

Three: Joe

In the chapter titled "Three: Joe" from *The Berry Pickers*, the narrative follows Joe, a fifty-six-year-old man burdened by illness, as he journeys to a doctor's appointment with his mother, Mae. The road is a metaphor for both physical and emotional turmoil; the potholes reflect Joe's pain and the journey of grappling with family grief. Despite feeling that he should be at home, he obeys his aging mother who insists he join her for a day out, culminating in an all-day breakfast that brings a momentary respite.

Joe's family is haunted by the mystery of his missing sister, Ruthie. He and Mae express disbelief at the finality of death, as Ruthie's absence colors their daily lives. They remember past seasons spent harvesting fruit with apple pickers, whose lively presence contrasted with the emptiness left by Ruthie's disappearance. As the seasons change, the family's dynamics shift, particularly when their mother becomes quiet, retreating into her own thoughts, suggesting a deep, unhealed wound.

The household adjusts roles; Mae becomes nurturing, taking over responsibilities for Joe and their mother. In their domestic life, the act of daily survival juxtaposes the backdrop of greater loss. The chapter provides vivid imagery of their interactions, fraught with reminders of Ruthie, while also showcasing the everyday realities of illness and familial duty.

Dad's unyielding attitude towards potential suitors for his children showcases his fierce protection against outsiders, particularly after a confrontation with a man named Mr. Hughes. He defends his family's autonomy and resists authority figures who threaten to take his children away. This is marked by the event of Joe's childhood when they play at hiding in the woods to avoid men who represent loss and control.

As Joe recalls these memories, layers of childhood innocence and the harsh reality of their family plight coexist. He yearns for recognition and belonging, feeling overshadowed by his parents' history and actions. The chapter intertwines moments of warmth and humor with layers of grief and loss, illustrating how family ties shape identity amidst ongoing struggles. These themes of survival, memory, and the search for hope resonate throughout Joe's experience, intimately connecting the past with the present.