

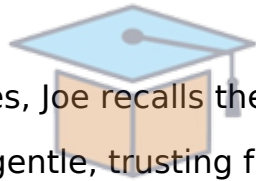
Chapter 1: Joe

Chapter 1: Joe opens with the narrator's reflection on the day his sister Ruthie went missing, a day marked by the relentless presence of blackflies. He recalls how local rumors circulated, claiming that Indigenous people had "sour blood" which kept the insects away, a myth he dismisses as absurd. His memories also include how his mother would use pulped alder bark to soothe the bites, a practical remedy for the discomfort caused by the constant swarming pests. The story is set in June 1962, in a remote area along Route 9, a place with few homes, where their family had arrived from Nova Scotia for the berry-picking season. The quiet, isolated nature of their surroundings, combined with the oppressive heat and the relentless blackflies, set the stage for a season filled with both hard work and emotional turbulence.

The family arrives at Mr. Ellis's property, a place with vast, well-maintained fields but an old and crumbling house that contrasts sharply with its outward appearance. Joe, who sees his family's poverty reflected in their circumstances, refers to the house as a "mansion," a symbolic reference to the wealth gap that defines his view of the world. After they settle in, Joe's father leaves to fetch more workers for the harvest, including familiar faces like Gerald and Frankie. This indicates that their family has been part of an established community, where seasonal labor binds people together. Joe's father stresses the importance of kindness among the workers, a valuable lesson in maintaining peace and cooperation in such a small, isolated group. This advice reflects the social dynamics within the community, where mutual support is crucial for survival, even amidst the challenges of their work.

As the camp is set up, Ruthie's personality emerges as a nervous, timid child who stays close to Joe, particularly when the rowdy boys of the camp engage in their nighttime antics. Their childhood memories are laced with a sense of fragility, as their upbringing was shaped by the impositions of the Indian agent's regulations, which

complicated their lives and their family dynamics. The family's gatherings at night become opportunities for traditional storytelling, with stories about lost children interwoven with ominous discussions that reveal the deep fears and tensions within the community. These gatherings highlight not just the warmth of familial bonding, but also the undercurrent of cultural trauma and a constant sense of vulnerability. Through these stories, the chapter paints a picture of a childhood filled with both innocent joy and the heavy weight of cultural dislocation, as their family's past struggles continue to haunt them.



Amidst the struggles, Joe recalls the sweet, innocent moments he shared with Ruthie, depicting her as a gentle, trusting figure who never strayed far from him. However, the tone of the chapter shifts dramatically when Ruthie goes missing, a sequence set into motion when Joe, in a moment of distraction, throws bread to the crows. What begins as a simple act escalates into frantic searches led by their parents, signaling the beginning of an emotional unraveling for the family. The anxiety grows, and the family's distress becomes palpable, especially when their interaction with the police is met with indifference and a lack of urgency. The authorities' apathetic response compounds Joe's emotional turmoil, as he wrestles with feelings of guilt, believing that had he been more attentive, Ruthie's disappearance might have been prevented.

The search for Ruthie ends in frustration, and the absence of any results only deepens the sense of loss. The family's grief grows more profound, especially for their mother, who retreats emotionally and physically from the family, creating an even greater divide within the household. Joe, feeling the weight of his sister's disappearance, reflects on the sorrow that binds them, but also on his own place within the family. His feelings of guilt intensify, with the haunting thought that he, in some way, is a more replaceable member of the family than Ruthie, further deepening his despair. This chapter sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the themes of loss, identity, and familial bonds, framed within the context of cultural dislocation, hardship, and unresolved grief. As the story unfolds, it promises to delve into the emotional landscapes that shape Joe's understanding of himself, his family, and their collective history.