

# Eleven: Joe

In the chapter "Eleven: Joe" from "The Berry Pickers," Joe finds himself in a liminal space between reality and dreams, grappling with memories and regrets as he interacts with his estranged wife, Cora, and their daughter, Leah. Joe awakens to Leah bringing Cora to see him, bringing a flood of emotions as they confront the years that have separated them. Joe's observations of Cora reveal the passage of time – her aging features remind him of their once-vibrant love.

As they engage in uneasy conversation, Joe attempts to apologize for the wrongs he has committed but struggles with expressing himself. Cora candidly acknowledges the pain he has caused and asserts that his failures are in the past. Joe reflects on his long absence — believing Leah was better off without him, even when tragedy struck their family. Cora presses him on why he never came home, especially after learning about Leah's existence, prompting feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

The narrative then shifts to Joe's memories of running away after a violent incident that left lasting scars. He drives aimlessly through various Canadian landscapes, seeking to escape his past. His journey leads him through moments of desperation, including a stop at a truck stop for a shower, attempting to cleanse the blood on his jeans but unable to cleanse his spirit. Here, Joe recalls fleeting encounters and a growing sense of loneliness, marked by interactions with strangers that highlight his inner turmoil.

Joe recalls a significant meeting with a woman in the grasslands, who challenges his perceptions about himself and his heritage. She offers a perspective that promotes self-forgiveness, steering him to acknowledge the narrative of his own painful history without labeling himself as inherently flawed.

By the chapter's end, as Joe recounts his continuing journey away from home, a dialogue with Leah underscores his enduring absence. Leah's presence evokes a sense of longing for familial connection that he feels he has forfeited. Ultimately, the chapter reflects on themes of regret, identity, and the possibility of redemption woven through the haunting tapestry of memory and loss.