

The Bean Trees

by Barbara Kingsolver

Week: 3 of 3

Chapters/Pages: pages 231-240, 291-312

Themes:

- Friendship/Support Systems
- Motherhood/Parenting
- Courage

Recommended Opening: “In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit.” ~Albert Schweitzer

- What do you think of this quote? What stands out to you about it?
- What does he mean by one’s “inner fire”? What kinds of things might make it go out?
- How can another person “rekindle the inner spirit”? What qualities do you think a person would have who can create that fire in another person?
- Who do you think “those people” are that he is talking about? Who are they or have they been for you specifically?
- What is your “inner fire”? Are there people for whom you have helped rekindle their inner fire? How did you do that?

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:

- Mattie tells Taylor, Estevan, and Esperanza to go with her to the desert to smell the first rain. Taylor asks Edna to watch Turtle a little longer and goes with them.
- When she gets back Taylor finds out that while they were in the park a man attacked Turtle. At first Edna didn’t know because she’s blind but then she heard noises of struggle and swung her cane toward where they were coming from, at a man. When the medical examiner checks she says there is no evidence of molestation, just some bruises, but Turtle’s eyes look blank like they did when Taylor got her in Oklahoma.

Recommended Reading Passages and Questions:

Read pages 231-240 (until, “But that wasn’t what I intended to discuss with Cynthia.”):

- How did you react to the news that Child Protection Services is trying to take Turtle? Why do you think the legal system works this way with kids like Turtle? Would you change the system if you were in charge? If so, how?
- How does Taylor react to this news? How does Lou Ann react to it?

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- What do you think of Taylor's comment: "Why should I think Turtle's better off with me than in a state home? At least there they know how to take care of kids. They won't let anything happen to her"? Why do you think Taylor feels this way? Do you agree? Why/why not?
- How would you assess Taylor's parenting thus far? Why?
- What do you think of the conversation Taylor and Mattie have about decision making (238)? What ways do you, or others you know, make important decisions about your life?
- What do you make of Mattie's comment that "Nobody can protect a child from the world"? How can a parent reconcile this with a desire to keep their child safe?
- What do you think Taylor is going to talk to Cynthia about when she goes back? What do you think accounts for the change in how she's responding to the situation?
- Who does Taylor have "in her corner" right now? How do these relationships seem to be affecting her and her decisions?

Summary of Interim Events:

- Taylor asks Cynthia about how she can get custody of Turtle. Cynthia tells her she must get written consent from the child's parents or closest living relative to be Turtle's legal guardian. She gives Taylor the name of someone in Oklahoma who can give her legal advice.
- Taylor decides she is going to drive Estevan and Esperanza to a safe house in Oklahoma and, while she's there, try to find Turtle's family. If she gets caught moving Estevan and Esperanza she could get five years in prison and a \$2,000 fine for each illegal person.
- Taylor drives east into Oklahoma. Along the way she finds out that Estevan and Esperanza are actually Mayan. They go to the bar where Taylor got Turtle but it has changed owners and the no one there has any information that can help lead to Turtle's relatives.
- They go to a cottage at the lake of the Cherokee Nation. While there, Turtle buries her doll in the dirt and says, "Mama," which Taylor takes to mean that Turtle watched her mother's burial somewhere in this area.
- Taylor asks Estevan and Esperanza a favor and they agree – they go to the contact Cynthia gave them and Estevan and Esperanza pose as Steve and Hope, claiming to be Turtle's biological parents. They sign over custody to Taylor. Esperanza is crying during it – and, it seems, not putting on an act – but after it's over she seems newly happy.

Read pages 291 – 302 (page break):

- What do you think about Taylor's goodbye to Estevan? How do you think Taylor will move on from this "lost love"? Have you ever lost someone you loved? If yes, how did you handle it?
- What do you think might have happened to Esperanza in the office?
- Why does Taylor say, "All four of us had buried someone we loved in Oklahoma"? Who is that for each of them?
- What do you think will happen to Estevan and Esperanza in this new sanctuary? What do you think their future might hold?
- Why do you think Taylor calls her mom in this moment? What is she looking for from her? What does she get from the call?
- Taylor thanks her mom for always making her feel good about herself even though she, "Couldn't believe you thought I was that good." Have you had anyone in your life who's

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done that for you? If so, who? How did they do that? Have you ever been that person for someone else?

- What is the significance of Taylor's conversation with Turtle? How has Taylor changed since the beginning of the book?

Read pages 302 (from "On an impulse I called 1-800-THE-LORD..." - 312:

- What are rhizobia? How does Taylor relate this to people?
- Who is part of the "invisible system for helping out" that Taylor has?
- What do you make of Taylor's conversation with Lou Ann? How has their relationship changed over the course of the book? How has Lou Ann changed?
- Lou Ann says, "I've gotten so brave hanging out with you" (309). What has Taylor given Lou Ann? What has Lou Ann given Taylor? What does it take to build a friendship like this?
- What does Lou Ann mean when she says she's realized that "everything you get is really just on loan" (310)?
- Taylor and Lou Ann describe each other and their kids as a family. What do you think makes a family? Can you choose your family? Why/why not? Do you have people in your life that aren't blood related but who you consider family? Who are they?
- What do you think of the end of the book? What do you see in store for Taylor and Turtle?

- Did you like this book? Why/why not?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why/why not?

Recommended Poetry: n/a

Recommended Poetry Prompt: "Rhizobia"

Taylor talks about the rhizobia, or the invisible network for helping out. Who's in your invisible network? Who can you turn to? Who or what are you keeping out of the system? Where do you find strength in yourself? Write creatively about the roots and connections that help you thrive.

Recommended Closing: "Let us be grateful to people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom." – Marcel Proust

Notes: