

# One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KEN KESEY

Born to dairy farmers in Colorado, Kesey then moved with his family to Springfield, Oregon. In college at the University of Oregon, he married his high school sweetheart Norma "Faye" Haxby in 1956 and they had three children: Jed, Zane, and Shannon. Kesey later had another child, Sunshine, with Carolyn "Mountain Girl" Adams in 1966. Kesey enrolled in a creative writing program at Stanford University in 1958 and joined a study called Project MKULTRA, which analyzed the effects of psychedelic drugs. He worked as a night aide in the veteran's hospital. His work there inspired him to write *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ken Kesey wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* as a part of the Beats literary movement, one which rejected conventional social norms and protested the government's lack of concern for certain neglected categories of society: the insane, the criminal, the homeless, etc. as well as the government's intervention in The Vietnam War (1955-1975) because of its commitment to abolish communism, while maintaining an opposition to totalitarian regimes.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Howl," by Allen Ginsburg (1955) is a long-form poem that is emblematic of the Beat culture of the fifties and sixties. He decries the government and society for failing to recognize the brilliance of its youth. In one of the more famous American poetic openings he writes, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix." The Beats culture celebrated drugs, like psychotropic drugs, that freed the mind, while chastising the use of drugs meant to 'control' behavior, like those given in a mental institution or addictive substances that made individuals dependent, desperate for an "angry fix." *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac (1957), chronicles Kerouac's exploits on a cross-country journey in America with his friends and lovers in a sexually fluid, drug-addled tale of anti-establishment life. Ginsberg was a friend of Kerouac's, and is featured as a character in the novel, though Kerouac went through and changed all of the names, including his own.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

- **When Written:** Late 1950s
- **Where Written:** Stanford University, while Kesey was a student of the creative writing program.
- **When Published:** 1962
- **Literary Period:** Beats
- **Genre:** Counterculture/Protest Novel
- **Setting:** Mental hospital in Oregon during the 1950s
- **Climax:** At the end of Part II, McMurphy violently rebels against Nurse Ratched's decision to close off the game room. He punches through the glass window at the nurse's station. It signals that McMurphy is beyond trying to get a rise out of Nurse Ratched for selfish reasons, but now believes she is a corruptive, evil force. It is here that McMurphy commits himself to truly rehabilitating the other men.
- **Antagonist:** Nurse Ratched
- **Point of View:** Chief Bromden (Narrator)

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Movie Disputes.** Kesey was originally involved in the film production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, but left after two weeks because of a monetary rights dispute. He refused to see the movie because Chief Bromden didn't narrate it like in the book, and he disagreed with the casting of Jack Nicholson as Randle McMurphy. Kesey wanted Gene Hackman.

**Wrestling Star.** Ken Kesey was a champion high school and college wrestler, and even nearly qualified for the Olympic team, but because of a shoulder injury couldn't compete.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Chief Bromden serves as the narrator for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. He has been a patient at the unnamed Oregon psych ward for ten years, and suffers from debilitating hallucinations of **fog**. While Chief Bromden is aware of his surroundings, he has pretended to be both deaf and dumb for the duration of his commitment. On the ward, all of the patients are men divided into Acutes (curable) and Chronics (vegetables). Nurse Ratched rules over the ward with an iron fist. If anyone dares to go against her, they are punished with shock treatment, or in severe cases, a lobotomy.

Randle McMurphy is the protagonist of the novel, and his arrival after a transfer from a Pendleton Work Farm marks the beginning of an unprecedented liberation in the ward. McMurphy introduces himself to both the Acutes and Chronics as a **gambler** and womanizer. After the first group therapy session, he claims that Ratched is a ball-breaker. McMurphy

bets the other patients that he can cause Ratched to lose her temper in his first week, and wins. After a group therapy session where Ratched refuses to let the men watch the World Series, which comes on during Ratched's scheduling cleaning of the ward, McMurphy protests by refusing to do his chores and sitting in front of the blank television. The other men join. Ratched is incensed and demands that they get back to work, but the men refuse.

McMurphy is thrilled with his victory. The patients on the ward expect for Ratched to retaliate by sending McMurphy to shock treatment, but she fears that sending McMurphy away will turn him into a martyr, and that after enough time has passed the other men will see that McMurphy is actually egotistical coward.

McMurphy soon learns that being involuntarily committed (which he is) leaves you at the mercy of the hospital staff to determine your freedom. He had previously thought that he would get to leave when his term was up. He begins to abide by the strict rules, not wanting to jeopardize his chance at getting out. It is too late, though, because the other patients already see McMurphy as their leader against Ratched. As the patients begin to realize McMurphy has submitted to her authority, Charles Cheswick becomes upset and drowns in the pool, which the doctor rules a possible suicide. McMurphy is torn up by Cheswick's death, and realize how the other men see him. He playacts for a little longer at being obedient, then punches through the nurse station window as Ratched sits inside after she takes away game room privileges as a punitive measure for the men's World Series protest.

McMurphy sets up a fishing trip for ten patients and himself. On the boat, he is largely absent below deck—allowing the men to take charge of steering and catching large fish, enabling them to feel free, in control, and masculine. McMurphy also devises a scheme for Billy Bibbit to lose his virginity to a prostitute named Candy Starr by sneaking her into the ward. The men return from the trip feeling empowered.

McMurphy and Chief Bromden get in a fight with some of the aides after they taunt George Sorenson in the shower after their fishing expedition. Both McMurphy and Chief Bromden are sent to Disturbed for shock treatment. Ratched brings him back to the ward to dispel the myth that McMurphy is immune to the treatments. McMurphy is encouraged by the men to escape, but he uses Bibbit's scheduled date that evening as an excuse not to leave. After bribing the night aide, Mr. Turkle, the men sneak Candy into the ward and a large party takes place with drinking, smoking, and Bibbit losing his virginity. Dale Harding urges McMurphy to escape to Mexico. McMurphy promises to, but falls asleep instead.

The aides discover all the men in the morning. Nurse Ratched finds Bibbit with Candy and threatens to tell his mother. He is so distraught that he slits his throat, killing himself. McMurphy, blaming Ratched for Bibbit's death, attacks her, ripping her

uniform. She sends McMurphy to be lobotomized and he's returned to the ward as a Chronic. However, her power is broken. Most of the men check out of the hospital or transfer to different wards. Chief Bromden suffocates McMurphy with a pillow as an act of mercy, then throws the impossibly heavy **control panel** out of a window and escapes the hospital.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Chief Bromden** – Narrator; half Indian, 6'3 patient who has been on the ward the longest. Pretends to be deaf and dumb for the majority of his commitment. Hallucinates a thick **fog** that begins to wane with McMurphy's arrival. He also begins to think more about his past, in which his Native American family was forced to sell their land to make way for a hydroelectric dam. He escapes the ward at the novel's end after suffocating a lobotomized McMurphy.

**Randle P. McMurphy** – The protagonist of the novel. A **gambling**, thirty-five year old womanizer, McMurphy was transferred to the ward after potentially faking psychosis, because he believed the ward would be more comfortable than the work farm he had sentenced to work at. He is shocked by the emasculating control that Nurse Ratched has over the men, and becomes a radical, subversive force of change that inspires the men to challenge Ratched.

**Nurse Ratched** – Often referred to as "Big Nurse." She runs the psychiatric ward with an iron fist, and functions as the novel's antagonist. She's a middle-aged, former Army nurse whose principal tactic of control is emasculating her male patients. She successfully controls the ward by carefully selecting staff that will be submissive to her. The novel pits her against Randle McMurphy.

**Dale Harding** – College-educated patient. Helps McMurphy learn the ropes of the ward. Harding is a homosexual, but the social pressure to be straight cripples him. He is married, but he prefers to commit himself to the hospital rather than face prejudice or the anger of his wife. After McMurphy is lobotomized, Harding checks himself out of the ward.

**Doctor Spivey** – The doctor assigned to the ward. Under Nurse Ratched's control because he's allegedly addicted to opiates, and she can use this as leverage to have him fired. He's also a pushover, making him easy to dominate. When McMurphy arrives, Doctor Spivey feels re-invigorated, just as his patients do, and frequently backs up McMurphy's suggestions, such as going on the fishing trip or starting a basketball team.

**Billy Bibbit** – A patient on the ward with a stutter. He appears young, but is actually thirty-one. He is completely dominated by his mother (a close friend of Nurse Ratched), and committed himself to the hospital voluntarily because he couldn't handle

the outside world. After he loses his virginity to Candy Starr in the nighttime ward party, he is initially proud. But when Nurse Ratched threatens to tell his mother, Bibbit slits his own throat and dies.

**George Sorenson** – A patient on the ward and a former fisherman. McMurphy names Sorenson the captain of the fishing trip. The aides give Sorenson the nickname “Rub-a-Dub George” because he has a phobia of being dirty. After the aides taunt Sorenson in the post-fishing trip shower, McMurphy and Chief Bromden step in to fight the aides. McMurphy and Bromden are then sent to Disturbed for shock therapy.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Charles Cheswick** – A patient on the ward and the first to support McMurphy’s rebellions against Nurse Ratched. He drowns in the pool in a possible suicide after McMurphy doesn’t stand up for Cheswick when he rebels against Nurse Ratched.

**Chief Tee Ah Millatoona** – Chief Bromden’s father, chief of the Columbia Indians. Married a white woman and took her last name to better assimilate, but their marriage was bad and after the government took his land he became an alcoholic.

**The Lifeguard** – A patient and former football player, he suffers from hallucinations. He is the first to reveal to McMurphy that involuntary commitments (such as McMurphy) can only leave the ward when Nurse Ratched says so. This realization quells McMurphy’s disobedience for a while.

**Mr. Turkle** – A Black aide who works the night shift from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. He has a bit of a drinking problem, but is kinder than the other aides. He goes along with the nighttime party near the end of the novel.

**Williams, Warren, Washington, and Geever** – Black hospital aides. Williams, Warren, and Washington are on the day shift. Geever is on the night shift. Nurse Ratched believes they’re all hate-filled men who want to lash out at the patients, which makes them easier for her to control.

**Nurse Pilbow** – A strictly Catholic nurse, whose most salient feature is a birthmark on her face. She’s afraid of the patients, particularly when they talk about sex.

**Candy Starr** – A prostitute from Portland, Oregon who knows McMurphy. She goes with the patients on the fishing trip, and sneaks into the ward at the end of the novel to have sex with Billy Bibbit.

**Martini** – A patient on the ward who suffers from hallucinations. McMurphy includes him in the card games and board games with the other patients.

**Ellis** – A Chronic who arrived at the ward as an Acute, but got brain damage from shock therapy.

**Ruckly** – A Chronic who arrived at the ward as an Acute, but

got brain damage from a botched brain surgery.

**Colonel Matterson** – The oldest Chronic on the ward. He was a cavalry soldier in World War I. His wife brought him in a few years earlier when she could no longer care for him.

**Old Pete Bancini** – A Chronic on the ward. Suffered brain damage at birth. Constantly proclaims he is tired, and once says he was “born dead.”

**Scanlon** – An Acute; the only other patient on the ward who was involuntarily committed besides McMurphy. Scanlon wants to blow things up.

**Sefelt** – An epileptic patient who despises taking his medication because they cause his teeth to fall out. He gives them to the other epileptic, Fredrickson, who takes both his dose and Sefelt’s.

**Fredrickson** – An epileptic patient who takes his medication and Sefelt’s.

**Maxwell Taber** – A rambunctious, disobedient patient who used to be on the ward. Nurse Ratched subjected him to many rounds of shock therapy, and eventually returned to the ward docile and obedient. He was permitted to leave, and Nurse Ratched views his case as a cure.

**Old Blastic** – The oldest vegetable on the ward. Chief Bromden has a dream one night that Blastic was taken to a mechanized slaughterhouse from his bed and murdered. When Bromden wakes, he learns that Blastic passed away during the night.

**Rawler the Scrawler** – A patient who was never quiet enough for Nurse Ratched, and was permanently sent to Disturbed. Ends up killing himself by cutting off both of his testicles and bleeding to death.

**Sandy Gilfillian** – A prostitute who knows McMurphy.

**Public Relation** – A fat, bald man who gives tours of the ward to show that it is a nice and pleasant place to be.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### SANITY V. INSANITY

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* explores the idea of what it means to be sane or insane, and, perhaps most importantly, who gets to define what qualifies as sane versus insane. One of the novel’s most salient insinuations is that the psych ward, Nurse Ratched, and all the other tools of “sanity” in the book are, in fact, insane. This question becomes central with the arrival of Randle McMurphy

to the ward, a likeable, crass gambler who may have faked psychosis to get relocated to the ward from a work camp. Regardless of Nurse Ratched's personal suspicions that McMurphy is not, in fact, insane, Ratched must *treat* him as insane because only then can she exercise control over him. In other words, a ward that is meant to help cure those who are insane is instead treating as insane a man who its chief nurse believes to be sane—a fact which is, arguably, itself insane behavior.

Ken Kesey's portrayal of the characters within the psych ward further asks the reader to question the line between what is sane and insane. The characters in the ward are undeniably damaged or hurting, but are they insane or do they just not fit perfectly well in a rigid society? The narrator of the novel, Chief Bromden, has successfully pretended to be deaf and mute for years in the ward, though his recalling of events as a narrator are largely lucid and appear sane despite the hallucinatory **fog**—which seems to be something that the ward and the world has done *to* him, rather than some problematic aspect of his psyche—that plagues him for a large portion of the book. Dale Harding is an eloquent, well-educated man, but because of his homosexuality he is so uncomfortable in society that he voluntarily puts himself in a mental institution. Through these and other characters in the psych ward, Kesey makes a deliberate point of challenging the reader to ask themselves where the boundaries of sanity are, and who exactly determines them, and what is a world that allows the strong to label the weak or misfit as crazy just to shut them away.



### INSTITUTIONAL CONTROL VS. HUMAN DIGNITY

Nurse Ratched is notorious for her desire to exercise complete control over the men who are under her jurisdiction on the psych ward, both as patients and as employees. In doing so, Nurse Ratched becomes a metaphor for the entire mental institution, the government, society at large—or to put it simply: any and every powerful institution that exists to regulate, control, and categorize groups of people. In order to determine the difference between sanity and insanity, for instance, some agent of power (society, the psych ward, Nurse Ratched) must first define the boundaries of what each word means. After this definition is decided upon, it can be used to control and categorize people to make them easier to control. The institutions of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* claim that they categorize the patients as insane in order to "treat" and "rehabilitate" them. But it quickly becomes clear in the novel that this rehabilitation is more punitive and controlling than it is helpful for any mental ailment: the shock treatment table, the red pills that cause memory loss, the daily meetings that pit men against each other, and the list on Nurse Ratched's desk to record and reward the men for betraying each other's secrets are all ways to force people to obey, not to

make them well.

The categorization of the men as Acutes and Chronics shows the inherent loss of human dignity that results from relying on such categories. As the novel opens, the men in the ward do not have names: they have broad labels: Acute or Chronic. That is the only marker of meaning regarding them: not who they are, not what they care about. Just Acute or Chronic. Further, the ward allows for little freedom of expression—though it is feigned with "democratic" group meetings. There is no recreation outdoors. There is little exposure to the outside world. All activities and therapy sessions are scheduled with precision, and to deviate from that schedule is to be a nuisance to Nurse Ratched. This is exactly as Nurse Ratched prefers it to be, because she can strip the humanity of her patients in order to be in complete control and run her ward like a well-oiled machine.

It is when Randle McMurphy becomes a patient—and begins to treat other patients with dignity—that the cold categorization of the institution begins to be subverted: the **fog** lifts for Chief Bromden, the men joke and play, they go on outings. The climactic party scene illustrates how the men (sane or insane) still possess the same desires as a nominally "sane" person: to have fun, to be free, to be respected. McMurphy's introduction of human dignity to the patients transforms the ward—the men realize that they have sacrificed not just their rights but their very beings by electing to be committed to the institution, but as they rediscover their own human dignity with the aid of McMurphy they attempt to wrest back that control.



### SOCIAL PRESSURE AND SHAME

Randle McMurphy is shocked to learn that there are more men on the psych ward who are voluntarily committed than those, like him, who have been committed by the state. Dale Harding, for instance, is so ashamed of his homosexuality that he chooses to commit himself to a mental asylum to escape the shame he feels around his wife. Billy Bibbit is in his early thirties, but he has become so infantilized and reliant on his mother's acceptance and approval that he is paralyzed by the thought of being with another woman, or of his mother finding out anything about him that would lessen her esteem of him (e.g. when he sleeps with Candy and blames the events on McMurphy and the rest of the men).

The novels makes it clear that many of these men are holding themselves back from living freely because they are terrified of how they will be received by the general population for their behaviors. Not fitting in because of sexual orientation, ethnic background, infantilization—no matter what it is, the men fear what makes them different and would rather hide from society than face its judgment of them. The judgments about what constitutes normal or abnormal behavior, about what is shameful and what is not, are decided by the few in positions of

institutional power, but their influence and legitimacy gives their views—however wrong or right—the ability to become the definition of what is Normal in society. For most of these men, they simply cannot deal with the shame of not fitting into what is conventionally normal until McMurphy helps them to recognize their own internal dignity and self-worth, to reconnect with themselves in a way that is unaffected by society's perception of them.



## THE COMBINE: MACHINE, NATURE, AND MAN

The Combine is what Chief Bromden calls society at large, a giant force that exists to oppress the people within it. The hospital ward is a mere factory for remedying mistakes made within The Combine (within neighborhoods and churches), to re-set peoples' behavior into the "correct" behavior. The ward is a mechanized extension of The Combine, but more importantly The Combine represents the increasingly mechanized structure of all of nature and society. Bromden's ideas about The Combine arise in part from his own history as a Native American—his ancestral land, on which his people lived and fished, was taken from him and his family for the purposes of building a hydroelectric dam.

Chief Bromden sees The Combine as a taming force against human nature: it devastated his homeland and, in doing so, stripped him of his human nature. He becomes what others believe to be deaf and dumb, much like an automaton—tasked with cleaning up the ward on schedule like a robot. His existence for years on the ward is without humanity; he exists only to complete tasks. Kesey suggests with the theme of The Combine that the taming of nature goes hand in hand with the taming of man. While Kesey focuses his attention in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to the psychiatric ward, and the way it runs like a factory, the novel also suggests that the ward functions as a metaphor for the world at large, which grounds down its people into mindless drones, disconnected from themselves and from nature.



## EMASCULATION AND SEXUALITY

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey draws a clear connection between the men's sexuality and their freedom—their very ability to be "men." Nurse

Ratched uses emasculating tactics throughout the novel in order to strip the men on the ward of their freedom. She sometimes employs physical force (such as shock treatment), drugs (personality altering pills), but also uses simple intimidation and other tactics to ensure that the men are always under a strict, unchanging schedule and that they are acting in a submissive, despondent way that makes them easier to control. When McMurphy arrives at the ward, he immediately identifies emasculation is the core of Nurse

Ratched's strategy of control, and notes after the first group session that she is a "ball-breaker." Nurse Ratched and McMurphy, then, operate in direct opposition of one another throughout the novel: Ratched the emasculating force, McMurphy the hyper-masculine force, bragging about his many sexual conquests and challenging the other men to show some balls.

While Kesey draws a strong correlative between emasculation and lack of freedom on the ward; emasculation is also intertwined with social pressures—most of the men arrive at the ward already emasculated, and this is in fact the root cause for why many elect to be committed in the first place. Dan Harding feels emasculated because of his homosexuality and his wife's reaction to his sexual proclivities. Billy Bibbit feels emasculated because of his mother's hold on him and the fact that he had never been with a woman until he has sex with Candy, the prostitute. This act, though, once discovered by Nurse Ratched, forces him to suicide because he cannot bear to think of his mother's reaction. After Bibbit's suicide, McMurphy rips Nurse Ratched's uniform, revealing her breasts and womanly figure for the first time to the patients. In the logic of the novel, McMurphy's attack destroys the institutionalized mask that Ratched uses to make herself non-human and non-feminine and reasserts masculine dominance. It shows the men that Ratched is not some impersonal avenging force, she's a woman, and that the men, by extension, are men, who traditionally are the powerful ones. And that they can reassert that power if they wish.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## FOG

Chief Bromden's hallucinations are dominated by a thick, debilitating fog that only begins to wane with the arrival of Randle McMurphy to the psych ward. Bromden's sees the world as becoming increasingly mechanized, and describes the greater society outside and including the ward as The Combine. This **fog** is symbolic of the waste that our mechanized society has created, and how it pollutes our ability to live naturally. Bromden literally feels as though he cannot see until the antithesis of mechanized control arrives to the ward: McMurphy, a man who looks to his instincts and natural desires for action.



## LAUGHTER

After Randle McMurphy arrives, Chief Bromden notices that his **laughter** is the first genuine

laughter he has heard in years. The longer McMurphy is on the ward, the more the men begin to laugh. Laughter becomes a symbol and an active representation of the men's freedom, even though they are basically imprisoned by the ward and by society. They can still find pleasure in their small rebellions and jokes, and this happiness—as embodied by laughter—cannot be taken from them.



## GAMBLING

Randle McMurphy is quick to introduce himself as an avid gambler, and tries to find the patient on the ward in charge of gambling and debts. McMurphy uses **gambling** throughout the book as a way to feel comfort and camaraderie with the men. He enjoys winning money, but gambling comes to represent how the men are given the opportunity to actually own something and realize that they have the agency to decide how to use their money. Moreover, gambling is symbolic of the ongoing game between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched—how they keep raising the stakes in their continuous battle against one another for control.



## THE CONTROL PANEL

Randle McMurphy makes a bet that he can lift **the control panel**, an object that is so large and heavy that no one believes he can actually do it—but they are all committed to seeing him try. Though he fails, and walks away with bloodied hands, there is a sense of victory in his fighting against the insurmountable. The control panel symbolizes The Combine and the rules of the ward that seem too big to move or change. Chief Bromden is groomed by McMurphy to get his old strength back, and at the book's end is able to throw the control panel out of the window and escape the ward. In other words, Bromden uses a symbol of his own oppression in the ward to free himself from it, and from The Combine in general.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* published in 2002.

## Part One Quotes

☞ Across the room from the Acutes are the culls of the Combine's product, the Chronics. Not in the hospital, these, to get fixed, but just to keep them from walking around the streets giving the product a bad name. Chronics are in for good, the staff concedes. Chronics are divided into Walkers like me, can still get around if you keep them fed, and Wheelers and Vegetables. What the Chronics are—or most of us—are machines with flaws inside that can't be repaired, flaws born in, or flaws beat in over so many years of the guy running head-on into solid things that by the time the hospital found him he was bleeding rust in some vacant lot.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 14-15

### Explanation and Analysis

In this opening description of a mental hospital, Chief Bromden describes a surreal, infernal room. The room is full of mental patients, some of them incapable of walking or talking; some, like Bromden, perfectly capable. As Bromden sees it, everyone in the mental hospital is, in some fundamental way, broken. Like everyone else in the modern world, the mental patients are manufactured by a mysterious force (essentially society) called the Combine--the only difference between a mental patient and a normal member of society is that hospital patients need to be repaired or at least kept off the streets.

In general, Bromden paints a sinister view of the hospital. It's important to note that while Bromden is talking about the hospital, everything he says can be applied to modern society in general. As Bromden sees it, human beings are being manufactured by the Combine--a potent symbol of the strong, insidious control of modern society. Humans have lost their natural life force--instead of blood and a soul, humans contain nothing but cold, sterile rust, a clear symbol of what the Chief perceives as humanity's vanished vitality.

☞ 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.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 43

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Chief describes the society of the mental hospital in more detail, and how McMurphy sees it. As he sees it, the society is composed of docile subservient men, submitting to the authority of the female Nurse Ratched. The passage suggests a crisis of manhood itself: instead of acting like strong, confident men, the patients act like babies, thanks to the overpowering maternal presence of the nurses.

The passage is also important in that it places a lot of emphasis on study and close observation. As the Chief says, it's important to study the game before you play yourself. (McMurphy is an avowed gambler, so Bromden observes him "playing" here.) By the same token, we spend a lot of time "studying" the structure of hospital society before we really meet any of the characters who inhabit it. The Chief wants to show readers the basic features of life at the hospital, because it's only when we understand such features that we can truly understand the patients who live there.

☞ 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. Nor 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?

**Related Characters:** Dale Harding (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 57

### Explanation and Analysis

Dale Harding is the hospital's intellectual, and yet he's also totally submissive to the established order. As we can see,

Harding believes that power is the only real justice in life; everyone should accept their place in society, depending on how strong or weak they are. There is a natural order in the universe, visible in all forms of life from rabbits up to human beings, and Harding sees no reason to disrupt such a natural order.

Harding's emphasis on nature and order turns out to be self-defeating, since he's gay, and therefore--in the judgment of his society, and seemingly in his own self-hating worldview--a violator of the "natural biological order." Moreover, it's surprising that Harding is so willing to accept the corrupt authority of the nurses in his hospital--he's smart enough to see that they're tyrannical, but not willing to challenge their tyranny. Harding is, in short, a frustrated, self-hating man, who knows that he's being treated unfairly by his society, and yet lacks the strength to do something about it.

☞ 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 up and 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...

**Related Characters:** Randle P. McMurphy (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 63

### Explanation and Analysis

McMurphy points out the total absence of laughter in the mental ward. McMurphy hasn't heard any laughter since he arrived; furthermore, he sees the absence of laughter in his new hospital as a symbol of the broader problem with the ward. Laughter, as McMurphy sees it, is one of men's most important weapons, both against women and against authority in general. With laughter one can satirize authority, reminding people not to trust it under any circumstances. Stripped of their ability to laugh, however, the patients seem to have resigned themselves to the nurses' authority--they have given up their most basic defense against tyranny.

McMurphy, then, is a kind of clown, whose role is to oppose tyranny using humor and satire, thereby liberating his new friends from the nurses' control.

☞ You're making sense, old man, a sense of your own. You're not crazy the way they think.

**Related Characters:** Randle P. McMurphy (speaker), Chief Bromden

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 117

### Explanation and Analysis

McMurphy meets Chief Bromden, his new bunk mate. The Chief refuses to speak for any reason, and everyone in the building seems to avoid him. And yet McMurphy notices Bromden right away, and regards him as wise and sensible. There's no good reason why McMurphy respects Bromden; Bromden hasn't done anything particularly brilliant or noteworthy. And yet McMurphy's quotation suggests why he's such a charismatic figure. McMurphy sees potential in everyone, regardless of how much or how little they talk.

The key words in this quotation are "a sense of your own." McMurphy doesn't claim to understand Bromden--why he's refusing to talk, for example. And yet McMurphy *does* acknowledge that there are many ways of looking at the world--many kinds of sense. Rather than dismiss the patients as insane, like Nurse Ratched, McMurphy celebrates the patients for their unique forms of "sense."

☞ If somebody'd of come in and took a look, men watching a blank TV, a fifty-year -old woman hollering and squealing at the back of their heads about discipline and order and recriminations, they'd of thought the whole bunch was crazy as loons.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker), Nurse Ratched

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 126

### Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the first Part of the novel, McMurphy achieves an ambiguous victory. He's petitioned for Nurse Ratched to

turn down the loud, cheesy music that plays throughout the hospital, and he's also tried to get the patients to vote to watch the baseball game on television. Nurse Ratched, reluctant to yield any power to McMurphy, has refused both of his requests. But here, McMurphy asserts his victory over Ratched by pretending that the ball game is playing on TV. Together, he and the patients yell and cheer at a blank TV screen.

In a way, McMurphy is doing what he's always done--using humor and satire to undermine Ratched's authority. Ratched thinks that she can use her power to crush McMurphy's spirit, but here, McMurphy proves her dead-wrong--he's more than capable of keeping his spirits up, even if the authorities deny him TV.

The final comment of the passage also emphasizes how Kesey blends the ideas of sanity and insanity in the book. Everyone in the ward is supposed to be "insane" except for the "sane" nurses, but in this case it's only when the patients are acting very lucid and rebellious that they really look "insane," and Nurse Ratched looks just as insane as any of them.

## Part Two Quotes

☞ They're trying to act like they still got their eyes on nothing but that blank TV in front of us, but anyone can see they're all sneaking looks at the Big Nurse behind her glass there, just the same as I am. For the first time she's on the other side of the glass and getting a taste of how it feels to be watched when you wish more than anything else to be able to pull a green shade between your face and all the eyes that you can't get away from.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker), Nurse Ratched

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 129

### Explanation and Analysis

Immediately following McMurphy's act of disobedience, there's a clear change in the atmosphere of the hospital. The mental patients, who are used to being constantly looked at by Nurse Ratched and her colleagues, find themselves staring *back* at Ratched. Nurse Ratched, Bromden imagines, isn't really used to having so many people stare at her. Trivial as it might seem, the patients' surveillance of Nurse Ratched constitutes an act of rebellion--it shows that

McMurphy is teaching the patients to think of Nurse Ratched as "just another person," not a demigod from whom they must avert their eyes at all times.

It's also significant that Bromden conceives of the patients' act of rebellion as a rebellion of *vision*. Bromden is haunted by the possibility that he's being watched at all times--surveyed by the agents of the Combine. It's only appropriate, then, that the Chief conceives of the patients' rebellion as an act of retaliatory surveillance.

☝ There was times that week when I'd hear that full-throttled laugh, watch [McMurphy] scratching his belly and stretching and yawning and leaning back to wink at whoever he was joking with, everything coming to him just as natural as drawing breath, and I'd quit worrying about the Big Nurse and the Combine behind her. I'd think he was strong enough being his own self that he would never back down the way she was hoping he would. I'd think, maybe he truly is something extraordinary. He's what he is, that's it. Maybe that makes him strong enough, being what he is. The Combine hasn't got to him in all these years; what makes the nurse think she's gonna be able to do it in a few weeks? He's not gonna let them twist him and manufacture him.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker), Randle P. McMurphy, Nurse Ratched

**Related Themes:**     

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 139-140

### Explanation and Analysis

Here Chief Bromden is beginning to see McMurphy as a hero. For Bromden, the world is firmly under the power of the Combine--the mysterious, dangerous force of mechanization and industry that controls all human beings. Bromden himself is the prisoner of the Combine--that's why he doesn't talk. And yet Bromden recognizes that McMurphy doesn't seem to be under the influence of the Combine at all. While other men are quiet and docile, since the Combine has crushed the life force out of them, McMurphy is bright and lively, an exemplar of the life force. Somehow, Bromden thinks, McMurphy hasn't allowed the Combine to destroy him.

While McMurphy himself probably wouldn't understand what the Chief was talking about, it's clear enough that he

embodies a certain kind of strength and self-confidence that is sadly lacking in the hospital, and perhaps in society as a whole. In other words, the passage clarifies the point McMurphy made earlier about Bromden having his own "kind of sense." Bromden's descriptions of the Combine might not be true, literally, but they have a kind of poetic truth about them.

☝ In the group meetings there were gripes coming up that had been buried so long the thing being griped about had already changed. Now that McMurphy was around to back them up, the guys started letting fly at everything that had ever happened on the ward they didn't like.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker), Randle P. McMurphy

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 144

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we see the effect that McMurphy's presence has had on the group dynamic during hospital therapy sessions. Where before the group therapy sessions were quiet and useless, presided over by a calm Nurse Ratched, now they have become wild and argumentative. The men have been repressed in their frustrations for so long that they're glad to have an opportunity to "air grievances." And beyond dealing with current problems, they also talk about problems that they had long ago, but never had the courage to discuss.

It's possible to interpret the new dynamic of the therapy sessions as dangerous and pointless--as Bromden notes, the patients aren't really addressing problems that can be solved at all, because they happened so long ago. And yet the patients' airing of grievances *does* serve a useful purpose: it allows them to vent the frustration that's been building up inside them for years. So even if the patients' complaints aren't in themselves "useful," they pave the way for more productive and satisfying conversations in the future.

“ I’m committed...I’d left here before now if it was up to me. Maybe I couldn’t play first string, with this bum arm, but I could of folded towels, couldn’t I? I could of done something. That nurse on my ward, she keeps telling the doctor I ain’t ready. Not even to fold towels in the crummy old locker room, I ain’t ready.

**Related Characters:** The Lifeguard (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 147

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we meet the Lifeguard, one of the patients at the hospital. The Lifeguard explains that he’s in the hospital involuntarily--he’ll be allowed to leave as soon as the nurses say he’s capable of surviving in the real world, but of course, such a day never arrives. Instead of leaving the hospital, the Lifeguard is going to spend the rest of his life there.

The passage is a good example of how the nurses might be abusing their authority in order to dominate their patients. The Lifeguard lacks the courage (or the means) to "define" himself--he’s forced to rely on other people, mostly the nurses, to tell him whether or not he’s "sane," "fit," etc. The Lifeguard’s words also educate McMurphy about the realities of his situation--he’d assumed that he would be allowed to leave the hospital after a fixed period of time, when in reality, he’ll only be permitted to leave when the nurses say he’s "healthy."

“ EST isn’t always used for punitive measures, as our nurse uses it, and it isn’t pure sadism on the staff’s part, either. A number of supposed Irrecoverables were brought back into contact with shock, just as a number were helped with lobotomy and leucotomy. Shock treatment has some advantages; it’s cheap, quick, entirely painless. It simply induces a seizure.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 162

### Explanation and Analysis

Harding describes the use of electroshock therapy (EST) at the hospital. EST is sometimes used to punish unruly patients. It’s also used to "cure" them of their supposed

problems--patients have supposedly been brought back into consciousness with the help of shock therapy.

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* played a large role in demonizing EST in popular culture--and EST certainly used to be used inhumanely and excessively in many institutions--but it is still used in some cases today, and has proven effective for many issues. (Harding gives a slightly nuanced view on the subject here, although throughout the book EST is shown as a "punitive measure," as he describes it.) Treatments like lobotomies and leucotomies, however, are entirely ineffective and horrifying in the personality changes they induce.

“ McMurphy doesn’t know it, but he’s onto what I realized a long time back, that it’s not just the Big Nurse by herself, but it’s the whole Combine, the nation-wide Combine that’s the really big force, and the nurse is just a high-ranking official for them.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker), Nurse Ratched, Randle P. McMurphy

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 164

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, McMurphy prepares to defy the authority of Nurse Ratched one more time. He’s angry that Ratched has punished the men for their disobedience by taking away their rec room--in retaliation, he’s planning to shock Ratched and undermine her power. As always, Bromden interprets McMurphy’s actions in his own terms--terms like "Combine," "fog," etc.

Although it’s hard to take everything the Chief says literally, his words clearly have a metaphorical truth. It’s been clear for some time that the hospital in the novel is a microcosm for modern American society--a society in which people’s vitality is taken and they’re forced to accept the identities society gives them. So when Bromden says that Nurse Ratched is only one small part of the total "Combine," we can’t help but agree: Ratched is just a metaphor for the mechanization (and, as Kesey portrays it, the emasculation) of social order.

●● I couldn't figure it at first, why you guys were coming to me like I was some kind of savior. Then I just happened to find out about the way the nurses have the big say as to who gets discharged and who doesn't. And I got wise awful damned fast. I said, 'Why, those slippery bastards have conned me, snowed me into holding their bag. If that don't beat all, conned ol' R. P. McMurphy;...Well I don't mean nothing personal, you understand, buddies, but screw that noise. I want out of here just as much as the rest of you. I got just as much to lose hassling that old buzzard as you do.'

**Related Characters:** Randle P. McMurphy (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 165

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, McMurphy comes to terms with his situation in the hospital. Contrary to what he'd believed, McMurphy is being watched very closely: he can't leave whenever he wants, and in fact is completely reliant on his nurses' approval for release from the hospital. McMurphy was only behaving like a clown because he thought he had nothing to lose—he thought he had a definite exit date, and wanted to have a good time until then.

In a way, McMurphy's admission in this quotation is disheartening for Bromden and the other patients. They'd assumed that McMurphy was being a kind of hero because he knew how much power Ratched exercised over him, and still wanted to stand up to her. Now, they realize that he's just like them: he's frightened of the nurses' authority, and wants to get on their good side. Whether McMurphy will continue to be obedient or revert to his old ways, however, remains to be seen.

●● Tell me why. You gripe, you bitch for weeks on end about how you can't stand this place, can't stand the nurse or anything about her, and all the time you ain't committed. I can understand it with some of those old guys on the ward. They're nuts. But you, you're not exactly the everyday man on the street, but you're not nuts.

**Related Characters:** Randle P. McMurphy (speaker), Billy Bibbit, Dale Harding, Sefelt

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 167

### Explanation and Analysis

McMurphy has just learned that he's involuntarily committed to the mental hospital until the nurses deem him fit to return to society. Furthermore, he discovers that the majority of the patients in the hospital are there voluntarily—they could leave at any time. McMurphy is shocked with the patients' attitude: he naturally assumed that they were involuntarily committed, since no one would voluntarily live with Nurse Ratched and then complain about her so much. McMurphy ends his quotation with a reminder that he sees his peers as human beings, not "crazy people." Even if Harding and Billy aren't exactly average people, they're perfectly capable of running their own lives.

The implicit answer to McMurphy's question is that the patients lack the courage and determination to live without Nurse Ratched behind them. They hate a tyrannical, domineering woman controlling their lives, but they're too cowardly to try anything else.

●● Please understand: We do not impose certain rules and restrictions on you without a great deal of thought about their therapeutic value. A good many of you are in here because you could not adjust to the rules of society in the Outside World, because you refused to face up to them, because you tried to circumvent them and avoid them. At some time—perhaps in your childhood—you may have been allowed to get away with flouting the rules of society. When you broke a rule you knew it. You wanted to be dealt with, needed it, but the punishment did not come. That foolish lenience on the part of your parents may have been the germ that grew into your present illness. I tell you this hoping you will understand that it is entirely for your own good that we enforce discipline and order.

**Related Characters:** Nurse Ratched (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 170

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Nurse Ratched gives one of her longest explanations of why she treats the patients the way she does: in short, sees everything she does as being for the patients' own good. Ratched doesn't go into any details about her medical or psychological theories; rather she states as a given that the patients are insane because of their inability to measure up to society's "rules." Ratched never bothers to justify or explain the rules of society—she accepts them dogmatically,

and therefore treats the patients like children and animals for their failure to obey.

The main difference between *Ratched* and *McMurphy* is that where *Ratched* accepts society's rules as the truth, *McMurphy* questions the same set of rules. A good example of a questionable rule would be the ban placed on sodomy and homosexuality in the United States at this point in history—a ban that plays a decisive part in sending Harding to the hospital. *Ratched* would never doubt that homosexuality is against the rules, and therefore wrong—*McMurphy*, on the other hand, seems to embrace all ways of life, even those that he doesn't understand.

Never before did I realize that mental illness could have the aspect of power, power. Think of it: perhaps the more insane a man is, the more powerful he could become. Hitler an example. Fair makes the old brain reel, doesn't it? Food for thought there.

**Related Characters:** Dale Harding (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 204

### Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Harding makes a provocative point about mental illness: it can be a source of strength. As we've seen, the patients in the hospital think of their mental illness as a disability—they're docile, meek, and generally childish. But Harding wants to argue that mental illness is a reason to be strong, not weak. Insanity, he explains, can provide a man with a vision that gives him power—Adolf Hitler is a disturbing but perhaps effective example.

While Harding doesn't clarify his thoughts in much detail, it's important to recognize that mental illness can provide the patient with a sense of insight and clarity lacking in most sane people. For example, Chief Bromden, even if his hallucinations of fog and electrical controls aren't literally true, has a way of seeing the world in its true, spiritual form—for example, even if there isn't literal fog in the hospital, the hospital is clogged with the metaphorical fog of obscurantism and tyranny. Harding's speech, then, illustrates the influence *McMurphy* has had on the hospital—he's encouraged the patients to band together against *Ratched*, no longer so ashamed of their mental problems.

They could sense the change that most of us were only suspecting; these weren't the same bunch of weak-knees from a nuthouse that they'd watched take their insults on the dock this morning. They didn't exactly apologize to the girl for the things they'd said, but when they ask to see a fish she'd caught they were just as polite as pie. And when *McMurphy* and the captain came back out of the bait shop we all shared a beer together before we drove away.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker), Randle P. *McMurphy*, Candy Starr

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 218

### Explanation and Analysis

*McMurphy* and his fellow patients at the hospital have left the hospital with supervisors (and a prostitute named Candy) and gone on a fishing trip. During the course of the excursion, Bromden notices an enormous change in the patients' attitudes. They're more relaxed and easygoing, and seem not to think of themselves as mentally diseased in any way. As a way of "measuring" the change in the patients, Bromden notes the way the dock workers who point *McMurphy* to the boat perceive the patients—instead of considering the patients oafish and ridiculous, they seem to think of the patients as "normal" people.

The normality of the fishing excursion culminates in the "sharing of a beer"—just about the most normal activity one can engage in in the United States. The message is clear: by treating his peers as ordinary, normal human beings, not specimens needing examination, *McMurphy* has cured them of many of their supposed psychological afflictions.

### Part Four Quotes

[Nurse *Ratched*] knew that people, being like they are, sooner or later are going to draw back a ways from somebody who seems to be giving a little more than ordinary, from Santa Clauses and missionaries and men donating funds to worthy causes, and begin to wonder: what's in it for them? Grin out of the side of their mouths when the young lawyer, say, brings a sack of pecans to the kids in his district school—just before nominations for state senate, the sly devil—and say to one another, He's nobody's fool.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker), Nurse *Ratched*

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 225

### Explanation and Analysis

Nurse Ratched tries a shady strategy for wearing away at McMurphy's authority. Instead of trying to censor him or punish him, she tries to convince his army of followers—i.e., the patients—that he doesn't have their best interests at heart. Ratched implies that McMurphy is only trying to steal the patients' money, and that he's only humoring the patients, pretending to treat them normally so that they'll gamble with him. As Bromden notes here, Ratched's attack is clever, because humans naturally question generosity of any kind—they ask themselves why the other person is being so generous and cheerful, and tend to assume that such a person is in fact selfish.

It's fair to say that Ratched has a point: McMurphy is no saint, to say the least, and he has in fact been conning the patients out of their money. And yet Ratched's attack totally misses the point: McMurphy is a charismatic leader to the other patients because he treats them as normal human beings. Ratched, who's used to treating the patients as children, can't conceive of a situation in which McMurphy treats his peers as adults. So even if McMurphy is conning the other hospital patients, his status as a therapeutic and normalizing force among patients hasn't changed.

☝ I still had my own notions—how McMurphy was a giant come out of the sky to save us from the Combine that was networking the land with copper wire and crystal, how he was too big to be bothered with something as measly as money—but even I came halfway to thinking like the others. What happened was this: He'd helped carry the tables into the tub room before one of the group meetings and was looking at me standing beside the control panel.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker), Randle P. McMurphy

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 231

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Chief Bromden expresses some of his doubts about McMurphy's character. Nurse Ratched has just implied that McMurphy is treating the other patients as “suckers,” winning away all their money in card games. Bromden doesn't fully believe Ratched's suggestions—he likes McMurphy too much to do so—and yet he does consider the possibility that McMurphy is just a con artist; Ratched's implication by itself is enough to incriminate McMurphy, even in the eyes of the Chief, perhaps his most loyal follower.

And yet the passage illustrates the full extent of McMurphy's worth in Bromden's eyes. As Bromden sees it, McMurphy is a liberator, here in the hospital to save the patients from Ratched's authority, and from the authority of the sinister, tyrannical Combine. The point here isn't that Bromden is right or wrong about McMurphy (it's entirely possible that McMurphy is just a con artist, with no great plans of crushing Ratched's authority or battling injustice). What counts is that Bromden believes that he's found a role model in McMurphy; whether or not McMurphy ultimately measures up to Bromden's worship, he's inspiring Bromden to escape from the hospital.

☝ I tried to talk to [McMurphy] into playing along with [Nurse Ratched] so's to get out of the treatments, but he just laughed and told me Hell, all they was doin' was chargin' his battery for him, free for nothing.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker), Randle P. McMurphy, Nurse Ratched

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 250

### Explanation and Analysis

Chief Bromden, now McMurphy's closest ally, tries to convince McMurphy to back off of intimidating Nurse Ratched. McMurphy and Bromden have been given the dreaded EST—shock therapy that gives them a seizure. Bromden has been terrified by his experiences with EST, and wants McMurphy to avoid having to receive the treatment in the future.

McMurphy, as tenacious as ever, refuses to back down. By this point in the novel, he's decided that Nurse Ratched can't defeat him. Even though he was previously worried that Ratched would use her authority to confine him to the

hospital forever, he's now more concerned about undermining her authority for its own sake. In another sense, McMurphy is trying to assert his own identity—masculine, strong, charismatic—instead of devolving into a docile, demure child.

☞ First Charles Cheswick and now William Bibbit! I hope you're finally satisfied. Playing with human lives—gambling with human lives—as if you thought yourself to be a God!

**Related Characters:** Nurse Ratched (speaker), Randle P. McMurphy, Charles Cheswick, Billy Bibbit

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 274

### Explanation and Analysis

Billy Bibbit has just committed suicide. Billy has had sex with a woman (with McMurphy's encouragement) and afterwards seems to have lost his stammer and neurotic behavior. Nevertheless, he is humiliated when Nurse Ratched finds him with the woman, and immediately regains his neuroses. When Billy kills himself, Ratched blames McMurphy for egging Billy on and pushing him to do things he didn't really want to do.

First, it's important to note that Ratched accuses McMurphy of "playing God." McMurphy has always been trying to challenge Ratched's absolute authority over the hospital. Ratched sees herself as the "God" of the building, meaning that any other authority figure must be a "false prophet." Also, of course, Ratched is the one who really drives Billy to kill himself, with her guilt and reminders of authority.

Second, it's worth asking if Ratched has a point. Certainly, McMurphy has urged his friends, mental patients, into some bizarre, unfamiliar circumstances. As Ratched puts it, McMurphy is a gambler through and through—he's organized parties and group outings without knowing how they're going to turn out. In the end, then, what Ratched really objects to isn't the fact that McMurphy threw a party or encouraged Billy to have sex—it's that he did so without knowing what would happen next. McMurphy's laid-back, uncertain approach to living life is the antithesis of Ratched's orderly, authoritarian worldview (in McMurphy's world, there's no schedule; in Ratched's there is only a schedule). In general, then, Ratched's outburst sums up the differences between herself and McMurphy.

☞ She tried to get her ward back into shape, but it was difficult with McMurphy's presence still tromping up and down the halls and laughing out loud in the meetings and singing in the latrines. She couldn't rule with her old power any more, not by writing things on pieces of paper. She was losing her patients one after the other. After Harding signed out and was picked up by his wife, and George transferred to a different ward, just three of us were left out of the group that had been on the fishing crew, myself and Martini and Scanlon.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker), Randle P. McMurphy, Nurse Ratched, Dale Harding, George Sorenson, Scanlon, Martini

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 277

### Explanation and Analysis

After McMurphy attacks Nurse Ratched, her authority is broken forever. McMurphy is severely punished for his actions, as we'll see. And yet by attacking Nurse Ratched, he accomplishes exactly what he wanted to: he liberates the patients of the hospital from Nurse Ratched's tyranny. Like many a martyr, McMurphy is more powerful absent than present: in person McMurphy was a threat to Ratched's power; now that he's been sent away, the idea of McMurphy acts as a constant, 24/7 attack on Ratched.

The effects of Nurse Ratched's loss of power are obvious: her patients leave. One by one, they regain certainty that they can control their own lives, and don't need Ratched telling them what to do. Some, such as the Chief himself, remain behind, but by and large it's clear that Ratched can no longer convince her subjects to obey her.

☞ I was only sure of one thing: [McMurphy] wouldn't have left something like that sit there in the day room with his name tacked on it for twenty or thirty years so the Big Nurse could use it as an example of what can happen if you buck the system. I was sure of that.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker), Randle P. McMurphy, Nurse Ratched

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 278

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Bromden comes face-to-face with the new McMurphy, who has been lobotomized as punishment for attacking the nurses. Bromden immediately recognizes what Nurse Ratched is aiming for: by lobotomizing McMurphy and then sending him back to his old hospital ward, Ratched is desperately trying to salvage her sinking authority. By parading McMurphy's lobotomized self around, Ratched is showing the other patients what happens to people who disobey her. McMurphy's fate, it seems, is to be a frightening reminder of why it's crucial to obey Ratched's authority. Notice that Bromden refers to the new McMurphy as an "it," not a "he." Bromden doesn't really think of "McMurphy" as a human being at all any more: even though McMurphy's body is intact, his mind (and, even more important, his indomitable spirit) is long-gone. McMurphy is as good as dead—the only question is, what will become of the body?

☞ The big, hard body had a tough grip on life. It fought a long time against having it taken away, flailing and thrashing around so much I finally had to lie full length on top of it and scissor the kicking legs with mine while I mashed the pillow into the face. I lay there on top of the body for what seemed days. Until the thrashing stopped. Until it was still a while and had shuddered once and was still again. Then I rolled off. I lifted the pillow, and in the moonlight I saw the expression hadn't changed from the blank, dead-end look the least bit, even under suffocation. I took my thumbs and pushed the lids down and held them till they stayed. Then I lay back on my bed.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker), Randle P. McMurphy

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 278

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the final pages of the novel, McMurphy is lobotomized for disobeying Nurse Ratched, and then returned to his old hospital ward. The Chief, horrified that his old friend has been reduced to a vegetable, decides to take matters into his own hands, literally: he kills McMurphy by smothering

him to death. The Chief can't stand to see McMurphy being defeated and manipulated—his lobotomization proves that Nurse Ratched has finally crushed McMurphy's spirit (the very thing McMurphy was always most afraid of).

There's also a more subtle side to Bromden's actions in this quotation: by killing McMurphy, Bromden allows his old hero to die in a blaze of glory instead of being seen by the patients, his former followers. McMurphy the vegetable would be a piece of propaganda for Ratched: "Do as I say or you'll get what he got." Dead, McMurphy can continue to be a symbol of resistance to Nurse Ratched: he'll live on, as wild and charismatic as he ever was.

☞ I been away a long time.

**Related Characters:** Chief Bromden (speaker)

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 281

**Explanation and Analysis**

At the end of the novel, Chief Bromden, having mercy-killed McMurphy, escapes from his mental hospital and returns to the Outside World he's feared for years. The Chief always had the strength to escape from the hospital; what he lacked was the willpower. Now that McMurphy is dead, Bromden knows that he owes it to McMurphy to escape the nurses' authority—to be as lively and courageous as McMurphy would have been.

Outside the hospital, Bromden is strangely casual—indeed, the final sentence of the novel, quoted here, sounds surprisingly laid back, as if Bromden is looking around, trying to decide where to visit first. For many years, Bromden was too neurotic to leave the hospital; now, though, he's seemingly been freed of his neuroses. The quotation suggests that Bromden's imprisonment in the hospital was itself what kept him mentally ill; in other words, the hospital perpetuated Bromden's mental problems instead of curing them. In all, the final sentence of the novel conveys a quiet optimism: Bromden has been asleep, and now he's waking up, ready to live a long life in McMurphy's memory.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PART ONE

The book begins with the narrator, Chief Bromden, waking up early within the psychiatric ward in Oregon where he has spent the past ten years of his life. He tries to be quiet as he passes the aides who he believes have been committing illicit sexual activities in the night, but they sense him and because he pretends to be deaf and dumb, they point out a spot to be mopped nicknaming him “Chief Broom.” They speak hatefully and gossip about hospital secrets because they don’t believe Bromden can hear them. As a result, Bromden goes mostly unnoticed in the ward.

Nurse Ratched, also known as the “Big Nurse”, enters the ward. Bromden knows it’s her by the way the key turns, and cold air follows her inside. Her fingertips match the color of her lips, a “funny orange.” She’s carrying the same wicker bag she’s had since Bromden arrived on the ward. Inside the bag Bromden can’t see any makeup or feminine items. Bromden thinks that when she notices the aides gossiping in the hallway from the nurse’s station she’ll rip them to pieces. She doesn’t hold back, Bromden says she “blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor, so big I can smell the machinery inside,” because no one pays any mind to deaf and dumb Bromden. But before she can get going, the other patients start to wake up and emerge.

Nurse Ratched composes herself. Bromden describes her face as being precisely made, like a doll, with everything seemingly working except for the odd color of her lips and fingernails and her irregularly large bosom, which she does her best to hide under her uniform.

Nurse Ratched proposes that to get a good start to Monday the aides should shave Bromden. He quickly hides in a mop closet. He tries to think back to where he grew up near the Columbia River and hunting birds with his father. But Bromden senses the aide, and soon enough they discover him in the closet and take him to the shaving room. Bromden doesn’t fight them because he knows that will just make it harder on him in the long run, but when he arrives and they put something on his temples he becomes hysterical and starts hallucinating a thick **fog**, cold snow coming down. Bromden can hear Nurse Ratched rushing towards him through the thick of it, and he’s pinned down and sedated.

*Bromden has a good enough grasp on reality that he can narrate the entire book, so it immediately questions the competence of the staff and the definition of sane/insane. He has pretended to be deaf and dumb for years, showing that the ward has little interest in recalling seeing the person beneath the “condition,” which it turns out he doesn’t even have. Instead, he’s used as a tool to clean things up as though he’s just a robot.*



*Bromden hones in on the fact that Nurse Ratched lacks the conventional feminine markers. She tries to appear gender neutral, in a way. Her entrance, followed by the cold, immediately gives an icy feel to her character. The fact that her wicker bag hasn’t changed in the ten years that Bromden has been on the ward shows her dedication to a specific routine, that it needs to be close to perfect—mechanized. She has to maintain a façade, though, in front of the patients that she is calm so she can be seen as more of a force than a person.*



*Ratched hides her breasts under her uniform because she doesn’t want to be seen as a sexual object by her male patients—something that might remind them that she is not, in fact, a force or machine there solely to tell them what to do.*



*There is no expressed need for Bromden to be shaved; this comes off as an arbitrary exercise of control on behalf of Nurse Ratched. When something is put on his temples it reminds him of electroshock therapy, and this terrifies him—signaling both the way that Ratched uses the threat of pain as a measure of control and foreboding electroshock therapy to come. The hallucinatory fog symbolizes the control of the Combine that plagues Bromden.*



Bromden promises that the story he is about to tell will burn him like a dog running scared in a thick fog: “about the hospital, and her, and the guys—and about McMurphy.” He says he’s been quiet for so many years that it will just come out of him like a flood, and no one will believe him, but it’s all true.

Bromden wakes in the dayroom as the **fog** is beginning to clear. He knows he wasn’t taken for shock therapy, but he mildly recalls being in Seclusion—but not for how long or when is the last time he ate. Bromden sees the ward door open, and wonders whether it will be a resident before the patients have had medication, or a visiting wife, or the Public Relations man who celebrates how ethical the treatment is in these psych ward facilities.

Instead, it’s a new admission: Randle McMurphy. He refuses the entry shower, claiming he received one already at the courthouse. The patients can only hear his loud voice, which reminds Bromden of his father’s once booming voice. McMurphy **laughs**, for no identifiable reason, and Bromden realizes it’s the first laugh he’s heard in years.

McMurphy introduces himself to everyone in the day room as a **gambler** and a fool, still **laughing**. He says he requested a transfer from the Pendleton Work Farm so that he could have more interesting days. McMurphy, a large, well-built redhead, wears farming work clothes and a black motorcycle cap. He inserts himself into a card game and says that the farm ruled him a psychopath after some scuffles he was in and he wasn’t going to argue with the court if it got him out of the hard work on the farm.

McMurphy scans the room, which Bromden then describes. It’s filled with Acutes (curables) and Chronics (vegetables). A logbook is kept by the nurse’s station so that if someone lets a secret slip in the day room, the man who tattles will be rewarded by getting to sleep in the next day. Bromden notes that not all of the Chronics are immobile (himself included). But also that they all didn’t arrive as Chronics: Ellis and Ruckly both came in as Acutes but became Chronics as the result of botched procedures. Bromden reveals he’s been on the ward the longest of anyone.

*Bromden breaks the “fourth wall” of narration to speak to the reader directly, pleading with them to believe his story. Because he’s spent so many years as “deaf,” he fears no one will hear him.*



*Bromden emerges from his hallucinatory fog after the sedation. He is not greeted by a doctor or nurse to brief him on what happened. There is no regard for him as a person, because it’s taken for granted that he won’t understand. The mention of the PR man shows the contrast between the realities of the ward and how it’s presented.*



*McMurphy is rowdy immediately at entry. His laughter comes off as a unique sound: there is never any true laughter in the ward. McMurphy’s genuine laughter shows that he has not been stripped of the dignity, wildness, or sense of fun as the other men on the ward have.*



*McMurphy’s role as a gambler shows he’s freewheeling, he enjoys raising the stakes, and he takes games seriously. His continued laughter shows the sterilized atmosphere of the ward does not intimidate him. He confesses that he’s not really crazy, he just let himself be described as such if it would make his life easier. He seems to have ways of manipulating The Combine.*



*The room is neatly categorized, not just between sane/insane (employees vs. patients), but into different types of insane (Acutes/Chronics). Ratched’s logbook shows how ruthless she is in maintaining control: she relies on pitting patients against each other (certainly not an intuitive method for rehabilitation or building trust). The Chronics who were once Acutes show that the “treatments” used by the ward have the ability put patients under lifelong control of the hospital.*



McMurphy realizes immediately he's an Acute and walks over to some of the others. He asks Billy Bibitt who's in charge so that he, himself, can take over. Billy says he supposes it's Dale Harding, the president of the Patient's Council who Bromden notes has effeminate good looks suited for the silver screen. McMurphy and Harding exchange joking words, trying to one-up each other, and Harding concedes his position as head to McMurphy. All of the Acutes have surrounded McMurphy in a way Bromden has never seen, curious about his story.

*McMurphy's immediate assertion of dominance is a rare thing on the ward. Harding's word-play combat with McMurphy is more for show than an actual claim to be in charge. Everyone is simply fascinated with McMurphy because he's arrived in such high spirits: he's not already torn down from the world outside. Note how Harding's good looks make him look like an actor, but it's very "delicacy"—he's gay—that caused him to commit himself to the ward.*



McMurphy continues to refuse the aides who want to administer the admission protocol shower, rectal thermometer, and injection. McMurphy goes around the room and shakes all of the Chronics' hands, to everyone's surprise. Bromden is the last one, and he feels that McMurphy can tell he's not deaf and dumb.

*McMurphy's continued refusal to follow protocol foreshadows his greater rebellions to come. He shows unprecedented respect for all of the patients by shaking their hands—he treats them like people, and Bromden has the immediate sense that McMurphy can see him as a person and see through his false deaf and dumbness.*



Nurse Ratched is calling for McMurphy (initially as McMurphy, her error) about his refusal to follow protocol. She discusses him with a nurse in the station, and compares him to a former patient, Maxwell Taber, who she says was a manipulator (which is how she sees McMurphy). Taber arrived disobedient, but Nurse Ratched says that was only for "a while."

*Nurse Ratched's conversation with the other nurse about Taber shows that she intends to rein McMurphy in, no matter what it takes. In Taber's case, we only know so far that his disobedience was short-lived—the "institution" won out.*



Bromden relates how strictly Nurse Ratched runs her ward. He believes that she's part of a larger conglomerate of the outside world called The Combine. She intimidates the doctors into doing what she wants, and she has carefully recruited three daytime black aides who are filled with hate. With her staff, the day's events run like clockwork. No one is to dispute their medication, like Maxwell Taber did, who was later pinned down by the aides and taken to the Disturbed ward for shock therapy. Taber was eventually sent to enough shock treatments that he becomes obedient enough to be discharged. The staff views him as a successful case.

*The Combine is Bromden's name for what he sees as an increasingly mechanized world outside of and including the ward, which treats people as units or machines and cares only about them fitting in. Ratched used electroshock therapy to break Taber and make him "calm" enough to leave, which made him "sane." There is no mention of whether Taber's character or personality remained intact, though, so Taber's eventual obedience isn't a success in terms of his dignity, but for the institution.*



Bromden believes that the psych ward is a factory for the Combine. It's purpose is to correct the mistakes that the neighborhoods, schools, and churches made so that the person, the "product," can go back into society "better than new."

*Bromden sees the world, The Combine, as a place that needs not people but units that "fit". The ward is the place that takes those who don't fit and either forces them to fit or never lets them go. It does not care about its patients as people, with their own intrinsic worth and dignity.*



The group meeting takes place and Nurse Ratched brings up what they had discussed on Friday: Harding's relationship with his wife. Nurse Ratched goes into detail about overheard conversations Harding has had concerning his wife's breasts, and Harding closes his eyes. McMurphy makes a crass joke, and this almost flusters Nurse Ratched—some of the Acutes try not to smile. Nurse Ratched turns her attention to McMurphy and reads out his long rap sheet, including a charge of rape of a fifteen year old, which McMurphy refutes, saying the girl said she was seventeen and it was consensual and he brags about how often they had sex. She hands McMurphy's folder to Doctor Spivey who notes McMurphy has no previously documented mental illness. Spivey reads a note from the doctor at the work farm that suggests McMurphy is feigning psychosis to get out of having to do physical labor. McMurphy stands up and asks the doctor if he looks like a sane man. The doctor tries not to laugh.

Doctor Spivey introduces the Therapeutic Community rules, which include airing grievances in the safe space of group sessions, and running meetings democratically where votes are taken by the patients to decide on problems that need solving. Bromden says he's heard these rules a million times. The doctor compares it to a small world within the larger world. Bromden recalls one time when the doctor was giving this speech and Nurse Ratched asked if anyone would like to start, and a bunch of Acutes started confessing dark secrets until Pete Bancini, an old Chronic, stood up and began claiming, in a moment of rare clarity, that he was "tired" and "born dead." None of the aides could calm him down. He was eventually sedated.

By the time it's two p.m. the group meeting is still in session and the patients are "tearing into poor Harding." When the session ends, everyone looks ashamed of how they talked about Harding, after spending so long drilling him with questions about why he can't please his wife, or what do they think he believes is wrong with him, or why he insists she's always been faithful, the other Acutes now sheepishly avoid him. McMurphy looks puzzled by the end and asks Harding if this is usually how the meetings go; he calls them a "pecking party." McMurphy talks loud enough that the other Acutes can hear. He says that the patients acted like chickens pecking at a wounded chicken, and a pecking party can wipe out the entire flock if you aren't careful. McMurphy says that Nurse Ratched is the first to peck, and she's pecking at Harding—and the rest of the men's—balls. He says she's a "ball-cutter."

*Nurse Ratched ensures that the discussion about Harding, a homosexual, and his wife make him supremely uncomfortable. McMurphy, not used to this kind of "ball-cutting" approach tries to unsettle Ratched with a crass joke. Ratched tries a similar tactic on McMurphy by trying to expose him as a rapist, which he turns on her by saying the girl told him she was of age and gladly consented—telling stories about how often they had sex. He's using his sexuality as a tool to unsettle her, while she was trying to emasculate him by making him seem like a pervert (as she did with Harding). McMurphy parodies the idea of sanity, when he stands up asking if he looks sane—showing that there really is no way to prove he is or isn't.*



*Since Bromden has heard these rules repeated more than anyone, if they were in any way helpful or "therapeutic" he would take this opportunity in the narration to attest to their good merits, but he does not. Instead, it just makes Bromden recall an episode of Bancini's during one of the group sessions. In his moment of clarity, he does not say the meeting is helping or that he feels relief, but rather that he's tired and he was born dead—he's hopeless. For this confession, accompanied by physical resistance, he wasn't comforted but sedated.*



*McMurphy insists that if the group meetings continue in this way, all of the men will simply destroy each other. He makes sure the men hear him when he points out that Nurse Ratched is the one that always initiates the first "peck," – she is the one that wants to see them self-destruct because then they will have only her to rely on, rather than themselves. By stripping them of the ability to brag about their manhood or their sexual history in a positive manner, she effectively emasculates them.*



Harding agrees, after some convincing, that McMurphy is right, just that no one has ever dared to say it before. Harding says that Dr. Spivey is like the rest of the men, submissive to Nurse Ratched. She can't be fired because the doctor doesn't have the power, it's the supervisor's power and the supervisor is a woman and an old friend of Nurse Ratched because they were both nurses together in the Army. Harding claims that they're all victims of a "matriarchy." He suggests that the doctor is addicted to opiates and says that Nurse Ratched is a master of insinuation, which ultimately condemns people, like Harding.

Harding says that the world belongs to the strong and the strong destroy the weak. It's natural law. They are rabbits and they have to accept that they're rabbits, and see that the wolf is strong. The rabbit knows to hide from the wolf in order to survive—to not challenge it. Harding says everyone is in the ward because they're a rabbit, and the nurse is a wolf. Harding says he was born a rabbit. Cheswick is the first to say he's not a rabbit. McMurphy suggests that the men just shouldn't answer Nurse Ratched's questions but McMurphy learns what The Shock Shop is: where men are sent by Nurse Ratched for electrotherapy if they don't behave. Harding points to Bromden sweeping in a corner and says that Bromden is now just a cleaning machine after taking so much electroshock.

McMurphy encourages the men to start voting on anything. He says that the most unsettling thing for him walking into the ward was that he hasn't heard anyone **laugh**. He claims without laughter you start to lose your "footing," and if a man lets a woman dominate him and hold him down until he can't laugh anymore then he'll lose his edge and she'll start to think she's stronger.

Harding continues with this line of thinking and asserts that the only way to show dominance over a woman is with their only weapon—not laughter, but their penises. Sex is their weapon, but they can't use it against the nurse who they see as icy. McMurphy makes a bet that he can make Nurse Ratched lose her temper by the end of his first week. McMurphy says he coned his way out of the work farm, he can handle beating Nurse Ratched at her own game.

Bromden believes that Nurse Ratched has the power to set the clock at any speed to alter time to either super fast or super slow. Bromden says the time-control only stops when the **fog** machine comes on, and you get lost in it. Bromden notes that the ward hasn't been completely fogged up today, since McMurphy arrived.

*Nurse Ratched has done everything in her power to make sure that she is the one who is in full control of the ward. The men are victims of a matriarchy, which to them means a system of power dominated by women who seek to keep men down through emasculation and shame.*



*Harding's analogy places the patients as rabbits and Nurse Ratched as a wolf—ensuring that the patients inherently don't have the ability to challenge the wolf; it's all a part of the natural order. McMurphy resists this because while he believes Harding's view of natural law may be correct, his categorization is mistaken—the men aren't rabbits like they've been forced to believe. McMurphy learns though that to challenge the wolf means shock therapy, and Bromden is the example of what can happen after too many.*



*McMurphy doesn't care what they vote on, just that they exercise some kind of agency. The lack of laughter shows to him that the men are living without any sense of control, and taking a man's laughter away emasculates him because it lets a woman think that she has the upper hand.*



*The consensus is that the men's only weapon against Nurse Ratched is their sexuality, since she is so keen on erasing masculinity from her ward. McMurphy, a hyper-masculine figure, believes he can crack Nurse Ratched in a week just by using the threat of sex/sexuality.*



*Bromden's fog, which symbolizes the control the ward has over the patients, hasn't been full force since McMurphy arrived. McMurphy is the anti-Combine force, with the power to make the fog dissipate.*



Music is constantly playing loudly overheard, and McMurphy doesn't like it. He's playing blackjack for cigarettes with the other patients. McMurphy nearly gets up to beat up one of the aides if he doesn't turn it down but Harding says that's the kind of behavior that will get him shock treatment. Bromden, as if in a trance, watches McMurphy while he plays blackjack with the patients—winning tremendously, then giving them back their confidence by letting them win all their losses back by the end—and **laughing** all the while.

McMurphy is given a bed next to Bromden, and as they are preparing for sleep he talks to Bromden. Bromden doesn't take his nightly medication for the first time in years. McMurphy says that one of the aides is coming and Bromden better get into bed. Geever comes in and ties Bromden down to the bed with a sheet. McMurphy tells Bromden he thought he was deaf because Bromden reacted to McMurphy's warning about the aide.

That night Bromden suffers from a nightmare/hallucination where the hospital is a slaughterhouse and Old Blastic is attached to a hook on the ceiling by the staff and gutted, but only rust and ash pour out. He dies. Mr. Turkle, the night aide, wakes Bromden up from his nightmare. Bromden sees that Old Blastic is covered with a sheet and being carried out on a stretcher after passing away in the night.

The ward wakes up to the sounds of McMurphy singing in the shower. Everyone's shocked to hear singing on the ward—which they haven't in years. McMurphy asks one of the aides for toothpaste, and when they refuse because it's against policy to give it to him this early, he brushes his teeth with soap. Bromden tries to hide his smile as he mops in the same place he did the day before, because McMurphy's use of humor to upset those with authority reminds him of his father.

Nurse Ratched arrives and prepares to punish McMurphy when she learns of his behavior, but he exits the bathroom with just a towel around his waist, which she says is not allowed. McMurphy claims someone took his clothes, and Ratched orders the aides to go find his uniform. Washington comes back with an outfit and McMurphy strips his towel away, showing that all along he's been wearing a pair of black satin boxer shorts with white whales on them. Nurse Ratched is furious but tries her best to regain control over herself and maintain order in the ward.

*McMurphy is learning the ropes of the hospital from Harding. McMurphy fascinates Bromden because he treats all of the patients like real men, and he does so with a laugh—which shows that he is still free and not under the control of the institution. McMurphy lets the men all win their money back in the end because he's not trying to dispirit them, but show them that they can have fun again.*



*This is the first time that McMurphy confirms to himself that Bromden is not deaf and dumb, because Bromden reacts to McMurphy's warning about Geever. Bromden's refusal to swallow his nightly medication also shows that the arrival of McMurphy has sparked a small rebellion in him too.*



*Bromden's hallucination/dream is everything he fears about the Combine. The ash and rust that come out of Blastic's body show that he's not even a person anymore after being in the hospital, just a tool of the Combine. The dream feels prophetic when it turns out Blastic died in the night.*



*Similar to laughter, singing hasn't been heard on the ward because it exerts a hopeful freedom. Bromden is charmed by McMurphy's humor because it not only upsets the harsh aides, but because it makes him feel close to his memories before life in the ward.*



*In keeping with the bet, McMurphy uses the towel as a weapon against Nurse Ratched, threatening to expose his nakedness. When it turns out he's wearing his boxers, it's even more of a victory for McMurphy because the mere threat of his manhood being exposed was enough to unsettle her—and the threat/the unseen is more terrifying than what is seen.*



McMurphy is especially cocky after his mild victory with Nurse Ratched. He spends the morning playing blackjack again with IOUs instead of cigarettes. The music is bothering him, and he gets up to ask Nurse Ratched to turn it down. Nurse Ratched justifies the music by saying that there are Chronic patients who rely on the radio because it's all they can do but listen. McMurphy suggests they take the card game elsewhere, to the meeting room. She says he can take up his suggestions with the rest of the staff at another time, but she's sure they'll all agree with her because they don't have enough staff to cover two rooms. McMurphy restrains himself with great effort and returns to blackjack.

Later that day, McMurphy has his admission interview with Dr. Spivey, and when McMurphy returns they are both **laughing**. At the group meeting afterward, Dr. Spivey says that McMurphy's suggested a plan to fix the music problem: it will be turned up louder for the Chronics, and the others can go play cards in another room. Spivey says this will work fine because the Chronics don't require much supervision. Nurse Ratched is furious, but has to keep from losing her temper.

McMurphy starts a game of Monopoly that has been going on for three days with Cheswick, Martini, and Harding. McMurphy adds pennies to the game to raise the stakes so it's more of a **gamble**. Bromden notes that McMurphy is making a very conscious effort not to lose his temper with staff, and that he doesn't seem affected by the **fog**.

McMurphy does lose control once at the other patients for acting "too chicken-shit," when none of them would stand up for an amendment to allow them to watch the World Series on television (something for which McMurphy had been taking bets). McMurphy proposes to Nurse Ratched that the men be allowed to watch the games, even though it deviates from the schedule—instead they would do their cleaning chores in the evening and watch TV in the afternoon. Nurse Ratched refuses. McMurphy calls a vote, but only Cheswick will raise his hand, and McMurphy is disgusted.

*Nurse Ratched still feels like she can control her ward, despite McMurphy's cockiness. She's confident that the rest of the staff will always back up her opinions, and that McMurphy won't have his way. McMurphy restrains his anger over the situation because Harding has already warned him that stepping out of line will result in shock therapy, but perhaps more importantly to McMurphy: he would lose the bet.*



*McMurphy's laughter is contagious. Any sense of hope has clearly long been absent from the ward, and Dr. Spivey is not immune to it. He too has been emasculated by Nurse Ratched, and sees McMurphy as a beacon of hope. He is taken in by McMurphy's charm and agrees to open up the game room. Nurse Ratched feels like she's losing control of her ward, but she too holds back her anger, because to lose control of herself would make her seem like less of an unmovable force and more like a person on equal footing with the patients.*



*McMurphy insists on gambling and raising the stakes, foreshadowing how he'll continue to raise the stakes with his own life. The fog doesn't bother McMurphy (in Bromden's hallucinations) because he's too strong; he can stand up against the Combine.*



*McMurphy is disappointed that his efforts haven't resulted in the men all banding together in favor of more liberties, yet. He realizes this will take longer than he thought, but he's still disappointed with how weak the men are and even angrier at Nurse Ratched who has made them all this way.*



McMurphy doesn't mention the World Series again until the day before the Series begins as they are playing cards. As they talk about the Series, they hear someone screaming upstairs, and Scanlon says that's Rawler the Squawler, who Nurse Ratched permanently sent to the Disturbed ward. But McMurphy won't let Scanlon change the subject and brings it back to the World Series. McMurphy asks who will vote for him when he brings it up again, and is in disbelief when only half agree. He says he hasn't missed a World Series in years and he'd sooner kick down the door and escape than miss one. Fredrickson mockingly asks how McMurphy would escape, and McMurphy responds that he'd break the mesh on the window. Cheswick says it's special-made, and won't break. McMurphy decides he would move the giant **control panel** and crawl out behind it, but everyone agrees that it's far too heavy for one man to lift. McMurphy bets them all he can lift it, and though they all know it's impossible, McMurphy tries so hard that his hands are bloodied and for a fleeting second they think he might do it. He walks away angrily claiming he tried, "I sure as hell did that much, now, didn't I?"

Bromden recalls the old hospital where there was no television, swimming pools or chicken served twice a month. He thinks about how when the Public Relations man comes through and gives tours of the hospital, he says how far they've come and that no one would want to escape from a place this nice. Bromden is finding it more and more difficult to see in the **fog**, but he believes the fog makes him feel safe. He thinks that McMurphy doesn't understand that he's pulling all of them out of the fog, and in doing so making them easier "to get at". Bromden hears a shuffle from upstairs into the lobby, and he learns from listening to the aides that Rawler the Squawler cut off his testicles and bled to death.

The group meeting begins and Bromden feels the **fog** starting to thicken in the room, which he believes Nurse Ratched turned on because she's going to do something to McMurphy. Bromden can vaguely hear what's going on in the meeting: talking about Billy Bibbit's stutter and his issues with women and his mother. Bromden feels afraid of how lost he feels in the fog and in his hallucination he sees the men start to fly past him. He figures this is what it must feel like to be dead or a vegetable. Then he hears McMurphy talk and starts to feel like he's drifting out of the fog—he wishes McMurphy would leave him alone.

*McMurphy's attempted lift of the control panel—which by its very name symbolizes the machine-like nature of the ward that oppresses the men—expresses his frustration with the men. The fact, though, that they believe for a fleeting second that he can lift it shows that their attitudes are truly beginning to shift about how much power and dignity they have as men, not just as patients to be manipulated in a ward. Even though McMurphy failed he emphasizes angrily that he at least tried, implying that this is precisely what the other men on the ward have not done, and are currently refusing to do by not voting in favor of watching the World Series.*



*In recalling the PR man, Bromden shows that the hospital makes a conscious effort to keep up a humane appearance. The fog, which he sometimes views as a comfort because it lets him escape, is thicker as it fights back against McMurphy. McMurphy is a threat to the fog because he's anti-Combine. The fog oppresses the men, but also gives them a place to hide. By removing the fog, McMurphy forces them to be people again, to be men again, to not hide—which makes them vulnerable to the Combine's power. Rawler chooses death over institutional control and kills himself by literally cutting off his balls: Nurse Ratched has won.*



*Bromden's fog becomes most powerful while Nurse Ratched is in control, an agent of the Combine. The men in the meeting who speak under her direction are all, then, under the control of the Combine. It is only when McMurphy, who is impervious to the Combine's power, speaks that the fog begins to clear and he can see. Bromden, at this point, is scared of leaving behind the protection of the fog. He wants to keep hiding, even if that means pretending to be deaf and dumb in the ward forever.*



McMurphy proposes another vote about watching the World Series, and Bromden watches as all twenty Acutes raise their hands. Nurse Ratched responds that the proposal is defeated because McMurphy needs a majority and there are forty patients on the ward, and none of the Chronics voted. McMurphy is incensed, but finally persuades Bromden to raise his hand. Nurse Ratched says it's too late.

*McMurphy should win this vote after getting Bromden to raise his hand, but he controls his temper knowing that he still has a bet to win.*



When it's time for afternoon chores, McMurphy says it's game-time and he sits down in front of the TV and turns it on. Ratched cuts off the power, but McMurphy stays seated and the other Acutes pull up chairs and join him in front of the blank TV. Nurse Ratched yells at them all to get back to work and screams at them for breaking the rules. McMurphy wins his bet about making Ratched lose control. Bromden says anyone looking in would think the whole room was filled with lunatics.

*McMurphy wins the bet, but not by being "hyper-masculine," he simply doesn't let Ratched control him. Her explosion of anger marks his victory, and Bromden's point about the entire room appearing insane shows the fine line between the definitions of sane and insane because clearly the behavior of both parties was anything but normal.*



## PART TWO

The Acutes and the aides are watching Nurse Ratched after her outburst while she sits in the nurse's station. Bromden notes that the **fog** has disappeared. He remembers he's supposed to clean the staff room during the staff meeting, but he's worried after raising his hand on the vote they'll suspect he's not deaf and has been listening in. Bromden still goes, aware now that Nurse Ratched suspects him of lying about his capabilities.

*The fog has disappeared with McMurphy's victory; he has momentarily defeated the Combine. Even though Bromden raised his hand, no one mentions the possibility that perhaps he can hear, showing how little Nurse Ratched and the aides are willing to re-evaluate diagnoses let alone allow change on the ward.*



Dr. Spivey begins a staff meeting to discuss McMurphy and the other residents (i.e. doctors in training) are all present. Nurse Ratched sits quietly at the meeting, and the residents take her silence as approval of their discussion throughout the meeting that McMurphy should be sent to the Disturbed ward. When she finally speaks, she disagrees with all of them and says that McMurphy is just a normal man, not an "extraordinary psychopath," who they should pass off to another ward. She believes they should keep him in the ward, and no one disagrees with her. She continues by saying his small rebellion will soon fade out and he'll lose respect amongst the men. She says they have plenty of time to get him under control.

*Dr. Spivey and the other residents are trying to impress Nurse Ratched by saying they believe McMurphy deserves electroshock therapy, because they believe she will take the punitive route. Nurse Ratched, though, doesn't want to give McMurphy the satisfaction of being labeled some kind of psychopath or extraordinary, when he's just an ordinary man causing trouble. She believes she can cut him down and expose him for who he is.*



Nurse Ratched immediately assigns McMurphy to latrine duty after the staff meeting, i.e. cleaning the communal bathroom. Despite her attempts to assert her power, McMurphy continues to toy with her and the aides as much as he can over the next week. McMurphy hardly cleans the toilets at all, and Bromden notes there really wasn't that much cleaning going on by the patients anywhere that week. Instead, they gathered around the TV every day that wasn't on until dinner.

*Ratched sees latrine duty as one of the more undesirable chores, and something that will cause McMurphy to act out in some sort of petulant way. Instead, he doesn't really do the chore at all and this inspires others not to do their chores too because they're joining McMurphy to "watch" the game.*



Bromden feels comforted by McMurphy's ease, and feels as though the Combine doesn't have the power over McMurphy that it does over everyone else. He says that for the first time in years the **fog** isn't persistent, and he's seeing people clearly. One night, for the first time in a long time, he can even see out of the window. He sees that the hospital is in the middle of the Oregon countryside. He sees a stray dog and a flock of geese. The dog runs out towards the highway, and he can see the headlights of passing cars. An aide guides him back to bed.

Group meetings have changed; the men even begin to question the logic behind the rules on the ward, like having to take seven people with you to the latrine. McMurphy is satisfied with how things have changed, but is surprised that Nurse Ratched isn't putting up more of a visible fight. He muses that perhaps she just needed to be put in line, but still feels unsettled by how she acts like she "still holds all the cards up that white sleeve of hers."

McMurphy learns why Ratched is so calm when, that Wednesday, the ward is taken on a mandatory trip to the swimming pool. There, McMurphy learns from the lifeguard, a former football player who has been committed to the hospital for eight years, that it's only possible to be released from the ward if you have the head nurse's permission. McMurphy had been under the impression that once he served his court appointed sentence, he could leave—which is how it worked on the work farm. Startled by this news, McMurphy ceases to be confrontational. The next morning, he cleans the latrine perfectly. In the afternoon meeting Cheswick complains that withholding cigarettes from the men isn't fair and he looks to McMurphy for backing, but McMurphy remains silent. The aides take Cheswick up to the Disturbed ward.

Some of the patients suspect that McMurphy is playing a long con against Nurse Ratched, and that's why he didn't speak up—but Bromden heard him speaking with the lifeguard and knows the truth. Bromden thinks that McMurphy is doing the smart thing, like the way his own Native American family sold their tribal land to the government—it was inevitable. Bromden thinks it's safe, "like hiding."

*McMurphy's presence is doing away with the fog, because he's a force against the Combine. Bromden can see so clearly that he knows for the first time where the hospital even is. Watching where the stray dog runs foreshadows Bromden's eventual escape from the ward.*



*Though McMurphy is happy with the way the men have begun to stand up for themselves with dignity. Notice how McMurphy thinks that Ratched has tricks hidden in her uniform sleeve—it is the uniform that makes her part of The Combine, some non-human force. Her uniform comes to symbolize her power.*



*When McMurphy learns that Ratched has actual control over him in ways that matter to him, his immediate instinct is to give in. To get out, he needs to protect himself, to play by Ratched's rules. So he does. But the other men don't know about this change, and Cheswick, the most daring of them, continues to rebel, only to discover that McMurphy, who he thought was his leader, has essentially betrayed him.*



*Bromden can't blame McMurphy for falling in line like the rest of the patients. He sees the Combine's power as insurmountable and their victory inevitable, so it's best to simply hide by being obedient. That's what Bromden's done, after all, in his fog.*



However, the other Acutes quickly catch on to why McMurphy is acting differently. None of them act mad or disappointed because they understand why McMurphy has changed his behavior, but they look at him like the wish it wasn't that way. When Cheswick returns from Disturbed, he tells McMurphy while they are walking to the swimming pool that he understands, though he added that he wished it were different. Cheswick then dives into the water and his fingers get stuck in the grate over the drain. No one can pull him free and he drowns.

*Cheswick returns having lost all hope. He had seen McMurphy as the ward's chance, and his chance, for freedom—and now, in his view, McMurphy has crumbled under the institution's power. It's heavily insinuated that Cheswick's death is a suicide, and that he forced his fingers to get stuck in the grate over the drain.*



Soon after, while waiting in the lunch line, Sefelt has an epileptic seizure. Nurse Ratched comes and stands over him saying Sefelt has been refusing his anti-seizure medication. Nurse Ratched pointedly turns to McMurphy and says that Sefelt is an epileptic and this is what it looks like when you “act foolishly.” Fredrickson steps in and asks if Nurse Ratched is just going to let him suffer out of spite. Bromden notes that Nurse Ratched knows, like everyone else on the ward knows, that Sefelt refuses his epilepsy medication. Fredrickson takes both his pills for epilepsy and Sefelt's. Sefelt's seizure ends. Fredrickson tells McMurphy that the medication makes your gums rot out and you lose your teeth from grinding them in the seizures. Bromden notes that McMurphy looks “haggard, puzzled,” with a “look of pressure.”

*Nurse Ratched tries to use Sefelt as a physical example to McMurphy of what happens when you don't obey her rule while they wait out Sefelt's seizure. Note also, though, that Ratched uses Sefelt as an example without making any move to actually help or comfort Sefelt. She just uses him, a man in the midst of an epileptic seizure. The look of puzzlement and pressure on McMurphy's face attests to the bind he finds himself in: controlled by Ratched on one side who holds the one thing he cares about, getting out, but with the fates of the men in the ward hanging on him too, as they see him as their leader.*



Harding's wife comes for a visit to the ward. Harding does not appear in any way affectionate. He calls over McMurphy to introduce him. She mocks Harding for “never having enough” when he doesn't have an extra cigarette and he questions if this is just literal or also symbolic. She tells him she wishes his limp-wristed friends would stop coming around the house. The conversation is tense. She leaves suddenly, but only after taking McMurphy's hand and saying she hopes she'll see him again. Harding asks McMurphy what he thinks of her, and McMurphy says she has great breasts. Harding persists and McMurphy erupts, saying Harding should shut up and that he doesn't know what to think—“I've got worries of my own without getting hooked with yours. So just quit!” Later at dinner, he apologizes to Harding, and Harding shrugs it off—saying it was probably the presence of his wife who can have that effect on people. McMurphy says it couldn't be her, he just met her—she can't be responsible for the nightmares he's been having the past week.

*Harding and his wife have a very odd and almost combative relationship. McMurphy's blow-up shows how much he is feeling the pressure of Cheswick's death hanging over him, and now the pressure of all the men on the ward looking to him as a kind of symbol of hope and freedom. It is worth noting also that McMurphy's feelings about women are almost entirely sexual—his only comment about Harding's wife pertains to her breasts. It might be possible to argue that McMurphy looks at women in much the same way that Ratched looks at men.*



On a Friday, three weeks after the vote about the World Series, everyone who can walk is taken for X-rays for TB in Building One. Across the hall from the X-ray office are those for electroshock therapy. McMurphy asks Harding what goes on in there, and Harding explains the Shock Shop (EST). Harding says it isn't always used for punishment, like Nurse Ratched uses it, and can sometimes actually help people. Harding says McMurphy shouldn't worry about it because EST is "almost out of vogue" and used only in extreme cases, similar to a lobotomy (which Harding calls a "frontal-lobe castration." He says that Ratched is the one in charge of sending the patients for EST or a lobotomy.

McMurphy tells the men that he finally understands why none of them ever said anything to quell his rebellious actions, because he was unaware of the stakes and the danger it put him in with Nurse Ratched: shock treatment, lobotomy, not being able to leave. Harding shocks McMurphy by responding that Scanlon is the only other Acute on the ward who is involuntarily committed—everyone else can leave whenever they want to. McMurphy asks Billy Bibbit in disbelief that he surely must be committed, why would he be here when he could be off with girls driving around in a convertible, and Billy begins to cry, claiming his mother is a good friend of Nurse Ratched and he doesn't have the guts to leave, like McMurphy does.

Heading back to the ward across the grounds, McMurphy lags behind the others, smoking a cigarette. Bromden drops back to walk with him, wanting to tell him not to worry. McMurphy asks one of the aides if they can stop and buy cigarettes, and buys three cartons. Bromden feels a ringing in his ears that persists until that afternoon when they have a group session. After the meeting finishes, Nurse Ratched says that she has decided with Dr. Spivey that because of the lack of remorse the men have shown for their behavior surrounding the World Series protest, the tub room that has been used for card games now has to be taken away as a privilege. She doesn't look at McMurphy but everyone else does, including the Chronis. McMurphy just smiles at everyone and tips his hat at Nurse Ratched

*Harding emphasizes that there are actually some people who benefit from EST. Nurse Ratched, though, doesn't use these tools as treatment, but punishment. Harding's claims that EST and lobotomies are "almost out of vogue," foreshadow McMurphy eventually receiving both. Harding calls lobotomies "frontal-lobe castrations" because he believes this is the closest Ratched can actually get to castrating the men.*



*McMurphy is shocked that he and Scanlon are the only two involuntarily committed Acutes on the ward. It shows how much these patients are so terrified of the outside world and its social pressures, that they would subject themselves to Ratched every day rather than face it. They don't believe they are worth enough to live a full life beyond the walls of the ward because they have been convinced by society and the hospital that they are incapable of ever being happy or being viewed as "normal" or "sane."*



*Bromden can sense, with the ringing in his ears, that something is about to happen with McMurphy. McMurphy's anxiety has been building up. Ratched believes she has McMurphy beat when she doles out the punishment for the game room and McMurphy does not respond beyond tipping his hat, as if giving in after a game well played.*



Nurse Ratched ends the discussion. McMurphy shrugs and stretches as he stands up. Bromden says he can see it's too late to stop McMurphy from whatever he's going to do. McMurphy walks over to the nurse's station where Nurse Ratched is sitting, and her eyes get big because she figured this was her "final victory over him" but suddenly sees that it isn't. She starts looking for her aides to protect her, but McMurphy just stops at the glass window and says he wants some of the cigarettes he bought. Then he punches his hand through the glass, and apologizes saying the glass was so clean he forgot it was there. He turns around as Nurse Ratched sits still, her face "jerking," and he finds a chair and starts to smoke. The ringing in Bromden's ears stops.

*The ringing in Bromden's ears stops because McMurphy has made his decision—even if it means he will never get out of the ward, he will keep on rebelling, continue to be a leader and a source of fun and hope for the other patients. In this moment, he has sacrificed himself for them. And in doing so he has fought back against the Combine, not just angering Ratched but actually scaring her. By instilling this fear in her, stemming from his physical prowess, he believes he can undo her.*



### PART THREE

After McMurphy shatters the glass at the nurse's station, he goes back to his rebellious ways while Nurse Ratched bides her time until she can come up with another idea to get her ahead again. The other Acutes begin joking and talking again, and McMurphy puts together a basketball team and has Dr. Spivey sign off on it for its "therapeutic value" despite Nurse Ratched's protests. At the nurse's station, the janitors place cardboard over where McMurphy had punched through, but Nurse Ratched keeps sitting behind it each day as though it was still transparent and she could see into the day room. She looks like "a picture turned to the wall."

*McMurphy now has essentially chosen to remain stuck in the ward. The only way he could get out is to completely destroy Nurse Ratched's power. And so he goes back to being rambunctious and problematic for Ratched and the aides. Nurse Ratched keeps sitting behind the nurse's station, even though she can't see through the cardboard because it fits in with her duty and her un-breaking schedule, but now this way of being seems almost ridiculous.*



Soon McMurphy reaches his one-month anniversary at the ward, which gives him the right to request an Accompanied Pass to allow a guest to come visit him. He lists a girl he knows from Portland named Candy Starr. The pass request is brought up in group meeting a few days later, the same day a new glass is installed at the nurse's station. Nurse Ratched rejects the request, saying that Candy doesn't seem wholesome. McMurphy shrugs and walks to the new nurse's station window and punches through it again, claiming he had no idea they'd replaced it. His hand bleeds. The other men start to become flirtatious with the women who work on the ward, and after the glass is replaced a third time with a giant white "X" Scanlon bounces the basketball through it and breaks it again. Nurse Ratched throws the basketball away.

*McMurphy's second punch-through of the glass window is a continuation of his physical rebellion, showing his male strength against Ratched's judgmental demands for conformity with her sense of what is proper. Scanlon follows suit with this, breaking the glass a third time, though he doesn't use his body but the basketball—an extension of McMurphy in a way, since he started the team. Ratched throws the basketball away in an attempt to weaken McMurphy's resolve because he so enjoyed the basketball team.*



McMurphy decides that if they can't play basketball they should go fishing. Dr. Spivey approves the trip for McMurphy and nine others after McMurphy says that they'll be accompanied by two of his nice aunts who live a small town outside of Oregon City. Nurse Ratched posts a newspaper clipping about rough seas and suggests the men think carefully about whether to go on the trip. McMurphy asks if he should sign her up, and she wordlessly pins the clipping to the bulletin board next to the sign up sheet. Men start signing up for the trip, paying ten dollars for the cost of renting the boat. Nurse Ratched keeps posting clippings about the rough water

Bromden wants to sign up but he doesn't have the money and also doesn't want to reveal that he isn't deaf and dumb: "I had to keep on acting deaf if I wanted to hear at all." Bromden then recalls a summer when he was still living in the village of Columbia with his family and three people came to his house to speak to his father about buying the tribal land. Bromden tried to speak to them, but they acted as though he hadn't said anything. Bromden is amazed he can recall this childhood memory, the first such memory he's had in a long time.

Soon after, Geever, a night aide, wakes Bromden and McMurphy as he scrapes off gum from under Bromden's bed. As Bromden pretends to be asleep, Geever sits on the edge of Bromden's bed and says to McMurphy that he can't understand where Bromden gets all his chewing gum with no money, and speculates that he's been chewing these same pieces over and over. After Geever leaves, McMurphy tosses Bromden a pack of Juicy Fruit that he won off of Scanlon, and before Bromden realizes it he says "thank you." Bromden's voice sounds more like a cry than anything else, and McMurphy comforts him by saying they have plenty of time.

McMurphy then tells the story of how when he was young he worked a job picking beans and all of the adults ignored him, but by the end of the season—after he'd remained silent and listened to everyone's gossip—he spoke up and told everyone the mean things that everyone else had said about them, causing an uproar. McMurphy wonders if Bromden is doing the same thing, but Bromden says he's too "little" to do something like that.

McMurphy responds that Bromden is physically huge, but Bromden says he inherited his size from his father, a Chief, and his mother—a white woman who was also tall. His parents' rocky marriage beat down his father, as did the government who took his land. Bromden gets so worked up explaining how the Combine took down his father, that an aide overhears and he and McMurphy have to pretend to be asleep as a flashlight passes. Bromden finally says his father fell prey to alcoholism.

*Nurse Ratched doesn't outright oppose the trip, but tries to sway the men from going via insinuation—which she is so good at—by posting clippings every day appealing to the patients' fears and anxieties.*



*Bromden's childhood recollection comes as a surprise to him. It's as though as the fog has begun to lift over the ward, so has a block against what he was able to remember about his life before he lived in the ward. This story serves as a kind of root or foundation for why Bromden chose to pretend to be deaf and dumb—he was hiding from his past, and the forced loss of that past.*



*McMurphy isn't shocked that Bromden speaks, though Bromden is surprised that he thanks McMurphy so automatically. McMurphy has clearly had his suspicions about Bromden for a while, but it only took a small gesture of kindness to break a ten-year spell of silence. Which also highlights how little actual kindness there has been in the ward before McMurphy showed up.*



*McMurphy's childhood story parallels Bromden's in a way, except that McMurphy used what he heard to take the men down in the end. Bromden says he's too little to do the same, but this foreshadows Bromden's eventual narration of the book: this is Bromden finally speaking up.*



*Bromden tries to explain his idea of the Combine to McMurphy and how it destroyed his father, which could be another reason why he fears it so much since Bromden looked up to his father and thought he was untouchable. Bromden's father's alcoholism is much the same as his fog—something to hide in, to dull your ability to see or be vulnerable to the world.*



Bromden feels a sudden warmth towards McMurphy where he wants to touch him just because he's there and "he's who he is," shrugging off the "fear hiding behind another" that this desire makes him a queer.

Before Bromden can act, McMurphy says Bromden should come on the fishing trip. Bromden says he's broke. McMurphy thinks for a bit and then asks if, when Bromden is full-sized and built up, would he be strong enough to lift something the size of **the control panel**. Bromden thinks he would. McMurphy says if Bromden promises to take McMurphy's special bodybuilding class to get strong enough to lift the control panel, then he'll cover Bromden's fee for the fishing trip. McMurphy reveals that the two "aunts" coming on the fishing trip are actually prostitutes and fantasizes about Bromden's soon-to-be sexual conquests. He gets up and says he's going to sign Bromden up right now, and, after stripping the sheet off Bromden and revealing his erection, comments that Bromden has already grown half a foot.

Only one of the two prostitutes shows up—Candy Starr. The men are all taken in by her beauty, and how she doesn't hide her femininity under a white uniform. Nurse Ratched threatens to cancel the trip because not all the men can fit in Candy's car, and in the ensuing back-and-forth with McMurphy it becomes clear that McMurphy overcharged the men for the boat rental. Nurse Ratched tries to use this fact to make the men turn on McMurphy, but none of them seem to care. McMurphy then persuades Dr. Spivey to join them on the trip and drive a second car.

When they stop at a gas station, the attendant notes that the men's uniforms are those from the mental hospital. Dr. Spivey says they're a work crew, but the "lying made us feel worse than ever—not because of the lie, so much, but because of the truth." The station attendant tries to take advantage of spineless Dr. Spivey, forcing him to buy extra-premium gas, but then McMurphy gets out of the car and says they'll take regular gas and they're a "government-sponsored expedition." When the attendant says the doctor told him they weren't patients, McMurphy says that they are indeed crazy psychopathic criminals headed to San Quentin prison. McMurphy intimidates the attendant so much that he tells them to send the gas bill to the hospital and use the cash to get some beer for the men in the car. The patients in the van, seeing McMurphy using their mental illness as a weapon of power, quit feeling so nervous and intimidate the attendant a little bit too.

*Bromden fears being a homosexual—another example of how society has programmed people about what is right or not right.*



*McMurphy sees Bromden as a potential tool in the future if he can lift the control panel. McMurphy's motivations still have a selfish edge, because he knows if the control panel can be lifted then it can be thrown through the window to escape. McMurphy celebrates Bromden's erection as a sign that he's already becoming stronger (both in the body-building regime they've agreed to, but also as a free-thinking man with sexual desire).*



*Nurse Ratched is clearly threatened by the men's attraction to Candy, but also wants to prevent their trip because she won't be there to supervise. Her exposure of McMurphy as something of a thief doesn't matter to the men because he's also given them so much. He cheats them honestly. Ratched cheats them dishonestly.*



*Dr. Spivey's initial lie about the men as a work crew is more harmful than the truth because it further stigmatizes mental illness, and makes them seem and feel less than human. When McMurphy uses mental illness as a way to intimidate the attendant, though, he shows that there is power in mental illness because people are afraid of what is different or what is not normal, particularly what isn't "sane." By capitalizing on this social fear of insanity, McMurphy shows the men that they are not helpless, and that, in fact, there is power in embracing who and what they are.*



When they arrive at the docks, the captain of the boat they rented refuses to let them get on because he doesn't have the proper waiver signed. The men who work on the dock keep harassing Candy, while the patients cower and feel ashamed that they don't stand up for her. McMurphy gives the captain a number to call for the waiver, and when the captain goes inside McMurphy rushes them all onto the boat because the number is actually for a brothel in Portland. They make it out to sea.

On the boat, everyone drinks and starts catching big fish. McMurphy doesn't help the men who plead with him to pull in the fish; he just watches and **laughs**. The patients look foolish trying to reel in their fish, and Bromden cuts his thumb. McMurphy can't stop laughing, and Bromden realizes it's because he knows that you need to be able to laugh at the things that hurt you just to "keep yourself in balance," so that "the humor will blot out the pain." Harding starts laughing too, and then Scanlon, and Candy, Sefelt, Dr. Spivey, and everyone else too.

When they got back to the docks, the captain was waiting with some cops. Dr. Spivey got off the boat and said that the cops didn't have any jurisdiction as this was a "government-sponsored expedition," and it would have to be a federal agency—plus, there should be an investigation into the lack of lifejackets on board. The police depart. McMurphy is still riled up and gets in a brief fistfight with the captain, but they end up settling on getting a drink. The men on the dock who were previously so crass to Candy now sense a change in the patients and are polite. On the way back to the hospital, Candy is asleep against Billy Bibbit's chest and McMurphy can tell that he likes her. He arranges a date for the two of them two weeks from then on Saturday at 2 a.m., saying he'll bribe a night aide.

When they return to the ward, Dr. Spivey takes the patients outside to his car to look at the halibut he caught. Only McMurphy stays behind, saying he's tired. Bromden notes that on the way back to the ward they had taken a detour at McMurphy's insistence past a place he had once lived, and that he had looked exhausted then too. In a tree branch by the house they were passing, a rag hung from a tree. McMurphy said it was the dress of a ten-year-old girl, maybe younger, with whom he'd had sex or the first time. She gave him the dress as a gift to remind him of her, but he threw it out the window and it caught on the tree where it still hung. As McMurphy was telling the story, Bromden noticed McMurphy's face reflected in the windshield and how it looked "dreadfully, tired and strained and *frantic*, like there wasn't enough time left for something he had to do."

*The patients' shame at being unable to stick up for Candy—to be men who protect a woman—shows that they still need McMurphy around to be their leader.*



*McMurphy is deliberately absent because he knows the men need this opportunity to see that they can do things on their own, without him. The outburst of laughter from everyone shows that this was a smart move by McMurphy: the men are beginning to feel free and independent in a way they perhaps never have before.*



*Dr. Spivey has also been emboldened by the trip and McMurphy's example, facing the cops when earlier he couldn't face the gasoline attendants. McMurphy and the captain's fight isn't motivated by spite or hate, it's just pent up "masculine" energy that they express and then settle over a drink. It's part of their natural masculine natures, and, the novel suggests, there's nothing wrong with it. McMurphy schedules the date for Billy because he knows Billy would never do it himself, and he thinks that Billy losing his virginity would empower him.*



*McMurphy appears tired because this trip wasn't really about him, though he enjoyed parts of it. He did it for the men on the ward: those who came, and those who didn't—giving them an opportunity to see that they can be independent and happy. McMurphy passing by his old house and seeing the relic of an adolescent sexual conquest is almost mournful, particularly with Bromden's description of McMurphy's face who is "frantic" because he doesn't think he has enough time to save these men, and himself, before Nurse Ratched takes him.*



## PART FOUR

Nurse Ratched's next play against McMurphy starts the day after the fishing trip. She posts a "statement of the patient's financial doings over the last few months," something that must have required hours of work. Everyone, except McMurphy, had a decline in funds. While McMurphy is on a long distance phone call, Nurse Ratched begins a group meeting without him and discusses McMurphy's winnings. She implies that he's only acting out of selfish gain. In his time he has accrued \$300. Some of the men seem slightly swayed by the logic of her argument, but later Harding says that McMurphy has always made it very clear that he's a con-man, and if anything they've gotten their money's worth.

Bromden says he never felt suspicious about McMurphy until an event with **the control panel**. McMurphy wants to see if his training regimen has worked for Bromden, and asks if he can lift the control panel to see if any progress has been made. Bromden can move it nearly half a foot. McMurphy tells him to keep this a secret. The next day McMurphy makes another bet with the patients about moving the control panel. When Bromden reluctantly lifts it, and McMurphy wins. He tries to give Bromden five dollars for gum money, but Bromden refuses it thinking McMurphy is perhaps just using him. When McMurphy asks why the men are suddenly treating him like some kind of traitor, Bromden says it's because he's always winning.

Nurse Ratched ensures that everyone who went on the fishing trip has to get a mandatory shower, "a *cautionary* cleansing" in light of the company they'd kept, and in hopes nothing would spread throughout the hospital. George Sorenson has a phobia of cleanliness and he begs them not to spray him with their putrid salve. McMurphy loses his temper and gets into a fistfight with the aides, and Bromden joins in on the fight. At the fight's end, all of the patients are congratulating McMurphy on a good fight, but Nurse Ratched has both McMurphy and Bromden sent to Disturbed. McMurphy enters Disturbed introducing himself like he had at the ward over a month before, asking where the **gambling** boss is on this floor. A Japanese nurse, who is nice to them, explains that nurses who were in the Army, like Nurse Ratched, tend to try to run things like they're still in an army hospital. She says they're "a little sick themselves," and that she sometimes thinks "all single nurses should be fired after they reach thirty-five."

*Ratched keeps trying to find an angle that will make the men turn on McMurphy, and while this one makes them a little dubious, it ultimately doesn't succeed. Once again, the point isn't that McMurphy isn't a cheater and a con-man. He is! But he's honest about it. He told the men he was a con-man, and sometimes he cons them. But in the process he helps to make them men.*



*Bromden doubts McMurphy's motives after he lies to the men that he knew Bromden could lift the control panel, and takes money from the bet. Bromden refuses the money on principle, thinking perhaps he has been duped this whole time. McMurphy is far from always winning, though. While he may have been successful in some bets on the ward, on a grand scale his life is in jeopardy with him pitted against Nurse Ratched.*



*McMurphy finally snaps at the inhumane treatment of George Sorenson and starts a fight with the aides. McMurphy's action dismisses any of Bromden's concerns about being deceived, because McMurphy wouldn't step in for George if he didn't really care about the men. It's clear the other men agree when they clap for McMurphy at the end of the fight. McMurphy approaches the entry to Disturbed like he did the other ward, searching for the boss, but knowing he's not going to find one here. The Japanese nurse on Disturbed is a refreshing voice of clarity against Nurse Ratched's vicious ways. She confirms that Nurse Ratched's methods are cruel and emasculating, linked to her being "single" and "over thirty-five" (which, it must be mentioned, is a rather stereotypical view to take of an "old maid")*



Bromden and McMurphy are assigned beds next to each other, but Bromden isn't tied down. He is woken in the middle of the night by a patient who is yelling, "I'm starting to spin, Indian! Look me, look me!" The man's hungry, yellow-toothed face haunts Bromden, and he wonders how McMurphy can possibly sleep when he must be "plagued by a hundred faces like that, or two hundred, or a thousand," all desperate for his attention.

Nurse Ratched visits Disturbed the next day and says that the patients agreed with the staff that it might help McMurphy to receive shock therapy unless he admits that he was in the wrong and demonstrates it through obedience. McMurphy refuses, saying she should add some other things for him to sign on to like saying living in her ward is like living in Hawaii, and that "those Chinese Commies could have learned a few things from you, lady." McMurphy and Bromden are sent to the Shock Shop. McMurphy doesn't seem afraid, so Bromden resolves not to yell or cry.

McMurphy gets onto the cross-shaped table without help, and asks if he'll receive a complimentary "crown of thorns." Bromden watches McMurphy receive treatment, and out of instinct tries to escape and struggles against the aides trying to pin him down. During his own shock treatment, Bromden is inundated with childhood memories. When he wakes up, he is able to fight off the **fog** for the first time after having received shock therapy, and he knows that "this time [he] had them beat."

McMurphy gets three more shock treatments that week alone. As soon as the old spark in him would return, Nurse Ratched would come up and order another round. Bromden tries to talk McMurphy into playing along so they'll stop the treatments, but McMurphy jokes that they're just recharging his battery for free and the first woman he's with after this will "light up like a pinball machine and pay off in silver dollars!" He claims he's not scared of "their little battery charger." Bromden can tell, though, that the treatments are affecting McMurphy because he looks unusually pained, pale, "thin and scared," whenever he's called in for another. Bromden is sent back to the ward under Nurse Ratched's control, and he tells the patients even better stories about how McMurphy is completely resistant to the treatments than they've already heard through the rumor mill. Nurse Ratched realizes, though, that McMurphy is only becoming more a hero now that the men can't see him actually failing under the shock treatment, and so she brings him back from Disturbed.

*Bromden cannot comprehend how McMurphy can sleep when he's surely haunted by so many more faces than Bromden, because McMurphy is carrying the weight of so many men's freedom and dignity on his shoulders.*



*McMurphy refuses to admit he did anything wrong because he sticks to his principles, and refuses to let Nurse Ratched win. He compares her to the Communists in China because she is so inhumane, but also because he knows she was an army nurse and that it will anger her. McMurphy approaches shock therapy like a martyr, and acts unafraid because he cannot allow himself to be afraid because of his leadership position with the men. If he breaks, they break, and he knows it.*



*The table is even cross-shaped, so it's no surprise McMurphy asks for a crown of thorns—referencing Christ at the crucifixion—because he feels he's been persecuted and now he's being sacrificed in the name of mental health and control. This reference also forebodes how McMurphy's self-sacrifice will free the men. Bromden comes out of his shock treatment faster than ever and realizes that he has control over his mind again, and the ward doesn't have him anymore.*



*McMurphy keeps refusing to say he was in the wrong; he knows the men on the ward need him to be a symbol of strength against the authority of the institution. Nurse Ratched moves him back down because she sees how McMurphy has grown to the mythic status he hoped to. She believes she can crack him and them by showing he is just a man after all.*



Knowing that Nurse Ratched will only keep hounding McMurphy, many of the patients tell him he should make a break for it. McMurphy responds, though, that tonight is the night of Billy Bibbit's date with Candy Starr and he can't leave yet because it would disappoint Billy. In a group meeting that day, Nurse Ratched suggests that McMurphy consider an operation, saying that there's "no cutting" involved. McMurphy says there's no use in lopping them off, he's "got another pair in [his] nightstand." Nurse Ratched looks furious when she realizes McMurphy's entendre.

The men are in high spirits after the meeting as they look forward to the party in the ward that night. At midnight, when Geever and the other aides besides Mr. Turkle go off duty, McMurphy gets Mr. Turkle to let Candy in through the window and to unlock the Seclusion Room for Billy Bibbit and Candy. Candy arrives later on with Sandy, bringing loads of alcohol. Everyone starts mixing their drinks with cough syrup, while McMurphy and Turkle smoke weed. Sefelt has a seizure next to Sandy, and she watches him "with quiet awe." Fredrickson puts a wallet between Sefelt's teeth. Sefelt grins when he comes out of it and asks for medication. Harding goes to the drug room, which has been unlocked, and sprinkles "a double handful of pill" over Sefelt and Candy. Harding makes a long speech about how "It is our last fling. We are doomed henceforth. Must screw our courage to the sticking point and face up to our impending fate. We shall be all of us shot at dawn." Billy and Candy go to the Seclusion Room after four a.m.

As morning approaches, Harding becomes adamant that McMurphy's must now escape and that they must do something about the mess on the ward. He says they should tie up Turkle so it looks like the party mess was a byproduct of McMurphy's escape, that way Turkle won't lose his job and the other patients will avoid getting in trouble. McMurphy can drive off with Candy and Sandy to Canada or Mexico. When McMurphy asks if anyone else wants to come with him, Harding says he's nearly ready to go, but he wants to do it with all the red tape. Bromden says he doesn't know where he wants to go yet. Harding promises McMurphy that the rest of the patients are "still sick men in lots of ways. But at least there's that: they are sick *men* now. No more rabbits, Mack."

McMurphy gets into bed with Sandy and asks Turkle to wake them up before the morning staff gets to the ward. Turkle falls asleep, though, and the aides discover everyone. Bromden says that what happens next was inevitable, whether McMurphy had escaped or not. Even if McMurphy had managed to get out, he wouldn't bear to be away to "let the Big Nurse have the last move and get the last play...It was like he'd signed on for a whole game and there wasn't any way of him breaking his contract."

*McMurphy knows he can escape, but he won't leave because escaping would be the same as giving in. It's not just his life that's important. It's all the patient's lives. In the meeting, McMurphy uses sexual language to unsettle Nurse Ratched again, with success, insinuating he has another pair of balls so she can take away the ones he has.*



*Sefelt takes his medicine at the party, something he previously refused to do, because he feels a new kind of freedom where he knows that he can live in the outside world, experience these seizures, and use the medicine to his benefit. Harding, though, makes a doomsday speech because he knows that the next morning everyone will get in huge trouble for the party. He hopes that McMurphy can escape, but he feels that realistically it won't happen.*



*Harding concocts an entire plan that would absolve the rest of the patients from punishment while McMurphy escapes. The others won't escape now because they still aren't ready, but they are men now, and that's what's important. Harding is trying to tell McMurphy that his work is done. McMurphy's failure to take his advice suggests that McMurphy, who has more experience than Harding, doesn't quite agree.*



*Bromden's admission that the following events were inevitable show McMurphy's dedication and love for the men: he couldn't bear to know Nurse Ratched would come out victorious, even at the expense of his own freedom—or his life.*



As the patients on the ward wake up, they are amazed at the party they had the night before. As Nurse Ratched discovers more and more damning evidence, the patients start **laughing** uncontrollably, which only makes Nurse Ratched angrier. Turkle opens up the screen on the window to let Sandy out, and McMurphy has the opportunity to escape with her, but he refuses even though Harding begs him to go, saying he's done his best to warn him—"predicting doom." An aide notices the unlocked window and locks it back up.

Nurse Ratched discovers Billy and Candy in the Seclusion Room and is shocked and appalled, though Billy appears happy. Everyone on the ward has crowded around and laughs when they see Billy and Candy together on the mattress. However, when Nurse Ratched threatens to tell Billy's mother about what he's done, he falls into hysterics. He starts stuttering, crying, and begging her to not say anything to his mother and then he begins to blame Candy, McMurphy, and Harding, saying that they all forced him to have sex. Nurse Ratched sends Billy to Dr. Spivey's office to cool off and think while she deals with the rest of the patients. But once in the office, Billy slits his throat, killing himself.

Nurse Ratched approaches McMurphy with the news of Billy's death and asks him if he's satisfied with how he's gambled with human lives like Billy and Charles Cheswick. She accuses McMurphy of playing God. She heads back to the nurse's station. Bromden watches McMurphy and says he knows that there is nothing that could have stopped him from what he was about to do: it wasn't the nurse forcing him, "it was us that had been making him go on for weeks, keeping him standing long after his feet and legs had given out" because of the shock treatment. McMurphy punches through the glass at the nurse's station and takes hold of Nurse Ratched, ripping open the front of her uniform, exposing one of her breasts, while he tries to strangle her. When McMurphy is pulled off of Nurse Ratched, he cried out "a sound of cornered-animal fear and hate and surrender and defiance." Bromden compares it to the final sound an animal makes before the dogs close in on it, "when he finally doesn't care any more about anything but himself and his dying."

*McMurphy has the opportunity to escape, but he doesn't because he can't leave his men behind; he feels responsible.*



*Billy is initially happy and proud when woken up, but when his mother is used as a threat against him this drives him to kill himself because he can't bear to think of his mother's judgment or the judgment of others in and outside of the hospital. He was not yet strong enough to face Ratched's use of shame against him.*



*Nurse Ratched blames McMurphy for Cheswick and Billy's deaths. And she really does seem to think it's his fault. She thinks that it was the way he helped them not to conform, rather than her shame-based demands for conformity, that killed them. Bromden knows there's no stopping McMurphy from what he's going to do when he attacks Nurse Ratched and tries to strangle her. When he rips the front of her uniform, this serves as a symbol of masculine dominance over the feminine. Ratched is revealed to be a "she" who is helpless against McMurphy's grip. Her womanhood now makes her subservient in this assault. McMurphy's cry when he's tackled is one of resignation, he knows that he's signed his own death warrant, and death is all he wants.*



In the week after McMurphy attacked Nurse Ratched, while Ratched is on medical leave, Sefelt and Fredrickson signed out of the hospital Against Medical Advice, and then three more Acutes left while six transferred to a different ward. Dr. Spivey is asked to resign but refuses. For the week that Nurse Ratched is away, the ward has the nice Japanese nurse, and the men still on the ward change a lot of policy: the tub room is restored to the blackjack room and Harding took over the role of dealer. When Nurse Ratched returns, everyone approaches her in the hall to ask about McMurphy. She looks beat up, and flinches at their approach. Her new uniform doesn't conceal the shape and size of her breasts. Nurse Ratched says that McMurphy will be back.

Nurse Ratched tries after that to return the ward to the way it was before McMurphy, but his noticeable absence keeps the ward alive with men laughing in meetings and singing in the showers. Patients keep signing themselves out of the ward, and then Harding signed out and was picked up by his wife. George Sorenson transferred. After a few weeks, only three of the fishing crew were left: Bromden, Martini, and Scanlon

One day, McMurphy is wheeled back into the ward on a gurney with a chart reading "Lobotomy." The men don't believe that it's him at first; he's a complete vegetable. Bromden was sure that McMurphy would never have his name attached to a body stored like that in the day room for the next twenty or thirty years just so Nurse Ratched could use him as "an example of what can happen if you buck the system." That night, Bromden suffocates McMurphy with a pillow and remarks that he looks the same in death as he did after the lobotomy.

Following Scanlon's advice that he should run, Bromden lifts **the control panel** and throws it through the window. He can hear aides running down the hall, so he jumps out of the window and runs across the grounds in the direction he recalls seeing the stray dog run. He knows no one will come after him, and that Scanlon could handle any questions about "the dead man," but he keeps running until he reaches the highway, where he hitches a ride with a Mexican trucker. Bromden says maybe he'll go to Canada one day, but he'd like to stop in Columbia and Portland, Hood River, and The Dalles to see if any of the people he used to know are still around and sober. He's heard that some of the Indians have taken to building a wooden scaffold over the government's hydroelectric dam and spearing salmon, and he'd like to see that. But mainly he wants to just see the land again. He says he's "been away a long time."

*The ward changes after the attack. Nurse Ratched's power, now that McMurphy's attack revealed her not as an implacable force but a woman wearing a uniform who could be physically cowed, has mostly dissolved and patients are checking out and leaving because they feel like men now, independent and capable. When Ratched returns, her new uniform doesn't conceal the shape of her breasts, which serves as a symbol of how McMurphy and the men succeeded in subverting her non-sexual matriarchal power. The men regained control of the ward and themselves.*



*Nurse Ratched can't get the ward back to what it once was, and all of her patients have pretty much left. Bromden feels obligated to stick around to see McMurphy.*



*McMurphy was lobotomized, and the men can't recognize him because this isn't McMurphy— this is the shell of a person. Ratched, effectively, had him killed. Bromden knows that she did this so he would be a half-living example of what happens when you go against her, and McMurphy would never want that. Bromden's suffocation of McMurphy is therefore an act of mercy.*



*Bromden throwing the control panel out shows the progress of the men in the book. The control panel—a symbol of the mechanized ward and the machine-like Combine—was once impossible to lift, like the wolf was once impossible to fight. Now Bromden has thrown it out of the window and escaped the ward and is finally free. He follows the path of the stray dog he saw that one night, because in many ways Bromden is stray, he has returned to his natural state of man—he's animalistic. His urge to return home and see familiar things—and to see how some of his Native American kin have founds ways around the Combine-created hydroelectric dam men have—is a desire to reconnect to both his past before the Combine and his future figuring out ways around the Combine. His final line is true both literally and figuratively: he's been away from home and he's been mentally absent.*





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