

The Bean Trees

by Barbara Kingsolver

Week: 2 of 3

Chapters/Pages: pages 103-120, 203-214

Themes:

- Motherhood/Parenting
- Work
- Friendship/Support Systems
- Overcoming fears

Recommended Opening: “Be not afraid of growing slowly, be afraid only of standing still.” - Chinese Proverb

- What do you think of this quote? Do you agree with it? Why/why not?
- What is the difference between “growing slowly” and “standing still”? Why do you think the proverb advises people to be afraid of the second but not of the first?
- Why might someone be “standing still”? What are some advantages of standing still? What are some disadvantages of standing still?
- Why might someone be “growing slowly”? How can you tell that you’re growing slowly and not standing still?
- How much are you in control of your own growth? Why?
- Have there been times in your life when you’ve been afraid of growing slowly? Of standing still? How did you overcome those fears?

Before Reading:

- Barbara Kingsolver, born in 1955, is an American novelist, essayist and poet. She was raised in rural Kentucky and lived briefly in the Congo in her early childhood.
- Kingsolver has received numerous awards and has been nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Pulitzer Prize. In 2000, Kingsolver established the Bellwether Prize to support "literature of social change".

Summary of Interim Events:

- Reminder of last week: Set in late 1970s/early 1980s. Story of Marietta (who renames herself Taylor) Greer. She leaves her home in Kentucky and sets out to find something better. At one of her early stops, a woman gives her a little girl—who, Taylor later realizes, has been abused—and Taylor takes the little girl (whom she calls Turtle) along with her.
- Taylor keeps driving and decides she’s going to live in Arizona. In Tucson, she gets two flat tires and goes to a place called *Jesus Is Lord Used Tires* to get help. A woman named Mattie comes out to help her and invites her for a cup of coffee.
- Taylor has to leave her car there and finds a hotel in walking distance to stay in. She makes friends with a woman named Sandi and starts working at the Burger Derby, where Sandi works. Taylor only lasts six days there before she gets into a fight with the manager and walks out.
- Taylor looks for a roommate and ends up choosing to live with a woman named Lou Ann Ruiz. We find out her story: Lou Ann’s husband, Angel, has an accident in his pick-up truck and ends up having to get an artificial leg. Shortly after this, he leaves Lou Ann a few months

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before she's due to have their baby, who she names Dwayne Ray. Once she has the baby Angel agrees to move back in until Lou Ann's mother and grandmother leave (they have come to help out with the newborn) because she doesn't want them to know her marriage is ending. Also, she has a cat named Snowboots.

Recommended Reading Passages and Questions:

Read pages 103-109 (until the page break):

- Why is Taylor hesitant to take the job at *Jesus Is Lord Used Tires*? What do you think about someone doing a job that involves something that scares them? Is there anything that scares you about a job in the trades? If so, how do you plan to overcome that?
- Why does Taylor eventually decide to take the job? Do you think this is a good choice for her? Why/why not? How have you made choices about what jobs to take or apply for? What kinds of things do you consider?
- What do you think of Mattie? How would you describe her? How does she seem to be as a supervisor/mentor to Taylor? What kinds of things are important to you in a supervisor?
- What do you think is going on in the upstairs of *Jesus Is Lord Used Tires*?
- Mattie explains the cycle of life of plants by saying: "The old has to pass on before the new can come around" (103). How do you see this applying to people, if at all?
- What do you think makes Taylor say at the end that she "missed [her] Mama so much [her] chest hurt"?

Read pages 109 (from page break) – 120:

- How would you describe Lou Ann? What kinds of things are important to her? Why do you think she might be this way?
- How would you characterize Lou Ann and Taylor's relationship? In what ways, if any, are they similar? In what ways, if any, are they different?
- What makes Taylor frustrated about their dynamic? Why do you think Taylor doesn't want them acting like a "family"?
- Why do you think Lou Ann wants to figure out Turtle's name with the baby name book? How does Taylor seem to feel about it?
- How would you describe Taylor's style of parenting? How would you describe Lou Ann's style of parenting? What are your thoughts on what/how each of them is doing?
- What is the significance of Lou Ann's story of the meteor shower?
- How would you characterize Lou Ann's attitude toward men? How would you characterize Taylor's attitude toward men? What do you think has contributed to each (personal experiences, media, upbringing, father figures, etc.)?

Summary of Interim Events:

- Taylor, Turtle, Lou Ann, Dwayne Ray, and Mattie go on a picnic. Mattie brings a young couple along, Esperanza and Estevan, who she says are from Guatemala.
- Later, Taylor and Lou Ann invite Esperanza and Estevan over for dinner and to watch Mattie appear on television – though Taylor doesn't know what the segment is about. They also invite two of their neighbors, Edna and Virgie, who have a portable TV that they can watch it on. Taylor doesn't know it at the time but she later discovers that Edna is blind.
- When Mattie appears on TV she talks about human rights, the concept of asylum, and that "we have a legal obligation to take in people whose lives are in danger".

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- Taylor starts to put together the pieces, that Mattie called her place a sanctuary, and realizes she is hiding undocumented immigrants upstairs.
- Taylor decides to take Turtle to a doctor. He tells her that Turtle is three years old and that her abuse caused a condition he calls “failure to thrive,” where she has stopped growing. Later, Taylor and Lou Ann discover that Turtle’s real name is April when she turns at the mention of it.
- Angel comes by Lou Ann’s to tell her he is leaving for good, going to join a rodeo.
- Esperanza tries and fails to commit suicide. Taylor talks to Estevan, who she is falling for, about his experiences. He shares that he and Esperanza had a daughter named Ismene who was taken in a raid in their old neighborhood because they were political targets. Esperanza’s brother and two friends were killed during this raid as well.
- Later, Taylor goes to visit Esperanza and says how sad she was to hear about Ismene.
- Lou Ann wants to get a job but she’s convinced she won’t get hired. She goes to an interview at a convenience store but the men who interview her are chauvinistic and insulting so she leaves.

Read pages 203 – 214:

- How does Lou Ann feel about her new job? Why do you think she feels this way about it?
- What changes does Taylor notice in her? What changes do you notice in her?
- What are some positive ways a job can change you or affect your life? What are some negative ways a job can change you or affect your life?
- What did you think of what Taylor shares about how saying you have a baby in Spanish is to say that “you give it to the light” (207)? Why do you think she likes brings this up?
- What do you make of Lou Ann’s dream? Do you find meaning in your dreams? Why/why not?
- What is the significance of Lou Ann’s story about the cigar box? Why do you think she is so afraid of death and disaster? How can this fear be helpful? How can this fear be harmful?
- Why do you think Lou Ann thinks of herself the way she does? If you were her friend, what would you tell her in response to her saying how “screwed up” she is (209)?
- In what ways do you see Taylor and Lou Ann’s relationship influencing Lou Ann? How do you see it influencing Taylor?
- Any predictions as to what will happen to Estevan and Esperanza?
- What does Taylor mean when she says, “If the truth was a snake it would have bitten me a long time ago. It would have had me for dinner” (214)?

Recommended Poetry: “I Give You Back” (Excerpt 2) by Joy Harjo

- What did you feel when reading/hearing this poem?
- What lines stood out to you? Why?
- Why is she releasing her fear? What might that allow her to do?
- Why do you think she calls fear her “beloved and hated twin”?
- Harjo talks about releasing something that has been tormenting her and holding her back. Is it possible for someone to make a conscious decision to get over/release something?
- Have you ever felt like you needed to release something? How did you know you need to release it? How did you release it? What was it like?
- Why do you think Harjo titles this poem, “I Give You Back”?

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- What does Harjo mean when she says she wants to “take back herself”? What might make someone feel as though they don’t belong to themselves/don’t have control of their own lives? Have you ever been in a situation where you felt as though you needed to take yourself back? What was it like? How did you deal with that?

Recommended Poetry Prompt: “I Release You”

What is the feeling or thing you’re ready to release? Shame? Doubt? Rage? Terror? Or? Who do you need to give this feeling back to? Notice her use of repetition, drum beat rhythm. Envision yourself alone with the feeling you’re ready to address and get up in its face. Grab hold of it and speak. What are you keeping? What do you need to take back?

Recommended Closing: “When I stand before thee at the day’s end, thou shalt see my scars and know that I had my wounds, and also my healing.” ~Rabindranath Tagore

Notes: