

Chapter 5: Joe

Chapter 5: Joe begins with a poignant moment where Joe's mother expresses her resignation about the search for his missing sister, Ruthie. Despite her sorrow, she insists that it's time to let go, holding on to the belief that Ruthie might still be out there, living her own life. Joe, now the youngest child after Ruthie's disappearance, feels the heavy burden of responsibility to support his mother during her grief. His presence alone, simply being there and offering her attention, becomes his way of helping, though it cannot erase the underlying sorrow. This dynamic sets the tone for Joe's emotional journey, marked by his struggle to fill the void left by Ruthie's absence and provide comfort to a mother unable to fully process her pain.

The family's once-bustling life has now become quieter, with fewer berry pickers and a diminishing sense of community at their camp. Joe's mind wanders back to the summer when he turned fifteen, a time filled with joyful memories but also overshadowed by Ruthie's disappearance. He reflects on the anticipation of a local carnival, a brief escape from the sadness that hung over their daily lives, and a rare opportunity to socialize with others, including a girl named Susan. The carnival, symbolizing both youthful excitement and an escape from grief, represents a fleeting moment of normalcy. Joe's memories reveal how significant the smallest moments of joy were in an otherwise somber existence, showing how these moments shaped his emotional landscape during such a turbulent time in his life.

As Joe picks berries, his excitement grows when the trucks carrying carnival equipment rumble past, signaling the upcoming festivities. However, his happiness is short-lived as he witnesses a violent altercation between his brother, Charlie, and a local bully named Archie Johnson. Despite Joe's attempts to intervene, the conflict escalates quickly, with Archie attacking Charlie after a verbal altercation. Charlie, in turn, defends Frankie, a drunken figure initially targeted by Archie's rage. The scene

becomes chaotic, and Joe's attempts to de-escalate the situation fail as violence erupts, leaving him helpless and watching the tragedy unfold. His innocence is shattered as he is thrust into the harsh realities of violence, which would soon alter his life irrevocably.

In the aftermath of the violent altercation, Joe runs to find his siblings, trying to get help as the joy of the carnival contrasts sharply with the brutality unfolding behind the tents. Charlie, severely injured in the attack, needs medical attention, but by the time Joe and Ben arrive, it is too late. This moment is a tragic realization for Joe, as the fragile nature of their family bond becomes glaringly apparent in the face of violence and loss. The brutality of the situation and the failure to protect Charlie haunt Joe, amplifying his feelings of guilt and helplessness. This event is a pivotal moment in the chapter, showcasing how quickly things can spiral out of control and how deeply violence can affect familial relationships, leaving scars that may never fully heal.

Joe is consumed by immense guilt and anger after Charlie succumbs to the injuries inflicted during the fight. The weight of responsibility and regret presses heavily on him as he struggles to reconcile his failure to prevent the violence that led to his brother's death. The chapter concludes with the family's painful departure from Maine, burdened by grief and unresolved tensions from the night's events. As they leave, the emotional scars of that evening are left unaddressed, lingering in the silence between them. Joe's grief, compounded by his sense of regret, is heightened by his inability to change the outcome, leaving him with a sense of helplessness that will continue to define his emotional journey. The themes of loss, violence, and the deep emotional wounds that follow are explored profoundly in this chapter, showing the lasting impact of trauma on individuals and families.