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## **Clipped Wings and a Beak Nailed Shut**

One popular definition of insanity is the act of doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting a different outcome each time. In the book *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Ken Kesey depicts the living conditions of patients in an insane asylum. Narrated by a seemingly unstable character himself, Chief Bromden bears witness to the rise and fall of a remarkable inmate named Randle McMurphy, who dares to challenge the ruler of the ward, Ms. Ratched. Yet, strangely, the mannerisms of the patients in the ward do not seem to reflect any definition of insanity. In fact, the patients of the ward display feelings of sorrow and hopelessness to Chief Bromden, as well as the reader.

Throughout the story, Chief Bromden continuously portrays the patients struggling to maintain their dignity and decency in the face of an uncaring staff. In a very sane and compassionate way, "crazy" Bromden witnesses the pitiful cries of his fellow sufferers. Despite the reader's expectation of finding him to be creepy or strange in some way, we find that he is consistently observing the degrading treatment of helpless patients who have no one to turn to when the going gets extremely tough:

He's nailed like that on the wall, like a stuffed trophy. They pull the nails when it's time to eat or time to drive him in to bed when they want him to move so's I can mop the puddle where he stands. At the old place he stood so long in one spot the piss ate the floor and beams away under him and he

kept falling through to the ward below, giving them all kinds of census headaches down there when roll check came around (Kesey 20.)

In the face of the awful and long-standing treatment of this patient, Bromden takes the time to describe the man sympathetically. Phrases such as “like a trophy,” and “census headaches” lead us to infer that Chief Bromden isn’t a fool. Bromden knows the patient is not at fault for peeing on the floor or being nailed to the wall, and makes us aware of the ongoing tragedy of his victimhood. It’s the callousness of the staff’s treatment of the patient that underlies the rawness of Bromden’s words in describing the man’s pitiful state. The man had suffered from use of the electric chair; a place where behavioral “problem” patients go for shock therapy, and he had returned a vegetable. There is no “craziness” to be seen in this situation, just despair.

Yet these daily occurrences of human misery and hardship play out every day around Chief Bromden, and they are so frequent that they do not even slightly faze the fifteen-year veteran of the ward. The daily battle of wills over the smallest issues between the patients and the staff are constantly lost by the patients. Little fights like bed times, or when the television gets to go on during the day go unheard and are dismissed casually. One example is seen when a patient wants more cigarettes in his weekly allowance, but is taken away by force even though all he had done was express his feelings on the subject:

“ ‘ I want something done! Hear me? I want something done! Something! Something! Something! Some - ”

The two big black boys clamped his arms from behind, and the least one threw a strap around him. He sagged like he'd been punctured, and the two big ones dragged him up to Disturbed; you could hear the soggy bounce of him going up the steps. When they came back and sat down, the Big Nurse turned to the line of Acutes across the room and looked at them.

“ ‘ Is there any more discussion,’ ” she said, “ ‘ on the rationing of cigarettes?’ ”

Observe the skill at which Kesey is able to demonstrate the patient's desperate plea. He uses italics to stress the words “ something” and “ done,” punctuating the sheer desperation and climbing frustration in the patient's voice. In contrast, the staff and the nurse dismiss the distressed patient without a word of concern or the smallest gesture of kindness. And the reader observes calmly, along with Chief Bromden, the coarse interaction between the upset patient and the staff – Chief Bromden seemingly dismisses it as something that happens all the time. Bromden voices no disturbance at the scene, nor does he react when the patient is manhandled from the meeting. His role is to witness – it is dangerous to do otherwise.

There is something so normal about the situation the Chief depicts, that it implies this is only one of the many small battles that have been fought over the years. This also indicates that the scene is symbolic of the patients' struggles as a whole in standing up for what they believe to be their right to some sort of justice. The lack of voice, freedom and care the patients experience is a never-ending prison sentence. Big Nurse and her staff

answer his pleas with cruelty and punishment. And when she turns to the other patients with her carefully phrased question, her meaning is clear: the patients don't count. That all of them, including Chief Bromden, don't have the right or even the freedom to say what they want, get what they want, and do what they want. The patients are "things" to be placed in orderly schedules, and pushed to the side. The staff doesn't want a fuss, and the small battle that was just shut down in a matter of a few seconds serves as an example to all; the patients have no power - they will never win. The issue is "control," and Big Nurse is in charge.

Harsh words and harsher punishments dictate the patients' lives at the asylum. Ken Kesey's novel paints a grim and despairing picture for his audience, and makes sure to point out the ugly, the pitiful, and the desperate in the hospital ward. It's a dreary story only brightened by the glimpse of light Randle McMurphy seems to shine on the other patients, which is all too soon extinguished by the ward's staff and head nurse. But Kesey's audience can be sure this is no fantasy. This is the real world, and these patients are the bottom of the social ladder and society's concerns. They therefore not afforded the care and protections many take for granted. The reader finishes the last page with a grimace and in sad agreement that "insane" patients are stuck in the worst kind of prison: clipped wings and a beak nailed shut.