One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest by Ken Kesey
Part 1 Chapter 8 /35

#### AnnotationsMake 5 connections. Label © /5Ask 5 questions. Label (?) /5Highlight 5 quotes that reveal characterization. O-/-< Discuss. /5 Define the vocabulary on the line. /5Write a summary of this chapter. Label (S) /5Answer questions in the margin. /15

 Come morning, McMurphy is up before I am, the first time anybody been up before me since Uncle Jules the Wallwalker was here. Jules was a shrewd old white-haired Negro with a theory the world was being tipped over on its side during the night by the black boys; he used to slip out in the early mornings, aiming to catch them tipping it. Like Jules, I'm up early in the mornings to watch what machinery they're sneaking onto the ward or installing in the shaving room, and usually it's just me and the black boys in the hall for fifteen minutes before the next patient is out of bed. But this morning I hear McMurphy out there in the ***latrine*** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ as I come out of the covers. Hear him singing! Singing so you'd think he didn't have a worry in the world. His voice is clear and strong slapping up against the cement and steel.
 “‘Your horses are hungry, that's what she did say.’” He's enjoying the way the sound rings in the latrine. “‘Come sit down beside me, an' feed them some hay.’” He gets a breath, and his voice jumps a key, gaining pitch and power till it's joggling the wiring in all the walls. “‘My horses ain't hungry, they won't eat your hay-ay-aeee.’” He holds the note and plays with it, then swoops down with the rest of the verse to finish it off. “‘So fare-thee-well, darlin', I'm gone on my way.’”
 Singing! Everybody's thunderstruck. They haven't heard such a thing in years, not on this ward. Most of the Acutes in the dorm are up on their elbows, blinking and listening. They look at one another and raise their eyebrows. How come the black boys haven't hushed him up out there? They never let anybody raise that much racket before, did they? How come they treat this new guy different? He's a man made outa skin and bone that's due to get weak and pale and die, just like the rest of us. He lives under the same laws, gotta eat, bumps up against the same troubles; these things make him just as vulnerable to the Combine as anybody else, don't they?
 But the new guy is different, and the Acutes can see it, different from anybody been coming on this ward for the past ten years, different from anybody they ever met outside. He's just as vulnerable, maybe, but the Combine didn't get him.
 “‘My wagons are loaded,’” he sings, “‘my whip's in my hand…’”
 How'd he manage to slip the collar? Maybe, like old Pete, the Combine missed getting to him soon enough with controls. Maybe he growed up so wild all over the country, batting around from one place to another, never around one town longer'n a few months when he was a kid so a school never got much a hold on him, logging, gambling, running carnival wheels, traveling lightfooted and fast, keeping on the move so much that the Combine never had a chance to get anything installed. Maybe that's it, he never gave the Combine a chance, just like he never gave the black boy a chance to get to him with the thermometer yesterday morning, because a moving target is hard to hit.
 No wife wanting new linoleum. No relatives pulling at him with watery old eyes. No one to care about, which is what makes him free enough to be a good con man. And maybe the reason the black boys don't rush into that latrine and put a stop to his singing is because they know he's out of control, and they remember that time with old Pete and what a man out of control can do. And they can see that McMurphy's a lot bigger than old Pete; if it comes down to getting the best of him, it's going to take all three of them and the Big Nurse waiting on the sidelines with a needle. The Acutes nod at one another; that's the reason, they figure, that the black boys haven't stopped his singing where they would stop any of the rest of us.
 I come out of the dorm into the hall just as McMurphy comes out of the latrine. He's got his cap on and not much else, just a towel grabbed around his hips. He's holding a toothbrush in his other hand. He stands in the hall, looking up and down, rocking up on his toes to keep off the cold tile as much as he can. Picks him out a black boy, the least one, and walks up to him and whaps him on the shoulder just like they'd been friends all their lives.
 “Hey there, old buddy, what's my chance of gettin' some toothpaste for brushin' my grinders?”
 The black boy's dwarf head swivels and comes nose to knuckle with that hand. He frowns at it, then takes a quick check where's the other two black boys just in case, and tells McMurphy they don't open the cabinet till six-forty-five. “It's a policy,” he says.
 “Is that right? I mean, is that where they keep the toothpaste? In the cabinet?”
 “Tha's right, locked in the cabinet.”
 The black boy tries to go back to polishing the baseboards, but that hand is still lopped over his shoulder like a big red clamp.
 “Locked in the cabinet, is it? Well well well, now why do you reckon they keep the toothpaste locked up? I mean, it ain't like it's dangerous, is it? You can't poison a man with it, can you? You couldn't brain some guy with the tube, could you? What reason you suppose they have for puttin' something as harmless as a little tube of toothpaste under lock and key?”
 “It's ward policy, Mr. McMurphy, tha's the reason.” And when he sees that this last reason don't affect McMurphy like it should, he frowns at that hand on his shoulder and adds, “What you s'pose it'd be like if evahbody was to brush their teeth whenever they took a notion to brush?”
 McMurphy turns loose the shoulder, tugs at that tuft of red wool at his neck, and thinks this over. “Uh-huh, uh-huh, I think I can see what you're drivin' at: ward policy is for those that can't brush after every meal.”
 “My gaw, don't you see?”
 “Yes, now, I do. You're saying people'd be brushin' their teeth whenever the spirit moved them.”
 “Tha's right, tha's why we—”
 “And, lordy, can you imagine? Teeth bein' brushed at six-thirty, six-twenty—who can tell? maybe even six o'clock. Yeah, I can see your point.”
 He winks past the black boy at me standing against the wall.
 “I gotta get this baseboard cleaned, McMurphy.”
 “Oh. I didn't mean to keep you from your job.” He starts to back away as the black boy bends to his work again. Then he comes forward and leans over to look in the can at the black boy's side. “Well, look here; what do we have here?”
 The black boy peers down. “Look where?”
 “Look here in this old can, Sam. What is the stuff in this old can?”
 “Tha's… soap powder.”
 “Well, I generally use paste, but”—McMurphy runs his toothbrush down in the powder and swishes it around and pulls it out and taps it on the side of the can—“but this will do fine for me. I thank you. We'll look into that ward policy business later.”
 And he heads back to the latrine, where I can hear his singing garbled by the piston beat of his toothbrushing.
 That black boy's standing there looking after him with his scrub rag hanging limp in his gray hand. After a minute he blinks and looks around and sees I been watching and comes over and drags me down the hall by the drawstring on my pajamas and pushes me to a place on the floor I just did yesterday.
 “There! Damn you, right there! That's where I want you workin', not gawkin' around like some big useless cow! There! There!”
 And I lean over and go to mopping with my back to him so he won't see me grin. I feel good, seeing McMurphy get that black boy's goat like not many men could. Papa used to be able to do it—spraddle-legged, dead-panned, squinting up at the sky that first time the government men showed up to negotiate about buying off the treaty. “Canada honkers up there,” Papa says, squinting up. Government men look, rattling papers. “What are you—? In July? There's no—uh—geese this time of year. Uh, no geese.”
 They had been talking like tourists from the East who figure you've got to talk to Indians so they'll understand. Papa didn't seem to take any notice of the way they talked. He kept looking at the sky. “Geese up there, white man. You know it. Geese this year. And last year. And the year before and the year before.”
 The men looked at one another and cleared their throats. “Yes. Maybe true, Chief Bromden. Now. Forget geese. Pay attention to contract. What we offer could greatly benefit you—your people—change the lives of the red man.”
 Papa said, “…and the year before and the year before and the year before…”
 By the time it dawned on the government men that they were being poked fun at, all the council who'd been sitting on the porch of our shack, putting pipes in the pockets of their red and black plaid wool shirts and taking them back out again, grinning at one another and at Papa—they had all busted up laughing fit to kill. Uncle R & J Wolf was rolling on the ground, gasping with laughter and saying, “You know it, white man.”
 It sure did get their goat; they turned without saying a word and walked off toward the highway, red-necked, us laughing behind them. **I forget sometimes what laughter can do.** The Big Nurse's key hits the lock, and the black boy is up to her soon as she's in the door, shifting from foot to foot like a kid asking to pee. I'm close enough I hear McMurphy's name come into his conversation a couple of times, so I know he's telling her about McMurphy brushing his teeth, completely forgetting to tell her about the old Vegetable who died during the night. Waving his arms and trying to tell her what that fool redhead's been up to already, so early in the morning—disrupting things, goin' contrary to ward policy, can't she do something?
 She glares at the black boy till he stops fidgeting, then looks up the hall to where McMurphy's singing is booming out of the latrine door louder than ever. “‘Oh, your parents don't like me, they say I'm too po-o-or; they say I'm not worthy to enter your door.’”
 Her face is puzzled at first; like the rest of us, it's been so long since she's heard singing it takes her a second to recognize what it is.
 “‘Hard livin's my pleasure, my money's my o-o-own, an' them that don't like me, they can leave me alone.’”
 She listens a minute more to make sure she isn't hearing things; then she goes to puffing up. Her nostrils flare open, and every breath she draws she gets bigger, as big and tough-looking's I seen her get over a patient since Taber was here. She works the hinges in her elbows and fingers. I hear a small squeak. She starts moving, and I get back against the wall, and when she rumbles past she's already big as a truck, trailing that wicker bag behind in her exhaust like a semi behind a Jimmy Diesel. Her lips are parted, and her smile's going out before her like a radiator grill. I can smell the hot oil and magneto spark when she goes past, and every step hits the floor she blows up a size bigger, blowing and puffing, roll down anything in her path! I'm scared to think what she'll do.
 Then, just as she's rolling along at her biggest and meanest, McMurphy steps out of the latrine door right in front of her, holding that towel around his hips—stops her dead! She shrinks to about head-high to where that towel covers him, and he's grinning down on her. Her own grin is giving way, sagging at the edges.
 “Good morning, **Miss Rat-shed!** How's things on the outside?”
 “You can't run around here—in a towel!”
 “No?” He looks down at the part of the towel she's eye to eye with, and it's wet and skin tight. “Towels against ward policy too? Well, I guess there's nothin' to do exec—”
 “Stop! don't you dare. You get back in that dorm and get your clothes on this instant!”
 She sounds like a teacher bawling out a student, so McMurphy hangs his head like a student and says in a voice sounds like he's about to cry, “I can't do that, ma'am. I'm afraid some thief in the night boosted my clothes whilst I slept. I sleep awful sound on the mattresses you have here.” “Somebody boosted…?”
 “Pinched. Jobbed. Swiped. Stole,” he says happily. “You know, man, like somebody boosted my threads.” Saying this tickles him so he goes into a little barefooted dance before her.
 “Stole your clothes?”
 “That looks like the whole of it.”
 “But—prison clothes? Why?”
 He stops jigging around and hangs his head again. “All I know is that they were there when I went to bed and gone when I got up. Gone slick as a whistle. Oh, I do know they were nothing but prison clothes, coarse and faded and uncouth, ma'am, well I know it—and prison clothes may not seem like much to those as has more. But to a nude man—”
 “That outfit,” she says, realizing, “was supposed to be picked up. You were issued a uniform of green ***convalescents*** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ this morning.”
 He shakes his head and sighs, but still don't look up. “No. No, I'm afraid I wasn't. Not a thing this morning but the cap that's on my head and—”
 “Williams,” she hollers down to the black boy who's still at the ward door like he might make a run for it. “Williams, can you come here a moment?”
 **He crawls to her like a dog to a whipping.**
 “Williams, why doesn't this patient have an issue of convalescents?”
 The black boy is relieved. He straightens up and grins, raises that gray hand and points down the other end of the hall to one of the big ones. “Mistuh Washington over there is 'signed to the laundry duty this mornin'. Not me. No.”
 “Mr. Washington!” She nails him with his mop poised over the bucket, freezes him there. “Will you come here a moment!” The mop slides without a sound back in the bucket, and with slow, careful movements he leans the handle against the wall. He turns around and looks down at McMurphy and the least black boy and the nurse. He looks then to his left and to his right, like she might be yelling at somebody else.
 “Come down here!”
 He puts his hands in his pockets and starts shuffling down the hall to her. He never walks very fast, and I can see how if he don't get a move on she might freeze him and shatter him all to hell by just looking; all the hate and fury and frustration she was planning to use on McMurphy is beaming out down the hall at the black boy, and he can feel it blast against him like a blizzard wind, slowing him more than ever. He has to lean into it, pulling his arms around him. ***Frost forms in his hair and eyebrows.*** He leans farther forward, but his steps are getting slower; he'll never make it.
 Then McMurphy takes to whistling “Sweet Georgia Brown,” and the nurse looks away from the black boy just in time. Now she's madder and more frustrated than ever, madder'n I ever saw her get. Her doll smile is gone, stretched tight and thin as a red-hot wire. If some of the patients could be out to see her now, McMurphy could start collecting his bets.
 The black boy finally gets to her, and it took him two hours. She draws a long breath. “Washington, why wasn't this man issued a change of greens this morning? Couldn't you see he had nothing on but a towel?”
 “And my cap,” McMurphy whispers, tapping the brim with his finger.
 “Mr. Washington?”
 The big black boy looks at the little one who pointed him out, and the little black boy commences to fidget again. The big boy looks at him a long time with those radio-tube eyes, plans to square things with him later; then the head turns and he looks McMurphy up and down, taking in the hard, heavy shoulders, the lopsided grin, the scar on the nose, the hand ***clamping*** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ the towel in place, and then he looks at the nurse.
 “I guess—” he starts out.
 “You guess! You'll do more than guess! You'll get him a uniform this instant, Mr. Washington, or spend the next two weeks working on ***Geriatrics*** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Ward! Yes. You may need a month of bedpans and slab baths to refresh your appreciation of just how little work you aides have to do on this ward. If this was one of the other wards, who do you think would be ***scouring*** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ the hall all day? Mr. Bromden here? No, you know who it would be. We excuse you aides from most of your housekeeping duties to enable you to see to the patients. And that means seeing that they don't parade around exposed. What do you think would have happened if one of the young nurses had come in early and found a patient running round the halls without a uniform? What do you think!”
 The big black boy isn't too sure what, but he gets her drift and ambles off to the linen room to get McMurphy a set of greens—probably ten sizes too small—and ambles back and holds it out to him with a look of the clearest hate I ever saw. McMurphy just looks confused, like he don't know how to take the outfit the black boy's handing to him, what with one hand holding the toothbrush and the other hand holding up the towel. He finally winks at the nurse and shrugs and unwraps the towel, drapes it over her shoulder like she was a wooden rack.
 I see he had his shorts on under the towel all along.
 I think for a fact that she'd rather he'd of been stark naked under that towel than had on those shorts. She's glaring at those big white whales leaping round on his shorts in pure wordless outrage. That's more'n she can take. It's a full minute before she can pull herself together enough to turn on the least black boy; her voice is shaking out of control, she's so mad.
 “Williams… I believe… you were supposed to have the windows of the Nurses' Station polished by the time I arrived this morning.” He scuttles off like a black and white bug. “And you, Washington—and you…” Washington shuffles back to his bucket in almost a trot. She looks around again, wondering who else she can light into. She spots me, but by this time some of the other patients are out of the dorm and wondering about the little clutch of us here in the hall. She closes her eyes and concentrates. She can't have them see her face like this, white and warped with fury. She uses all the power of control that's in her. Gradually the lips gather together again under the little white nose, run together, like the red-hot wire had got hot enough to melt, shimmer a second, then click solid as the molten metal sets, growing cold and strangely dull. Her lips part, and her tongue comes between them, a chunk of slag. Her eyes open again, and they have that strange dull and cold and flat look the lips have, but she goes into her good-morning routine like there was nothing different about her, figuring the patients'll be too sleepy to notice.
 “Good morning, Mr. Sefelt, are your teeth any better? Good morning, Mr. Fredrickson, did you and Mr. Sefelt have a good night last night? You bed right next to each other, don't you? Incidentally, it's been brought to my attention that you two have made some arrangement with your medication—you are letting Bruce have your medication, aren't you, Mr. Sefelt? We'll discuss that later. Good morning, Billy; I saw your mother on the way in, and she told me to be sure to tell you she thought of you all the time and knew you wouldn't disappoint her. Good morning, Mr. Harding—why, look, your fingertips are red and raw. Have you been chewing your fingernails again?”
 Before they could answer, even if there was some answer to make, she turns to McMurphy still standing there in his shorts. Harding looks at the shorts and whistles.
 “And you, Mr. McMurphy,” she says, smiling, sweet as sugar, “if you are finished showing off your manly physique and your gaudy underpants, I think you had better go back in the dorm and put on your greens.”
 He tips his cap to her and to the patients ogling and poking fun at his white-whale shorts, and goes to the dorm without a word. She turns and starts off in the other direction, her flat red smile going out before her; before she's got the door closed on her glass station, his singing is rolling from the dorm door into the hall again.
 “‘She took me to her parlor, and coo-oo-ooled me with her fan’”—I can hear the whack as he slaps his bare belly—“‘whispered low in her mamma's ear, I luh-uhvvv that gamblin' man.’”
 Sweeping the dorm soon's it's empty, I'm after dust mice under his bed when I get a smell of something that makes me realize for the first time since I been in the hospital that this big dorm full of beds, sleeps forty grown men, has always been sticky with a thousand other smells—smells of germicide, zinc ointment, and foot powder, smell of piss and sour old-man manure, of Pablum and eyewash, of musty shorts and socks musty even when they're fresh back from the laundry, the stiff odor of starch in the linen, the acid stench of morning mouths, the banana smell of machine oil, and sometimes the smell of singed hair—but never before now, before he came in, the man smell of dust and dirt from the open fields, and sweat, and work.