Chapter XXVIII

In Chapter XXVIII, the journey south from Nebraska continues as the characters remain miles from Salina. Despite the Beaumonts urging them to head directly to Salina Hope Hospital, Lester remains obstinate about making a final detour. The group occupies their time eating snacks from the Mega Mega Mart while trying to avoid thoughts of Poppa, who is in the hospital.

As they near Manhattan, a police siren causes the children to tense up, but they soon realize it’s not related to them. They observe Lill and Lester, who are preoccupied with each other. Fish, sensing something amiss, announces he can smell water, which prompts concern among the kids. Lester confirms their proximity to Tuttle Creek Lake, which reassures Fish.

In an attempt to boost Fish's confidence after his traumatic experience during a hurricane, the narrator reminds him he is in control. As they approach their next destination, Carlene's name comes up, which prompts a startled reaction from Lester. The girl’s unintended revelation about Lester's tattoos leads to a discussion about Carlene, who has a dubious reputation for abandoning pets, causing tension within the bus.

Lester initially appears contemplative and is affected by the harsh voices of Rhonda and Carlene echoing in his head. Mibs, frustrated with the negative influence, admonishes him. Despite Lester's discomfort, he realizes the truth behind his relationship with Carlene, acknowledging her deception and recognizing that she was the one who secured his job and the bus.

In a moment of vulnerability, Lester expresses a desire to settle his debts with Carlene before he can focus on Lill. Lill’s supportive response softens Lester, and he feels as though he has found a guiding light in her, bringing a sense of hope. The chapter captures themes of personal conflict, the struggle against negative influences, and redemption as Lester reclaims his sense of self amid his struggles with self-doubt and the shadows of his past .