

Chapter XVII

In Chapter XVII, the group, having traveled towards the town of Emerald, encounters Samson, one of the narrator's brothers, who appears quietly beside Fish while holding an empty bag of potato chips. Lill, surprised by Samson's arrival, learns he is seven years old and not very talkative. Fish expresses their hunger, noting it's well past supper. In response, Lill, a waitress at the Emerald Truck Stop Diner, acknowledges her own tardiness and expresses sympathy towards the group after hearing about their troubles. She offers to treat them to a meal, including banana cream pie, which surprises everyone, especially Samson, who rarely speaks. His husky voice, full of longing for banana cream pie, lightens the mood and brings laughter among the group.

Arriving at the diner, they find it illuminated by neon lights and bustling with vehicles, indicating a busy setting. Lester, the bus driver, parks in a back alley cluttered with garbage, apologizing for not letting them off closer to the restaurant. Lill guides the children through the neglected alley, and they find Samson walking confidently between Lill and Lester, although he is still anxious.

As they near the parking lot, the narrator spots a hand emerging from a pile of soiled clothes behind a dumpster, triggering alarm and concern. Despite Will's apprehension that the man might just be drunk, the narrator insists on checking the man's condition, recalling the state of their own father, Poppa. Ignoring Will's urging to move on, the narrator kneels beside the homeless man and reaches out to feel for a pulse, concentrating on waking him up.

However, instead of hope, the narrator hears a voice of despair echoing in her mind, revealing the man's deep-seated pain and regret. This realization shatters her belief in her ability to help, bringing a profound sense of uselessness and sorrow. The encounter leads her to despair over her savviness, wrestling with the wish that she could be like her father, free from the burdens of ability, hope, and subsequent heartache.