

24. Duck Boy

Chapter 24: Duck Boy Summary

The chapter opens with Paper's famous sweet potato pie bringing together Nate, Addie, Rusty, Fatty, and Miggy, who arrives late from work at Pennhurst. Upon entering, Miggy's professional demeanor contrasts with her past as an oracle on Hemlock Row, prompting an immediate connection with Nate. After some light banter, Miggy shares her perspective on her life and work at the hospital. She describes herself as a "cleaner" of both spaces and people, mainly men, elaborating on the emotional toll her job takes on her as she witnesses the suffering of the patients there.

Despite the light-hearted conversation, an undercurrent of seriousness looms as Miggy delves deeper into the horrific realities of Pennhurst, sharing experiences of neglect, fear, and abuse faced by the patients, including the tragic story of a boy known as "Duck Boy," who quacked instead of speaking. His journey reflects the horrors of the institution, as he faced maltreatment that led to his being placed in the dreaded C-1 ward. Miggy shows her connection and empathy for the patients, vowing that their spirits deserve care, while expressing deep anger toward the corrupt attendants ruling the wards, including a man known as Son of Man.

Further, she mentions the contradictions of the physical space the patients inhabit as well as their psychological torment. In doing so, Miggy expresses a yearning for justice and deliverance, not just for herself, but especially for the vulnerable children. She reflects on a little boy's disappearance, suggesting that he may have escaped through tunnels reportedly hidden beneath Pennhurst, linking her idea of hope to the idea of those tunnels being a gateway to freedom.

Eventually, the discussion circles back to the "Egg Man," who brings eggs and coffee for the patients every morning, highlighting the logistical absurdities of the hospital. The chapter culminates in a tense atmosphere as Miggy reveals the ongoing presence of Son of Man, emphasizing the complexities of patient care in a system that seems designed to fail. The chapter ends with Nate's silent contemplation about the echoes of the lives trapped within Pennhurst, and a symbolic focus on the communal hope carried within that gathering space, signified by the sweet potato pie.