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 | One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest by Ken KeseyPart 1 Chapter 5AnnotationsMake 3 connections. Label ©Ask 3 questions. Label (?)Highlight 3 quotes that reveal characterization. O-/-< Discuss what each quote says about the narrator.Define the vocabulary on the line. Write a summary of this chapter. Label (S) Before noontime they're at the fog machine again but they haven't got it turned up full; it's not so thick but what I can see if I strain real hard. One of these days I'll quit straining and let myself go completely, lose myself in the fog the way some of the other Chronics have, but for the time being I'm interested in this new man—I want to see how he takes to the Group Meeting coming up. Ten minutes to one the fog dissolves completely and the black boys are telling Acutes to clear the floor for the meeting. All the tables are carried out of the day room to the tub room across the hall—leaves the floor, McMurphy says, like we was aiming to have us a little dance. The Big Nurse watches all this through her window. She hasn't moved from her spot in front of that one window for three solid hours, not even for lunch. The day-room floor gets cleared of tables, and at one o'clock the doctor comes out of his office down the hall, nods once at the nurse as he goes past where she's watching out her window, and sits in his chair just to the left of the door. The patients sit down when he does; then the little nurses and the residents straggle in. When everybody's down, the Big Nurse gets up from behind her window and goes back to the rear of the Nurses' Station to that steel panel with dials and buttons on it, sets some kind of automatic pilot to run things while she's away, and comes out into the day room, carrying the log book and a basketful of notes. Her uniform, even after she's been here half a day, is still starched so stiff it don't exactly bend any place; it cracks sharp at the joints with a sound like a frozen canvas being folded. She sits just to the right of the door. Soon as she's sat down, Old Pete Bancini sways to his feet and starts in wagging his head and wheezing. “I'm tired. Whew. O Lord. Oh, I'm *awful* tired…” the way he always does whenever there's a new man on the ward who might listen to him. The Big Nurse doesn't look over at Pete. She's going through the papers in her basket. “Somebody go sit beside Mr. Bancini,” she says. “Quiet him down so we can start the meeting.” Billy Bibbit goes. Pete has turned facing McMurphy and is lolling his head from side to side like a signal light at a railroad crossing. He worked on the railroad thirty years; now he's wore clean out but still's functioning on the memory. “I'm ti-i-uhd,” he says, wagging his face at McMurphy. “Take it easy, Pete,” Billy says, lays a freckled hand on Pete's knee. “…Awful tired…” “I know, Pete”—pats the skinny knee, and Pete pulls back his face, realizes nobody is going to **heed** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ his complaint today. The nurse takes off her wrist watch and looks at the ward clock and winds the watch and sets it face toward her in the basket. She takes a folder from the basket. “Now. Shall we get into the meeting?” She looks around to see if anybody else is about to interrupt her, smiling steady as her head turns in her collar. The guys won't meet her look; they're all looking for hangnails. Except McMurphy. He's got himself an armchair in the corner, sits in it like he's claimed it for good, and he's watching her every move. He's still got his cap on, jammed tight down on his red head like he's a motorcycle racer. A deck of cards in his lap opens for a one-handed cut, then clacks shut with a sound blown up loud by the silence. The nurse's swinging eyes hang on him for a second. She's been watching him play poker all morning and though she hasn't seen any money pass hands she suspects he's not exactly the type that is going to be happy with the ward rule of gambling for matches only. The deck whispers open and clacks shut again and then disappears somewhere in one of those big palms. The nurse looks at her watch again and pulls a slip of paper out of the folder she's holding, looks at it, and returns it to the folder. She puts the folder down and picks up the log book. Ellis coughs from his place on the wall; she waits until he stops. “Now. At the close of Friday's meeting… we were discussing Mr. Harding's problem… concerning his young wife. He had stated that his wife was extremely well endowed in the bosom and that this made him uneasy because she drew stares from men on the street.” She starts opening to places in the log book; little slips of paper stick out of the top of the book to mark the pages. “According to the notes listed by various patients in the log, Mr. Harding has been heard to say that she ‘damn well gives the bastards reason to stare.’ He has also been heard to say that he may give *her* reason to seek further sexual attention. He has been heard to say, ‘My dear sweet but illiterate wife thinks any word or gesture that does not smack of brickyard brawn and brutality is a word or gesture of weak **dandyism**­\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.’” She continues reading silently from the book for a while, then closes it. “He has also stated that his wife's **ample** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ bosom at times gives him a feeling of inferiority. So. Does anyone care to touch upon this subject further?” Harding shuts his eyes, and nobody else says anything. McMurphy looks around at the other guys, waiting to see if anybody is going to answer the nurse, then holds his hand up and snaps his fingers, like a school kid in class; the nurse nods at him. “Mr.—ah—McMurry?” “Touch upon what?” “What? Touch—” “You ask, I believe, ‘Does anyone care to touch upon—’” “Touch upon the—subject, Mr. McMurry, the subject of Mr. Harding's problem with his wife.” “Oh. I thought you mean touch upon her—something else.” “Now what could you—” But she stops. She was almost flustered for a second there. Some of the Acutes hide grins, and McMurphy takes a huge stretch, yawns, winks at Harding. Then the nurse, calm as anything, puts the log book back in the basket and takes out another folder and opens it and starts reading. “McMurry, Randle Patrick. Committed by the state from the Pendleton Farm for Correction. For diagnosis and possible treatment. Thirty-five years old. Never married. Distinguished Service Cross in Korea, for leading an escape from a Communist prison camp. A dishonorable discharge, afterward, for insubordination. Followed by a history of street brawls and barroom fights and a series of arrests for Drunkenness, Assault and Battery, Disturbing the Peace, re*peated* gambling, and one arrest—for Rape.” “Rape?” The doctor perks up. “Statutory, with a girl of—” “Whoa. Couldn't make that stick,” McMurphy says to the doctor. “Girl wouldn't testify.” “With a child of fifteen.” “Said she was *seventeen*, Doc, and she was *plenty* willin'.” “A court doctor's examination of the child proved entry, *repeated* entry, the record states—” “So willin', in fact, I took to sewing my pants shut.” “The child refused to testify in spite of the doctor's findings. There seemed to be intimidation. Defendant left town shortly after the trial.” “Hoo boy, I *had* to leave. Doc, let me tell you”—he leans forward with an elbow on a knee, lowering his voice to the doctor across the room—“that little hustler would of actually burnt me to a frazzle by the time she reached legal sixteen. She got to where she was tripping me and beating me to the floor.” The nurse closes up the folder and passes it across the doorway to the doctor. “Our new Admission, Doctor Spivey,” just like she's got a man folded up inside that yellow paper and can pass him on to be looked over. “I thought I might brief you on his record later today, but as he seems to insist on asserting himself in the Group Meeting, we might as well dispense with him now.” The doctor fishes his glasses from his coat pocket by pulling on the string, works them on his nose in front of his eyes. They're tipped a little to the right, but he leans his head to the left and brings them level. He's smiling a little as he turns through the folder, just as tickled by this new man's brassy way of talking right up as the rest of us, but, just like the rest of us, he's careful not to let himself come right out and laugh. The doctor closes the folder when he gets to the end, and puts his glasses back in his pocket. He looks to where McMurphy is still leaned out at him from across the day room. “You've—it seems—no other psychiatric history, Mr. McMurry?” “Mc*Murphy*, Doc.” “Oh? But I thought—the nurse was saying—” He opens the folder again, fishes out those glasses, looks the record over for another minute before he closes it, and puts his glasses back in his pocket. “Yes. McMurphy. That is correct. I beg your pardon.” “It's okay, Doc. It was the lady there that started it, made the mistake. I've known some people inclined to do that. I had this uncle whose name was Hallahan, and he went with a woman once who kept acting like she couldn't remember his name right and calling him Hooligan just to get his goat. It went on for months before he stopped her. Stopped her good, too.” “Oh? How did he stop her?” the doctor asks. McMurphy grins and rubs his nose with his thumb. “Ah-ah, now, I can't be tellin' that. I keep Unk Hallahan's method a strict secret, you see, in case I need to use it myself someday.” He says it right at the nurse. She smiles right back at him, and he looks over at the doctor. “Now; what was you asking about my record, Doc?” “Yes. I was wondering if you've any previous psychiatric history. Any analysis, any time spent in any other institution?” “Well, counting state *and* county coolers—” “*Mental* institutions.” “Ah. No, if that's the case. This is my first trip. But I *am* crazy, Doc. I swear I am. Well here—let me show you here. I believe that other doctor at the work farm…” He gets up, slips the deck of cards in the pocket of his jacket, and comes across the room to lean over the doctor's shoulder and thumb through the folder in his lap. “Believe he wrote something, back at the back here somewhere…” “Yes? I missed that. Just a moment.” The doctor fishes his glasses out again and puts them on and looks to where McMurphy is pointing. “Right here, Doc. The nurse left this part out while she was *summarizing* my record. Where it says, ‘Mr. McMurphy has evidenced *repeated*’—I just want to make sure I'm understood completely, Doc—‘*repeated* outbreaks of passion that suggest the possible diagnosis of psychopath.’ He told me that ‘psychopath’ means I fight and fuh—pardon me, ladies—means I am he put it overzealous in my sexual relations. Doctor, is that real serious?” He asks it with such a little-boy look of worry and concern all over his broad, tough face that the doctor can't help bending his head to hide another little snicker in his collar, and his glasses fall from his nose dead center back in his pocket. All of the Acutes are smiling too, now, and even some of the Chronics. “I mean that **overzealousness**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, Doc, have you ever been troubled by it?” The doctor wipes his eyes. “No, Mr. McMurphy, I'll admit I haven't. I am interested, however, that the doctor at the work farm added this statement: ‘Don't overlook the possibility that this man might be feigning psychosis to escape the drudgery of the work farm.’” He looks up at McMurphy. “And what about that, Mr. McMurphy?” “Doctor”—he stands up to his full height, wrinkles his forehead, and holds out both arms, open and honest to all the wide world—“do I look like a sane man?” The doctor is working so hard to keep from giggling again he can't answer. McMurphy pivots away from the doctor and asks the same thing of the Big Nurse: “*Do* I?” Instead of answering she stands up and takes the manila folder away from the doctor and puts it back in the basket under her watch. She sits back down. “Perhaps, Doctor, you should advise Mr. McMurry on the protocol of these Group Meetings.” “Ma'am,” McMurphy says, “have I told you about my uncle Hallahan and the woman who used to screw up his name?” She looks at him for a long time without her smile. She has the ability to turn her smile into whatever expression she wants to use on somebody, but the look she turns it into is no different, just a calculated and mechanical expression to serve her purpose. Finally she says, “I beg your pardon, Mack-Murph-y.” She turns back to the doctor. “Now, Doctor, if you would explain…” The doctor folds his hands and leans back. “Yes. I suppose what I should do is explain the complete *theory* of our Therapeutic Community, while we're at it. Though I usually save it until later. Yes. A good idea, Miss Ratched, a fine idea.” “Certainly the theory too, doctor, but what I had in mind was the rule, that the patients remain seated during the course of the meeting,” “Yes. Of course. Then I will explain the theory. Mr. McMurphy, one of the first things is that the patients remain seated during the course of the meeting. It's the only way, you see, for us to maintain order.” “Sure, Doctor. I just got up to show you that thing in my record book.” He goes over to his chair, gives another big stretch and yawn, sits down, and *moves around for a while like a dog* coming to rest. When he's comfortable, he looks over at the doctor, waiting. “As to the *theory*…” The doctor takes a deep, happy breath. “Ffffuck da wife,” Ruckly says. McMurphy hides his mouth behind the back of his hand and calls across the ward to Ruckly in a scratchy whisper, “Whose wife?” and Martini's head snaps up, eyes wide and staring. “Yeah,” he says, “whose wife? Oh. Her? Yeah, I see her. *Yeah*.” “I'd give a lot to have that man's eyes,” McMurphy says of Martini and then doesn't say anything all the rest of the meeting. Just sits and watches and doesn't miss a thing that happens or a word that's said. The doctor talks about his theory until the Big Nurse finally decides he's used up time enough and asks him to hush so they can get on to Harding, and they talk the rest of the meeting about that. McMurphy sits forward in his chair a couple of times during the meeting like he might have something to say, but he decides better and leans back. There's a puzzled expression coming over his face. Something strange is going on here, he's finding out. He can't quite put his finger on it. Like the way nobody will laugh. Now he thought sure there would be a laugh when he asked Ruckly, “Whose wife?” but there wasn't even a sign of one. The air is pressed in by the walls, too tight for laughing. There's something strange about a place where the men won't let themselves loose and laugh, something strange about the way they all knuckle under to that smiling flour-faced old mother there with the too-red lipstick and the too-big boobs. And he thinks he'll just wait a while to see what the story is in this new place before he makes any kind of play. *That's a good rule for a smart gambler: look the game over awhile before you draw yourself a hand.* I've heard that theory of the Therapeutic Community enough times to repeat it forwards and backwards—how a guy has to learn to get along in a group before he'll be able to function in a normal society; how the group can help the guy by showing him where he's out of place; how society is what decides who's sane and who isn't, so you got to measure up. All that stuff. Every time we get a new patient on the ward the doctor goes into the theory with both feet; it's pretty near the only time he takes things over and runs the meeting. He tells how the goal of the Therapeutic Community is a democratic ward, run completely by the patients and their votes, working toward making worth-while citizens to turn back Outside onto the street. Any little gripe, any grievance, anything you want changed, he says, should be brought up before the group and discussed instead of letting it ***fester*** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ inside of you. Also you should feel at ease in your surroundings to the extent you can freely discuss emotional problems in front of patients and staff. Talk, he says, discuss, confess. And if you hear a friend say something during the course of your everyday conversation, then list it in the log book for the staff to see. It's not, as the movies call it, “squealing,” it's helping your fellow. Bring these old sins into the open where they can be washed by the sight of all. And participate in Group Discussion. Help yourself and your friends probe into the secrets of the subconscious. *There should be no need for secrets among friends*. Our intention, he usually ends by saying, is to make this as much like your own democratic, free neighborhoods as possible—a little world Inside that is a made-to-scale prototype of the big world Outside that you will one day be taking your place in again. He's maybe got more to say, but about this point the Big Nurse usually hushes him, and in the lull old Pete stands up and wigwags that battered copper-pot head and tells everybody how tired he is, and the nurse tells somebody to go hush him up too, so the meeting can continue, and Pete is generally hushed and the meeting goes on. Once, just one time that I can remember, four or five years back, did it go any different. The doctor had finished his **spiel** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and the nurse had opened right up with, “Now. Who will start? Let out those old secrets.” And she'd put all the Acutes in a trance by sitting there in silence for twenty minutes after the question, quiet as an electric alarm about to go off, waiting for somebody to start telling something about themselves. Her eyes swept back and forth over them as steady as a turning beacon. The day room was clamped silent for twenty long minutes, with all of the patients stunned where they sat. When twenty minutes had passed, she looked at her watch and said, “Am I to take it that there's not a man among you that has committed some act that he has never admitted?” She reached in the basket for the log book. “Must we go over past history?” That triggered something, some **acoustic** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ device in the walls, rigged to turn on at just the sound of those words coming from her mouth. The Acutes stiffened. Their mouths opened in unison. Her sweeping eyes stopped on the first man along the wall. His mouth worked. “I robbed a cash register in a service station.” She moved to the next man. “I tried to take my little sister to bed.” Her eyes clicked to the next man; each one jumped like a shooting-gallery target. “I—one time—wanted to take my brother to bed.” “I killed my cat when I was six. Oh, God forgive me, I stoned her to death and said my neighbor did it.” “I lied about trying. I did take my sister!” “So did I! So did I!” “And me! And *me*!” *It was better than she'd dreamed*. They were all shouting to outdo one another, going further and further, no way of stopping, telling things that wouldn't ever let them look one another in the eye again. The nurse nodding at each confession and saying Yes, yes, yes. Then old Pete was on his feet. “I'm *tired*!” was what he shouted, a strong, angry copper tone to his voice that no one had ever heard before. Everyone hushed. They were somehow ashamed. It was as if he had suddenly said something that was real and true and important and it had put all their childish hollering to shame. The Big Nurse was furious. She swiveled and glared at him, the smile dripping over her chin; she'd just had it going so good. “Somebody see to poor Mr. Bancini,” she said. Two or three got up. They tried to soothe him, pat him on his shoulder. But Pete wasn't being hushed. “Tired! Tired!” he kept on. Finally the nurse sent one of the black boys to take him out of the day room by force. She forgot that the black boys didn't hold any control over people like Pete. Pete's been a Chronic all his life. Even though he didn't come into the hospital till he was better than fifty, he'd always been a Chronic. His head has two big dents, one on each side, where the doctor who was with his mother at borning time pinched his skull trying to pull him out. Pete had looked out first and seen all the delivery-room machinery waiting for him and somehow realized what he was being born into, and had grabbed on to everything handy in there to try to stave off being born. The doctor reached in and got him by the head with a set of dulled ice tongs and jerked him loose and figured everything was all right. But Pete's head was still too new, and soft as clay, and when it set, those two dents left by the tongs stayed. And this made him simple to where it took all his straining effort and concentration and will power just to do the tasks that came easy to a kid of six. But one good thing—being simple like that put him out of the clutch of the Combine. They weren't able to mold him into a slot. So they let him get a simple job on the railroad, where all he had to do was sit in a little clapboard house way out in the sticks on a lonely switch and wave a red lantern at the trains if the switch was one way, and a green one if it was the other, and a yellow one if there was a train someplace up ahead. And he did it, with main force and a gutpower they couldn't mash out of his head, out by himself on that switch. And he never had any controls installed. That's why the black boy didn't have any say over him. But the black boy didn't think of that right off any more than the nurse did when she ordered Pete removed from the day room. The black boy walked right up and gave Pete's arm a jerk toward the door, just like you'd jerk the reins on a plow horse to turn him. “Tha's right, Pete. Less go to the dorm. You disturbin' ever'body.” Pete shook his arm loose. “I'm *tired*,” he warned. “C'mon, old man, you makin' a fuss. Less us go to bed and be still like a good boy.” “Tired…” “I said you goin' to the dorm, old man!” The black boy jerked at his arm again, and Pete stopped wigwagging his head. He stood up straight and steady, and his eyes snapped clear. Usually Pete's eyes are half shut and all murked up, like there's milk in them, but this time they came clear as blue neon. And the hand on that arm the black boy was holding commenced to swell up. The staff and most of the rest of the patients were talking among themselves, not paying any attention to this old guy and his old song about being tired, figuring he'd be quieted down as usual and the meeting would go on. They didn't see the hand on the end of that arm pumping bigger and bigger as he clenched and unclenched it. I was the only one saw it. I saw it swell and clench shut, flow in front of my eyes, become smooth—hard. *A big rusty iron ball at the end of a chain.* I stared at it and waited, while the black boy gave Pete's arm another jerk toward the dorm. “Ol' man, I say you got—” He saw the hand. He tried to edge back away from it, saying, “You a good boy, Peter,” but he was a shade too late. Pete had that big iron ball swinging all the way from his knees. The black boy whammed flat against the wall and stuck, then slid down to the floor like the wall there was greased. I heard tubes pop and short all over inside that wall, and the plaster cracked just the shape of how he hit. The other two—the least one and the other big one—stood stunned. The nurse snapped her fingers, and they sprang into motion. Instant movement, sliding across the floor. The little one beside the other like an image in a reducing mirror. They were almost to Pete when it suddenly struck them what the other boy should of known, that Pete wasn't wired under control like the rest of us, that he wasn't about to mind just because they gave him an order or gave his arm a jerk. If they were to take him they'd have to take him like you take a wild bear or bull, and with one of their number out cold against the baseboards, the other two black boys didn't care for the odds. This thought got them both at once and they froze, the big one and his tiny image, in exactly the same position, left foot forward, right hand out, halfway between Pete and the Big Nurse. That iron ball swinging in front of them and that snowwhite anger behind them, they shook and smoked and I could hear gears grinding. I could see them twitch with confusion, like machines throttled full ahead and with the brake on. Pete stood there in the middle of the floor, swinging that ball back and forth at his side, all leaned over to its weight. Everybody was watching him now. He looked from the big black boy to the little one, and when he saw they weren't about to come any closer he turned to the patients. “You see—it's a lotta baloney,” he told them, “it's all a lotta baloney.” The Big Nurse had slid from her chair and was working toward her wicker bag leaning at the door. “Yes, yes, Mr. Bancini,” she crooned, “now if you'll just be calm—”“That's all it is, nothin' but a lotta baloney.” His voice lost its copper strength and became strained and urgent like he didn't have much time to finish what he had to say. “Ya see, I can't help it, I can't—don't ya see. I was born dead. Not you. You wasn't born dead. Ahhhh, it's been hard…” He started to cry. He couldn't make the words come out right anymore; he opened and closed his mouth to talk but he couldn't sort the words into sentences any more. He shook his head to clear it and blinked at the Acutes: “Ahhhh, I… tell… ya… I tell *you*.” He began slumping over again, and his iron ball shrank back to a hand. He held it cupped out in front of him like he was offering something to the patients. “I can't help it. I was born a miscarriage. I had so many insults I died. I was born dead. I can't help it. I'm tired. I'm give out trying. You got chances. I had so many insults I was born dead. You got it easy. I was born dead an' life was hard. I'm tired. I'm tired out talking and standing up. I been dead fifty-five *years*.” The Big Nurse got him clear across the room, right through his greens. She jumped back without getting the needle pulled out after the shot and it hung there from his pants like a little tail of glass and steel, old Pete slumping farther and farther forward, not from the shot but from the effort; the last couple of minutes had worn him out finally and completely, once and for all—you could just look at him and tell he was finished. So there wasn't really any need for the shot; his head had already commenced to wag back and forth and his eyes were murky. By the time the nurse eased back in to get the needle he was bent so far forward he was crying directly on the floor without wetting his face, tears spotting a wide area as he swung his head back and forth, spatting, spatting, in an even pattern on the day-room floor, like he was sowing them. “Ahhhhh,” he said. He didn't flinch when she jerked the needle out. He had come to life for maybe a minute to try to tell us something, something none of us cared to listen to or tried to understand, and the effort had drained him dry. That shot in his hip was as wasted as if she'd squirted it in a dead man—no heart to pump it, no vein to carry it up to his head, no brain up there for it to mortify with its poison. She'd just as well shot it in a dried-out old cadaver. “I'm… tired…” “Now. I think if you two boys are *brave* enough, Mr. Bancini will go to bed like a good fellow.” “…aw-ful tired.” “And Aide Williams is coming around, Doctor Spivey. See to him, won't you. Here. His watch is broken and he's cut his arm.” Pete never tried anything like that again, and he never will. Now, when he starts acting up during a meeting and they try to hush him, he always hushes. He'll still get up from time to time and wag his head and let us know how tired he is, but it's not a complaint or excuse or warning any more—he's finished with that; it's like an old clock that won't tell time but won't stop neither, with the hands bent out of shape and the face bare of numbers and the alarm bell rusted silent, an old, worthless clock that just keeps ticking and cuckooing without meaning nothing. The group is still tearing into poor Harding when two o'clock rolls around. At two o'clock the doctor begins to squirm around in his chair. The meetings are uncomfortable for the doctor unless he's talking about his theory; he'd rather spend his time down in his office, drawing on graphs. He squirms around and finally clears his throat, and the nurse looks at her watch and tells us to bring the tables back in from the tub room and we'll resume this discussion again at one tomorrow. The Acutes click out of their trance, look for an instant in Harding's direction. Their faces burn with a shame like they have just woke up to the fact they been played for suckers again. Some of them go to the tub room across the hall to get the tables, some wander over to the magazine racks and show a lot of interest in the old *McCall's* magazines, but what they're all really doing is avoiding Harding. They've been maneuvered again into grilling one of their friends like he was a criminal and they were all prosecutors and judge and jury. For forty-five minutes they been chopping a man to pieces, almost as if they enjoyed it, shooting questions at him: What's he *think* is the matter with him that he can't please the little lady; why's he *insist* she has never had anything to do with another man; how's he expect to get well if he doesn't answer *honestly*?—questions and insinuations till now they feel bad about it and they don't want to be made more uncomfortable by being near him. McMurphy's eyes follow all of this. He doesn't get out of his chair. He looks puzzled again. He sits in his chair for a while, watching the Acutes, scuffing that deck of cards up and down the red stubble on his chin, then finally stands up from his arm chair, yawns and stretches and scratches his belly button with a corner of a card, then puts the deck in his pocket and walks over to where Harding is off by himself, sweated to his chair. McMurphy looks down at Harding a minute, then laps his big hand over the back of a nearby wooden chair, swings it around so the back is facing Harding, and straddles it like he'd straddle a tiny horse. Harding hasn't noticed a thing. McMurphy slaps his pockets till he finds his cigarettes, and takes one out and lights it; he holds it out in front of him and frowns at the tip, licks his thumb and finger, and arranges the fire to suit him. Each man seems unaware of the other. I can't even tell if Harding's noticed McMurphy at all. Harding's got his thin shoulders folded nearly together around himself, like green wings, and he's sitting very straight near the edge of his chair, with his hands trapped between his knees. He's staring straight ahead, humming to himself, trying to look calm—but he's chewing at his cheeks, and this gives him a funny skull grin, not calm at all. McMurphy puts his cigarette back between his teeth and folds his hands over the wooden chair back and leans his chin on them, squinting one eye against the smoke. He looks at Harding with his other eye a while, then starts talking with that cigarette wagging up and down in his lips. “Well say, buddy, is this the way these leetle meetings usually go?” “Usually go?” Harding's humming stops. He's not chewing his cheeks any more but he still stares ahead, past McMurphy's shoulder. “Is this the usual *pro*-cedure for these Group Ther'py shindigs? Bunch of chickens at a peckin' party?” Harding's head turns with a jerk and his eyes find McMurphy, like it's the first time he knows that anybody's sitting in front of him. His face creases in the middle when he bites his cheeks again, and this makes it look like he's grinning. He pulls his shoulders back and scoots to the back of the chair and tries to look relaxed. “A ‘pecking party’? I fear your quaint down-home speech is wasted on me, my friend. I have not the slightest inclination what you're talking about.” “Why then, I'll just explain it to you.” McMurphy raises his voice; though he doesn't look at the other Acutes listening behind him, it's them he's talking to. “The flock gets sight of a spot of blood on some chicken and they all go to *peckin'* at it, see, till they rip the chicken to shreds, blood and bones and feathers. But usually a couple of the *flock* gets spotted in the fracas, then it's their turn. And a few more gets spots and gets pecked to death, and more and more. Oh, a peckin' party can wipe out the whole flock in a matter of a few hours, buddy, I seen it. A mighty awesome sight. The only way to prevent it—with chickens—is to clip blinders on them. So's they can't see.” Harding laces his long fingers around a knee and draws the knee toward him, leaning back in the chair. “A pecking party. That certainly is a pleasant analogy, my friend.” “And that's just exactly what that meeting I just set through reminded me of, buddy, if you want to know the dirty truth. It reminded me of a flock of dirty chickens.” “So that makes me the chicken with the spot of blood, friend?” “That's right, buddy.” They're still grinning at each other, but their voices have dropped so low and taut I have to sweep over closer to them with my broom to hear. The other Acutes are moving up closer too. “And you want to know somethin' else, buddy? You want to know who pecks that first peck?” Harding waits for him to go on. “It's that old nurse, that's who.” There's a whine of fear over the silence. I hear the machinery in the walls catch and go on. Harding is having a tough time holding his hands still, but he keeps trying to act calm. “So,” he says, “it's as simple as that, as stupidly simple as that. You're on our ward six hours and have already simplified all the work of Freud, Jung, and Maxwell Jones and summed it up in one analogy: it's a ‘peckin’ party.'” “I'm not talking about Fred Yoong and Maxwell Jones, buddy, I'm just talking about that crummy meeting and what that nurse and those other bastards did to you. Did in spades.” “*Did* to me?” “That's right, *did*. Did you every chance they got. Did you coming and did you going. You must of done something to makes a passle of enemies here in this place, buddy, because it seems there's sure a passle got it in for you.” “Why, this is incredible. You completely disregard, completely overlook and disregard the fact that what the fellows were doing today was for my own benefit? That any question or discussion raised by Miss Ratched or the rest of the staff is done solely for therapeutic reasons? You must not have heard a word of Doctor Spivey's theory of the Therapeutic Community, or not have had the education to comprehend it if you did. I'm disappointed in you, my friend, oh, very disappointed. I had judged from our encounter this morning that you were more intelligent—an illiterate clod, perhaps, certainly a backwoods braggart with no more sensitivity than a goose, but basically intelligent nevertheless. But, observant and insightful though I usually am, I still make mistakes.” “The hell with you, buddy.” “Oh, yes; I forgot to add that I noticed your primitive brutality also this morning. Psychopath with definite sadistic tendencies, probably motivated by an unreasoning egomania. Yes. As you see, all these natural talents certainly qualify you as a competent therapist and render you quite capable of criticizing Miss Ratched's meeting procedure, in spite of the fact that she is a highly regarded psychiatric nurse with twenty years in the field. Yes, with your talent, my friend, you could work subconscious miracles, soothe the aching id and heal the wounded superego. You could probably bring about a cure for the whole ward, Vegetables and all, in six short months, ladies and gentlemen or your money back.” Instead of rising to the argument, McMurphy just keeps on looking at Harding, finally asks in a level voice, “And you really think this crap that went on in the meeting today is bringing about some kinda cure, doing some kinda good?” “What other reason would we have for submitting ourselves to it, my friend? The staff desires our cure as much as we do. They aren't monsters. Miss Ratched may be a strict middle-aged lady, but she's not some kind of giant monster of the poultry clan, bent on sadistically pecking out our eyes. You can't believe that of her, can you?” “No, buddy, not that. She ain't peckin' at your eyes. That's not what she's peckin' at.” Harding flinches, and I see his hands begin to creep out from between his knees like white spiders from between two moss-covered tree limbs, up the limbs toward the joining at the trunk. “Not our eyes?” he says. “Pray, then, where is Miss Ratched pecking, my friend?” McMurphy grinned. “Why, don't you *know*, buddy?” “No, of course I don't know! I mean, if you insi—” “At your balls, buddy, at your everlovin' *balls*.” The spiders reach the joining at the trunk and settle there, twitching. Harding tries to grin, but his face and lips are so white the grin is lost. He stares at McMurphy. McMurphy takes the cigarette out of his mouth and repeats what he said. “Right at your balls. No, that nurse ain't some kinda monster chicken, buddy, what she is is a ball-cutter. I've seen a thousand of 'em, old and young, men and women. Seen 'em all over the country and in the homes—people who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the line, to follow their rules, to live like they want you to. And the best way to do this, to get you to knuckle under, is to weaken you by gettin' you where it hurts the worst. You ever been kneed in the nuts in a brawl, buddy? Stops you cold, don't it? There's nothing worse. It makes you sick, it saps every bit of strength you got. If you're up against a guy who wants to win by making you weaker instead of making himself stronger, then watch for his knee, he's gonna go for your vitals. And that's what that old buzzard is doing, going for your vitals.” Harding's face is still colorless, but he's got control of his hands again; they flip loosely before him, trying to toss off what McMurphy has been saying: “Our dear Miss Ratched? Our sweet, smiling, tender angel of mercy, Mother Ratched, a ball-cutter? Why, friend, that's most *unlikely*.” “Buddy, don't give me that tender little mother crap. She may be a mother, but she's big as a damn barn and tough as knife metal. She fooled me with that kindly little old mother bit for maybe three minutes when I came in this morning, but no longer. I don't think she's really fooled any of you guys for any six months or a year, neither. Hooo*wee*, I've seen some bitches in my time, but she takes the cake.” “A bitch? But a moment ago she was a ball-cutter, then a buzzard—or was it a chicken? Your metaphors are bumping into each other, my friend.” “The hell with that; she's a bitch and a buzzard and a ball-cutter, and don't kid me, you know what I'm talking about.” Harding's face and hands are moving faster than ever now, a speeded film of gestures, grins, grimaces, sneers. The more he tries to stop it, the faster it goes. When he lets his hands and face move like they want to and doesn't try to hold them back, they flow and gesture in a way that's real pretty to watch, but when he worries about them and tries to hold back he becomes a wild, jerky puppet doing a high-strung dance. Everything is moving faster and faster, and his voice is speeding up to match. “Why, see here, my friend Mr. McMurphy, my psychopathic sidekick, our Miss Ratched is a veritable angel of mercy and why just *everyone* knows it. She's unselfish as the wind, toiling thanklessly for the good of all, day after day, five long days a week. That takes heart, my friend, heart. In fact, I have been informed by sources—I am not at liberty to disclose my sources, but I might say that Martini is in contact with the same people a good part of the time—that she even *further* serves mankind on her weekends off by doing generous volunteer work about town. Preparing a rich array of charity—canned goods, cheese for the binding effect, soap—and presenting it to some poor young couple having a difficult time financially.” His hands flash in the air, molding the picture he is describing. “Ah, look: There she is, our nurse. Her gentle knock on the door. The ribboned basket. The young couple overjoyed to the point of speechlessness. The husband open-mouthed, the wife weeping openly. She appraises their dwelling. Promises to send them money for—scouring powder, yes. She places the basket in the center of the floor. And when our angel leaves—throwing kisses, smiling ethereally—she is so *intoxicated* with the sweet milk of human kindness that her deed has generated within her large bosom, that she is beside herself with generosity. Be-*side* herself, do you hear? Pausing at the door, she draws the timid young bride to one side and offers her twenty dollars of her own: ‘Go, you poor unfortunate underfed child, go, and buy yourself a *decent* dress. I *realize* your husband can't afford it, but here, take this, and *go*.' And the couple is forever indebted to her benevolence.” He's been talking faster and faster, the cords stretching out in his neck. When he stops talking, the ward is completely silent. I don't hear anything but a faint reeling rhythm, what I figure is a tape recorder somewhere getting all of this. Harding looks around, sees everybody's watching him, and he does his best to laugh. A sound comes out of his mouth like a nail being crowbarred out of a plank of green pine; Eee-eee-eee. He can't stop it. He wrings his hands like a fly and clinches his eyes at the awful sound of that squeaking. But he can't stop it. It gets higher and higher until finally, with a suck of breath, he lets his face fall into his waiting hands. “Oh the bitch, the bitch, the bitch,” he whispers through his teeth. McMurphy lights another cigarette and offers it to him; Harding takes it without a word. McMurphy is still watching Harding's face in front of him there, with a kind of puzzled wonder, looking at it like it's the first human face he ever laid eyes on. He watches while Harding's twitching and jerking slows down and the face comes up from the hands. “You are right,” Harding says, “about all of it.” He looks up at the other patients who are watching him. “No one's ever dared come out and say it before, but there's not a man among us that doesn't think it, that doesn't feel just as you do about her and the whole business—feel it somewhere down deep in his scared little soul.” McMurphy frowns and asks, “What about that little fart of a doctor? He might be a little slow in the head, but not so much as not to be able to see how she's taken over and what she's doing.” Harding takes a long pull off the cigarette and lets the smoke drift out with his talk. “Doctor Spivey… is exactly like the rest of us, McMurphy, completely conscious of his inadequacy. He's a frightened, desperate, ineffectual little rabbit, totally incapable of running this ward without our Miss Ratched's help, and he knows it. And, worse, she *knows* he knows it and reminds him every chance she gets. Every time she finds he's made a little slip in the bookwork or in, say, the charting you can just imagine her in there grinding his nose in it.” “That's right,” Cheswick says, coming up beside McMurphy, “grinds our noses in our mistakes.” “Why don't he fire her?” “In this hospital,” Harding says, “the doctor doesn't hold the power of hiring and firing. That power goes to the supervisor, and the supervisor is a woman, a dear old friend of Miss Ratched's; they were Army nurses together in the thirties. We are victims of a matriarchy here, my friend, and the doctor is just as helpless against it as we are. He knows that all Ratched has to do is pick up that phone you see sitting at her elbow and call the supervisor and mention, oh, say, that the doctor seems to be making a *great* number of requisitions for Demerol—” “Hold it, Harding, I'm not up on all this shop talk.” “Demerol, my friend, is a synthetic opiate, twice as addictive as heroin. Quite common for doctors to be addicted to it.” “That little fart? Is he a dope addict?” “I'm certain I don't know.” “Then where does she get off with accusing him of—” “Oh, you're not paying attention, my friend. She *doesn't* accuse. She merely needs to insinuate, insinuate anything, don't you see? Didn't you notice today? She'll call a man to the door of the Nurses' Station and stand there and ask him about a Kleenex found under his bed. No more, just ask. And he'll feel like he's lying to her, whatever answer he gives. If he says he was cleaning a pen with it, she'll say, ‘I see, a pen,’ or if he says he has a cold in his nose, she'll say, ‘I see, a cold,’ and she'll nod her neat little gray coiffure and smile her neat little smile and turn and go back into the Nurses' Station, leave him standing there wondering just what *did* he use that Kleenex for.” He starts to tremble again, and his shoulders fold back around him. “No. She doesn't need to accuse. She has a genius for insinuation. Did you ever hear her, in the course of our discussion today, ever *once* hear her accuse me of anything? Yet it seems I have been accused of a multitude of things, of jealousy and paranoia, of not being man enough to satisfy my wife, of having relations with male friends of mine, of holding my cigarette in an affected manner, even—it seems to me—accused of having nothing between my legs but a patch of hair—and *soft* and *downy* and *blond hair at that!* Ball-cutter? Oh, you *underestimate* her!” Harding hushes all of a sudden and leans forward to take McMurphy's hand in both of his. His face is tilted oddly, edged, jagged purple and gray, a busted wine bottle. “This world… belongs to the strong, my friend! The ritual of our existence is based on the strong getting stronger by devouring the weak. We must face up to this. No more than right that it should be this way. We must learn to accept it as a law of the natural world. The rabbits accept their role in the ritual and recognize the wolf as the strong. In defense, the rabbit becomes sly and frightened and elusive and he digs holes and hides when the wolf is about. And he endures, he goes on. He knows his place. He most certainly doesn't challenge the wolf to combat. Now, would that be wise? Would it?” He lets go McMurphy's hand and leans back and crosses his legs, takes another long pull off the cigarette. He pulls the cigarette from his thin crack of a smile, and the laugh starts up again—eee-eee-eee, like a nail coming out of a plank. “Mr. McMurphy… my friend… I'm not a chicken, I'm a rabbit. The doctor is a rabbit. Cheswick there is a rabbit. Billy Bibbit is a rabbit. All of us in here are rabbits of varying ages and degrees, hippity-hopping through our Walt Disney world. Oh, don't misunderstand me, we're not in here *because* we are rabbits—we'd be rabbits wherever we were—we're all in here because we can't *adjust* to our rabbithood. We need a good strong wolf like the nurse to teach us our place.” “Man, you're talkin' like a fool. You mean to tell me that you're gonna sit back and let some old blue-haired woman talk you into being a rabbit?” “Not talk me into it, no. I was born a rabbit. Just look at me. I simply need the nurse to make me *happy* with my role.” “You're no damned rabbit!” “See the ears? the wiggly nose? the cute little button tail?” “You're talking like a crazy ma—” “Like a crazy man? How astute.” “Damn it, Harding, I didn't mean it like that. You ain't crazy that way. I mean—hell, I been surprised how sane you guys all are. As near as I can tell you're not any crazier than the average asshole on the street—” “Ah yes, the asshole on the street.” “But not, you know, crazy like the movies paint crazy people. You're just hung up and—kind of—” “Kind of rabbit-like, isn't that it?” “Rabbits, *hell!* Not a thing like rabbits, goddammit.” “Mr. Bibbit, hop around for Mr. McMurphy here. Mr. Cheswick, show him how *furry*, you are.” Billy Bibbit and Cheswick change into hunched-over white rabbits, right before my eyes, but they are too ashamed to do any of the things Harding told them to do. “Ah, they're bashful, McMurphy. Isn't that sweet? Or, perhaps, the fellows are ill at ease because they didn't stick up for their friend. Perhaps they are feeling guilty for the way they once again let her victimize them into being her interrogators. Cheer up, friends, you've no reason to feel ashamed. It is all as it should be. It's not the rabbit's place to stick up for his fellow. That would have been foolish. No, you were wise, cowardly but wise.” “Look here, Harding,” Cheswick says. “No, no, Cheswick. Don't get irate at the truth.” “Now look here; there's been times when I've said the same things about old lady Ratched that McMurphy has been saying.” “Yes, but you said them very quietly and took them all back later. You are a rabbit too, don't try to avoid the truth. That's why I hold no grudge against you for the questions you asked me during the meeting today. You were only playing your role. If you had been on the carpet, or you Billy, or you Fredrickson, I would have attacked you just as cruelly as you attacked me. We mustn't be ashamed of our behavior; it's the way we little animals were meant to behave.” McMurphy turns in his chair and looks the other Acutes up and down. “I ain't so sure but what they should be ashamed. Personally, I thought it was damned crummy the way they swung in on her side against you. For a minute there I thought I was back in a Red Chinese prison camp…” “Now by God, McMurphy,” Cheswick says, “you listen here.” McMurphy turns and listens, but Cheswick doesn't go on. Cheswick never goes on; he's one of these guys who'll make a big fuss like he's going to lead an attack, holler charge and stomp up and down a minute, take a couple steps, and quit. McMurphy looks at him where he's been caught off base again after such a tough-sounding start, and says to him, “A hell of a lot like a Chinese prison camp.” Harding holds up his hands for peace. “Oh, no, no, that isn't right. You mustn't condemn us, my friend. No. In fact…” I see that sly fever come into Harding's eye again; I think he's going to start laughing, but instead he takes his cigarette out of his mouth and points it at McMurphy—in his hand it looks like one of his thin, white fingers, smoking at the end. “…you too, Mr. McMurphy, for all your cowboy bluster and your sideshow swagger, you too, under that crusty surface, are probably just as soft and fuzzy and rabbit-souled as we are.” “Yeah, you bet. I'm a little cottontail. Just what is it makes me a rabbit, Harding? My psychopathic tendencies? Is it my fightin' tendencies, or my fuckin' tendencies? Must be the fuckin', mustn't it? All that whambam-thank-you-ma'am. Yeah, that whambam, that's probably what makes me a rabbit—” “Wait; I'm afraid you've raised a point that requires some deliberation. Rabbits are noted for that certain trait, aren't they? Notorious, in fact, for their whambam. Yes. Um. But in any case, the point you bring up simply indicates that you are a healthy, functioning and adequate rabbit, whereas most of us in here even lack the sexual ability to make the grade as adequate rabbits. Failures, we are—feeble, stunted, weak little creatures in a weak little race. Rabbits, *sans* whambam; a pathetic notion.” “Wait a minute; you keep twistin' what I say—” “No. You were right. You remember, it was you that drew our attention to the place where the nurse was concentrating her pecking? That was true. There's not a man here that isn't afraid he is losing or has already lost his whambam. We comical little creatures can't even achieve masculinity in the rabbit world, that's how weak and inadequate we are. Hee. We are—the *rabbits*, one might say, of the rabbit world!” He leans forward again, and that strained, squeaking laugh of his that I been expecting begins to rise from his mouth, his hands flipping around, his lace twitching. “Harding! Shut your damned mouth!” It's like a slap. Harding is hushed, chopped off cold with his mouth still open in a drawn grin, his hands dangling in a cloud of blue tobacco smoke. He freezes this way a second; then his eyes narrow into sly little holes and he lets them slip over to McMurphy, speaks so soft that I have to push my broom up right next to his chair to hear what he says. “Friend… *you*… may be a wolf.” “Goddammit, I'm no wolf and you're no rabbit. *Hoo*, I never heard such—” “You have a very wolfy roar.” With a loud hissing of breath McMurphy turns from Harding to the rest of the Acutes standing around. “Here; all you guys. What the hell is the matter with you? You ain't as crazy as all this, thinking you're some animal.” “No,” Cheswick says and steps in beside McMurphy. “No, by God, not me. I'm not any rabbit.” “That's the boy, Cheswick. And the rest of you, let's just knock it off. Look at you, talking yourself into running scared from some fifty-year-old woman. What is there she can do to you, anyway?” “Yeah, what?” Cheswick says and glares around at the others. “She can't have you whipped. She can't burn you with hot irons. She can't tie you to the rack. They got laws about that sort of thing nowadays; this ain't the Middle Ages. There's not a thing in the world that she can—” “You s-s-*saw* what she c-can do to us! In the m-m-meeting today.” I see Billy Bibbit has changed back from a rabbit. He leans toward McMurphy, trying to go on, his mouth wet with spit and his face red. Then he turns and walks away. “Ah, it's n-no use. I should just k-k-kill myself.” McMurphy calls after him. “Today? What did I see in the meeting today? Hell's bells, all I saw today was her asking a couple of questions, and nice, easy questions at that. Questions ain't bonebreakers, they ain't sticks and stones.” Billy turns back. “But the wuh-wuh-*way* she asks them—” “You don't have to answer, do you?” “If you d-don’t answer she just smiles and m-m-makes a note in her little book and then she—she—oh, *hell!*” Scanlon comes up beside Billy. “If you don't answer her questions, Mack, you *admit* it just by keeping quiet. It's the way those bastards in the government get you. You can't beat it. The only thing to do is blow the whole business off the face of the whole bleeding earth—blow it all up.” “Well, when she asks one of those questions, why don't you tell her to up and go to hell?” “Yeah,” Cheswick says, shaking his fist, “tell her to up and go to hell.” “So then what, Mack? She'd just come right back with ‘Why do you seem so *upset* by that par-tik-uler question, Patient McMurphy?’” “So, you tell her to go to hell again. Tell them all to go to hell. They still haven't hurt you.” The Acutes are crowding closer around him. Fredrickson answers this time. “Okay, you tell her that and you're listed as Potential Assaultive and shipped upstairs to the Disturbed ward. I had it happen. Three times. Those poor goofs up there don't even get off the ward to go to the Saturday afternoon movie. They don't even have a TV.” “And, my friend, if you *continue* to demonstrate such hostile tendencies, such as telling people to go to hell, you get lined up to go to the Shock Shop, perhaps even on to greater things, an operation, an—” “Damn it, Harding, I told you I'm not up on this talk.” “The Shock Shop, Mr. McMurphy, is jargon for the EST machine, the Electro Shock Therapy. A device that might be said to do the work of the sleeping pill, the electric chair, *and* the torture rack. It's a clever little procedure, simple, quick, nearly painless it happens so fast, but no one ever wants another one. Ever.” “What's this thing do?” “You are strapped to a table, shaped, ironically, like a cross, with a crown of electric sparks in place of thorns. You are touched on each side of the head with wires. Zap! Five cents' worth of electricity through the brain and you are jointly administered therapy and a punishment for your hostile go-to-hell behavior, on top of being put out of everyone's way for six hours to three days, depending on the individual. Even when you do regain consciousness you are in a state of disorientation for days. You are unable to think coherently. You can't recall things. Enough of these treatments and a man could turn out like Mr. Ellis you see over there against the wall. A drooling, pants-wetting idiot at thirty-five. Or turn into a mindless organism that eats and eliminates and yells ‘fuck the wife,’ like Ruckly. Or look at Chief Broom clutching to his namesake there beside you.” Harding points his cigarette at me, too late for me to back off. I make like I don't notice. Go on with my sweeping. “I've heard that the Chief, years ago, received more than two hundred shock treatments when they were really the vogue. Imagine what this could do to a mind that was already slipping. Look at him: a giant janitor. There's your Vanishing American, a six-foot-eight sweeping machine, scared of its own shadow. That, my friend, is what we can be threatened with.” McMurphy looks at me a while, then turns back to Harding. “Man, I tell you, how come you stand for it? What about this democratic-ward manure that the doctor was giving me? Why don't you take a vote?”Harding smiles at him and takes another slow drag on his cigarette. “Vote what, my friend? Vote that the nurse may not ask any more questions in Group Meeting? Vote that she shall not *look* at us in a certain way? You tell me, Mr. McMurphy, what do we vote on?” “Hell, I don't care. Vote on anything. Don't you see you have to do something to show you still got some guts? Don't you see you can't let her take over completely? Look at you here: you say the Chief is scared of his own shadow, but I never saw a scareder-looking bunch in my life than you guys.” “Not me!” Cheswick says. “Maybe not you, buddy, but the rest are even scared to open up and *laugh*. You know, that's the first thing that got me about this place, that there wasn't anybody laughing. I haven't heard a real laugh since I came through that door, do you know that? Man, when you lose your laugh you lose your *footing*. A man go around lettin' a woman whup him down till he can't laugh any more, and he loses one of the biggest edges he's got on his side. First thing you know he'll begin to think she's tougher than he is and—” “Ah. I believe my friend is catching on, fellow rabbits. Tell me, Mr. McMurphy, how does one go about showing a woman who's boss, I mean other than laughing at her? How does he show her who's king of the mountain? A man like you should be able to tell us that. You don't slap her around, do you? No, then she calls the law. You don't lose your temper and shout at her; she'll win by trying to placate her big ol' angry boy: ‘Is us wittle man getting *fussy?* Ahhhhh?’ Have you ever tried to keep up a noble and angry front in the face of such consolation? So you see, my friend, it is somewhat as you stated: man has but *one* truly effective weapon against the juggernaut of modern matriarchy, but it certainly is not laughter. One weapon, and with every passing year in this hip, motivationally researched society, more and more people are discovering how to render that weapon useless and conquer those who have hitherto been the conquerors—” “Lord, Harding, but you do come on,” McMurphy says. “—and do you think, for all your acclaimed psychopathic powers, that you could effectively use your weapon against our champion? Do you think you could use it against Miss Ratched, McMurphy? Ever?” And sweeps one of his hands toward the glass case. Everybody's head turns to look. She's in there, looking out through her window, got a tape recorder hid out of sight somewhere, getting all this down—already planning how to work it into the schedule. The nurse sees everybody looking at her and she nods and they all turn away. McMurphy takes off his cap and runs his hands into that red hair. Now everybody is looking at him; they're waiting for him to make an answer and he knows it. He feels he's been trapped some way. He puts the cap back on and rubs the stitch marks on his nose. “Why, if you mean do I think I could get a bone up over that old buzzard, no, I don't believe I could…” “She's not all that homely, McMurphy. Her face is quite handsome and well preserved. And in spite of all her attempts to *conceal* them, in that sexless get-up, you can still make out the evidence of some rather extraordinary breasts. She must have been a rather beautiful young woman. Still—for the sake of argument, could you get it up over her even if she wasn't old, even if she was young and had the beauty of Helen?” “I don't know Helen, but I see what you're drivin' at. And you're by God right. I couldn't get it up over old frozen face in there even if she had the beauty of Marilyn Monroe.” “There you are. She's won.” That's it. Harding leans back and everybody waits for what McMurphy's going to say next. McMurphy can see he's backed up against the wall. He looks at the faces a minute, then shrugs and stands up from his chair. “Well, what the hell, it's no skin off my nose.” “That's true, it's no skin off your nose.” “And I damn well don't want to have some old fiend of a nurse after me with three thousand volts. Not when there's nothing in it for me but the adventure.” “No. You're right.” Harding's won the argument, but nobody looks too happy. McMurphy hooks his thumbs in his pockets and tries a laugh. “No sir, I never heard of anybody offering a twenty-bone bounty for bagging a ball-cutter.” Everybody grins at this with him, but they're not happy. I'm glad McMurphy is going to be cagey after all and not get sucked in on something he can't whip, but I know how the guys feel; I'm not so happy myself. McMurphy lights another cigarette. Nobody's moved yet. They're all still standing there, grinning and uncomfortable. McMurphy rubs his nose again and looks away from the bunch of faces hung out there around him, looks back at the nurse and chews his lip. “But you say… she don't send you up to that other ward unless she gets your goat? Unless she makes you crack in some way and you end up cussing her out or busting a window or something like that?”“Unless you do something like that.” “You're sure of that, now? Because I'm getting just the shadiest notion of how to pick up a good purse off you birds in here. But I don't want to be a sucker about it. I had a hell of a time getting outa that other hole; I don't want to be jumping outa the fryin' pan into the fire.” “Absolutely certain. She's powerless unless you do something to honestly deserve the Disturbed Ward or EST. If you're tough enough to keep her from getting to you, she can't do a thing.” “So if I behave myself and don't cuss her out—” “Or cuss one of the aides out.” “—or cuss one of the aides out or tear up jack some way around here, she can't do nothing to me?” “Those are the rules we play by. Of course, she always wins, my friend, always. She's impregnable herself, and with the element of time working for her she eventually gets inside everyone. That's why the hospital regards her as its top nurse and grants her so much authority; she's a master at forcing the trembling libido out into the open—” “The hell with that. What I want to know is am I safe to try to beat her at her own game? If I come on nice as pie to her, whatever else I in-*sinuate*, she ain't gonna get in a tizzy and have me electrocuted?” “You're safe as long as you keep control. As long as you don't lose your temper and give her actual reason to request the restriction of the Disturbed Ward, or the therapeutic benefits of Electro Shock, you are safe. But that entails first and foremost keeping one's temper. And you? With your red hair and black record? Why delude yourself?” “Okay. *All* right.” McMurphy rubs his palms together. “Here's what I'm thinkin'. You birds seem to think you got quite the champ in there, don't you? Quite the—what did you call her?—sure, impregnable woman. What I want to know is how many of you are dead sure enough to put a little money on her?” “Dead sure enough…?” “Just what I said: any of you sharpies here willing to take my five bucks that says that I can get the best of that woman—before the week's up—without her getting the best of me? One week, and if I don't have her to where she don't know whether to shit or go blind, the bet is yours.” “You're *betting* on this?” Cheswick is hopping from foot to foot and rubbing his hands together like McMurphy rubs his. “You're damned right.” Harding and some of the others say that they don't get it. “It's simple enough. There ain't nothing noble or complicated about it. I like to gamble. And I like to win. And I think I can win this gamble, okay? It got so at Pendleton the guys wouldn't even lag pennies with me on account of I was such a winner. Why, one of the big reasons I got myself sent here was because I needed some new suckers. I'll tell you something: I found out a few things about this place before I came out here. Damn near half of you guys in here pull compensation, three, four hundred a month and not a thing in the world to do with it but let it draw dust. I thought I might take advantage of this and maybe make both our lives a little more richer. I'm starting level with you. I'm a gambler and I'm not in the habit of losing. And I've never seen a woman I thought was more man than me, I don't care whether I can get it up for her or not. She may have the element of time, but I got a pretty long winning streak goin' myself.” He pulls off his cap, spins it on his finger, and catches it behind his back in his other band, neat as you please. “Another thing: I'm in this place because that's the way I planned it, pure and simple, because it's a better place than a work farm. As near as I can tell I'm no loony, or never knew it if I was. Your nurse don't know this; she's not going to be looking out for somebody coming at her with a trigger-quick mind like I obviously got. These things give me an edge I like. So I'm saying five bucks to each of you that wants it if I can't put a betsy bug up that nurse's butt within a week.” “I'm still not sure I—” “Just that. A bee in her butt, a burr in her bloomers. Get her goat. Bug her till she comes apart at those neat little seams, and shows, just one time, she ain't so unbeatable as you think. One week. I'll let you be the judge whether I win or not.” Harding takes out a pencil and writes something on the pinochle pad. “Here. A lien on ten dollars of that money they've got drawing dust under my name over in Funds. It's worth twice that to me, my friend, to see this unlikely miracle brought off.” McMurphy looks at the paper and folds it. “Worth it to any of the rest of you birds?” Other Acutes line up now, taking turns at the pad. He takes the pieces of paper when they're finished, stacking them on his palm, pinned under a big stiff thumb. I see the pieces of paper crowd up in his hand. He looks them over. “You trust me to hold the bets, buddies?” “I believe we can be safe in doing that,” Harding says. “You won't be going any place for a while.” |
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