

One: Joe

****Summary of "The Berry Pickers: Joe"****

The chapter begins with the narrator recalling the day Ruthie went missing, marked by the relentless blackflies. He reflects on the store rumors claiming that Indigenous people have a sour blood that keeps the bugs away, a notion he dismisses as false. He remembers how his mother would treat their bites with pulped alder bark. The setting is June 1962, in an area with few houses along Route 9, where they had come from Nova Scotia for the berry-picking season.

Mr. Ellis, the landowner, had old, dilapidated property, contrasting with his expansive, manicured fields. The narrator, Joe, viewed it as a "mansion," illustrating his poverty compared to Ellis's seeming wealth. After their arrival, Joe's father left to fetch more berry pickers, including familiar faces like Gerald and Frankie, indicating an established community. Joe grapples with the idea that kindness is necessary, as advised by his father, to maintain peace among the workers.

As they set up their camp, Ruthie, described as a nervous child, clung close to Joe while diverging from the rowdy boys at night. Memories of past summers and family dynamics surface, emphasizing their fragmented upbringing shaped by the Indian agent's regulations. Nighttime gatherings involve traditional stories and ominous discussions about lost children, reflecting deep fears and cultural tensions.

Despite their struggles, Joe recalls sweet moments shared with Ruthie, who's depicted as innocent and gentle. The chapter's tone shifts dramatically when Ruthie goes missing after Joe throws bread to crows, igniting frantic searches led by their parents. The family's anxiety escalates, compounded by tense interactions with the indifferent police. Joe's emotional turmoil is exacerbated, leading to feelings of guilt and despair over his sister's disappearance.

The search yields no results, and the sense of loss deepens within the family, particularly in their mother, who physically and emotionally withdraws from the family unit. Joe reflects sorrowfully on their collective grief, feeling that he would have been a more replaceable child. Ultimately, this chapter sets up a profound exploration of family, loss, and identity against a backdrop of cultural dislocation and hardship.