

Chapter 7: Joe

Chapter 7: Joe delves into the emotional complexities of Ben's life, a man who is confined to his bed as he faces the dual burdens of physical pain and the inevitability of his mortality. His days are measured in the most tangible way, with each passing day marked off on a small calendar, a grim reminder of the little time he has left. Although his body is frail, the presence of his family, including his brother Ben and daughter Leah, offers some comfort. Leah, in particular, becomes a source of light in Ben's otherwise dark world. She arrives every Tuesday, bringing with her a warmth that temporarily alleviates his suffering. However, despite her affection, there remains an emotional distance between them, as Leah has never once called him "Dad." This subtle, yet significant gap weighs heavily on Ben, as he is acutely aware of the unresolved issues between them.

During their conversations, Ben's memories flood back, taking him to a time when his sister Ruthie disappeared from their lives. Leah's casual mention of Ruthie's disappearance serves as a haunting reminder of the pain that has never been fully processed by the family. This innocent remark sparks a conversation that unearths deep emotions and unresolved grief, showing how much Leah has yet to understand about the past and her family's history. The mention of Ruthie acts as a catalyst for Ben to reflect on the life he once had, full of joy and connection, before it was shattered by her sudden loss. For Ben, the grief of losing Ruthie has never fully left him, and Leah's questions bring it all rushing back, forcing him to confront both the hope and the despair that have colored his family's past.

Ben's thoughts turn darker as he recalls the aftermath of losing Ruthie and, later, his brother Charlie. The weight of these losses continues to haunt him, and though the family attempts to move forward, it is clear that the pain of the past lingers in the background. Ben, who once threw himself into multiple jobs to support his family, now sees the futility of their efforts to rebuild. Meanwhile, Mae, his partner, continues to struggle with her own sense of independence, finding it difficult to navigate a world that seems indifferent to their suffering. Amidst this, Ben's past political activism stands out, highlighting his passion for fighting injustices that affected the lives of those around him. The mention of his activism serves as a reminder of Ben's once fervent belief in making the world better, even as the weight of personal loss begins to overshadow his efforts.

The narrative takes a dramatic turn when Ben's brother returns from Boston with startling news: he claims to have seen Ruthie alive in the city. This revelation sends shockwaves through the family, igniting a mixture of hope, disbelief, and emotional turmoil. The possibility that Ruthie could still be alive stirs up long-buried emotions, creating an atmosphere of tension within the family. Ben, who has lived for years with the belief that Ruthie was gone, is torn between the hope of reuniting with her and the skepticism that the truth might be far more complicated. The conflicting emotions that this new development brings threaten to destabilize the fragile equilibrium that the family has managed to maintain, drawing them back into the emotional chaos that the disappearance once caused. This moment is a turning point, one that forces Ben and the others to grapple with their past while attempting to look toward the future.

As the chapter concludes, Ben is left to navigate the painful memories of his past, all while the weight of expectation presses down on him. The possibility of finding Ruthie offers a glimmer of hope, but it is tempered by the years of despair and loss that have defined his life. This emotional struggle encapsulates the complexity of Ben's journey, where hope and regret collide. The chapter paints a vivid picture of the universal human struggle with loss, as well as the enduring nature of familial love and longing. Ben's reflections serve as a poignant reminder that, even in the face of overwhelming sorrow, the flicker of hope can push us forward, even if only for a moment. The uncertainty of whether Ruthie will ever truly be found leaves the family—and the readers—wondering if closure is ever truly achievable when the past still holds such power over the present.