ease, but in reality, he was secretly still remarkably anxious.

Eventually, Tom and Mike reached the front of the queue, dripping with rainwater. They were both requested to fill in a form; Mike's help was much appreciated at this time by Tom, who had once again worked himself up into a state of sheer panic. It was decided that Tom should use Mike's address, as they could not tell what Tom's mother would do if a letter from an art institution was to come through the letterbox.

Subsequent to handing in their forms, their artwork was taken away from them and passed along an extensive line of workers, towards the place where they were to be judged.

"I'm going to sneak in and have a look," Tom whispered as they were just turning to leave the entrance. "I can't just let it go!"

With that, and before Mike could prevent him, Tom had ducked under the arms and artwork of the budding artists filling the entrance hall of the Academy. Unseen, Tom passed into the judging room and concealed himself behind a vast display board to the rear of the judges, who were seated on a long white wooden bench.

Suddenly, Tom saw his own piece of work enter the room. Unfortunately for him, however, the volume of discussion in the room hindered his hearing.

"Yes, okay, doubtful," Tom heard one of the judges, an old, important-looking man sigh.

Tom's countenance fell. He no longer needed to wait in expectation of whether his work would be accepted: it was doubtful, dubious, unlikely that his work would be admitted. With a sigh, he crept out of the room, and then out of the Academy altogether, where he found Mike, looking rather disquieted.

"I thought you'd be caught!" Mike gasped. "What did you see?"

"Don't look good for me," Tom mumbled.

"Oh no! Did they give it an 'X'?" Mike inquired.

"A 'doubtful'," Tom replied.

Mike laughed, sweeping his hair out of his face. "Tom, there are only two categories that the art is split into - rejected and doubtful. Despite what the name may suggest, 'doubtful' actually means that you have a very good chance of having your artwork displayed in the gallery!"

Tom was confounded. Speech failed him, but he was reinvigorated with hope and he felt he could leap for joy.

"What about my work?" Mike asked, enthusiastically.

"Um..." Tom began, "It must have been judged while I was trying to hide, because I didn't see it."

However, the truth was that Tom had been so concerned with himself that he had failed to pay attention to the result of his friend and helper's work. He began to blush, realising the shameful of his selfishness.

Chapter 4

The return journey was made slightly more enjoyable by the fact that everyone who was going to work had already gone, and so the train was less densely populated. Nevertheless, Tom continued to suffer from a slight nausea and felt that he could readily vomit. Happily, when the pair disembarked from the train at Folkestone Central, Tom was yet to vomit.

However, not all was good news, as, on his doorstep, Tom was met by his extremely livid mother, who was shaking most violently with rage.

"I don't know where you've been or how you got out!" she erupted, "but I'll make sure you don't get out of this house again for a month!"

Tom thought that it was ultimately better to obey his mother, instead of adding to the animosity she already harboured, and so, when ordered to go to his room, he complied willingly.

The days of that month were long and dull, as Tom was left devoid of sensible company. Even school seemed appealing to Tom: he longed to converse with someone other than his uncongenial mother.

At the end of the month, Tom was finally released. He made his way directly to his workplace to explain his lengthy and silent absence to his boss. Although the boss was understanding, he had, sadly, already employed a new worker to fill Tom's place.

Following school that day, Tom hurried to Mike's studio. Mike was most surprised and overjoyed to see his young friend after such a long time.

"Where have you been all this time?" he asked in amazement.

Thus Tom unfolded how the harsh sentence of his mother had prevented him from leaving his home, from doing anything he loved to do, in fact.

"Anyway, I've got to meet mum," Tom said after a drink of orange juice. "I'll come round tomorrow - that's if I don't get locked up again!"

"Just a minute!" Mike stopped Tom as he was leaving the studio. He handed Tom an envelope with 'The Royal Academy of Arts' stamped on it. "This came for you today. Let me know tomorrow how you got on!"

Tom affirmed that he would and rushed off, his stomach stirring within him. When he finally arrived home after meeting his mother, he hastened upstairs and ripped open the envelope:

'Thank you for entering the Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition 2010. Over 1000 pieces of art were submitted, in a variety of styles, making it the judging process extremely difficult. On this occasion, I am pleased to inform you that your artwork has been selected to feature in the Exhibition. We expect you to be present at the opening party on June 30th at 6pm. Yours sincerely, Professor A. Patrick.'

Tom was utterly amazed. Never had he achieved anything of significance before; his mother had been wrong - he could be a successful artist! Enthused with confidence, Tom flew down the stairs into the kitchen, and told his old mother, who was sat swigging lager, his good news.

Unfortunately, Tom did not receive the praise he had hoped for: his mother's brow wrinkled, and she withdrew her lips, giving her the appearance of someone who had just sucked an incredibly sour lemon. She swayed to her feet and lurched forward, growling; at this point, Tom deemed it wiser to tell his trusted friend, Mike, about his good fortune, and swiftly escaped the house.

Mike immediately congratulated Tom on his success. "My work didn't get exhibited this year, but there's always next year," Mike sighed. Tom expressed his wish that Mike would accompany him to the opening party, and Mike delightfully confirmed that he would attend.

On 30th June, Tom and Mike repeated the journey that they had made the previous month, only this time Tom was less apprehensive. Much to his relief, this seemed to lessen his travel-sickness somewhat, and before he had time to contemplate what was happening, the pair were inside the Royal Academy.

Tom was surprised, but rather pleased that his piece was featured amongst the architecture, as the room was more spacious and contained less: this meant that his work was not over-shadowed by other pieces.

At 8 o'clock, all were gathered into a large, elaborately-decorated hall, where the judges were introduced, and the prizes read out. To Tom's astonishment, the 'Lord Foster prize for architecture' was ascribed to him. At the announcement of his name, Tom was compelled to climb onto the stage and shake hands with the man himself. This was a greatly daunting experience for Tom, who was not accustomed to a little attention, let alone a hall full of eyes watching him and hands applauding him.

As he shook hands with the Lord Foster, he leaned close and whispered: "Remarkable skills for a boy of your age! There's always room in my company for someone so talented."

Tom stood astounded as the man handed him his business card, along with an envelope containing a cheque. On descending the stage, Tom was met by a beaming Mike.

"I told you you'd be set up for life!" he exclaimed.

“None of this would have happened if it weren’t for you, Mike!” Tom cried
“Don’t get emotional, now,” Mike laughed. “Just remember me when you’re working for Lord Foster!”

Times were by no means easy for Tom following his initial success, as his mother still plagued him greatly. However, the confidence he had gained through his experience, together with his finding of a true friend meant that he no longer suffered under his mother’s oppression or wandered the streets with his head bowed. Instead, he had his eyes raised and firmly fixed upon the future, knowing that he could achieve great things.