Chapter 24: Duck Boy

Chapter 24: Duck Boy opens with the arrival of Paper's renowned sweet potato pie, which serves as the focal point for a gathering of Nate, Addie, Rusty, Fatty, and Miggy, who arrives late after work at Pennhurst. Miggy, with her professional demeanor, contrasts sharply with her past life on Hemlock Row, immediately establishing a bond with Nate. Their light banter sets the stage for a deeper conversation, and as the evening progresses, Miggy opens up about her life and her work at the hospital. She describes her role as a "cleaner" not only in the physical sense but also emotionally, especially when it comes to the male patients she cares for. The weight of her job becomes clear as she shares the emotional toll it takes on her, as she witnesses firsthand the suffering and despair of the people she tries to help.

While their conversation remains light-hearted for a time, the underlying gravity of Miggy’s experiences at Pennhurst soon emerges. She begins to recount the tragic stories of the patients, sharing accounts of neglect, fear, and abuse that have marked their lives. One of the most haunting stories she tells is that of a boy known as "Duck Boy," a patient who quacked instead of speaking, his speech disability a result of the horrific mistreatment he endured. Miggy reveals the tragic details of Duck Boy’s life, highlighting how he was subjected to harsh treatment and eventually placed in the notorious C-1 ward, a place known for its brutal conditions. Through her words, the suffering of the patients becomes more than just statistics—it becomes a reflection of the deeply flawed system that governs their care. Miggy’s empathy for these individuals is palpable, as she vows to honor their spirits and seeks justice for their torment. Her anger toward the corrupt attendants, particularly a man known as Son of Man, is evident as she speaks about the oppressive environment the patients face on a daily basis.

As Miggy continues her story, she delves deeper into the physical and psychological contradictions of the space where the patients are confined. The hospital, while physically imposing and intimidating, becomes a symbol of the mental and emotional anguish endured by its inhabitants. Miggy’s reflection on the lack of care and the deep psychological torment faced by the children she works with shows her yearning for a solution, for justice to be served not only for herself but for the vulnerable souls trapped within Pennhurst. Her mind often returns to the case of a young boy who disappeared from the institution, and she wonders if he found a way to escape through the mysterious tunnels that are rumored to run beneath the facility. These tunnels, she believes, symbolize a pathway to freedom, offering a glimmer of hope for those desperate to flee the hellish existence they are trapped in. The notion of escape is a beacon of possibility, a dream that sustains her in her otherwise bleak reality.

The conversation then shifts to the strange but consistent figure of the "Egg Man," a man who brings eggs and coffee to the patients every morning. While this small act of kindness stands out against the institutional absurdity of Pennhurst, it also highlights the logistical oddities of the hospital system. The patients’ daily lives, marked by routine and neglect, are punctuated by this man’s presence, which, though seemingly insignificant, offers a rare moment of comfort in their otherwise dehumanizing existence. This discussion about the Egg Man adds a surreal layer to the otherwise grim narrative, reinforcing the disorienting contradictions that define life at the institution. As the chapter nears its end, the tension rises as Miggy brings up Son of Man again, emphasizing the ongoing presence of the sinister figure who continues to exert control over the patients’ lives. His influence, and the systemic failures that allow such abuses to continue, cast a long shadow over everything, from the patients’ daily routines to the emotional toll it takes on the people who work there.

The chapter concludes with Nate, who has been quietly absorbing the weight of Miggy’s words, left to contemplate the invisible scars carried by the people trapped within Pennhurst’s walls. His silent reflection captures the emotional depth of the narrative, and the chapter’s final image of the sweet potato pie, a symbol of communal hope and connection, subtly reinforces the theme of unity amidst suffering. The pie,

shared among the group, stands in stark contrast to the horrors that Miggy and the patients face, symbolizing a flicker of warmth and human connection in the otherwise cold and oppressive environment. As the chapter closes, the reader is left to consider the profound emotional toll of such a place, where individuals are caught in an unending cycle of neglect and abuse, and the haunting question of whether true justice will ever come for those who have suffered there.