

The Bean Trees



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BARBARA KINGSOLVER

Growing up in rural Kentucky, Barbara Kingsolver developed a love for nature that she maintained by studying biology at De Pauw University and then the University of Arizona, before ultimately becoming a writer. Kingsolver's passion for environmental projects shine through in her writing, as she believes that the best way to serve her community is to write about the importance of the natural world. A prolific author, Kingsolver has written 13 books since 1988 that, among other things, all deal with humanity's place in the environment and mankind's duty to serve and care for the land. She has been named one of *Writer's Digest's* most important writers of the 20th century and received the National Humanities Medal in 2000 for her service through the arts. After living in Tucson for twenty years, Kingsolver now lives on a farm in the Appalachian Mountains with her husband and her two children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Taylor Greer, the main protagonist of *The Bean Trees*, tries to raise Turtle, a young Cherokee girl who has been abandoned in Oklahoma. Present day Oklahoma is home to large numbers of Cherokee Native Americans after the US governments' Indian Removal efforts of the 1800s and early 1900s. Under the administration of President Andrew Jackson in 1838, thousands of Cherokee people were relocated from Georgia to a reservation in Oklahoma, an event called the Trail of Tears because of the harsh conditions and rampant disease that took the lives of over 4,000 Cherokee as they were forced to travel. To this day, reservation life remains difficult as many Native American tribes struggle to receive the resources and support the United States government promised them in payment for the relocation, and poverty marks the lives of many reservation Native. The novel also includes the Guatemalan Refugee crisis of the 1970s and 80s that resulted from the Guatemalan Civil War. The Guatemalan government began a crusade against the indigenous Mayan population of Guatemala, causing in response the formation of leftist rebel groups supported by the rural poor of Guatemala. As war raged, many Guatemalans were forced to flee to America due to their ethnic background, their political affiliation, or the complete destruction of their homes and livelihoods. Though the United States had played a role in inciting the civil war by helping the conservative military regime of Carlos Castillo Armas take control of Guatemala's formerly democratic government, American immigration policy did not allow Guatemalan immigrants to gain refugee status. Many Guatemalans, like Estevan and Esperanza in the novel,

were therefore forced to come into the United States illegally. Some immigrants seeking asylum in the United States did receive help from the Sanctuary Movement, a collection of church congregations committed to helping refugees find shelter, employment and legal resources, just as Mattie did for Estevan and Esperanza in the novel.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Bean Trees, like the majority of Kingsolver's novels, focuses on the strong relationships between her female characters, similar to Amy Tan's [The Joy Luck Club](#). Like Louise Erdrich, and her novel *The Roundhouse*, Kingsolver also writes from a modern perspective regarding Native American experience and with great respect for the American landscape in which her characters live. Kingsolver also belongs to a tradition of environmental justice novels, as she strongly believes in advocating for social justice and human rights causes in her novels.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Bean Trees*
- **When Written:** 1987-1988
- **Where Written:**
- **When Published:** 1988
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Realism
- **Setting:** Tucson, Arizona
- **Climax:** Taylor finally manages to legally adopt Turtle, a Cherokee child who was abandoned, when two Guatemalan refugees agree to pose as Turtle's birth parents.
- **Antagonist:** Racism, classism and sexism in American society
- **Point of View:** First Person, with two chapters of third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Writing and Expecting. Kingsolver's first novel, she wrote *The Bean Trees* when she herself was pregnant with her first child.

Sequel. Kingsolver's novel *Pigs in Heaven* (1993) continues Taylor and Turtle's story by exploring Turtle's Cherokee heritage and the legal custody of Native American children.



PLOT SUMMARY

The novel's narrator opens by describing her hometown in

Pittman County, Kentucky, a place where poverty, teenage pregnancy, and a lack of education determine the life paths of all who live there. A childhood memory of Newt Hardbine's father getting thrown in the air by an exploding tire scars the narrator, and she vows to leave her hometown as soon as possible. The narrator then shares her name: Marietta.

Marietta finishes high school and gets a job at the Pittman County Hospital. One day, Newt Hardbine's wife comes in with a bullet wound because Newt's father shot both her and Newt (who died). Marietta becomes even more determined to leave Pittman and saves up money for an old car. As soon as she has the funds, Marietta drives her old car west, renaming herself Taylor after the first town she reaches when she has to stop for gas. Two days later, Taylor runs into an old woman at a bar near Cherokee Nation, Oklahoma. The woman gives Taylor a baby, who she says is in danger. Not long after, Taylor's car breaks down and Taylor is stuck in Oklahoma. Taylor thinks that it's fitting that she's stuck on Cherokee land, given that her great-grandfather was Cherokee.

The novel then introduces Lou Ann Ruiz, a woman from Kentucky currently living in Tucson, Arizona. Lou Ann's husband, Angel, used to work for the rodeo but lost his leg in an injury. This accident, coupled with Lou Ann's pregnancy, puts a strain on their relationship until Angel leaves Lou Ann on Halloween.

Meanwhile, Taylor has been living at the Broken Arrow motel, cleaning rooms to pay for her room and board. She continues to take care of the child, a girl, whom Taylor has named Turtle because of the child's tight grip that reminds her of a mud turtle's jaw. Turtle was severely abused by her biological family, and never speaks or smiles. After the New Year, Taylor continues west and decides to settle in Arizona because she falls in love with the landscape. In Tucson, her tires give out and Taylor pulls into a shop called "Jesus Is Lord Used Tires." The owner, a woman named Mattie, welcomes Taylor to Tucson and gives her advice about how to raise Turtle. Taylor decides to stay in Tucson, even though she is unfamiliar with everything about Tucson culture.

Meanwhile, Lou Ann's baby, Dwayne Ray, is now one month old, and Lou Ann's grandmother and mother are getting ready to leave after coming to Arizona to help Lou Ann with the birth. Lou Ann doesn't get along with her family, but doesn't want them to leave either. Angel agreed to move back in for the visit so that Lou Ann's family won't know that she will be a single parent, but Lou Ann's grandmother, who is prejudiced against both Mexicans and Catholics, doesn't approve of Angel. As Lou Ann's grandmother gets ready to leave, she gives Lou Ann a bottle of **water** from a creek near their house to baptize Dwayne Ray, but Angel pours it down the drain once Lou Ann's family is gone.

Taylor gets a job at a fast food restaurant called Burger Derby, but quits because the manager forces the employees to pay to

launder their own uniforms and because she doesn't think it is healthy to leave Turtle by herself in a day care all day. Taylor tries to find a new job and a new place to stay. Finally, she finds Lou Ann's ad looking for a roommate, and Taylor and Turtle move in with Lou Ann and Dwayne Ray after the two women bond over their Kentucky roots.

Taylor then gets a job at Mattie's tire shop and finds out that Mattie also runs a safe house for Central American refugees. Mattie helps Taylor start to overcome her fear of tires, and shows Taylor and Turtle her garden. Lou Ann cares for the kids during the day, trying to get Turtle to come out of her shell. Taylor, meanwhile, becomes uncomfortable that she seems to be acting as a breadwinning "father" while Lou Ann is taking the role of "mother." But the two of them talk it through, and become even better friends.

Taylor, Lou Ann, and the kids go on a hike with Mattie and two Guatemalan refugees, a young married couple named Estevan and Esperanza. Estevan is an English teacher from Guatemala City who charms them all with his wit and sunny disposition. Esperanza is quieter, and spends most of her time watching Turtle. Turtle continues to improve, even saying her first word, "bean." Taylor decides to have Estevan and Esperanza over for dinner to watch Mattie as she appears on a television program about Central American immigration, also inviting over the neighbors Edna and Virgie Mae. At the dinner, Virgie insults immigrants and Taylor realizes how unfair American culture is to immigrants like Estevan. Estevan takes it in stride, simply telling a fable with the moral of taking care of other people.

Soon, Taylor finds out that her mother is going to get remarried, a prospect that both angers and scares her because her mother had been the biggest champion of female independence when Taylor was growing up. The day they get this news, Taylor's makeshift family goes to the park, where Lou Ann daydreams about Taylor's mother's wedding, and how she first fell in love with Angel. Meanwhile, Taylor realizes that she has fallen in love with Estevan, but says nothing. As Turtle plays in a patch of **wisteria vines**, Edna and Virgie Mae come by to tell Lou Ann that Angel is looking for her. Taylor worries that Lou Ann will take Angel back, forcing her and Turtle out.

One day, Taylor has to take off work to take Turtle to the doctor. The doctor pronounces Turtle physically healthy now, but x-rays reveal the full awful details of the past abuse she endured, and the doctor says that Turtle is so small because after the abuse she had suffered "failure to thrive," though she seems to be doing better now. Later that same day, Taylor goes to meet Lou Ann at the zoo. Lou Ann is also crying because Angel found her to tell her that he is leaving for good to join a rodeo in Montana. During this conversation, Taylor and Lou Ann inadvertently find out Turtle's real name, April, but decide to keep calling her Turtle.

Estevan comes over that night with the shocking news that Esperanza has attempted suicide. Taylor and Estevan talk about

Estevan's past in Guatemala, revealing the circumstances that forced Esperanza and Estevan to leave. During one raid, Estevan reveals, Estevan and Esperanza's daughter Ismene was taken hostage and the couple has no idea where she is now. Taylor cries at all of this injustice in the world, and grapples with the more personal revelation that her crush on Estevan is not meant to be.

The next morning, Estevan goes home to Esperanza, who has pulled through. Lou Ann, meanwhile, soon begins to look for a job now that Angel is gone for good. At the grocery store that afternoon, Taylor realizes that their neighbor Edna is blind, a discovery which shocks her and Lou Ann but ultimately does not change their relationship with the sweet older woman. Meanwhile, Taylor tries to help Esperanza avoid losing all hope, even as Lou Ann is losing hope because of terrible and unsuccessful experiences interviewing for jobs.

In May, though, Lou Ann gets a job at a salsa factory. Edna starts watching the kids full time. One night after work, Lou Ann confesses that she has always worried about Dwayne Ray because she had a dream that he would not live past the year 2000. Taylor tries to soothe Lou Ann's fears and bolster Lou Ann's self-esteem, which has been growing ever since Lou Ann got a job. Yet in June, Angel writes a letter to Lou Ann asking her to come live with him in Montana, something that Taylor thinks will destroy all the progress Lou Ann has made.

Soon enough, the first **rain** of summer comes. Mattie takes Taylor, Estevan, and Esperanza out to experience the storm in the desert and to smell the scent of greasewood, and Taylor feels renewed. Yet she comes home to tragedy, as Turtle was assaulted in the park while under blind Edna's care and has retreated to her old comatose self. Taylor busies herself with chasing a **bird** out of the house instead of talking to the social worker, unsure that she still deserves to be a mother. The social worker starts to see Taylor and Turtle weekly to talk about Turtle's troubled past, but adds a further complication when she alerts CPS that Taylor does not have legal custody of Turtle. Taylor falls into a depression at the thought that she and Turtle might be separated.

Meanwhile, Estevan and Esperanza's lives are also in danger because they cannot find safe transport to a more secure sanctuary in Oklahoma. Taylor offers to drive them to Oklahoma in the hopes that she can find out more about Turtle's family there and gain legal custody of Turtle. Edna and Virgie show Taylor and Turtle a **night-blooming cereus flower** the night before they leave, which Taylor takes as a good omen.

On the way to Oklahoma, Taylor finds out more about the hardships of Estevan's past as a Mayan Indian in Guatemala, and Esperanza bonds with Turtle. The little group returns to the bar where Taylor found Turtle, but the ownership has changed and no one knows how to contact anyone who would know Turtle's biological family. Unsure what to do next, Taylor

decides to take them all on a mini-vacation to the Lake of the Cherokees. In the pristine natural environment, on Cherokee land, Taylor comes up with a plan for getting legal custody of Turtle.

Estevan and Esperanza agree to pose as Turtle's biological parents, as most white people cannot tell the difference between Mayan features and Cherokee features. Taylor takes them to a public notary that the social worker recommended, and Esperanza has a cathartic experience saying goodbye to Turtle that lets her finally release her grief over losing Ismene. The public notary signs off on this falsified adoption, making Taylor the official legal guardian of Turtle. Taylor then takes Estevan and Esperanza to a new sanctuary in Oklahoma City where they can try to start their family anew. Taylor calls her mother, finally congratulating her on her marriage. and then calls Lou Ann, finding out that Lou Ann has let go of Angel and is committed to staying in Tucson with Taylor. Taylor and Turtle drive home, finally secure and happy in their roles as mother and daughter.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) – Born Marietta Greer, Taylor is the main protagonist and narrator of the novel. She leaves her Kentucky home to try to create a life for herself that does not include the inevitable housewife position that awaits her in her hometown. Yet she is forced into motherhood when she is given Turtle, an abandoned Cherokee child. Taylor's intelligence, dedication and tenacious attitude help her create a life for herself and Turtle in Tucson, Arizona, where they build a community of other strong women including Lou Ann and Mattie.

Turtle (April) – An abandoned Cherokee child, Turtle becomes Taylor Greer's daughter when she is left with Taylor at a gas station in Oklahoma. Though severely traumatized by the abuse she suffered as a young child and the death of her biological mother, Turtle is eventually able to thrive in Taylor and Lou Ann's care and even cultivates a love of gardening, growing in tough soil just like the **wisteria vines** she loves. Turtle becomes Taylor's legal daughter at the end of the novel.

Lou Ann Ruiz – Though reeling from her husband Angel's abandonment at the beginning of the novel while she is pregnant, Lou Ann becomes Taylor's best friend and an important mother figure in the surrogate family that she and Taylor create for their children. Lou Ann overcomes her low self-esteem and her tendency to worry about disaster in order to provide for her son Dwayne Ray.

Mattie – Taylor's boss at the tire repair shop that Mattie owns in Tucson. Mattie is good with children and helps Taylor find confidence as a new mother. Taylor later finds out that Mattie is

highly involved in the Sanctuary Movement that helped provide resources and shelter for Central American immigrants seeking asylum in the United States, including Estevan and Esperanza. Mattie, as a business owner and member of the Sanctuary Movement, is a powerful woman, and becomes a mentor and member of the women-centric community that Taylor becomes a part of.

Estevan – A Guatemalan refugee, Estevan is a highly educated man who was forced to flee his home in Guatemala when the war there led to the persecution of teachers (which he was). He and his wife, Esperanza, had their daughter Ismene taken from them in Guatemala but he remains hopeful that they can rebuild their life in the United States. Taylor falls in love with his quiet grace, though he never strays from his wife and she does not seek to get him to. He does help Taylor gain legal custody of Turtle by posing as Turtle's biological father despite the high risk of speaking to public officials due to his own undocumented status in the US. Estevan is both strong and sensitive, and seems to embody the characteristics of what the novel sees as the ideal man.

Esperanza – A Guatemalan refugee and Estevan's wife, Esperanza is badly shaken by the loss of her daughter Ismene during the war in Guatemala. However, she begins to heal that wound by bonding with Turtle and eventually helps Taylor gain legal custody of Turtle by posing as Turtle's biological mother despite the high risk this put on her own undocumented status in the US. She finds the act of "giving" Turtle to Taylor to be healing, a kind of symbolic parting from her own lost daughter.

Angel Ruiz – Lou Ann's husband, who leaves her due to his own disappointment at losing his leg in a rodeo accident. He joins a rodeo in Montana and asks Lou Ann to come with him, but she refuses. He is often selfish and callous, and while not exactly a villain in any real way he also seems to represent a lot of what the novel sees as "toxic" masculine traits that negatively impact women.

Taylor's Mother – Taylor's mother, whose full name is Alice Jean Stamper Greer Elleston. She raised Taylor as a single parent and unconditionally supported Taylor throughout her life and loves Turtle for Taylor's sake. Taylor's mother gets remarried to Harland Elleston over the course of the novel, forcing Taylor to reevaluate what she thought she knew about being an independent woman.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dwayne Ray – Lou Ann's son, born in the middle of the novel. Lou Ann believes that he is jinxed, even though Dwayne Ray is happy and healthy.

Newt Hardbine – Another student at Taylor's high school, who lives out every bad expectation of poor families in Pittman County and dies at the hands of his own father.

Edna Poppy – One of Lou Ann and Taylor's neighbors in Tucson,

Edna is a sweet old woman who sometimes watches Dwayne Ray and Turtle. She always dresses in red and needs the help of her friend Virgie because she is blind.

Virgie Mae Parsons – One of Lou Ann and Taylor's neighbors. Taylor finds Virgie incredibly stiff and mean, until Taylor finds out that Virgie cares for Edna because Edna is blind.

Granny Logan – Lou Ann's grandmother, who is crotchety and constantly fighting with Lou Ann's mother, Ivy. Granny Logan wants Lou Ann to come back to Kentucky and live with them.

Ivy Logan – Lou Ann's mother, who lives with Granny Logan despite the fact that Granny Logan is her mother-in-law, and the two constantly fight. Ivy loves her daughter, but is very distant.

Ismene – Estevan and Esperanza's daughter, who was taken from her parents during a raid in Guatemala City. They never see her again.

Sandi – A young mother who works at Burger Derby. She becomes Taylor's first friend in Tucson and teaches Taylor a few tricks about how to raise a baby on a budget.

Cynthia – The social worker who first threatens to split up Taylor and Turtle, but helps Taylor find out how to legally adopt Turtle.

Mr. Jonas Armistead – The public notary in Oklahoma City who unknowingly fakes Taylor's adoption of Turtle.

Eddie Rickett – Taylor's first boss in her job at the Pittman County Hospital.

Mr. Hughes Walter – Taylor's science teacher in high school, who helps Taylor get her first job.

Dr. P (Dr. Pelinowsky) – Lou Ann's obstetrician, who agrees to see Turtle and helps Taylor realize the extent of the abuse Turtle suffered.

Mrs. Hoge – An old woman who owns the Broken Arrow, a motel in Oklahoma where Taylor works when she first finds Turtle. She wants her daughter-in-law, Irene, to lose weight and have a baby but dies of Parkinson's disease before that happens.

Irene – Mrs. Hoge's daughter-in-law, who is overweight. Irene loses weight and takes over the Broken Arrow motel when Mrs. Hoge dies.

Foster Greer – Taylor's father, an alcoholic who never even knew Taylor existed.

Harland Elleston – Taylor's mother's second husband. He is a kind man who works at the auto body and paint shop in Pittman County, Kentucky.

Jolene Shank – Newt Hardbine's wife, who is constantly pregnant and gets shot in the arm by Newt's father.

Bob Two Two – The Cherokee mechanic in Oklahoma who fixes Taylor's old car for an outrageously high price. Taylor later uses

his last name when Estevan and Esperanza need Oklahoman identities.

Lee Sing – The Chinese owner of a grocery store that Taylor and Lou Ann shop at in Tucson.

Bobby Bingo – An old man who sells vegetables in Taylor’s neighborhood in Tucson.

Fei – A vegan woman in Tucson with whom Taylor does not get along when she is looking for a place to stay.

La-Isha – A vegan woman in Tucson with whom Taylor does not get along when she is looking for a place to stay.

Timothy – a vegan man in Tucson with whom Taylor does not get along when she is looking for a place to stay.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FAMILY AND MOTHERHOOD

Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Bean Trees* follows Taylor’s attempts to raise her adopted daughter Turtle, focusing on what it takes to be a family and the alternative forms that family can take in the absence of the traditional mother-father-children family model. Taylor is fiercely protective of the small family she forms with Turtle, her best friend Lou Ann, and Lou Ann’s son Dwayne Ray in Tucson, Arizona as they all help each other “through hell and high water.” Taylor even figures out a way to legally adopt Turtle, not to prove that Turtle is a legitimate part of her family, but to protect the familial bond that she has already formed with Turtle from the reach of Child Protective Services. At the same time, the Guatemalan couple that poses as Turtle’s biological parents to aid Taylor in her adoption, must also learn to rebuild their family after the loss of their biological daughter in the Guatemalan Civil War that forced the couple to flee to the United States. Throughout the events of the novel, Kingsolver compares these families that *chose* each other, that chose to be families, to Lou Ann’s experience of the traditional family model, suggesting that the chosen families are actually more strongly connected through their willingness to help each other through anything.

While all family bonds are significant in the novel, the most important family role is that of motherhood. Kingsolver portrays many types of mothers, birth, adoptive and surrogate, as Taylor meets many women who help her raise Turtle as her own daughter. Though Taylor, and many of the other mothers in the novel, are not perfect, the mistakes that the mothers make

are largely overshadowed by Kingsolver’s descriptions of the love that mothers have for their children. Both Taylor and Lou Ann must come to terms with the intense responsibility of motherhood, eventually finding the joy and fulfillment in a role they initially did not want. As the two women learn to be mothers who unconditionally love their children, the way that Taylor’s own mother loves her, the novel argues that motherhood requires nothing more or less than a willingness to do anything for your child. What matters is not how a person becomes a mother, or inherits any other family role, but the commitment to keeping those relationships strong.



FEMINISM AND SOLIDARITY AMONG WOMEN

The Bean Trees, like many of Barbara Kingsolver’s novels, deals in an almost exclusively female world.

These strong, complex female characters drive the plot forward on their own, with little need for male characters. Indeed, the only male characters treated with sympathy are Estevan and Dwayne Ray—Estevan because he is emotionally sensitive and profoundly respectful of women and Dwayne Ray because as a baby and toddler he is too young to have internalized the male-dominated culture that Kingsolver sees in America. Taylor, raised by a single mother, sees no need for a male father figure in the makeshift family she forms for her daughter Turtle. Taylor refuses to let American society, especially the conservative sensibilities of her rural Kentucky hometown, limit what she can and can not do, working in the traditionally masculine fields of medicine and car repair in order to provide for Turtle. Further, Taylor and Lou Ann each take over aspects of traditionally masculine roles in the family, as Taylor teaches Lou Ann how to let go of the societal expectations of female bodies and the judgment passed on working mothers and helps Lou Ann become a truer version of herself in the process.

Aside from exposing the cultural pressure that dictates acceptable choices for women, the novel also exposes the multiple instances of outright misogyny that women face. Taylor is often dismissed or patronized by men in the novel, as Kingsolver comments on how women are rarely treated seriously in the workforce. Even worse, Turtle suffers sexual abuse at the hands of her extended family, something that Kingsolver refers to as the unfortunate birthright of being a woman. While some characters, like Estevan, are able to overcome the toxic culture that perpetuates this suffering, others, like Angel, cannot help but carry it out. In the face of gender inequality and injustice, *The Bean Trees* argues that women must support each other. Taylor and Lou Ann learn to lean on each other as they raise children with a better chance at equal gender relations, teaching Turtle to stand up for herself and Dwayne Ray to respect women.



NATURE

Kingsolver's background as a biologist and her intense love of nature are prominent throughout the novel. Aside from the many beautiful

descriptions of the landscapes around the characters, the characters themselves also love the natural world and find peace when they are in natural environments. Kingsolver continually affirms that humans are also animals, and therefore part of the environment in which they live. Taylor learns to integrate herself into the environment when she moves to Arizona. Though the flora and fauna in the desert are the polar opposite of the natural world in Taylor's original Kentucky home, Taylor is enchanted with the stark beauty of this new landscape. The animals that have adapted to the harsh desert or overcome the extra stresses that human cities put on natural resources in the desert provide inspiration for Taylor as she and Turtle learn to survive and thrive in this arid land despite the troubles they have faced. Taylor expresses Kingsolver's belief that modern human society has adversely affected natural ecosystems and begins to learn about the ways that humans have harmed the delicate balance of the desert and ways that humans can help return the earth to its natural rhythms. Kingsolver reverently describes the beauty and wonder of nature, as well as the harsh balances of life and death in the natural world, as she advocates for humans to become responsible stewards of the good and the bad in the environment.

More than simply rest and relaxation, natural spaces in the novel also offer cathartic experiences that begin to heal traumatic experiences from many characters' pasts. Turtle, though shell-shocked from the tragedies of her first years, takes an interest in gardening that helps her to slowly bridge the gap between human and natural worlds. Turtle's growth matches the growth of the **wisteria vines** that thrive in the poor soil of the Tucson desert. Turtle's rebirth into human society takes place at a **lake** as Turtle reenacts the burial of her mother. At the same lake, Taylor finally realizes how to gain legal custody of Turtle. Though the natural world is far from idyllic in Kingsolver's conception, it is still more perfect than the manmade institutions that have caused Taylor and Turtle, as well as Estevan and Esperanza, so much trouble in the novel. Taylor, Turtle, and the others need to spend regular time in natural environments in order to be happy and healthy. Kingsolver writes these natural scenes with an eye towards building awareness of the majesty of nature while convincing her readers that the natural world needs people who are committed to preserving that beauty for future generations.



DISASTER AND SURVIVAL

Though disasters and tragedies loom large in *The Bean Trees*, the novel also includes the ever-present hope of survival. Characters in the novel across all

social, economic, and political divides struggle with all manner of disasters, ranging from the personal loss of a family member, to the failure of national institutions, to the high number of natural disasters occurring with greater frequency around the globe. Kingsolver does not blame her characters for the disasters they face, instead condemning the isolation and competition of modern American life for making these problems even worse in recent times.

Given that disaster is unavoidable for all characters in *The Bean Trees*, Kingsolver examines the various ways that people can respond to disaster. Some characters, like Mattie and Esperanza, turn to religion as a way to make sense of a disordered world. Other survivors, like Lou Ann at points in the novel, begin to see the potential for disaster in all everyday situations, and feel hopeless or lost because of it. Still others, like Taylor, stay practical and form contingency plans to prepare for any disaster without becoming paranoid. Lou Ann's worries provide comic relief in the novel, whereas Taylor's knack for staying calm in a crisis save the family on multiple occasions. Taylor learns even more about surviving adversity from Estevan and Esperanza, while they remake their lives in America after making it out of the Guatemalan Civil War, and Turtle, who is resilient enough to bond with Taylor after the assault and abandonment she suffered at the hands of her birth family. These characters show Kingsolver's belief in the ability of people to recover from disaster and thrive, and even suggest that people who have survived disaster are more compassionate and better able to help other people who are in trouble.



BELONGING AND HOMELAND

The theme of belonging and homeland works on two levels within the novel. On a small scale, the novel's plot follows Taylor's struggles to find her true home. Unhappy with the classism and sexism of her rural Kentucky hometown, Taylor searches for a place that feels more comfortable. Through this search, Kingsolver points out that the place where a person is born is not necessarily where that person belongs. When Taylor settles in Arizona, she feels that she has found her new home both because of her own affinity for the desert landscape and the community that builds with the people of Tucson. Taylor's openness to the new culture and her appreciation and respect for the previous communities of Arizona allow her to make Arizona her new homeland.

On a large scale, the novel asks who truly "belongs" on American land. Though Taylor has Cherokee blood, she does not feel like she belongs on the territory that was stolen from Native American tribes, and believes that her adopted daughter Turtle, a full-blooded Cherokee child, deserves to live in America more than she does. Yet this idea of Native American connection to the land is complicated by the novel's setting in Arizona. This desert state is nothing like the ancestral

Cherokee homelands in Georgia, and furthermore has a vibrant Native American culture of its own that also experienced displacement. While Turtle's ancestry may be more "American" than Taylor's, neither of them truly "belongs" in Arizona.

After considering the history surrounding the acquisition of American land, Kingsolver then examines American hypocrisy regarding immigration in the 20th century. Though virtually all Americans (aside from Native American populations) are here thanks to the immigration of their ancestors, Kingsolver notes how some American citizens today feel strongly that new immigration should be stopped at all costs. Even though Estevan and Esperanza are in some ways more qualified to be American than Taylor, given Estevan's expert command of the English language as a teacher of English, their place in America is extremely tenuous. Though American settlers effectively invaded the southwest United States during the Gold Rush boom of the 1800s, the descendants of these American settlers now resent what they refer to as the "invasion" of Central Americans into the area. Kingsolver suggests that those who are against immigration to the United States should reevaluate what it means to be an American, and face up to their own family history as immigrants.

and new decisions for the characters. When Lou Ann receives a bottle of tug fork creek water to baptize her son Dwayne Ray, she realizes that she is no longer connected to her old home and needs to build her own family in Tucson. Yet when Angel pours that water out, Lou Ann starts to understand that she will not start that new life with him. Taylor has a similar experience watching the first rain of summer in Tucson, as she discovers her intense love for her new desert home, yet this rain also foreshadows Turtle's assault which makes Taylor question her place as Turtle's mother.

Finally, Taylor makes very important decisions while on lakes. While swimming with Estevan, Taylor first acknowledges her feelings for him. Then, while boating on the Lake of the Cherokees, Taylor says goodbye to that love and comes up with a plan for keeping Turtle for good. Throughout the novel, water is a sign of change for the characters – with all the good and bad consequences that those changes bring.



WISTERIA VINES (BEAN TREES) AND PLANTS

All plants are symbolically important in the novel, as the well-being of nature matches the well-being of the characters. Taylor is surprised to find an abundance of plants in the desert, just as she is surprised at the quality of her new life in Tucson. Taylor also sees flowers, like the night-blooming cereus flower, as good omens for her future. When she first starts talking, the only words Turtle speaks refer to vegetables, calling to mind the gardens in Tucson that are able to bridge the gap between man-made buildings and the wild bramble of nature.

Yet wisteria vines play a special symbolic role in their relation to Turtle's character development. Wisteria vines (or "bean trees," as Turtle calls them) are ugly looking plants at first, just as Turtle started the novel in a comatose, abused state. Yet the wisteria vines are also able to grow in poor soil where no other plants thrive. Turtle too comes back from her unfortunate infancy to become a vibrant little girl. At the end of the novel, Taylor learns that wisteria vines grow thanks to insects called rhizobia that create fertilizer for the plant. This mirrors the way that Turtle needed the support system of Taylor and their makeshift family in Tucson in order to grow.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperTorch edition of *The Bean Trees* published in 1998.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BIRDS

Birds serve as a symbol of freedom in the novel because of their ability to fly, but it is a delicate, vulnerable freedom. Birds represent the freedom of nature, but this freedom is threatened by the confines of modern life in an American city like Tucson. Roads kill birds, while houses trap them in places that they don't belong. Taylor mourns a blackbird killed on the side of the road and tries to release a trapped song sparrow from her kitchen at moments when the institutions of modern life are most threatening to Taylor's ability to hold on to her adopted daughter Turtle. Conversely, when Taylor hears bird song, the city of Tucson seems a friendlier, kinder place. In addition, the heroes of the novel are the characters who treat birds with kindness, as when Estevan stops his car to allow quail to pass. Through the relationships of these characters with the birds around them, the novel suggests that the natural freedom that birds represent can be harmed by humans, but also require human protection in order to survive and thrive.





WATER AND RAIN

Water in many forms symbolizes new realizations

Chapter 1 Quotes

☛☛ She had on this pink top that was loose so it could have gone either way, if you were pregnant or if you weren't. As far as I know, she wasn't just then. It had these little openings on the shoulders and bows on the sleeves, though of course it was shot to hell now.

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Jolene Shank

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 11


Explanation and Analysis

When Jolene comes into the hospital the first week that Taylor (then called Marietta) works there, Marietta focuses on the blood from Jolene's bullet wound getting on Jolene's shirt. Focusing on the damage done to the clothing rather than the damage done to Jolene's arm is indicative of Marietta's unique way of responding to disaster, as she never seems to worry about the things that other people are concerned with. Marietta is practical-minded enough to be able to worry about clothing in the midst of disaster, but also seems to lack empathy by minimizing Jolene's tragedy to its effect on her clothing.

Yet Kingsolver also uses this shirt as a metaphor for the female experience in the male-dominated American society that Marietta grew up in. The shirt is pink, a stereotypically female color, and is useful during pregnancy, the main female occupation in Marietta's experience of rural Kentucky. The bullet holes and blood stains on the shirt were caused by a man, through no fault of Jolene's. Marietta, another woman, is left to try to salvage the shirt, just as women in the novel must pull together to help each other after tragedy strikes. This experience is one of many that Marietta experiences that makes her wary of men and it is another incident that Kingsolver uses to expose the damage of misogyny and the necessity of women to protect each other.

☛☛ There were two things about Mama. One is that she expected the best out of me. And the other is that then no matter what I did... she acted like it was the moon I had just hung up in the sky and plugged in all the stars; Like I was that good.

Related Characters: Taylor's Mother, Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

The relationship built in Chapter 1 between Taylor and her mother forms a foundation for the rest of the family relationships built throughout the novel. Taylor's mother is her main source of strength, support, and confidence, though the two characters do not interact very much during the actual events of the novel. Taylor's mother has high standards for Taylor that force Taylor to leave their hometown in Pittman County, Kentucky, but Taylor's mother also gives Taylor the unconditional love and praise that she needs in order to meet those goals. Kingsolver suggests that this is the best way to mother, neither stifling one's children or neglecting them. Taylor may have run away from home, in one sense, but she is not running from her family. The mark of Taylor's mother's success as a mother is the fact that Taylor is able to leave and accomplish her goals, rather than staying stuck in Pittman county dependent on her family. Taylor models her own experiences as a mother off of this example.

☛☛ She put her hands where the child's shoulders might be, under all that blanket, and pushed it gently back into the seat, trying to make it belong there. She looked at it for a long time. Then she closed the door and walked away. As I watched her I was thinking that she wasn't really round. Without the child and the blanket she walked away from my car a very thin woman.

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Turtle (April)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

The circumstances through which Taylor becomes Turtle's mother are surreal and unexpected, as Turtle's biological aunt simply places Turtle in Taylor's car while Taylor is stopped at a gas station. Taylor had been extremely against becoming a young mother, fleeing her home town in order to escape that fate but ironically falling into this family role because she went on the road. Yet though Turtle's aunt has to "make it [Turtle] belong" in Taylor's car, the two actually do belong together by the end of the novel. Kingsolver's

novel argues that the bonds of family can be created through experiences rather than pure blood ties.

Turtle's aunt also portrays both the burden and the fulfillment that Kingsolver sees in motherhood. The aunt appears round when she is carrying Turtle, a behavior that symbolizes both fatness due to wealth and prosperity, and the societal expectation that women become overweight and unattractive when they become mothers. In the poverty-stricken environment of Taylor's youth, thinness means starvation rather than beauty.

☝ The Indian child was a girl. A girl, poor thing. That fact had already burdened her short life with a kind of misery I could not imagine. I thought I knew about every ugly thing that one person does to another, but I had never even thought about such things being done to a baby girl.

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Turtle (April)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 31



Explanation and Analysis

When Taylor finally gets Turtle to a bath after the small child is dropped off in her car at a gas station in the middle of Oklahoma, Taylor realizes that the child is a girl and that she has been severely physically and sexually abused. These incidents are unfortunately fairly common in the United States, and often this abuse is explicitly tied to the child's gender. Furthermore, Kingsolver also mentions Turtle's Cherokee heritage, suggesting that the poverty and lack of opportunities on the Native American Reservation also played a role in Turtle's abuse. Kingsolver points out that, in certain places and environments, simply being born female can cause a lifetime of mistreatment. Taylor, meanwhile, cannot imagine this type of abuse because her mother raised her with such love and care. This is why Taylor's duty as Turtle's mother, to teach Turtle to stand up for herself and other women, is so important.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ "Feeding a girl is like feeding the neighbor's New Year Pig. All that work. In the end, it goes to some other family." Lou Ann felt offended, but didn't really know how to answer. She was a long way from her own family in Kentucky, but she didn't see this as being entirely her fault.

Related Characters: Lee Sing, Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Lou Ann Ruiz

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Lee Sing presents another cultural viewpoint on women, which is just as misogynistic as the rural American culture that Taylor and Lou Ann experience growing up. Lee Sing predicts that Lou Ann's baby will be a girl, then laments that Lou Ann will have to do all the work of raising her daughter just to "give" that daughter away to another family when it comes time to marry. Lou Ann herself has married a Mexican man and moved to Tucson with him rather than staying close to her family in Kentucky, but is offended at the thought that she was "wasted effort" to her family. In both the Chinese and American cultures, Kingsolver suggests, girls are not respected as valid people. The girls are then blamed for not staying close to a family that never appreciated them for their merits. At this point, Lou Ann sees these injustices but has no idea how to confront them or change them.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ By this time, I had developed a name for the child, at least for the time being. I called her Turtle, on account of her grip. She still wasn't talking but she knew her name about as far as a cat ever does, which means that when you said it she would look up if she was in the right mood.

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Turtle (April)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 48-49

Explanation and Analysis



Taylor names the Native American child that was given to her Turtle, because Turtle has a very strong grip like a mud turtle, which has an extremely strong jaw. At this point, Turtle seems to have retreated to the animal world after experiencing horrible abuse at the hands of her human family. Taylor's name for Turtle, and her description of Turtle as cat-like, reveal both that Taylor has an immense respect for animals and that she chooses to meet her child on Turtle's own terms. Turtle's name does not come from the

shyness or slowness often negatively associated with turtles, but from the strong grip. Taylor clearly admires these turtles for their ability to hold on, and hopes that Turtle will be able to hang on despite the hard start to her life.

Taylor does not take the fact that Turtle doesn't talk and doesn't always answer to her name as a sign that Turtle is not smart, simply explaining that Turtle must be clearly choosing when she wants to answer and when she doesn't. Taylor also does not blame Turtle for choosing not to engage with the human world that has caused her so much harm already. Taylor will give Turtle the space, support, and praise that she needs to reenter the human world when she is ready, and let her take solace in the natural world as long as she chooses to.

“I never could figure out why men thought they could impress a woman by making the world out to be such a big dangerous deal. I mean, we've got to live in the exact same world every damn day of the week, don't we?”

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis


When Taylor stops for gas for the first time in Arizona, she meets a man at the gas station who insists on warning Taylor about a tarantula they see on the ground and the special kind of poison that the tarantula carries. Taylor, naturally distrustful of men, does not believe that tarantulas actually release poison, and wonders to herself why men always feel the need to scare women. In Taylor's perspective, raised by a single mother who was far more capable of taking care of a child than any man in her hometown, women are just as qualified to assess the dangers of the world and deal with them without male help. Taylor completely rejects the idea that women need men to keep them safe, or indeed that women need men at all. She resents the ways that men seem to exaggerate the danger of the world in order to force women not to live their lives as fully as possible. Admittedly, Taylor does not yet understand how dangerous the world can actually be, but the novel makes it clear that this naïve bravery is due to her youth and inexperience and that her gender will not stop her from continuing to face the world head on. Taylor's

attitude about female independence also shows in the way that she raises Turtle without any male figures at all.

“You know, your little girl doesn't look a thing like you,” ... “She's not really mine,” I said. “She's just somebody I got stuck with.”

Sandi looked at both of us, her elbow cocked on her hip and the salad tongs frozen in midair. “Yeah, I know exactly what you mean.”

Related Characters: Sandi, Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Turtle (April)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Soon after Taylor and Turtle move to Tucson, Taylor makes friends with Sandi, an employee at the fast food restaurant where Taylor eats most of her meals to cut down on costs. Sandi is another example of young motherhood in the novel, doing her best to take care of her son with a minimum wage job and no family support. Sandi notices that Taylor and Turtle don't look related, unlike her own son who looks exactly like her with blond hair. Taylor explains that she got “stuck with” Turtle, and Sandi identifies with the feeling. The novel often asserts the worth of all types of families by showing how alternative families like Taylor's are just as loving and committed as biological families. Here, it takes the opposite tactic and argues that biological families can feel just as arbitrary as alternative families.

Even though Sandi is a biological mother and Taylor is an adoptive mother, the two still share similar feelings about their children. Sandi feels as though she got “stuck” with her son, because no matter how much she loves him, he has still added an amount of difficulty to her life that she did not ask for. Sandi will do anything to give her son a good life, including working at a fast food restaurant that she hates, but that doesn't mean that this is the right life for Sandi or the life that she wanted. Sandi takes on the challenges of single motherhood with resourceful cheer, but she still has doubts. Using Sandi as a comparison allows Taylor to also have doubts without losing sight of the fact that Taylor is a real mother – no matter how she got “stuck” with her child.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ He moved around in there for quite a while before he said anything to Lou Ann, and it struck her that his presence was different from the feeling of women filling up the house. He could be there, or not, and it hardly made any difference. Like a bug or a mouse scratching in the cupboards at night – you could get up and chase after it, or just go back to sleep and let it be. That was good, she decided.

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer), Lou Ann Ruiz (speaker), Angel Ruiz

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 84-85

Explanation and Analysis

After Lou Ann's family leaves from their visit helping Lou Ann take care of her newborn son, her husband, Angel, returns to pack up his stuff and move back out. Lou Ann then explains the difference between Angel's presence in the house and her mother and grandmother's presence in the house: her female family members fill the house while Angel leaves it still empty. Lou Ann compares Angel to an animal, rather than another human being in the house. To Lou Ann, at least, women offer companionship to other women, but men are not even the same species. Even if Lou Ann were to try to communicate with Angel, he wouldn't understand, and Lou Ann would just have to "chase" after him rather than talk to him as equals. Lou Ann decides that this is a good thing, growing up as she did with a mother and grandmother who kept each other from getting lonely both while Lou Ann's father was alive and after he died. It is only once Lou Ann meets Taylor that she feels true companionship.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ "So one time when I was working in this motel one of the toilets leaked and I had to replace the flapper ball. Here's what it said on the package; I kept it till I knew it by heart: 'Please Note. Parts are included for all installations, but no installation requires all of the parts.' That's kind of my philosophy about men. I don't think there's an installation out there that could use all of my parts."

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

As Taylor tries to convince Lou Ann not to mourn the departure of her husband, Angel, Taylor gives the analogy that men are like toilet bowl installations. Taylor has experience with fixing toilets because she once worked in a hotel called the Broken Arrow in Oklahoma, soon after she found Turtle. Taylor doesn't feel like a traditional romantic relationship between a man and a woman would ever fulfill all the various parts of her identity as a woman. Taylor has felt constrained by traditional female roles throughout the novel, whether that be in her job or in her family. Even the metaphor that Taylor uses has a decidedly masculine tone, as plumbing is usually seen to be a man's job. Taylor questions the idea that women need a man to be complete.

☞ "I'll tell you one thing," Lou Ann said. "when something was bugging Angel, he'd never of stayed up half the night with me talking and eating everything that wasn't nailed down. You're not still mad, are you?" I held up two fingers. "Peace, sister."

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer), Lou Ann Ruiz (speaker), Angel Ruiz

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis


Soon after Lou Ann and Taylor start to room together, Taylor takes on the "father" role in the family by going to work and coming home grumpy, while Lou Ann takes the "mother" role by staying home with the kids and trying to keep Taylor happy. Yet instead of perpetuating this dynamic, Taylor quickly becomes uncomfortable with the standard gender roles that they are falling into and decides to talk to Lou Ann about how they can keep up a more equitable arrangement in the house. Lou Ann can't believe that Taylor is treating her with such respect, commenting that her husband, Angel, would never have tried to solve a problem by talking. Kingsolver presents this night of talking things out as a hallmark of healthy female relationships, a point which Taylor underscores by calling Lou Ann "sister." Relationships between women in the novel have a chance of being fair, whereas relationships between men and women are usually unequal. Even if the family of two women and their children is less conventional than the family with a mother and a father, Lou Ann is far better off living with

Taylor than she ever was living with Angel.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ This whole conversation had started with a rhyme he used to help his students remember how to pronounce English vowels...Lou Ann and I had already told him three or four times that he spoke better English than the two of us combined.

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Estevan, Lou Ann Ruiz

Related Themes: 



Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

One of the defining traits of Estevan's character is his command of the English language, even though it is not his first or even his second language. When he first comes to America, Estevan's English skills are a necessary part of his survival, but they are also an important sign that he truly belongs in this country. Lou Ann and Taylor stand out because of their Kentucky accents, meaning that Estevan actually fits in better in Tucson than they do. Estevan has put years of effort into perfecting his English, while Lou Ann and Taylor have never put much thought into their speaking patterns. This parallels the way that those born in the United States take their place in this country for granted, while immigrants must fight to prove that they belong here.

☝☝ Mrs. Parsons said, "And is this naked creature one of theirs? She looks like a little wild Indian." She was talking about Turtle, who was not naked, although she didn't exactly have a shirt on... "She's mine," I said. "And she is a wild Indian, as a matter of fact."

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Turtle (April), Virgie Mae Parsons

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

When Taylor invites Estevan and Esperanza, a Guatemalan refugee couple, and her neighbors Edna Poppy and Virgie Parsons over for dinner, Virgie's stiff and formal version of good etiquette rubs Taylor the wrong way. The final straw

comes when Virgie passes judgment on Turtle as a "wild Indian," invoking the harmful stereotype of Native Americans as "savages" who need to be civilized. She furthermore mistakes Turtle for Estevan and Esperanza's daughter, letting the color of Estevan and Esperanza's skin convince her that the couple is somehow savage as well. Kingsolver uses Virgie to explain the viewpoint of many white Americans about their ownership of American land. These people believe that they belong in America and therefore have the privilege of deciding what behavior is acceptable here and who is allowed to belong here. They are not in favor of granting sanctuary to refugees, thinking that these immigrants are just adding more wild children to America rather than contributing anything positive. Virgie means "Indian" as an insult, but Taylor reclaims that word to insist that Turtle is an Indian, and therefore belongs in America more than Virgie does.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ "You are poetic, mi'ija."

"What's miha?"

"Mi hija," he pronounced it slowly.

"My something?"

"My daughter. But it doesn't work the same in English. We say it to friends. You would call me mi'ijo."

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Estevan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 158



Explanation and Analysis

Estevan and Taylor grow close as they talk before work at Mattie's tire shop. Estevan finds Taylor's rural colloquialisms to be poetic, a sign of how easily he accepts the good points of other cultures. Just like Taylor earns the right to belong in Tucson because she accepts the desert on its own terms, Estevan belongs in America because he comes to this country with an open heart and mind. He also shares an aspect of his culture, calling Taylor "mi hija", Spanish for "my daughter." Unlike American English, Estevan's Guatemalan Spanish has a way to casually consider friends like family. Taylor has been building a family out of her friends, including Lou Ann and Estevan, but had no way to refer to this in the language that she knew. Estevan shows her that the boundaries between friends and family do not have to be so rigid. Kingsolver points out that this chosen form of family is even more meaningful to Taylor.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ But poor Scotty with his electricity and his trigonometry, he just didn't belong to any group. It was like we were all the animals on Noah's ark that came in pairs, except of his kind there was only the one.

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

When Estevan comes over to tell Taylor the sad news that his wife, Esperanza, has attempted suicide, Taylor begins to think of a boy she knew in high school who committed suicide on his 16th birthday. Taylor describes this sad event as a product of Scotty's loneliness. As in the biblical story of Noah where all the animals survived a great flood because Noah collected two of each animal and put them on a huge boat until the water was gone, Scotty did not have a mate and therefore could not survive the inevitable disasters of life. Humans, just like animals, need to belong to each other in order to be happy and healthy. Scotty had no group or clique to belong to at his high school. Without a family to depend on, Scotty was not able to survive. This parallels Turtle's failure to thrive when she lived with her abusive birth family and underscores the incredible importance of family connections in the novel.

☞ "You think you're the foreigner here, and I'm the American, and I just look the other way while the President or somebody sends down this and that . . . to torture people with. But nobody asked my permission, okay? Sometimes I feel like I'm a foreigner, too."

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Estevan

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis


When Estevan comes to Taylor's house with the bad news that his wife Esperanza is in the hospital for attempted suicide, he and Taylor stay up late into the night drinking and talking about their backgrounds. Estevan, a Guatemalan refugee who had to flee Guatemala due to persecution of

the teachers' union, educates Taylor on the atrocities the Guatemalan government enacted and the support that this administration had from the American government. Taylor balks at the guilt that she feels for these events, as an American who has little to no say in what the American government chooses to do. Though Taylor is American by birth, she disagrees with the values that are associated with this American identity. She therefore feels just as foreign in that type of American environment as Estevan does in the country. While Estevan desperately wants to belong to America so that he can be safe, Taylor explores the unfortunate consequences of automatically belonging to a place that doesn't always feel like home.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☞ "It's terrible to lose somebody," I said, "I mean, I don't know firsthand, but I can imagine it must be. But it's also true that some people never have anybody to lose, and I think that's got to be so much worse."

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Ismene, Esperanza

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis


After Esperanza attempts suicide, Taylor goes to speak with Esperanza while she is recovering in Mattie's office. Taylor wants to convince Esperanza that she still has much to live for, even if Esperanza has lost so much with the raid against her family in Guatemala, the loss of her daughter Ismene, and her refugee status in America. Yet, by Taylor's own admission, Taylor herself does not know what it is like to deal with that sort of tragedy. Taylor has to learn from Esperanza how to keep going after the many tragedies that have marked her life.

With the little that Taylor does know about loss, she reminds Esperanza of the bonds that she has with her family that made it so hard to lose them in the first place. This underscores the importance of family in the novel. It was far better for Esperanza to have Ismene, and experience the joy of family and motherhood for a short while, than to never have it at all. Kingsolver maintains that humans need to be connected to other people in order to be truly happy, even if that means running the risk of losing them.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☛ ...If somebody offered to show me a picture of Dwayne Ray in the year 2001, I swear I wouldn't look."
 "Well, nobody's going to," I said gently, "so you don't have to worry about it. There's no such thing as dream angels. Only in the Bible, and that was totally another story."

Related Characters: Lou Ann Ruiz, Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Dwayne Ray

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 210-211

Explanation and Analysis


Lou Ann and Taylor bond over their shared experience as new mothers, but Taylor often gets frustrated with how much Lou Ann worries that Dwayne Ray will fall victim to some disaster. Lou Ann's preoccupation with disaster is her defining character trait for much of the novel, as her father's death and her family's superstitious outlook on life have caused her to look for danger everywhere. Yet Taylor insists that worrying about all the possible disasters is a waste of effort that won't help the young women deal with disaster when it actually happens. Taylor often references Christianity as a place that people look to for comfort during a disaster, but she usually seems skeptical that this religious belief will help either. Here, Taylor suggests that "dream angels" are only real in the Bible, an alternate reality where anything can happen that does not have much to do with the real world that she and Lou Ann have to live in. Kingsolver seems to agree that there are a lot of terrible things that can happen to a child, considering her frank portrayal of Turtle's sexual abuse or the hardships that the Guatemalan refugee children face. Yet the proper response to these dangers is not to make up "dream angels" that warn Lou Ann of all the possible things that might happen to Dwayne Ray, or retreat to asking help from other sources, but to face up to these events when they come and deal with them as best as one can.


Chapter 12 Quotes

☛ I wasn't really afraid, but there is something about seeing a snake that makes your stomach tighten, no matter how you make up your mind to feel about it. "Fair's fair," Mattie pointed out, as we skirted a wide path around the tree. "Everybody's got her own mouths to feed."

Related Characters: Mattie, Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer)

(speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

Taylor and Mattie are walking back from watching the first rain of summer come in when they hear a rattlesnake in a tree. Mattie tells Taylor that the snake is probably climbing to get birds' eggs to eat. Taylor attempts to stay as calm as Mattie, but can't help feeling scared of the snake. The novel certainly celebrates nature, but it does not shy away from the harsh stakes of the natural world. Throughout the novel, birds have been a symbol of the vulnerable parts of nature that need protection. Taylor wants the natural world to be fair according to her desires, helping the underdog live and giving a break to the weaker animals. But Mattie knows that the animals that eat birds' eggs deserve to live too. It is easy to try to paint the snake as a villain because it is a scary animal, but humans who truly care for nature have to remember that the snake is simply trying to feed its own babies and is not truly acting maliciously. In the natural world, things that seem unjust according to human sensibilities are actually the truly "natural" outcome. It is the human responsibility to protect all facets of nature and not interfere with the aspects that seem wrong to us.

☛ "Well, don't feel like the Lone Ranger," she said. "Nobody is."

Related Characters: Lou Ann Ruiz, Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

After Turtle is assaulted in Roosevelt Park because Edna accidentally kept her out after nightfall, Turtle returns to the non-responsive state that Taylor originally found her in and Taylor starts to question her own fitness as a mother. Lou Ann gets angry at Taylor, wondering why she would consider abandoning her child like that. When Lou Ann finally confronts Taylor, Taylor confesses how worried she is about keeping a child safe in such a dangerous world. Lou Ann's answer refers to the Lone Ranger, a cowboy character

who famously worked alone while he crossed the frontier of the United States. While this lone wolf attitude may have worked for the cowboy hero, it is the exact opposite of what the responsibilities of motherhood require. Taylor has to remember that she isn't raising Turtle on her own, even if she is a single mother. She has Taylor, Mattie, and countless others supporting her as she supports Turtle. Moreover, every mother has to have some sort of human support system in order to survive and help their children. These family connections are the most important human bonds in the novel, as the characters step up to help each other again and again through disaster and tragedy.

Chapter 13 Quotes

“But the problem is that you have no legitimate claim. A verbal agreement with a relative isn't good enough. You can't prove to the police that it happened that way. That you didn't kidnap her, for instance, or that the relatives weren't coerced.”
 “No, I can't prove anything. I don't understand what you're getting at. If I don't have a legal claim on Turtle, I don't see where anybody else does either.”

Related Characters: Cynthia, Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

After Turtle is assaulted, Cynthia, a social worker, gets involved with the family to try and help Turtle recover from the incident, but she unfortunately learns that Taylor doesn't actually have any official documentation that she is Turtle's mother. Taylor explains how she was given Turtle, but Cynthia insists that the verbal agreement is not proper claim for the state of Arizona. Taylor and Cynthia have very different definitions of what constitutes family. In Cynthia's mind, all the legal documentation must be there in order to ensure that the child is with her “legitimate” family. Yet from Taylor's perspective, Taylor is the only one who is remotely interested in caring for Turtle. Therefore, Taylor is the only possible choice for Turtle's mother, no matter what the blood or legal relationships are. Taylor doesn't understand why Cynthia cannot make her definition of family more fluid so that Turtle can live with someone who loves her.

The novel shows again and again that family is the people you choose to treat like family, regardless of what is considered family from a legal perspective. Alternative

families like the adoptive family Taylor gives to Turtle are just as good, if not better than the birth family that Cynthia seems to think that Turtle deserves. While Kingsolver sympathizes somewhat with Cynthia's job, as Cynthia has to do her due diligence for Turtle and Turtle's birth family, the family bond that Turtle has formed with Taylor is the highest priority of the novel.

“You're asking yourself, Can I give this child the best possible upbringing and keep her out of harm's way her whole life long? The answer is no, you can't. But nobody else can either... Nobody can protect a child from the world. That's why it's the wrong thing to ask, if you're really trying to make a decision.”

“So what's the right thing to ask?”

“Do I want to try? Do I think it would be interesting, maybe even enjoyable in the long run, to share my life with this kid and give her my best effort and maybe, when all's said and done, end up with a good friend?”

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer), Mattie (speaker), Turtle (April)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

After Turtle is assaulted in the park, Taylor begins to question whether she is even fit to be Turtle's adoptive mother. Taylor goes to Mattie for advice on whether she should fight to keep Turtle or give Turtle up to be brought up by the state. Mattie reinforces the idea that no mother is perfect, telling Taylor that these bad things that have happened to Turtle are not her fault or her responsibility. The important thing that Taylor can give is her “best effort” in sharing her life with Turtle. This view of motherhood deals with both mother and child as individuals, and suggests that each has just as much to offer the other. Approaching Turtle as a “friend” means that Taylor can learn from Turtle how to be a good mother, rather than worrying about protecting Turtle from the world or becoming the perfect mother for Turtle overnight.

Chapter 14 Quotes

“A human being can be good or bad or right or wrong, maybe. But how can you say a person is illegal? You just can't. That's all there is to it.”

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Esperanza, Estevan

Related Themes: 



Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

Estevan and Esperanza are refugees from Guatemala who have entered the United States without the proper documentation, making them “illegal” in the eyes of many Americans. Taylor, growing up in rural Kentucky, had no strong feelings on the subject of immigration, or whether immigrants truly belonged in America. Yet as Taylor continues to get to know Estevan, she becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the thought that anyone of Estevan’s warmth, intelligence, and kindness should be barred from living in the United States. Taylor argues that people should be judged as people, not as dehumanized “illegals.” The question of who is legally allowed to be American or live on American land should also be a more individualized process, rather than painting large populations of people as illegal and nothing more.

☝ “That looks beautiful,” I said. “That’s the Cherokee Nation?”
 “Part of it,” she said. “It’s real big. The Cherokee Nation isn’t any one place exactly. It’s people. We have our own government and all.”

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

When Taylor returns to Oklahoma, she finds that the bar where she first received Turtle is under completely new management. While talking to the girl behind the counter of the bar-turned-café, Taylor also finds out that the wasteland she thought was Cherokee Nation is actually just the tip of this land. True Cherokee Nation is a natural paradise with beautiful lakes, somewhere that the Cherokee people can now be proud of even though they were forced here against their will. The girl also points out that part of what makes Cherokee Nation Cherokee is that it belongs to the people. Taylor has struggled with the question of where she belongs throughout the novel, moving from her hometown in Kentucky to a new home in Tucson, Arizona. Taylor had

been basing her home on the location that she appreciated most, but the girl helps her see that home is the place where there are people who you belong with.

On a larger scale, the Cherokee Nation also has its own government, meaning that it can dictate who belongs on Cherokee land and who does not. As the novel follows Turtle, Estevan, and Esperanza, all indigenous people who have been pushed out of their homes, the novel celebrates this example of Native Americans taking back the control of a land that should have belonged to them before immigrants from Europe took the American land for themselves. While Cherokee Nation may not be on the land that the Cherokee tribe originally lived on, Oklahoma is now where the Cherokee people live. This means that the land belongs to them.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝ Here were a mother and her daughter, nothing less. A mother and child – in a world that could barely be bothered with mothers and children – who were going to be taken apart. Everybody believed it. Possibly Turtle believed it. I did.

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Turtle (April), Esperanza

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

When Taylor can’t find any of Turtle’s relatives in order to try and legally adopt Turtle, she asks the Guatemalan couple Estevan and Esperanza to pose as Turtle’s parents in order to fake an adoption. Over the course of the novel, Esperanza and Turtle have grown very close, partly due to their similar looks and personalities, as well as the fact that Esperanza has lost her biological daughter and Turtle has lost her biological mother. By the time the little group reaches Oklahoma, Esperanza and Turtle have seemed to use each other to fill the void that their lost blood relations left in their lives. At the public notary’s office, Esperanza and Turtle say a truly heart-wrenching goodbye as they draw up the adoption papers. Their relationship is no longer false in any sense of the word, and they are truly family in that moment right before they will be separated. This chance to say a proper goodbye gives both Turtle and Esperanza closure on the previous tragedies where they were denied that opportunity.



The bond of motherhood is sacred in the novel, and one of


the most significant influences in a child's life. Even though society at large can "barely be bothered" about this bond, Kingsolver continues to uphold this value as the highest calling for any mother. Taylor, believing in the bond that Esperanza and Turtle have made, dedicates herself to becoming the mother that Turtle deserves, now that she has had to say goodbye to two mothers – her birth mother and Esperanza.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ The wisteria vines on their own would just barely get by, is how I explained it to Turtle, but put them together with rhizobia and they make miracles.

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Turtle (April)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 305

Explanation and Analysis

Turtle and Taylor go to Oklahoma so that Taylor can gain legal custody of Turtle. While waiting for the public notary to file the papers, Taylor takes Turtle to the public library and looks up wisteria vines, Turtle's favorite plant back home in Tucson. Throughout the book, Turtle has been compared to the wisteria vines, which are ugly plants on first glance that blossom into beautiful flowers when they are ready. This is yet another example of how human beings are shown to be a part of the natural systems around them. Now, Taylor finds out another reason that Turtle is like a wisteria vine. Turtle grew up in very poor conditions, losing her biological mother and living with an abusive aunt and uncle in poverty. Yet wisteria vines are able to thrive in poor soil thanks to the helpful rhizobia bug that fertilizes the dirt, just as Turtle is able to grow strong thanks to the help of

Taylor and her other adoptive family members. Kingsolver extends this metaphor to all the characters of her book, all of whom need the help of other people in order to live healthily and happily.

☝☝ She watched the dark high-way and entertained me with her vegetable-soup song, except that now there were people mixed in with the beans and potatoes: Dwayne Ray, Mattie, Esperanza, Lou Ann and all the rest. And me. I was the main ingredient.

Related Characters: Taylor Greer (Marietta Greer) (speaker), Turtle (April)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 312

Explanation and Analysis

After Taylor gains legal custody of Turtle in Oklahoma, the two drive back to their home in Tucson. Turtle, who has had trouble connecting with other people due to the abuse she suffered with her biological family, is finally able to engage with the other members of her new-found family. Previously, Turtle only said the names of vegetables as a way to show how much more comfortable Turtle was with the natural world instead of human society. Now instead of talking about vegetables in the ground, Taylor describes Turtle's speech as a "vegetable-soup" that can nourish people and help them grow.

Taylor too was uncomfortable with the new family that she had formed with Turtle, Lou Ann, and Dwayne Ray, because she didn't feel like she truly belonged as Turtle's mother. But now that Taylor has learned that Turtle loves her best, making her the "main ingredient" in her soup, Taylor can feel secure as Turtle's mother. Their family may not be conventional, but it is the best thing for Taylor and Turtle to come home to.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: THE ONE TO GET AWAY

The narrator begins the novel by telling a story from her past. The father of Newt Hardbine, a boy from the narrator's rural hometown, overfilled a tire and was thrown over the building in the resulting explosion. The narrator feels bad for Newt in the wake of this family tragedy even though they are not friends. The Hardbines are a family at about the same low economic status as the narrator and her mother, but the narrator like to think that she and her mother have much more class. The narrator hopes she will be the one down-on-her-luck kid to get out of their small town in Pittman County, Kentucky.

The narrator introduces herself as Marietta, but says that everyone just called her Missy. This nickname came from Marietta's childhood demand that people call her Miss Marietta, the way that she had to address the well-off children that she and her mother cleaned for as Miss or Mister. Marietta explains that her mother often supported Marietta's wishes, even when they seemed odd. When Marietta took up fishing, her mother praised even the smallest fish that she caught.

While in high school, Newt drops out of school to work with his father and marries a girl he gets pregnant. Marietta explains that this is the best that anyone expects of a Hardbine, but that she herself was determined to finish high school. Marietta does not want to be "barefoot and pregnant" like the majority of the other girls in her grade. Marietta makes it to her senior year without incident.

During her senior year, Marietta's science teacher is an attractive young man named Mr. Hughes Walter. All the girls in Marietta's grade swoon over him, but Marietta likes him because he gets her a job. Mr. Walter's wife needs an assistant at the Pittman County Hospital, a job that Marietta feels unqualified for but desperately wants.

The narrator and her mother do not belong in this small town, and the narrator wants to leave as soon as possible, starting the search for a new home that drives much of the novel's plot. This section also introduces the narrator's fear of disaster, in the form of exploding tires. She will experience much more disaster through the course of the novel and her character will be defined by how she deals with these tragedies.



Marietta, though poor, believes that she is just as good as the richer families in her hometown. Marietta will go on to question other social hierarchies, including those of race and sex, just like she disrupts the economic hierarchy here in Pittman. Marietta's mother is a very important source of support and confidence for Marietta, and is Marietta's template for a good mother.



Newt becomes Marietta's foil, or complete opposite, as he and his young wife live out the type of choices that Marietta could have made if her mother had not supported her ambitions. Marietta suggests that other people's expectations for one's future play a large role in their development, and that she is lucky to have had a mother who allows her to excel.



Marietta seems to have no interest in the "feminine" pursuits that occupy most of her classmates. Instead she has career ambitions, specifically a job in the stereotypically male-dominated field of medicine. Though Marietta does not label this as feminism, she certainly lives out the ideals of equality between the genders.



Marietta tells her mother about her job insecurities while the two shuck peas on their front porch. Her mother responds that Marietta is just as qualified as all the other, richer kids in her class. Marietta describes the bright colors of the **flowers** on their front porch, explaining that she and her mother both like to wear these flashy colors as well.

Marietta and her mother shuck peas while they talk, a subtle reminder of their connection to agriculture and taking care of the land. They are both literally and figuratively more grounded than the richer residents of their hometown. Marietta's mother continues to bolster Marietta's self-confidence in the face of the limiting social codes Kingsolver describes in rural Kentucky. Even the clothes the two women wear have bright colors, which helps them stand out rather than blend into the background the way that women in Pittman County are "supposed" to.



As Marietta and her mother continue shucking peas, Marietta describes her mother as someone who has put her wild times behind her. Marietta's father, a man named Foster Greer, was an alcoholic who left before Marietta was born because he didn't want to settle down with a child. Now Marietta's mother focuses on raising her daughter, and convinces Marietta to ask Mr. Walter for the job. Marietta assumes that one of the more attractive girls will have already gotten the job, but makes up her mind to ask Mr. Walter after school the next day.

Marietta's mother was not always perfect, as evidenced by her wild experiences with Marietta's alcoholic father. But Kingsolver shows that these mistakes don't stop Marietta's mother from being a wonderful mother, because she puts her child first. This starts during the pregnancy when Marietta's mother puts aside her own relationships and focuses on her daughter rather than pining for Marietta's father, and continues to the present day as Marietta's mother pushes her to work towards her ambition even though it might be difficult due to Marietta's class and gender. Significantly, though Marietta gives her father's name, she does not mention her mother's. This suggests a special closeness, as naming her father makes him seem like a more distant individual, separate from Marietta's life.



Marietta stays after school to ask Mr. Walter if the hospital assistant position is still available. She is shocked to find out that she is the first girl to talk to Mr. Walter about the opportunity, because she knows that the other girls in her grade all daydream about getting Mr. Walter alone. Marietta gets the job and starts working in the lab under Eddie Rickett, as it turns out Mr. Walter's wife was actually looking for an assistant in the hospital lab. Marietta counts platelets in blood samples and delivers human waste samples. Eddie, the head supervisor of the hospital laboratory, has a practical, no nonsense demeanor that Marietta appreciates.

Marietta again distances herself from the stereotypical female by going after this opportunity rather than dreaming about seducing Mr. Walter. Marietta's thoughts about these other girls are tinged with contempt, as Marietta seems not to understand why the other girls wouldn't want more than the domestic life awaiting them. Her job in the hospital is not glamorous, but it is intensely satisfying to Marietta. She also displays an "unfeminine" appreciation for her boss's brusque, direct manner.



A week after Marietta starts her job in the lab at the Hospital, orderlies come in to warn that Hardbine trouble is coming in and that one is alive and the other is dead. Newt Hardbine's wife, Jolene, shows up first. She has blood pouring out of a bullet wound in her shoulder and is yelling hysterically at Newt to stop fighting with his father. The doctors patch Jolene's arm as best they can, while Marietta tries to clean up her clothing and calm her down. Then the orderlies wheel in another stretcher with a sheet over a body. Marietta slowly realizes that Newt's dead body is on the second stretcher.

Marietta falls back on the traditionally feminine duties of cleaning and soothing when confronted with a crisis, as Kingsolver points out that these gender roles harden into habits that are hard to break. Marietta has struggled to escape the traditional occupations that await women in Pittman County, and the emergency before her takes too much energy on its own for Marietta to keep up her efforts to reject these stereotypes.



Marietta stays with Jolene, as Jolene continues to babble about what happened. Marietta wonders what it would be like to be Jolene, sleeping around in high school just to prove that she could and getting pregnant with Newt's child at a young age. Jolene, in shock from the incident, finally manages to articulate the story: Newt's father had been physically abusive for years and Newt finally fought back. Newt's father tried to shoot Newt, eventually killing Newt and shooting Jolene in the arm. Marietta tries to understand why Jolene married into Newt's family in the first place, but Jolene simply says that her own father always expected her to be a slut and Newt was available to help that come true. Marietta counts herself lucky not to have a father.

After the incident with the Hardbines, Marietta thinks that she is not cut out to work in a hospital. But as she tells her mother about the day's events that night at dinner, she decides that she has probably seen the worst that will happen and might as well continue to work there. Marietta's mother is immensely proud of her. Marietta comments that her mother was proud of everything she ever did.

Marietta keeps her job at the Pittman County Hospital for five and a half years. But she has a plan to get out of rural Kentucky: saving what she can to buy a used car. Marietta's mother insists that Marietta has to learn to change a tire if she is going to drive an old car. Marietta sees the sense in this lesson, and changes all the tires even though she is terrified that the tires will blow up just like they did with Newt's father.

Marietta finally saves up enough to buy the used car, and leaves Pittman County. As she does, she makes two promises to herself. The first is to pick out a new name. Marietta decides to name herself after the first sign she sees whenever she runs out of gas. Marietta pushes her car as far as it will go and rolls into Taylorville on the last drops of her gas. She renames herself Taylor Greer. The second promise Taylor makes is to drive west until her car falls apart and then settle wherever she ends up. However, Taylor reveals that she will break this promise.

Jolene seems to be everything that Marietta does not want to be, completely dependent on men who treat her (and everyone else) poorly. The abusive tendencies that Newt and his father display are common to many of the male characters in the novel, as Kingsolver points out the damaging effects of a society that equates masculinity with violence. Marietta could have easily been in Jolene's situation without the strong female role model that Marietta's mother gave to her, unburdened by the demands of a father figure. Yet though Marietta acknowledges how close she was to this fate, she doesn't seem to have much sympathy for Jolene, instead wondering why Jolene didn't choose something better for herself than being Newt's wife.



Marietta rationally accepts this brush with disaster and does not let it keep her from the things that she wants to do. Her mother's relentless and passionate support of everything that Marietta sets her mind to allows Marietta to develop the self-confidence to believe in herself and build a healthy mindset towards the constant threat of tragedy.



Marietta, though hardworking and ambitious, has to patiently plan to leave her home town in search of somewhere better. Yet Marietta's mother knows that trouble will likely befall Marietta no matter how careful she is, and insists that Marietta learn to deal with disaster instead of allowing her to avoid her fears for now only to be caught by them at a later, more dangerous time.



Marietta's renaming is the first step in finding her own identity separate from the stifling atmosphere of her hometown. While the name may seem arbitrary, tied to wherever Taylor runs out of gas, it is actually Taylor's choice to keep pushing her car past cities that she doesn't want to get to Taylorville at the last possible second. Taylor's agency also plays a role in her promise to head west. Taylor actually keeps going past where she breaks down the first time in Oklahoma in order to make it to Arizona. Taylor may act like she doesn't care about her name or her hometown, but she puts a lot of care into redefining those two things once she leaves Pittman County.



As she drives west, Taylor feels intimidated by the sheer size and barren waste of the Great Plain. The flatness of Oklahoma depresses Taylor, and her car breaks down in the middle of nowhere in Cherokee Nation. A man named Bob Two-Two is able to get Taylor's car back into semi-working order, but Taylor knows that her car is too beaten up to continue. Taylor thinks about the irony of where she ended up, because her mother always spoke of their Cherokee head rights as a security blanket if things got really bad. These head rights are the land parcels given to any person who can prove that at least 1/8 of their blood comes from Cherokee heritage. Now that Taylor can see the land owned by the Cherokee tribe, though, she knows that her 1/8 blood rights won't amount to much. Furthermore, Taylor sees the lack of trees in the area as a special offense to the Cherokee religion, which believes that **trees** are homes for the gods.

Taylor parks at a gas station as she tries to decide what to do with her broken down car, and goes into a bar next door. She picks out a postcard with two Native American women on it wearing turquoise and red, Taylor's favorite colors. Taylor decides to send it to her mother. The only other patrons in the bar are two men in cowboy hats, one white and one Native American. Taylor tries to steer clear of them in case they're mean drunks.

At the bar, Taylor asks what she can buy for less than a dollar. The white man at the counter laughs and offers Taylor ketchup, but Taylor refuses to let him make fun of her. Taylor orders a cheeseburger and grows increasingly claustrophobic as she waits for the food to arrive. She notices a small woman wrapped in a blanket sitting at a table in the back. The woman is very round and seems wary of the two men at the counter. Taylor finishes her food, trying to ignore the ad on the TV proclaiming "1-800-THE-LORD" and leaves the bar before the atmosphere becomes too stuffy.

When Taylor gets back to her car, the small, round woman from the bar follows her. The woman shows Taylor a child that had been hidden in her blanket, and asks Taylor to take the baby. The woman says that the baby was her dead sister's child, and asks Taylor to take the baby again, insinuating that one of the men in the bar is putting the child in danger. Taylor is reluctant, knowing that she left Kentucky to avoid becoming a young mother, and that she needs documentation in order to officially take the child. The small woman says that the baby has no papers because it was born in a Plymouth (i.e. a car); no one will notice if the baby just disappears.

Taylor is intensely affected by the landscape around her. The barrenness of Oklahoma feels "dead" to her, due to the lack of hills and trees that she is used to from rural Kentucky. This unfertile wasteland was historically not wanted by American settlers, which is why the Cherokee tribe was relocated to this land. According to head rights, the legal award of Oklahoma land to the descendants of Cherokee Native Americans, Taylor should "belong" on this land. But neither Taylor, nor indeed many of the Cherokee, want to live in Oklahoma. Taylor describes this disconnect in spiritual terms, saying that the Cherokee religion requires trees. Though Taylor should have stayed here, as per her promise to settle wherever her car breaks down, Taylor moves on to a place that suits her better.



These colors, turquoise and red, are important in the Cherokee cosmology. Red traditionally symbolizes success, while the turquoise gemstone is the symbol of life and rebirth. Taylor may be down on her luck right now, but the presence of these colors suggest that she will survive this incident. Meanwhile, in the bar, Taylor's innate distrust of men (especially drunk men) comes to the fore as she avoids even harmless looking men just in case.



The woman in the bar reinforces Taylor's distrust of the men, as Kingsolver suggests that even women who are strangers to each other are often bound together by their attempts to avoid dangerous men. The advertisement at the bar highlights the sense of tragedy here, as Taylor imagines that people tend to call on the Lord in times of need or struggle. Taylor, however, does not want to call this number, preferring to remain self-sufficient through whatever befalls her.



Taylor is abruptly confronted with young motherhood, the biggest thing that she left Pittman County to avoid. The child was born in a car and left in a car, allowing Taylor's car to stand in as the site of the child's "rebirth" into Taylor's family. Ironically, the car the child was born in was called a Plymouth, recalling Plymouth Rock, the landing site of the white settlers who came to America and eventually caused so much death and hardship for the Native Americans.



Ignoring Taylor's protests, the small, round woman places the baby in the back seat of Taylor's car and walks away. Taylor watches her go, realizing that the woman is in fact very skinny now that she is no longer carrying the baby. Taylor thinks about leaving the child with the bartender, but, as she is deciding, the bar closes and the bartender leaves. Taylor manages to get her car to start as well and drives off looking for a motel with the child in her back seat.

Taylor drives 50 miles with the baby in her back seat before she gets to a small town. Taylor hums and talks to the baby to try to keep herself awake. The child doesn't answer. Taylor even starts to worry that the baby is actually dead, but is relieved when she notices that the child is alive enough to pee her pants. Taylor finally reaches a motel and goes to talk to the woman who owns the motel. Taylor tells the woman that she can't afford to pay for a room but offers to clean if she and the baby can stay for the night.

Taylor goes out to the car to bring the baby in to the motel room and is surprised at the strength with which the child holds on as soon as she is picked up. Once Taylor gets everything into a small room, she decides to give the baby a bath. As Taylor starts to undress the child, she compares it to a mud turtle because of the amazing grip that the child and mud turtles both share.

When Taylor gets the child undressed, she sees that the baby is a girl and that the baby has been sexually abused. Taylor has to throw up at the sight of the baby's wounds, but the baby happily plays in the bathwater and smiles. Taylor finishes the baby's bath, dresses the baby in a turquoise and red shirt for luck, and puts the baby to bed. Taylor adds one line to the postcard for her mother, saying that her "head rights" as a Cherokee have finally found her.

CHAPTER 2: NEW YEAR'S PIG

The chapter begins by introducing Lou Ann Ruiz, a woman from Kentucky who now lives in Tucson, Arizona. Lou Ann is married to a Latino man named Angel, who is planning to leave Lou Ann this Halloween. Three years earlier, on Christmas Day, Angel got in an accident at his job at the rodeo that left him with an artificial leg and a terrible attitude about life. Lou Ann, now pregnant, hopes that her child will not be born on Christmas Day and bring back bad memories.

Taylor comments on the woman's appearance before and after she is holding the baby to highlight both the burden and joy of motherhood. The woman is weighed down by the baby yet also seems healthier with the child. Her thinness when she gives the baby up suggests both freedom and starvation. Taylor, now stuck with the child, will have to find her own balance between burden and nourishment as a mother.



Though Taylor did not want to be a mother, she already feels responsible for the baby's well-being. Even though Taylor is exhausted, she stays awake until she gets the baby to a motel and promises to work so that the baby can sleep in safety rather than in the car.



The child is compared to different animals many times in the book, as Kingsolver points out the many ways that humans are just another animal in the ecosystem. This is not a way of demeaning humans, but rather Kingsolver's celebration of animal kind and nature in general.



Taylor is confronted with the extreme outcome of the misogyny she has seen all her life: sexual assault of a defenseless, innocent baby girl. Yet though the baby has experienced the absolute worst parts of being a female, she is able to survive relatively unharmed. Kingsolver again evokes the Cherokee colors of success (red) and rebirth (turquoise) to say that this baby will indeed thrive. Taylor also references her family's Cherokee heritage as the reason that she has found this Cherokee baby, as Kingsolver begins to cement Taylor and the baby as "real" family.



The first glimpse of Lou Ann defines her in terms of her husband, a dynamic that holds true in their marriage. Angel takes the lead in their relationship, especially after he feels emasculated by his accident. Lou Ann reacts to this accident by becoming superstitious. She chooses not to deal with tragedy, just worrying about the possibility that disaster will strike again.



Lou Ann knows that she and Angel will likely separate, but does nothing to either hasten his departure or make him stay. They argue more often, and Angel accuses Lou Ann of cheating on him because he has a bum leg. Lou Ann doesn't mind Angel's artificial leg, knowing that a leg is a small price to pay for the accident that should have killed Angel, and actually misses being able to take care of Angel the way she did right after the accident. Lou Ann doesn't understand why Angel can't recuperate emotionally from the accident now that he has physically healed. Angel focuses on the fact that he can no longer wear cowboy boots even though he can do everything else he used to do.

Angel leaves on a Friday because it is pay day, apparently unaware that it is Halloween. Meanwhile, Lou Ann is at a doctor's appointment for her seven-month prenatal exam. She worries over the baby's due date, knowing how hard Christmas has been every year since Angel's accident and that kids with Christmas birthdays are overlooked in the holiday bustle. She is brought out of her reverie by a nurse announcing that "Dr. P" is ready for "Mrs. Angel Ruiz." Lou Ann doesn't correct the nurse's pronunciation of Angel, though Angel himself is very particular about the proper Mexican pronunciation "Ahn-hel." Lou Ann's mother (Ivy) dislikes Angel because of his Mexican heritage, but it makes no difference to Lou Ann. Now that she lives in Arizona, Lou Ann does not consider Mexicans to be a "foreign race."

At the doctor appointment, Dr. P warns Lou Ann again that she is gaining too much weight. Lou Ann has barely thought about her weight because she was previously so skinny. The doctor gives her a dietary pamphlet printed in English and Spanish. Lou Ann wishes she could send it to Ivy as proof that Mexicans need help having babies just like Anglos. She then reconsiders, not wanting to remind her mother of the growing Mexican population in the United States or tell her that Angel's family wants the baby to be given a Catholic baptism when it is born.

Lou Ann gets on the bus to go home and continues to look at the pamphlet, wondering why prenatal care information always shows pictures of mothers and children rather than pregnant women themselves. She decides that the pamphlets are mostly written by men who do not like the look of pregnant women. She realizes how much she likes being pregnant, because she can ride the bus peacefully without any unwanted male attention. She compares this feeling of freedom to the "magic circle" that her grandfather taught her to draw around herself with a jack-knife when she was a child.

Lou Ann passively does not act in her marriage and her life, allowing Angel to set the tone for her marriage. In order to feel like a man, Angel must feel dominant to Lou Ann. This forces Lou Ann to stay in the background and make no choices for herself. The only time that Lou Ann felt needed was when Angel was incapacitated by his accident, but Angel was also extremely unhappy during that time. He still feels that his bum leg makes him less of a man, seen in his desire to wear cowboy boots as a sign of his masculinity.



Angel himself does not notice the auspicious timing of the day he left, showcasing how Lou Ann looks for the superstitious meaning in everything that happens to her – even the possibility of the baby's birth on Christmas. Lou Ann's passive demeanor carries over to her treatment at the doctor's office, where Angel would have forcefully let everyone know the proper way to say his name. The question of how to pronounce Angel's name mirrors the ambiguity of whether or not Angel is considered "foreign" or "not belonging" due to his Mexican heritage.



Lou Ann, like the woman who gave Taylor the baby, is also made much rounder by motherhood, though she was previously very skinny. The bilingual dietary pamphlet highlights how much Arizona belongs to both American and Mexican cultures. Lou Ann's mother would see a catholic baptism as another, lesser form of superstition rather than a real religion.



Lou Ann relishes the freedom that pregnancy gives her to exist outside of the male-dictated beauty standards in society. While she is pregnant, she does not have to live up to conventionally attractive measures or receive sexual attention that otherwise follow women in the United States. Kingsolver points out again how limiting those standards are for women.



Lou Ann gets off the bus in front of a shop called “Jesus Is Lord Used Tires.” The tire shop has a large mural of Jesus on the wall with a tire painted underneath his left hand like a yo-yo. Beside the tire shop is a night club and adult entertainment store called “Fanny Heaven.” This store has a woman painted on the door with the door handle as her crotch – an image that always makes Lou Ann shiver. Lou Ann walks past both shops and tries not to give either much thought.

On her walk home, Lou Ann goes to the Lee Sing Market to buy some of the new foods from the dietary pamphlet. The proprietor, Lee Sing herself, tells Lou Ann that the baby will be a girl, but Lou Ann says that she would be happy either way. Lee Sing scoffs, saying that having a daughter is like feeding the neighbor’s New Year Pig: a lot of work put into something that will eventually benefit another family. Lou Ann is offended, but acknowledges that neither she nor her brother remained particularly close to their family once they grew up. Her brother married a Canadian woman and had four daughters, but Lou Ann can’t remember their “Eskimo” names.

Lou Ann makes it home, grateful that none of the neighborhood homeless tried to talk to her. She notices that Angel has come home, taken his things, and left for good. Rather than being truly upset, Lou Ann is interested to see which things Angel took for himself after four years of marital sharing. Lou Ann doesn’t mind that some things are gone, but hates how empty the house now looks. Angel took clothes, a few books, some toiletries, and a picture of him in the rodeo with a bull drugged on PCP. Angel had performed as “Dusty,” short for “Angel Dust.”

Lou Ann has forgotten that it’s Halloween, and so when some children come to the door, Lou Ann realizes she has no candy to give them. Unable to give them things that are unwrapped (for the children’s safety) or turn them away with nothing (for her own safety), Lou Ann empties out a Mickey Mouse bank and hands out pennies to the neighborhood children. She had been saving the pennies to buy a washing machine for the baby’s diapers, but Angel had always called that a fool’s mission anyway.

“Jesus is Lord” echoes the television ad “1-800-The-Lord” that Taylor saw in the bar, setting it up to be another place of salvation for people in need. If the tire shop represents salvation, the adult entertainment store next door represents damnation. Lou Ann is intensely uncomfortable with this reminder of misogyny that she has to walk past every single day.



Lee Sing’s Chinese market is another reminder of the great diversity on American land, even though some Americans like Lou Ann’s mother would say that these non-white immigrants do not belong here. Lee Sing also extolls a male-centric culture, arguing that daughters are a waste of time because they do not continue the family name. In Lou Ann’s experience, both sons and daughters can choose to distance themselves from their families. Lou Ann’s brother even left American land altogether, a choice that Lou Ann supports even if she does not understand the new culture that her brother has chosen to be a part of.



After Angel leaves, Lou Ann seems to miss the idea of a husband more than Angel in particular. Angel has shown his true character as he takes apart the house that they built together. Even his name takes on a new dimension. Originally connoting innocence and purity like a religious angel, his name now carries the drug reference of the nickname Angel Dust for PCP.



Lou Ann’s worrywart tendencies show again as she imagines the kids being poisoned by unwrapped cookies or food. Instead, she gives the kids pennies that she had saved up for a washing machine that would make life easier with her own child. Angel, in another sign of how he does not respect Lou Ann, does not see the use in trying to make Lou Ann’s life easier.



At 11 pm, Lou Ann gives up on the trick-or-treaters and goes to bed. As she gets ready for bed, she realizes that her feet are so swollen and her belly is so big that she can't get her shoes off without Angel here to do it for her. She puts her nightgown on over her pantyhose and shoes, thinking that she looks "pornographic," like she belongs at Fanny Heaven. She lies in bed, feeling the baby move and half-listening to see if Angel will come back home. Finally, she cries herself to sleep, feeling the salt water sting her eyes as they had when she kept her eyes open in the ocean. Angel had warned her not to keep her eyes open underwater, but Lou Ann had been too worried that she wouldn't see what was lurking in the deep.

Lou Ann's dependency on Angel was almost absolute, as she cannot even take her shoes off without him there. Like Fanny Heaven, Lou Ann's housewife role is also a product of the male-dominated world that Lou Ann lives in. Lou Ann's tears are compared to the ocean, strengthening the ties that Kingsolver is building between the natural world and the human world. Yet Lou Ann's tears accomplish nothing to bring Angel back, just as keeping her eyes open in the ocean did not help her avoid any disaster that might have been waiting for her.



CHAPTER 3: JESUS IS LORD USED TIRES

Back on the road, Taylor describes her first glimpse of Arizona. The cartoonish pink clouds and "forest" of red rock formations are a welcome change from the flat, washed-out plains of Texas. Falling in love with the rocks, Taylor tells the Native American child that they will live in Arizona. It is now January 2nd, as Taylor and the child stayed in the Oklahoma motel for the holiday season. Ms. Hoge, the older woman that had helped Taylor the first night, is grateful for the help during the Christmas rush, as the woman's daughter-in-law, Irene, weighs as much as an "elephant or a hippopotamus" and can no longer walk.

Kingsolver lets Taylor revel in the extreme landscape of Arizona, celebrating the awesome diversity of America's natural environments. While she acknowledges that not every part of America is beautiful, these places make landscapes like Arizona even more impressive by comparison. Kingsolver also compares Irene to a large animal, continuing the trend of drawing connections between human and animal kind.



Mrs. Hoge is very taken with the Native American child, telling Irene that she looks lovely with a baby on her hip. Taylor scoffs at the idea of becoming a mother because it looks good, but has become very attached to the child herself. Taylor calls the child Turtle, for her strong grip like a mud turtle's jaw. Turtle does not talk, and Mrs. Hoge worries that she is mentally handicapped, but Taylor insists that Turtle just has her own way of doing things. Especially after Turtle's abusive past, Taylor does not want to push Turtle at all.

Taylor, though she became a mother by accident, at least recognizes the responsibility involved—it's not a job that one should take on just for appearances. Meanwhile, Turtle is brought the closest to animal kind out of all the characters with her very name. Turtle has been intensely hurt by the worst of human behavior, to which Taylor's response is to let her retreat from humankind and find solace in the natural world.



Taylor is very pleased to be back on the road and leave the flat emptiness of Oklahoma. Arizona suits Taylor much better, but a sudden hail storm forces Taylor to get off the interstate. Taylor realizes that the old "laws of nature" that she knew in Kentucky do not apply here, and that Arizona is a foreign country to both her and Turtle. An old man comes out of the gas station where Taylor has parked and asks where Taylor is from. Taylor gives him a sassy answer about her Kentucky plates, not liking the look of the guy.

Taylor, though deeply connected to the natural world in Kentucky, has the presence of mind to realize that she is no longer an expert of the nature here. Kingsolver points out that every region of America is unique and requires respect on its own terms. Both Taylor and Turtle, coming from other parts of America and with different Native American backgrounds, must adapt to this new environment.



When the hail stops, two rainbows appear in the sky and it gets hot enough for Taylor to start sweating in her sweatshirt. Taylor stays in awe of the landscape, thinking it is even more extreme than it looks in the movies. The man from the gas station is still looking at Taylor and now warns her about a tarantula crossing the road. Taylor puts up another brave face, refusing to pander to this man trying to make the world seem more dangerous than it is. The man explains that the rain drives all sorts of bugs out of their holes. Taylor decides that the man is more stupid than mean, and that she has spent enough time in his company. She gets out of the car to push it until it will start. The man scoffs at the old tires, and Taylor knows that he is right. She drives on a busted tire for another couple of blocks until she sees a tire repair shop.

As Taylor pulls into the tire shop, she sees a woman in jeans and cowboy boots hosing bugs off her pavement and notices the name of the shop: Jesus Is Lord Used Tires. It reminds Taylor of the ad for 1-800-THE-LORD that she saw in Oklahoma the night she got Turtle. The woman from the tire shop welcomes Taylor in and gets Taylor's car up on the jack. Taylor holds Turtle tightly, nervous that the tires will explode just like the tire exploded on Newt Hardbine's father in Kentucky. Taylor finally sits Turtle down on an empty (and thus safe) tire and introduces them both to the woman at the tire shop. The woman doesn't bat an eye at Turtle's unconventional name, and introduces herself as Mattie.

Taylor helps Mattie get the old tires off her car, and Taylor notices a wedding ring on Mattie's finger that looks long settled into the older woman's skin. Mattie apologizes sincerely that the tires are too far gone to hold a patch, and kindly offers to help Taylor pick out some retreads to put back on the car. Taylor is too ashamed to tell Mattie that she can't afford new tires, even if they are used. Mattie seems to know how bad this news is for Taylor and invites Taylor and Turtle into her shop for coffee and peanut butter crackers.

As Taylor and Mattie have coffee, Taylor laughs at the mug she is given. It is covered with cartoon rabbits having sex and seems at odds with the religious name of the shop. Mattie asks about Taylor's Kentucky plates, and gives more crackers to Turtle. Taylor sees that Mattie is very comfortable with children, and Turtle seems more at ease here than she has since Taylor met her.

The landscape reminds Taylor of the movies, larger than life but even better because it is real. Kingsolver suggests that everyone needs to experience this kind of natural beauty for themselves in order to truly appreciate it. This reference to the movies extends to the man who tries to scare Taylor into thinking that the world is more dangerous than it really is. Taylor is not a damsel in distress from an old Western, but a strong modern woman who can take care of herself. Even though her old car makes a clean getaway more difficult, it also showcases Taylor's tenacity in the face of obstacles.



Mattie is another female character who displays traditionally masculine traits, in both her job and the way she dresses. Mattie's non-judgmental character shows from the beginning, as her acceptance of Turtle's name belies her experience accepting everyone. Mattie's shop will also be a site of salvation for Taylor and Turtle, as Taylor is able to lean on a fellow woman in a way that she doesn't trust men to help her. But the tire shop doesn't seem like a safe haven at first, as it's full of one of Taylor's biggest fears of disaster.



Unlike Lou Ann, Mattie's marital status is introduced as more of an afterthought in her character. Mattie is not defined by her husband, but has a full life of her own. Mattie displays female solidarity and maternal care by trying to help Taylor, even though Taylor is still too proud to accept this assistance.



Mattie's Christianity embraces nature, laughing at the natural processes of sex rather than putting taboos on them. Mattie is also very familiar with children, a role model that Taylor very much needs as she tries to become an adoptive mother for Turtle.



Mattie welcomes Taylor to Tucson, telling her about her late husband Samuel who came from Tennessee and never quite got used to the dryness. Samuel and Mattie started the tire shop because Samuel was a “fanatical” mechanic and Mattie keeps it running now that he is gone. Mattie notices that Turtle has eaten all the peanut butter crackers while she and Taylor were talking, and offers to go get Turtle some juice. Taylor declines, but Mattie insists that it’s no trouble and steps out the back door.

While Mattie is out getting juice for Turtle, two men stop into the tire shop. One simply wants to pick up a new tire, while the other looks like he is dressed as a Priest. Taylor is wary of this man, as she hadn’t encountered many Catholics in Kentucky, but he leaves when he hears that Mattie is not in. He drives off in a station wagon that looks like it has a whole family of “Indians” in the back. The other man, Roger, waits for Mattie to get back.

When Mattie returns, she gives Turtle a sippy cup and goes to help the other man (Roger) with his car. Taylor is impressed, both with the genius of the sippy cup and Mattie’s know-how with cars. Roger takes the tire he wants, and Mattie comes back to Taylor and Turtle to offer Turtle more juice. Slightly overwhelmed by Mattie’s kindness, Taylor comes clean that she won’t be buying any tires today. Mattie laughs, saying that she already knew that and just wanted to help cheer them up. Taylor asks if Mattie has any grandchildren, and Mattie gives a confusing answer: “Something like that.”

Mattie continues to give Taylor child care advice, warning her that dehydration is a constant danger in Arizona, and Taylor realizes how much about motherhood she still has to learn. Mattie then asks Taylor what kind of work she might be looking for. Taylor shares her “peculiar resume” from the odd jobs she had in Kentucky, including picking bugs off **bean vines**. Mattie laughs and goes to show Taylor the bean vines she has in a little garden that she keeps in the back yard of her shop. Taylor is amazed by the bountiful produce available in January, and Mattie explains that a frost usually arrives to kill the crops mid winter, but that this year has been uncommonly warm. The beans in particular came from Mattie’s Chinese neighbor, brought from China in 1907.

Mattie makes it clear that Tucson’s extreme environment is not for everyone. She also reveals that she may have started the tire shop because of her husband, but that she has made it her own place now. Mattie’s confidence is an important role model for Taylor’s insecurity as a mother.



Taylor calls the family “Indians” because she is not familiar with any other nationalities that might be coming into America. This is the first hint that Mattie might be involved in immigration of some kind. Taylor’s natural distrust of men paints this as something nefarious, but the man is actually more concerned about keeping the people he is helping hidden and safe.



Mattie is skilled at both traditionally male things, like working on cars, and traditionally female jobs, like caring for children. Taylor admires how Mattie escapes the boundaries that other men and women fall into. Mattie’s “something like” grandchildren will show up later: the children of the immigrants that she helps.



Taylor expects that her skills working with the land won’t come in handy in the Arizona desert, but nature surprises Taylor again with its resilience. Yet the unusual warmth is a small reminder that all is not right with nature, as Kingsolver hints at human-influenced climate change. The beans that grow in Mattie’s garden are also transplants from another place, coming from China. These bean trees will become very meaningful to Turtle, another immigrant to Tucson.



Taylor marvels at how different Tucson feels, even though it is still American land. Her hometown in Kentucky is stuck twenty years behind the cultural developments of the rest of the country, and Taylor feels as though she has catapulted into the future. This is exciting, but Taylor is also unnerved by the lack of community she senses in this urban center. She decides to leave her car with Mattie and take Turtle to live in a hotel for the meantime. Living in this hotel is much rougher than the hotel where Taylor lived in Oklahoma, with a clientele of prostitutes and homeless people congregating at the corner.

Taylor is especially confused by a new type of poor people that she meets in Tucson. Though they look like the bag ladies that Taylor remembers from Kentucky, they seem to enjoy their exotic appearance and live in galleries and studios they have converted out of an abandoned shopping mall. Taylor goes inside one of these stores try to understand, and is mainly confused by the art and the artist herself. Turned off by the artist's snobby attitude when she asks about the name of one of the works of art, Taylor makes fun of the other paintings and leaves.

Taylor struggles to find a new source of income as her savings dwindle, but draws the line at giving blood as the other homeless people in Tucson do. She tries to work at the blood bank because of her experience in the Pittman County Hospital, but is turned away because she has no license in the state of Arizona. She hangs out at Burger Derby, a dying fast food joint, talking to the girl behind the counter. The girl, Sandi, turns out to be crazy about the Kentucky Derby horse race and loves hearing all the juicy details that Taylor knows about Secretariat, a famous race horse.

Taylor asks Sandi about getting a job at Burger Derby, then realizes that she would have to pay someone to watch Turtle. Surprisingly, Sandi also has a son that she leaves at the Kid Central Station at the mall while she works. This day care is meant for shoppers, but Sandi just checks in every two hours on her breaks. Taylor thinks about checking the Kid Central Station out, and Sandi asks her to check in on Seattle, her son, if she's going there now. Sandi explains that Seattle is named after a race horse and looks exactly like her with blonde hair. Sandi then comments that Turtle looks nothing like Taylor, and Taylor explains that Turtle isn't really hers. Turtle is just someone Taylor "got stuck with," a feeling that Sandi understands.

Taylor comments on the differences in both the land and the culture of Tucson. Taylor is used to the sleepy rhythms of rural Kentucky, where the community may be stifling but it is also a support system that acts like a family. Taylor feels the lack of people that she knows, compounded by living in an impersonal hotel.



Taylor's lack of culture causes her to mistake urban artists for homeless people. Kingsolver pokes fun at these artists, who think that they are living closer to the earth but are actually creating artificial barriers between themselves and the people around them.



Taylor, coming from rural Kentucky, does not have the right documentation to be taken seriously in the more developed city of Tucson. She feels like an outsider in this place, even though she wants it to be her home. In contrast, Sandi dreams of the pastoral charms of Kentucky. Just as Taylor thought that Arizona was out of a movie, people who are not from Kentucky think that it is like a movie.



Sandi, a young single mother in Tucson, proves to be a surprising source of advice for Taylor. Sandi has an unconventional approach to child care, but is only doing what she must in the absence of other support. Both Sandi and Taylor share a feeling of "getting stuck" with their family, though Sandi's child is biological and Taylor's is not. Kingsolver continually points out the similarities that non-traditional families share with more traditional ones.



CHAPTER 4: TUG FORK WATER

The story returns to Lou Ann, who has recently given birth. Lou Ann's mother Ivy Logan and Grandmother Logan have come to town for a while to help care for the new baby. Grandmother Logan dislikes the intense light and heat of the Tucson winter, and Ivy drives Lou Ann crazy by taking over the kitchen and humming one line of hymns under her breath. Still, Lou Ann also dreads her family's imminent departure and being left alone as a single mother.

Lou Ann tries to convince Ivy and Grandmother Logan to stay longer so that they can spend more time with Angel and see more of Arizona. Surprisingly, Angel agreed to move back in so as not to upset Lou Ann's family, as Grandmother Logan would force Lou Ann to come back to Kentucky if she knew that Lou Ann would be a single parent. But despite all of Lou Ann's pleading, her mother and grandmother are eager to get away from the heat and strangeness of Arizona. Lou Ann, feeling nostalgic for the house of women she had growing up, wonders aloud whether her mother and father were ever close. Ivy responds that they lived with Grandmother Logan so that both Ivy and Grandmother Logan would not be lonely.

Though Grandmother Logan and Ivy are not speaking because of a long-forgotten argument, they are each other's only companions. Lou Ann wonders how her mother and grandmother will communicate on the Greyhound bus home to Kentucky. Meanwhile, Granny Logan tells Lou Ann to take the baby out of this heat and go back to Kentucky with them. Lou Ann tells Granny that she is happy here with Angel, ignoring the fact that she and Angel are no longer together.

Lou Ann has grown accustomed to living in the desert, though it was a hard transition, and does not want to move her son Dwayne Ray from his birthplace. Dwayne Ray was born on January 1st, just 45 minutes to late to win the "First Baby of the Year" prize of a year of free diapers. Granny Logan still doesn't understand how people can live in a place so different from Kentucky, and Lou Ann reminds her again that this winter is warm even for Arizona. Granny Logan just tells Lou Ann not to forget her roots with the "ignorant hill folk" in Kentucky now that she is a big-city dweller in Tucson.

Lou Ann's biological family is also extremely dysfunctional. Her family is unable to let go of their ideas about the right way to raise a child and the right place to live, instead of celebrating Lou Ann where she is now. Yet though Lou Ann's family isn't perfect, Lou Ann still appreciates their support.



Lou Ann clearly feels as though she belongs in Tucson rather than Kentucky. As Lou Ann tries to avoid being lonely in her new home, she does not seem to consider the fact that she should try to convince Angel to stay even after her family leaves. Lou Ann is starving for female companionship, the only type of support that matters to many of the female characters in the novel. Even Ivy and Granny Logan lived together while constantly fighting in order to escape loneliness in marriage to men.



The emotional connections between women in the novel are complex but strong. Ivy and Granny Logan do not usually get along, but they are far more bonded than Lou Ann and Angel are. Rather than facing up the distance between her and Angel, Lou Ann ignores this problem in order to stay in her new home.



Lou Ann seems to believe that Dwayne Ray "belongs" in Tucson because he was born here, one of the simplest arguments for belonging. But whether Dwayne Ray and Lou Ann belong in Tucson or not, Lou Ann's family still finds every reason not to like this place because they only want what they are used to. Lou Ann still worries over everything, thinking that Dwayne Ray's unluckiness started the moment he was born too late to win the contest.



Before they leave, Granny Logan gives Lou Ann a small vial of **water** from the Tug Fork river to baptize Dwayne Ray. Lou Ann takes the bottle, not telling her family that Dwayne Ray was supposed to be baptized in the Catholic tradition before Angel left. Granny Logan and Ivy start to leave, not listening when Lou Ann tells them to wait until Angel gets home from work. Ivy responds that Angel working on a Sunday is a sign that he is a “heathen Mexican.” Lou Ann is too tired to argue.

Lou Ann writes out directions to the bus depot and helps Granny Logan put on a coat in spite of the 80-degree heat. The three women walk to the bus stop, as Ivy continues to warn Lou Ann of all the dangers that await a baby. Lou Ann then warns Granny Logan and Ivy not to sit on the metal bench, hot from the sun, as they wait for the bus to arrive. Ivy hugs Lou Ann and helps Granny Logan get on the bus. Lou Ann makes Dwayne Ray wave at the bus as it pulls away, but her mother and grandmother are sitting on the wrong side to see.

As Lou Ann walks back from the bus stop to her house, she stops at Bobby Bingo’s truck to look at the vegetables he is selling. His produce is better and cheaper than the grocery store, and Lou Ann buys tomatoes that remind her of Kentucky. Bobby gives Lou Ann an apple for Dwayne Ray, even though the baby doesn’t have any teeth, and tells Lou Ann about his own son. Bill Bing, as the son calls himself, sells used cars on TV and is rich enough to offer his father a house in Beverly Hills. Bobby refuses, saying that people don’t eat good **vegetables** in Beverly Hills. Bobby sends Lou Ann off with her tomatoes and a bunch of grapes for Dwayne Ray, warning her that whatever she wants the most will be the worst thing for her.

Lou Ann gets home, washes the fruit and stews about Bobby’s final warning. She opens all the curtains that her grandmother had closed during her visit and stares at the bright, blue sky. She feels both lonely and content in the solitude after her family has left, missing Kentucky without any desire to go back. She picks up the bottle of **Tug Fork water** that her grandmother left out and puts it in the medicine cabinet, unsure what else to do with it. Lou Ann starts to nurse Dwayne Ray, trying to remember her own baptism in the Tug Fork, but is unable to feel any connection to the memory.

The baptismal water that Granny Logan gave to Lou Ann would have become a marker of Dwayne Ray’s birth into Lou Ann’s family. Yet Lou Ann can’t tell her family that her baby will also have to belong to other traditions. The traditions that Angel’s family believe in are completely against Lou Ann’s family’s beliefs. Lou Ann chooses to build new traditions rather than blindly following what her family has always done.



Granny Logan is so set in her ways that she does not even pay attention to the cues (and temperature) of the natural world around her. Lou Ann’s worrywart tendencies clearly came from her family. Lou Ann’s mother and grandmother sit on the wrong side of the bus to wave goodbye, turning their backs on Lou Ann and Dwayne Ray and seemingly choosing not to see the good things in life.



Bobby Bingo’s cart is better than the grocery store, suggesting that the efforts of ordinary people working on the land are better than the large corporations that try to sell natural products back to the urban residents of Tucson. Bobby’s son has sold-out to the fakeness rampant in Beverly Hills, a dig on out-of-touch rich people who have no idea about the life of common people. Lou Ann may long for that kind of easy life of conventional success, but Bobby warns her that it won’t truly satisfy her.



Lou Ann, still passive, is stuck between following the traditions of her family or moving forward on her own. She puts away the water, delaying the decision of whether Dwayne Ray belongs with her Kentucky roots or her new Tucson home. When she thinks of her own childhood, her home does not seem to evoke any warmth for her.



As Lou Ann nurses Dwayne Ray, Angel returns from work. Lou Ann notices his presence in the kitchen, but thinks that it feels more like an animal sharing the house than another human. Angel comes into her room and tells Lou Ann that he is packing up his things again now that her family is gone. Angel asks Lou Ann where his belt buckle is, but Lou Ann reminds him that he left it with his friend Manny who has since moved to San Diego. As they talk, Lou Ann is struck by the oddness of living with someone who is not related to her, but reminds herself that she and Angel are related by marriage. Angel goes into the bathroom and find the bottle of **Tug Fork water**. As he pours it out, scoffing at the backwards Kentucky traditions, Lou Ann focuses on nursing rather than the ache in her heart.

Lou Ann feels as though Angel is not even the same species, comparing him to an animal rather than another human. Men and women mostly travel in separate spheres in the novel, making few connections between the two. Marriage has the potential to be one of those connections, but Angel and Lou Ann's marriage is not a true partnership. Angel blusters back to the house, blaming Lou Ann for his own mistakes. He also makes Lou Ann's decisions for her, pouring out the Tug Fork water and forcing Lou Ann to leave her old home behind.



CHAPTER 5: HARMONIOUS SPACE

The novel returns to Taylor's perspective while she and Turtle are still living in the Republic Hotel in downtown Tucson. The hotel is near the railroad station, which Taylor describes as an artery delivering blood to the city that has hardened, and a train wakes Taylor up every morning at 6:15. On the days that it doesn't wake her up, Taylor waits for it to whistle before she gets out of bed.

Taylor's description of the train tracks as arteries helps make the urban city into a living organism. Taylor, living in the city, becomes a part of this organism, acting as if the 6:15 is delivering necessary blood to her as well. Separated from her hometown, Taylor has to find ways to integrate herself into this new place.



Taylor has quit her job at the Berger Derby, and she misses working with Sandi. Sandi's life post-pregnancy has been difficult, as the baby's father left and Sandi's family resent the fact that Sandi's son is illegitimate. Yet Taylor respects the way that Sandi seems to know all the tricks to raising a child on a budget in Tucson. Taylor and Sandi go together to pick their kids up from the Kid Central Station at the mall, playacting that they have been shopping this whole time instead of working.

Sandi is approaching motherhood all on her own, which Kingsolver acknowledges is difficult. Yet even though Sandi's tips and tricks for childcare might not be the most conventionally responsible, Taylor's admiration shows that Sandi is still a good mother to her son. Kingsolver treats Sandi with sympathy rather than judgement.



Turtle still does not speak or engage with anyone, and stares cat-like into empty space the whole time she is at the Kid Central Station daycare. Taylor knows this isn't healthy, but doesn't know what else to do with Turtle while she is at work. Her worries bleed into her time on shift, and Taylor soon can't stand the Burger Derby work policies any longer. When the manager tells her that she is supposed to dry clean her own uniform, Taylor throws her hat in the trash and quits. Even though she is glad to be rid of the toxic environment of the fast food restaurant, Taylor regrets that she doesn't see Sandi any more and that she has no other ideas for a reliable source of income.

Kingsolver starts to connect Turtle to cats, an image that will have a deeper meaning later in the chapter. For now, it simply reinforces that Turtle is not ready to join human society and still needs the solace of the natural world. Taylor too is struggling with the artificial world of a fast food restaurant. Like Bobby Bingo complained in the previous chapter, many city-dwellers don't eat "real food" and rely on fake fast food chains instead. The manager also does not treat Taylor with human respect, simply regarding her as another piece of the machine in his business.



Now that Taylor can no longer go to Burger Derby for breakfast, she hangs out at local coffee shops to read newspapers that other patrons leave behind. Taylor looks at the want ads and the For Rent articles trying to find another place to stay. The artistic population of Tucson often write strange (to Taylor's mind) requests for roommates who are vegetarian or sensitive, but Taylor finally finds two roommate ads that seems passably normal in good locations.

Taylor goes to the first address on her roommate search, wearing the cleanest clothes she can find and dressing Turtle in her lucky red and turquoise shirt. The house is a ramshackle bungalow with wind chimes on the front porch. A woman in bohemian clothing answers the door and invites Taylor and Turtle into a room decorated with rugs and pillows but no furniture. The woman introduces herself as Fay (spelled Fei) and the two other inhabitants as La-Isha and Timothy. Taylor finds them both exotic and puzzling, with their brightly colored clothing and concerns about caffeine.

Taylor introduces Turtle to the housing collective. Fei welcomes Turtle as a "small person," but the housing interview begins to fall apart when Taylor says that Turtle ate a hot dog for lunch. Fei, La-Isha, and Timothy are devoutly vegan and expect any potential roommate to assist in their soy-milk collective. La-Isha is clearly having doubts about Taylor and Turtle's suitability for the house, which only worsens when Taylor shares that she used to work at Burger Derby. Timothy attempts to play with Turtle, but she stays non-responsive as usual. Fei inquires about Turtle's Native American ancestry, to which Taylor lies that Turtle got her Cherokee from her grandfather, as Cherokee blood "skips a generation."

The second house that Taylor visits is right across the street from Jesus Is Lord Used Tires. Taylor meets the owner, Lou Ann Ruiz, and the two women bond immediately over their Kentucky backgrounds. Taylor and Lou Ann laugh about Taylor's disastrous first roommate interview. Lou Ann then shows Taylor around the house, including the room where Taylor and Turtle will sleep and the room where Dwayne Ray is asleep.

Though Taylor hated the extremely fake environment of the fast food restaurant, the other extreme of vegetarian artists is also distasteful to her. Kingsolver comments on the lengths that people go to be close to nature, when they are actually creating strange human versions of being close to nature. Taylor's down-to-earth practicality is much better in Kingsolver's view.



Taylor's care with her and Turtle's appearances suggest that Taylor is faking her confidence, a sure sign that this house is not the right fit for Taylor and Turtle. The three potential roommates are also performing false identities, as Kingsolver hints by misspelling Fei's name the first time that Taylor hears it and making Fei specify the spelling of her name even though they are all just talking aloud with no need to write it down. Fei's fake care is not what Taylor and Turtle need.



Fei treats Turtle as something other than a child, making it hard for Taylor and Turtle to maintain their relationship as mother and child. This perhaps leads to Taylor's lies about Turtle's background—she feels as though she has to reassert how Turtle belongs to her. The housing collective's comedic outrage over the Burger Derby and the hot dog points out that it is possible to take respect for nature too far. It is necessary to accept nature on its own terms rather than creating a pure and perfect version of nature for humanity's comfort.



Jesus Is Lord Used Tires is still a safe house for Taylor, perhaps adding to her feelings of comfort with Lou Ann. Lou Ann and Taylor bond over their shared backgrounds as well as their new motherhood. Each woman needs help adjusting to their new home in Tucson and new role as mothers, and they find a special kind of understanding in their female companionship.



Lou Ann tells Taylor that Dwayne Ray was born in January and asks how old Turtle is. Taylor fills Lou Ann in on the unconventional circumstances of Turtle's "adoption" as Turtle clutches tight to Taylor's braided hair. Lou Ann and Taylor commiserate over the rough start that Turtle had to life as they watch Lou Ann's cat, Snowboots, scratch at the carpet as if it is a litter box. Lou Ann comments that she thinks that the cat went crazy because she treated it with affection while Angel, her ex-husband, couldn't stand it. Taylor thinks that the cat is funny, but Lou Ann is ashamed at this evidence that Snowboots came from a broken home.

As Taylor explains Turtle's broken past, the cat offers a look into Turtle's damaged psyche. Building on the cat connection that Kingsolver stated earlier in the chapter, Snowboots' erratic behavior symbolizes how Turtle displays unusual behavior because she was treated so poorly by her family. Yet while Taylor can find this funny due to her supportive upbringing with her own mother, Lou Ann also identifies with this insecurity. Lou Ann understands Snowboots' ever-present guilt for things he hasn't done because Angel also blamed Lou Ann for mistakes that weren't actually her fault.



Lou Ann and Taylor continue to talk about the events that led Taylor to find Turtle. Lou Ann says to be glad that Taylor was in a car and not an airplane, a perspective that Taylor had never considered before. Lou Ann describes a horrific plane crash in a river in Washington DC that she saw once on the news, then leaves Taylor to that memory as she goes to get Dwayne Ray from his nap. Taylor remembers footage from that plane crash of a woman who was saved by a rescue helicopter. She thinks that the woman looked like Turtle while clinging to the rope from the helicopter.

Lou Ann sees disaster everywhere, even imagining a possible disaster with an airplane that could never have happened to Turtle and Taylor. Yet Taylor has a much more practical reaction to this memory of a plane crash. Taylor sees Turtle as a survivor, one who has experienced horrors yet is still able to hold on to the rope that will save her.



Lou Ann brings Dwayne Ray out, fussing about his flat face, but Taylor assures her that all baby's heads look flat for a while. Taylor then asks if she and Turtle can move in and Lou Ann says that she would love it. Lou Ann was afraid that no one would ever want to live with her and that she had wasted 4 dollars on the ad in the paper. Taylor tells her to stop being so insecure, and that she herself is just a "plain hillbilly from East Jesus Nowhere with this adopted child that...is dumb as a box of rocks." Lou Ann hides her smile, laughing that Taylor talks just like she does.

Lou Ann may be the biological mother, but Taylor provides her with knowledge about children that she didn't know, proving that adoptive or surrogate mothers can be just as capable as biological mothers. Meanwhile, Taylor assuages some of Lou Ann's insecurities simply by the way she talks. Taylor's "plain hillbilly" speech is a sign of where she grew up and where she once belonged. Lou Ann also belonged to that place once, and this shared past helps the two women create a new home where they can both belong now.



CHAPTER 6: VALENTINE'S DAY

The first frost of winter comes on Valentine's Day and all of Mattie's plants start to die. Taylor is saddened by this but Mattie is unfazed. Mattie says that this is simply the cycle of life, but Taylor thinks that Mattie is gloating a bit because she had the foresight to pick the **green tomatoes** before the frost came.

The frost comes on Valentine's Day, a bad sign on a holiday intended to celebrate romance and warmth. Mattie turns this into a good thing, though, by spinning the frost as a gift from nature so that the green tomatoes would be ready. Through Mattie's eyes, nature is able to adapt to any so-called "disaster."



Taylor has decided to take a job at Jesus Is Lord Used Tires, something she hates because of her fear of tires, but also loves because of her friendship with Mattie. At first, Taylor tried to change the subject whenever Mattie talked about needing extra help, but Mattie stubbornly insists that Taylor would have an aptitude for tires. Finally, Mattie offers to fix Taylor's car for free if Taylor takes the job, and Taylor knows she can't say no. The working arrangement is perfect, because Turtle can come in to work if Lou Ann can't watch her.

Taylor finds out that Mattie lets many Spanish-speaking families stay in her upper room, which Mattie says is a "Sanctuary." Taylor compares this to a bird sanctuary where **birds** cannot be shot, and Mattie is content to leave the explanation there. The priest that Taylor saw the first day she came to Jesus Is Lord Used Tires brings the refugee families to and from Mattie's back door. Father William wears a belt buckle with a stick figure in a maze (a Native American symbol for life) and Taylor finds him both oddly handsome for a priest and oddly old for his young age. Taylor remembers later that she had a book of poems as a child that included the poem "You are Old, Father William."

Taylor congratulates herself for how well she is hiding her fear of tires, but Mattie notices how jumpy she is around the shop. Mattie asks her what she is afraid of, saying that anything is okay as long as Taylor is not running from the law. Taylor wonders why Mattie has had so much experience with people running from the law. After some deliberation, Taylor decides to admit to Mattie that she has a "**chicken**-shit" fear of exploding tires. Mattie looks at Taylor with disbelief, and then throws a can of water at Taylor. Taylor catches it, barely, as Mattie explains that an exploding tire would not have any more force than that can of water.

Taylor, still wary, explains to Mattie that she once saw a man blown in to the air because of an exploding tire, but Mattie tells Taylor not to worry unless it is a tractor tire. Taylor is comforted, though still afraid, and realizes that it is better to live your life as fully as possible than to stay paralyzed by fear. Taylor offers to help Mattie if there ever is a tractor tire in the shop, then pours the can of water out on Mattie's **bean plants**. As Taylor wonders why the bean plants didn't die in the frost as the other plants did and idly watches a young boy ride past with a bunch of roses, she realizes that Mattie is watching her in such a motherly fashion that she aches to see her own mother.

Mattie's attitude toward disaster is to face it head-on, as she suggests that Taylor should do by confronting her fear of tires. Mattie becomes a surrogate mother for Taylor, encouraging Taylor to reach toward her goals even when it is difficult. This calls back to Taylor's mother's advice the first time she was scared to take a job in Chapter 1.



Birds are a symbol of vulnerability in the novel, just as the families that Mattie helps are in an incredibly vulnerable position as undocumented immigrants in the United States. Father William's name, though obviously a sign of his Catholic position, is also a reminder of the family that Mattie and Father William create for these immigrants. Father William's belt buckle then represents the sanctuary's attempt to guide these refugees safely through life.



Like a real mother, Mattie is able to see when Taylor is uncomfortable and trying to hide it. Taylor's "chicken-shit" fear uses the bird as a symbol of how vulnerable coming clean about her fears makes her feel. Mattie teaches Taylor how to deal with this fear and how to have a practical approach toward disaster in general. Taylor needs to learn that some things may hurt, but that she is capable of survival.



Taylor's fear of tires now becomes a desire to help Mattie if disaster (symbolized by a tractor tire) ever comes. Using the watering can from her tire lesson to water the bean plants metaphorically explains how Taylor will use this lesson about being prepared to survive disaster to grow as a person. Mattie's place as Taylor's surrogate mother is cemented in that last look, as the boy riding past with the roses reminds us how Valentine's Day can also be used to celebrate other types of familial love.



After work, Taylor goes to buy Turtle some books to look at. She chooses *Old MacDonald Had an Apartment House*, because the small garden in the book reminds her of Mattie and because the pages are thick enough to withstand Turtle's tough grip. While shopping, Taylor also picks out a Valentine's Day card for her mother. Taylor still feels guilty for betraying her mother by changing her name, even though when her mother found out she had said that Taylor fits her better than Marietta ever had. Taylor eventually decides on a card with a picture of a pipe wrench inside as a joke to help her mother open tight jar lids.

When Taylor gets home, she finds out that Lou Ann has bought a baby name book for Turtle. Lou Ann reads out names to Turtle as she cooks dinner, but Turtle and Dwayne Ray both just stare into space as they sit in high chairs at the table. Lou Ann is reading names from the L's when Taylor comes in and she excitedly tells Taylor that the name Lou Ann is on the exact middle page of the book. Taylor scoffs at any meaning this might have, saying that the only name book their parents had was the Bible.

In a bad mood, Taylor tells Lou Ann that trying to find out Turtle's name is foolish, but Lou Ann insists that they have to try to find Turtle's personality beyond her habit of grabbing on to things. Lou Ann tells Taylor to play with Turtle more to help her develop a personality. Taylor, hurt at this comment, snaps at Lou Ann that she bought a book for Turtle today. Lou Ann apologizes and changes the subject to the borscht soup she has made. Taylor imagines Lou Ann trying to find recipes that use the **vegetables** that Taylor brings home from Mattie's garden and laments the fact that Lou Ann is starving herself to get rid of the non-existent baby weight she gained. Taylor apologizes in turn, telling Lou Ann that she just had a bad day.

Taylor starts to feed Turtle some borscht soup, while Lou Ann warns her not to give Turtle any peas so she won't choke. Lou Ann sees disaster everywhere, even saving newspaper clippings of freak disasters around the country. Lou Ann considers anything involved in these accidents, even innocuous things like Frisbees, to be dangerous. Taylor assures Lou Ann that she will be very careful about what Turtle eats and Lou Ann settles down to eat herself, commenting that her Granny Logan would never eat a Russian soup like borscht for fear of communism.

Like the apartment garden, Turtle will thrive in the city environment that Taylor creates for her. Taylor's thoughts of her own mother suggest that she is feeling guilty for changing her whole identity more than just her name, but her mother is smart and strong enough to know that children have to change as they grow up. The card that Taylor picks is another sign of how Taylor does not feel that she needs male help in her life, using a pipe wrench rather than a husband to open a jar.



Though Turtle is much older than Dwayne Ray, the two children seem to be developmentally at the same place. Turtle's lack of a real family at birth stunted her emotional growth, and her emotional maturity should instead perhaps be counted from the day that Taylor became her mother. Lou Ann still sees symbolism in everything.



Lou Ann's attempts to find Turtle's real name are an attempt to recover Turtle's time with her birth family, but Taylor is resistant to anything that will distance Turtle from being truly hers. As a young mother, Taylor is not able to accept that Turtle may not always have the name that Taylor chose for her, even though Taylor's own mother just gave her an example of how to deal with that exact situation. However, Taylor's mother has had more time to see Taylor's true personality, something that Turtle has not yet been able to display. Lou Ann oddly parallels Turtle's lack of growth, specifically not eating so that she will shrink back to the most conventionally attractive version of herself. Lou Ann is uncomfortable with both the metaphorical and literal weight of being a mother.



Lou Ann again sees disaster in everyday circumstances, a worry that neither helps prevent these disasters nor would make it easier to handle them if they did come true. Taylor, for her part, knows that Turtle needs the nourishment of the vegetables in the soup so that her growth is not stunted any more than it has been. Lou Ann's family rejects this potential growth in another way, refusing to learn from other cultures for fear of any change.



That night, after the kids are put to sleep, Taylor realizes that she is uncomfortable with the family dynamic that she and Lou Ann have fallen into with Lou Ann caring for the kids and Taylor working all day. Lou Ann comes in with the baby name book and Taylor decides to talk to her about this feeling, giving Lou Ann a beer to prepare her for the conversation. Taylor tries to explain how she likes Lou Ann and appreciates her help, but doesn't want Lou Ann to feel obligated to do things for her as if they were a real family. Three beers later, with plenty of snacks as well, Lou Ann is crying while Taylor wonders aloud why she is acting like a workaholic father when she never even knew her dad. Taylor blames this emotional outburst on the junk food they've been eating.

A while into this conversation about families, Lou Ann goes very still and Taylor thinks that she is choking. Lou Ann then covers her eyes and wails that she never drinks because she is afraid to lose control. Lou Ann's biggest fear is that she will lose all her friends because she says something stupid in a momentary lapse of control, an idea that Taylor calls a "weird theory of friendship."

Lou Ann recounts an embarrassing experience she had while drinking. She and Angel went to look for a meteor shower with some friends and a bottle of tequila, but one friend lost an earring and Lou Ann spent the whole night looking for it. The next morning, Angel kept talking about the wonderful meteor shower and teasing Lou Ann for not remembering it. Taylor can't decide how this makes her feel about Angel, a man sensitive enough to go star-gazing, but crude enough to tease Lou Ann about missing something that may never have happened. Taylor asks Lou Ann if she ever checked with the friends to see if the meteor shower actually happened, but Lou Ann says that the friends moved to San Diego. In any event, Lou Ann says that the meteor shower is not the point, as what she is truly concerned about is the troubling possibility of a lapse in memory.

Still melancholy, Lou Ann mourns her lack of a husband on Valentine's Day. Taylor doesn't know how to comfort her, thinking that Lou Ann will only hear what she wants to. Taylor looks at Lou Ann lying flat on the couch and thinks about Lou Ann's father, who was killed when his tractor rolled over and flattened him. Lou Ann interrupts Taylor's morbid thoughts to wonder whether it was her fault that Angel left. Lou Ann insists that something is wrong with her because people are supposed to love the same person their whole lives, but Taylor just tells her that she reads too many magazines.

Taylor realizes that she is performing the traditional "father" role of the family by going to work and leaving Lou Ann to the traditional "mother" role at home with the kids. While Taylor has no problem acting in a male position, enforcing these gender roles is not healthy for either woman. However, the way that Taylor explains it opens up the question of whether she and Lou Ann are a "real" family. The unnatural, processed food that Lou Ann and Taylor are eating reinforces how Taylor sees this family as an unnatural construct at the moment.



Lou Ann's fear of losing control suggests that she thinks that she can avert disaster if she is in control at all times. Taylor's response is a reminder that the only way to deal with disaster is to lean on your friends and family when it happens.



Angel displays an emotional abuse tactic known as gas-lighting, in which an abuser convinces another person that their view of reality is false. Specifically, Angel convinces Lou Ann that her memories of the meteor shower are incorrect, as Kingsolver examines the shades of domestic abuse in Lou Ann's marriage. Lou Ann needs the support of another woman to recover from this, as Taylor tries to help Lou Ann come to terms with these lies. Lou Ann doesn't seem ready yet to place the blame on anyone but herself.



Lou Ann is still wrapped up in the vision of conventional love, even though she was unhappy with Angel. Taylor's musings about Lou Ann's father bring in the idea that Lou Ann's childhood upbringing colored her view of healthy relationships for life, as Kingsolver again points out how much influence family has on a person's life. Taylor, raised by a single mother, never bought into those ideas of conventional family, but Lou Ann is still not ready to let them go.



Taylor goes to get more junk food from the fridge, even as she thinks that too much junk food will kill them. She tells Lou Ann her theory on “staying with one man your whole life long,” which involves Taylor’s experience fixing a toilet. As Taylor replaced a part in the toilet tank, the packaging read “No installation requires all of the parts,” a philosophy that Taylor has carried over into her love life. No one man could possibly understand all of Taylor’s parts. Lou Ann laughs, once again covering her mouth, and Taylor wonders who shamed Lou Ann about her laugh. To keep Lou Ann laughing, Taylor starts ranting about all of her parts as if she is a **chicken** that men want to pick apart and eat.

Lou Ann and Taylor keep laughing, so Taylor shows Lou Ann the wrench card she got for her mother. Lou Ann laughs harder, trying to remember the name of the tool that looks like a “weenie,” and Taylor comments that all tools look like either weenies or guns. Lou Ann laughs harder at the thought of sending a card like that to her own mother and grandmother. Finally in a good mood, Taylor thinks that Lou Ann looks like an Egyptian queen laid out on her couch. Lou Ann tells Taylor that Angel never would have stayed up all night to talk about something that was bothering him, and asks if Taylor is still mad. Taylor responds, “Peace, sister,” knowing that this 70s slang is woefully out of date anywhere but her hometown in Kentucky.

CHAPTER 7: HOW THEY EAT IN HEAVEN

The chapter opens as Lou Ann remembers a mnemonic device for spelling “arithmetic”: A Red Indian Thought He Might Eat Tobacco In Church. Lou Ann then begs pardon for talking about Indians that way, but neither Taylor, Mattie, nor either of the refugees staying with Mattie take offense. Mattie then tries to think of the memory trick for geography, but can’t remember the word for the y. A young man, the husband of the Guatemalan couple currently staying with Mattie, chimes in to finish the rhyme. As he was an English teacher in Guatemala City, Lou Ann and Taylor tell him that he knows better English than the two of them combined. Taylor can’t remember the young man’s name, knowing only that it starts with Es-something.

Taylor, Lou Ann, Mattie, and the two Guatemalan refugees are talking about spelling while on a picnic in the desert. Taylor is sweating in her jeans, as the weather has turned unseasonably warm again after the one frost on Valentine’s Day. Mattie says that the summer **wildflowers** blooming before Easter is a sign from the Lord that they all need to go have a picnic. Taylor skeptically wonders just who Mattie’s Lord is, but doesn’t mind following the enjoyable commandments he gives.

Taylor uses two metaphors about romance between men and women, both of which paint these relationships in an unflattering light. The toilet metaphor suggests that all the parts of a woman’s personality, both the stereotypically masculine and the feminine traits, will never reach their full potential in a relationship with a man. The chicken metaphor, bringing in the bird symbolism that threads through the novel, accentuates the vulnerability that women have in a male-centric society that prioritizes male appetites (sexual or otherwise) above female safety, as Taylor describes her body being metaphorically consumed by men.



Taylor wants to help Lou Ann reach the place of feminine independence that she and her mother have embraced. The two women make fun of the male ego as Kingsolver jokes at calling men “tools” who are attracted to phallic shapes. Taylor references Egyptian queens such as Cleopatra or Nefertiti whose strength and intelligence were overshadowed by the males in their lives, like Lou Ann was stifled by Angel. Taylor presents a better way to form a family, with the two women as equal sisters rather than one partner being stronger than the other.



When Lou Ann apologizes for talking about “Indians,” it’s unclear whether she is worried about offending Taylor (for Turtle’s sake) or the Guatemalan couple, as Kingsolver starts to connect Turtle and the Guatemalan couple. The husband’s superior knowledge of English shows that he “belongs” in America just as much or more than Lou Ann and Taylor, who were born here. He put effort into learning these English mnemonics that those who were born here did not.



The unseasonable warmth is another sign that nature is suffering due to human actions, even as the main characters of the novel unabashedly enjoy the fruits of nature on their picnic. Mattie connects her love of nature to her spiritual beliefs. Kingsolver’s own regard for nature is as sacred as the religious beliefs that she talks about in the novel.



The picnic spot is a watering hole that Lou Ann recommended, as it was a place that she and Angel used to go to together. Taylor worries that the location will bring back bad memories of Angel, but Lou Ann seems more concerned that the rest of them are happy with the picnic spot. Lou Ann even talks about how she and Angel wanted to get married here, except for the fact that Angel's mother would have been aghast at the thought of either hiking or riding horseback this far into the desert. The English teacher translates this story into Spanish for his wife, and the humor of Angel's overbearing mother is one of the few things that earns a smile from the quiet young woman.

Taylor finally remembers the Guatemalan couples' names: Estevan and Esperanza. She describes the married couple as more like twins, both for their matching names and their matching appearances. Both are small and dark with eyes that remind Taylor of Turtle's Cherokee features, due to Estevan and Esperanza's Mayan heritage. While Taylor thinks that Estevan's smallness is sprightly, Esperanza's smallness strikes her as sad – as if Esperanza used to be larger but shrunk. Esperanza's silent watchfulness also reminds Taylor of Turtle.

Taylor describes the strange scene when Esperanza first met Turtle. When she saw Turtle get out of the car at the trailhead to the picnic spot, Esperanza looked like she had been hit with an exploding tire, and her face paled. As they hike, Taylor thinks that Esperanza looks like a school girl from another time, with an orange canteen that sticks out as if from another planet. Taylor asks Estevan if Esperanza is okay, and he says that she is. He explains that Turtle simply looks like a child they once knew in Guatemala. Taylor responds that Turtle could be Guatemalan for all she knows, given that Turtle isn't really Taylor's daughter.

At the watering hole, Esperanza continues to watch Turtle while Taylor and Estevan decide to go for a swim after finishing their baloney sandwiches. Lou Ann furiously warns them not to swim for at least an hour after eating, for fear they will drown. Taylor simply tells Lou Ann to pull them out if they start to sink, and dives into the freezing water. Taylor and Estevan splash Lou Ann and Mattie until Mattie and Lou Ann tell them that they won't even dream of saving them after this bad behavior.

Lou Ann is starting to display her own character and opinions, a far cry from her passive traits in Chapter 2. She is still dependent on her friend's approval, but she has moved away from chasing Angel's approval and by extension is rejecting a society that says women should try to please men. The family dynamics that Lou Ann describes cross the language and cultural barriers, as Kingsolver points out that family is universal.



Taylor describes the Guatemalan couple like two halves of a whole, the one true partnership between a man and a woman in the novel. Their appearances, as well as matching each other, match Turtle's as Kingsolver sets up parallels between the couple and Turtle as fellow refugees and survivors. Esperanza's "shrunk" appearance is reminiscent of the shrunken appearance of Turtle's aunt after she gives up Turtle. This suggests that Esperanza had some sort of motherhood-related tragedy in her past.



Taylor again talks about tragedy in terms of tires, cementing the idea that Turtle reminds Esperanza of some form of disaster she experienced in her past. Kingsolver also relates Esperanza to the innocence of nature, suggesting that the artificial plastic of the canteen does not belong to the earth the way that Esperanza does. Taylor first mentions the possibility of Estevan and Esperanza being Turtle's parents as a joke, but this potential family will return again and again until the climax of the novel.



Taylor once again laughs off Lou Ann's warning, as Kingsolver continually points out that endless worrying over disaster will not prevent those events. Both Taylor and Estevan dive into this danger, as their method of dealing with disaster is to face it head on.



Calming down from the excitement, Estevan swims over to Esperanza's rock and sings to her in Spanish. Taylor guesses that it is a love song and notes how handsome Estevan looks as he sings. Esperanza doesn't seem to notice, entranced by the sight of Turtle and Dwayne Ray asleep in the sun. Taylor looks closer at the kids and sees Turtle's eyes moving beneath her lids, as if she is dreaming of doing all the things that she simply watches in her waking life.

The group leaves the picnic spot at dusk, with Estevan driving Mattie's car because of Mattie's terrible vision at night and Lou Ann, Taylor and the kids in Taylor's car. Mattie warns Estevan not to attract the attention of the police, which Taylor finds odd considering how carefully Estevan drives. Lou Ann complains about her sunburn and tries to keep the kids entertained in the back seat when suddenly Estevan stops and Taylor has to slam on the breaks. Taylor worries about Turtle falling in the back seat, but Lou Ann assures her that Turtle is fine. Turtle is smiling, and may have even laughed at the sudden movement of the car.

Lou Ann and Taylor try to see what made Estevan stop, finally noticing a family of **quail** crossing the road in front of the car. Taylor, Lou Ann, and Turtle freeze as they watch the baby quail swarm in all directions around the mother quail, until finally the mother manages to corral all her children safely into the bushes. Estevan taps the brake once more, as if winking the lights, and then continues driving. Taylor feels as if she is going to cry, but thinks that she must be about to get her period. Lou Ann mentions that Angel would have given himself two points for every quail he hit.

Taylor feels much better now that Turtle's first sound was a laugh, taking it as a sign that she isn't completely failing as a mother. Taylor laughs at herself for looking for signs, blaming it on Lou Ann's avid interest in horoscopes and symbols. Yet when it happens, neither Lou Ann nor Taylor can make sense of Turtle's true first word: **Bean**.

Turtle speaks her first word, **bean**, while she and Taylor are helping Mattie in the garden. Taylor tries to explain the concept of seeds to Turtle, a process that Mattie says Turtle will find confusing because most seeds don't look like the vegetable they will grow into. Taylor decides to show Turtle a bean, which looks the same as the beans they eat, and Turtle names it accordingly. Taylor is dumbfounded at the sound of Turtle's voice, until Mattie prompts her to praise Turtle for her effort. Taylor then hugs Turtle, calling her "the smartest kid alive."

Taylor realizes that she is attracted to Estevan while they are in water, which the novel uses as a symbol of significant realizations. This is not the first time that Taylor has acknowledged that a man is handsome, but it is the first time that she has not treated that as something shameful. However, Estevan and Esperanza remain completely unaware of this epiphany and instead remind Taylor of her responsibility as Turtle's mother. Taylor puts aside her attraction to Estevan in order to focus more fully on Turtle.



Taylor does not understand the constant danger that Estevan and Esperanza are in due to their status as undocumented refugees. If they are stopped by the police, Estevan and Esperanza will be sent back to Guatemala. Kingsolver presents Taylor's worries at Turtle's tumble as normal for a new mother, but also points out Turtle's resilience by having her laugh at this fall.



The quail, another instance of symbolic birds in the novel, are in a vulnerable position because of the road that humans have built through their habitat. Estevan, in contrast to Angel's destructive masculinity, is sensitive to the birds' danger. This moment makes Taylor even more attracted to Estevan, though she refuses to admit it to herself. Taylor also identifies with the mother quail, desperately trying to keep her babies safe like Taylor tries to keep Turtle safe.



Both Turtle's laugh and her first word point to Turtle's ability to grow. Even though she has suffered more than any child should, she can still experience joy. Like a bean, which is small and ordinary at first, Turtle has the potential to grow into a beautiful plant.



Taylor needs Mattie's help with this momentous occasion in Turtle's life, as she is still young enough to need motherly advice even though she is a mother herself. Taylor's effusive praise of Turtle echoes the way that Taylor's mother always unconditionally supported Taylor.



Mattie suggests that Taylor take some **beans** home for Turtle to play with, and Taylor agrees (though she worries what Lou Ann will think of the choking hazard). Taylor explains to Turtle the difference between playing-with beans, eating beans, and putting-in-the-ground beans. Turtle seems to understand, playing quietly with her beans and then finally burying them in between two squash plants. On the way home, Turtle exclaims “bean” at every patch of dirt they see.

At home, Lou Ann is cutting her hair again, something that has become an almost daily habit. Taylor warns Lou Ann that she will be bald if she keeps this up, saddened by the fact that Lou Ann probably never noticed that she had the type of perfectly straight blonde hair that all the high school girls envied. Instead, Lou Ann focuses on her flaws. Lou Ann wails that her hair looks like it has died, and Taylor hesitates to either agree or contradict her, as Lou Ann manages to turn even compliments about her appearance into insults. Taylor wishes she could give Lou Ann a lucky shirt like she did for Turtle, to remind Lou Ann how beautiful she really is.

As Lou Ann worries over her hair, Taylor starts to prepare for Esperanza and Estevan to come over for dinner. Lou Ann invited them over to watch Mattie who was appearing on the evening news, forgetting that Angel had taken their little TV when he moved out. Taylor corrects this by inviting over some neighbors who own a portable TV, Edna Poppy and Virgie Parsons. Though Taylor hasn’t met them yet, she knows that Lou Ann likes them, and owes them a favor for watching Dwayne Ray occasionally.

As Taylor cooks dinner, she mulls over the arrangement she and Lou Ann have made over household chores. Taylor wants to make sure that Lou Ann feels repaid for the times she watches Turtle. The two women also split the bills, with Taylor working and Lou Ann drawing from savings that Angel left. Taylor is cooking sweet and sour chicken for the party, though she had originally planned to make navy bean soup in honor of Turtle’s first word. By now, Turtle has said so many new words that Taylor can’t fit them all into any soup – even if Turtle’s vocabulary is limited to **vegetables** alone.

Lou Ann worries about what to wear for the party, considering that she is heavier after giving birth to Dwayne Ray. Taylor refuses to hear Lou Ann call herself fat, forcing Lou Ann to change the subject to Mattie’s TV appearance. Lou Ann doesn’t know exactly why Mattie will be on TV, only that it has something to do with “the people that live with her,” but Lou Ann is sure that she wouldn’t want to be on TV herself.

Taylor is starting to anticipate Lou Ann’s thoughts as they continue to grow closer as a family. Still, Taylor does not give in to Lou Ann’s worrying but prepares Turtle for this danger as best she can. Turtle, for her part, associates the beans with their potential to grow. These ritual “burials” show that Turtle has the potential to grow herself.



Kingsolver laments the ever-changing standards of beauty for American women as Lou Ann struggles to understand that she is beautiful without even trying. Taylor managed to escape those worries, probably through the unwavering support of her own mother. The t-shirt that Taylor gave Turtle is a sign that Taylor will raise Turtle to find her own beauty as well, but Taylor cannot do the same to reprogram Lou Ann’s years of internalized sexism.



Taylor’s little community is growing, as she wants to invite Estevan, Esperanza, Edna, and Virgie into her home. The extra-familial bonds give each person something that they cannot provide for themselves, as Edna and Virgie bring the TV, and Taylor provides the food. Kingsolver suggests that this type of sharing may be uncommon in large cities today but is an important component of human society.



Lou Ann and Taylor’s partnership is as equal as possible, as the two women attempt to avoid the struggle for dominance that they have seen in relationships between men and women. Turtle is thriving in this environment, and each new veggie that she pronounces seems like another sign of her emotional growth.



Lou Ann is still preoccupied by the weight she gained while pregnant, not seeing that these extra pounds are a normal outcome of her new role as a mother. Lou Ann and Taylor’s ignorance about Mattie’s immigrant relief efforts show how people who belong in America by birth don’t always recognize their privilege or even consider welcoming in new immigrants.



Lou Ann compares her fear of being on TV to her childhood fear of saying something inappropriate in church, and Taylor agrees that she is always afraid that she will say something scandalous to Mattie's Catholic priest friend. Lou Ann likens this to a strange episode in high school, when she worried that she was going to throw herself off of the dome at the Kentucky state capital. Her boyfriend at the time called it a fear of heights, but Lou Ann knows that it is something else. Taylor calls it a "fear that the things you imagine will turn real" and Lou Ann is shocked that Taylor understands so exactly. Taylor just shrugs, saying she saw a Star Trek episode along those lines.

Estevan and Esperanza arrive. Estevan compliments Taylor's new look, thanks to Lou Ann's ministrations and a borrowed Chinese style dress, but Taylor thinks that Esperanza looks even more beautiful. Esperanza's Guatemalan dress is a rainbow riot of colors and Taylor can't believe that Esperanza had to leave a country whose vegetation matched the vibrant colors on Esperanza's clothing.

The women from next door finally show up with the television, and Taylor helps Edna Poppy set it up. Edna is dressed entirely in red, while Virgie Mae looks like she is in her formal church wear. On TV, Mattie starts to talk about the United Nations "something-something" on human rights. The program continues to explain the plight of thousands of Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrants who flee civil wars but are not granted asylum in the United States. Taylor finds it all hard to understand, made worse by the hubbub of the guests still getting comfortable.

As Edna and Virgie finally settle in, the TV program Mattie appeared on ends. Virgie sniffs, saying that all she caught was "some kind of trouble with illegal aliens and dope peddlers." Taylor then tries to introduce Estevan and Esperanza, but Estevan cuts in to introduce himself as Steven and his wife as Hope. Virgie asks if Turtle, who is wandering around "like a wild Indian" without a shirt on, is theirs but Estevan tells her that they have no children. Esperanza looks like she has been slapped. Taylor claims Turtle as her own, proudly stating that Turtle is a wild Indian, and ushers the group into the kitchen for dinner.

Esperanza comes into the kitchen to help Taylor set the table, and Taylor apologizes for Virgie's rudeness. As everyone comes in, Taylor looks over Virgie and Edna's outfits again. Edna has two red bobby pins in her hair, and Taylor imagines the sweet older woman finding them in the drug store and trying to share her excitement with Virgie only to find Virgie lecturing the check-out boy.

Lou Ann, who sees disaster everywhere, takes it one step further by thinking that just imagining these things may cause them to happen. While a previous boyfriend misread this fear as a simpler fear of heights, Taylor understands Lou Ann's complex motives. Taylor is able to meet Lou Ann at a deeper level than any of the males in her life have, even though Taylor continues to joke about this connection.



Taylor's look borrows (and arguably appropriates) fashion from another culture, as many American trends have done. Esperanza's dress, however, belongs to Esperanza's own heritage. Taylor seems jealous of how completely Esperanza belongs to her own culture, as Taylor has never been entirely comfortable in her American homes.



Edna's red outfit appeals to Taylor, who has previously mentioned her affinity for the color. Virgie's dress, however, reminds Taylor of the formality and judgment that some people associate with religion. When Mattie starts talking on the TV, Kingsolver specifically does not explain what Mattie is talking about. Taylor's ignorance on the immigrant crisis mirrors how many Americans in the 70s and 80s had no idea of the struggle that these people faced.



Virgie represents the viewpoint of many Americans who only see the problems that immigrants might cause in America, subtly echoing Lou Ann's earlier fear of the things she imagines becoming real. Virgie lets her fear rule her life rather than seeing the human element of immigration. Estevan understands this and tries to pass himself and his wife off as Americans with American names. Virgie mistakenly thinks that Turtle is Estevan's daughter, as Kingsolver continues to point out this possible family. Yet Taylor, Turtle's real mother, refuses to be cowed by Virgie's judgement and proudly revels in Turtle's "Indian" heritage.



Taylor, for all that she is ashamed by Virgie's judgment of immigrants, also makes the mistake of judging Virgie. She imagines that Edna is always sweet while Virgie is always sour even though she has no way of knowing what these women are actually like.



Estevan brings out a package of chopsticks for everyone to use. Taylor thanks him, but Edna pronounces herself not up for such a “great adventure” and Virgie sniffs at “such foolishness.” Everyone else attempts to use the chopsticks, learning from Estevan who works as a dishwasher at a Chinese restaurant. Estevan relates how the Chinese family translates English through their five-year-old daughter, which sends Virgie on a diatribe against immigrants stealing jobs in America and degrading the language. Edna stops her, but Taylor is angry at what these comments might mean to Estevan. She wants to tell Virgie that Estevan was an English teacher in Guatemala City, but notices that Estevan himself is staying calm and decides to stay quiet herself.

After Virgie’s outburst, Edna smooths out the mood by complimenting the food. Turtle finally manages to spear a piece of pineapple on her chopstick, but starts to cry when it slides off. Estevan comforts Turtle with a “wild Indian” story from South America about heaven and hell. Virgie makes a face, but Estevan continues: In hell, there is a pot of stew, but no one can eat because their spoons are too long for their arms. No one can reach his own mouth and so they starve. Estevan looks right at Virgie and goes on: In heaven, there is the same stew and the same long spoons yet everyone is well fed—because they feed each other. Then Estevan picks up a piece of pineapple with his chopsticks and feeds it to Turtle.

CHAPTER 8: THE MIRACLE OF DOG DOO PARK

Taylor finds out that her mother is getting remarried, to a man named Harland Elleston who works at a car body paint shop in Pittman County, Kentucky. Taylor is incredulous, both that Lou Ann was the one to receive this important phone call and that her mother is getting married at all. Taylor calls her mother, and they chatter about the gardening peculiarities of Arizona before Taylor’s mother confesses that she is as surprised by the wedding as Taylor is. In her whirlwind of emotions, Taylor’s mother remembers to ask how Turtle is doing. Taylor tells her mother that Turtle finally started talking and Taylor’s mother says that Taylor herself was late to talk too. Taylor wonders why that matters, as Turtle is not biologically related.

Lou Ann is much more excited about the prospect of a wedding than Taylor is, as Taylor can only focus on how her mother will never come out to Arizona now that she has married a Kentucky man. Lou Ann says that Taylor is jealous, just like Lou Ann was when her brother married and “deserted” their family. Lou Ann’s Granny Logan was aghast at the girl’s “Eskimo” heritage, while Lou Ann found the whole thing exotic.

Estevan continues to show his openness to new cultures. Edna and Virgie however, are not ready to change their ways – though Virgie is much more critical of these new additions to American life than Edna is. Taylor wants to prove Virgie wrong, a testament to her courage and loyalty to her friends, but she is too rash in her anger. Estevan is much more even-tempered, knowing that the risk of exposing his and his wife’s background is far more important than proving a point to someone who will likely not change her opinion anyway.



Edna and Virgie are another complex duo of women, seemingly completing each other in ways that no man could. Meanwhile, Estevan manages to drive home Kingsolver’s point about the importance of community. Heaven is only a paradise because people choose to feed each other instead of always worrying about themselves. Likewise, those in America who are scared of the changes that immigrants would bring should focus more on how they can help people in need rather than futilely attempting to preserve the status quo.



Taylor’s mother was the ultimate symbol of female independence to Taylor, which is why Taylor is so disturbed by the news that her mother is getting married. Yet it is clearly still possible to be a feminist and be married to a man, as Taylor’s mother does not compromise anything of her own identity in getting married. The conversation about gardens subtly hints that this moment will be a growth opportunity for both Taylor and her mother. Taylor’s mother also shows how she fully accepts Turtle as part of their family, even though she is not Taylor’s biological child.



Marriage can either add people to a person’s family, or steal them away, and Taylor definitely feels that her mother is leaving their family by getting married. It would be easy to read this as a gendered decision, but Lou Ann also brings up her brother as an example. Both men and women can choose to desert their family or stay connected to them when they get married.



Lou Ann and Taylor are talking about the upcoming wedding while their kids play in Roosevelt park, which the neighborhood kids call Dead Grass Park and Dog Doo Park because it is so scraggly and unkempt. Lou Ann sums up Taylor's discomfort by telling her to focus on the good news that her mother still has a life. Lou Ann's own mother practically died when her husband did, and Lou Ann would be ecstatic if her mother remarried. Lou Ann suggests that her mother should marry Bobby Bingo, the **vegetable** seller, so that Bobby and Turtle can talk vegetables all day.

Taylor is still upset that her mother is going to marry a man who isn't "related" to them. Lou Ann reminds Taylor that she never seems to like any men, to which Taylor responds that she likes Estevan. As she says so, Taylor feels her heart jump a beat and realizes that she has romantic feelings for Estevan. Lou Ann dismisses Estevan as "taken" and tells Taylor that she should try harder to find a good man for herself.

Lou Ann starts to daydream about when she first met Angel. Though the only good thing to come out of their relationship was Dwayne Ray, Lou Ann stills finds Angel's old rodeo persona deeply romantic. Lou Ann wanted to catch Angel's eye because he had seemed so bored even with the excitement of the rodeo all around him.

As Lou Ann talks, a boy in a Michael Jackson t-shirt runs up and tells Lou Ann that he recognizes her from when she gave out pennies on Halloween. Lou Ann rolls her eyes at this reminder of her past embarrassment, but the boy just warns Lou Ann and Taylor not to stay in the park after the bums come at nightfall, and rides off. Taylor and Lou Ann are sitting in the arbor, the nicest part of the park with a trellis covered in **wisteria vines**. Taylor is pleasantly surprised when the wisteria vines bloom after looking dead all winter, comparing it to the Bible story of striking water out of a rock. These flowers out of bare dirt are the Miracle of Dog Doo Park.

Lou Ann circles back to talking about Taylor's mother. Taylor scoffs that her mother, already named Alice Jean Stamper Greer, doesn't need to add Elleston to the end, but Lou Ann finds the whole thing romantic. Lou Ann teases Taylor by singing about her mother and Harland, and Taylor starts singing to drown them out, until the two women see their neighbors, Mrs. Parsons and Edna Poppy. They wave to their neighbors, and Turtle waves back, thinking that Taylor is waving at her.

Roosevelt park, which could have been an oasis of nature in the city of Tucson, is another sign of how humans do not take care of nature. Lou Ann's mother is a sad vision of what Lou Ann could have become without Angel, but luckily Lou Ann seems focused on building her own identity. Her reference to Bobby Bingo's vegetables, while a joke, is also a sign of Lou Ann's desire for self-growth.



Just like Lou Ann felt that living with Angel was like living with a stranger, Taylor also has trouble thinking that men and women can be truly family. Estevan's sensitivity and charm have allowed Taylor to see him as a fellow human rather than another strange man.



From the very beginning, Lou Ann and Angel's relationship was unequal. Lou Ann and Angel's relationship was built on Lou Ann trying to impress Angel and live up to his high standards.



The boy from the park reminds Lou Ann of the pennies, a small fund that Lou Ann had started for a washing machine that Angel had never supported. However romantic Lou Ann found Angel, he was never a true partner to her. The boy's warning about the bums foreshadows that this park can be a dangerous place. The wisteria vines, which Turtle later compares to bean trees, grow in poor soil, just like many of the characters in the novel (Turtle especially) must miraculously grow in tough circumstances.



Significantly, Taylor suggests that her mother will add another last name rather than replacing Greer with Elleston. This shows that Taylor will always consider her mother a part of her family first, no matter what other families she joins. Turtle is starting to engage with people, noticing her mother's greeting and greeting her in return – a far cry from her previous blank stare.



Taylor and Lou Ann have started leaving Turtle and Dwayne Ray with Edna Poppy and Virgie Mae Parsons a couple of times a week. Turtle calls them **Poppy and Parsnip**, keeping up her trend of speaking solely in vegetables. Turtle greets Edna as “Ma Poppy,” just as she adds ‘ma’ to the beginning of every woman’s name. Edna and Virgie walk slowly toward the little group, Edna dressed all in red and Virgie dressed in “old lady clothing.” Edna has worn all red since she was 16, a trait that Taylor admires. Taylor also admires Edna’s forthright speech, even though the older woman never looks at people when she talks. Edna and Virgie say hello, and Virgie warns Lou Ann that Angel may be looking for her.

When Edna and Virgie leave, Lou Ann wonders why Angel would want to see her again. Taylor, however, wonders why sweet Edna puts up with sour Virgie. Lou Ann says that Virgie is harmless, just a stubborn woman like her Granny Logan. Yet, Lou Ann adds that her Granny Logan is different because she is only mean to her own relatives. Finally, Taylor summons her courage to ask Lou Ann questions she’s been wondering about: if Lou Ann would ever take Angel back, even if it meant that Taylor and Turtle had to move out. Lou Ann, surprised at the question, just says that Angel is her husband.

Taylor goes into work the next day still bothered by what Virgie said about immigrants the night they all had dinner together. She apologizes to Estevan and says that Virgie didn’t really mean it. Estevan just shrugs and says that Americans tend to believe that bad things only happen to bad people. Taylor wants to disagree, but knows that it is probably true, if only because it “makes us feel safe.”

Estevan and Taylor chat often, as Estevan gets ready to catch his bus from Mattie’s office to his work. Taylor adores the beautiful way that Estevan speaks English, and appreciates Estevan’s looks too (though she does not tell Estevan this). Estevan just laughs and says, “You are poetic mi’ija.” He tries to explain to Taylor what it means to call someone mi’ija (literally: my daughter), but can’t translate the sentiment into English. Taylor thanks him for the poetic compliment, and Estevan leaves to jump up onto the bus. Taylor imagines him catching a bus in Guatemala City with his arms full of books and papers, even though Estevan only works as a dishwasher in Tucson.

Vegetables are still a positive force in Turtle’s imagination, a symbol of all the growth that she will accomplish. Turtle sees the goodness in Edna and Virgie, calling Edna a beautiful red flower, while Virgie is parsnip, a harsher vegetable that is nonetheless very nutritious. Though Taylor doesn’t know it, Turtle’s habit of adding ma to women’s names is presumably a tradition in her birth family, a well as a reminder of the new familial bonds that Turtle is building with her community in Tucson.



Lou Ann accepts that her grandmother is mean to family, as Lou Ann’s experience of family is not a group of people who support each other unconditionally. This helps explain why she claims Angel as her husband even though he doesn’t support Lou Ann like a husband ideally should. Taylor’s nerves over Angel make sense, as she doesn’t know if Lou Ann will go back to the harmful but socially-acceptable family that she has always known, or stay committed to the healthier family they are creating.



According to Estevan’s view of American logic, he and Esperanza must have done something terrible in order to be forced to leave their home. Taylor points out that this argument makes people feel safe because it gives people a sense of control over these disasters.



Taylor is attracted to Estevan’s intelligence, as well as the fact that his impeccable English is the complete opposite of the rural twang of the boys that Taylor hated when she grew up. Estevan’s endearment “mi’ija” is another reminder that the boundaries of family can be blurred in the novel, especially as Taylor builds a new family for herself out of friends.



Feeling depressed, Taylor goes to Mattie that evening to find out more history of Tucson. Mattie tells Taylor the origin of Roosevelt Park, named for Eleanor rather than Teddy or Franklin, and describes a speech that Eleanor Roosevelt gave in that park about helping the poor. The houses around Roosevelt Park used to belong to the upper class, but the neighborhood has not aged gracefully. However, Mattie notes that this allows her to better hide her sanctuary, a concept that Taylor is starting to understand means that families come and go quietly and often.

Mattie sometimes leaves for a few days, with Taylor in charge of the shop and afraid that a tractor tire will come in. Mattie just laughs, saying that no one will bring a tractor tire to a “city vet.” Then she leaves in a four-wheel Blazer with binoculars and says she is going **birdwatching**. Sometimes, a young red-headed man comes to see Mattie when she returns from these trips. Mattie says that he is a doctor who looks after people who arrive here sick or hurt. When Taylor is confused why people would get here injured, Mattie elaborates that people often arrive with burns, specifically cigarette burns on their backs. This evening, as Taylor leaves the shop, she sees a small woman with white hair in Mattie’s office window. The woman is folding a pair of men’s pants very carefully, over and over.

Just as he said, Angel soon comes back. But instead of trying to move back in with Lou Ann, he tells Lou Ann that he is leaving for good. Taylor, meanwhile, is off at a doctor’s appointment for Turtle when Angel brings the news. Turtle is healthy, but Taylor wants to make sure that the abuse Turtle suffered as a baby is not continuing to affect her. Taylor has trouble filling out the forms detailing Turtle’s unknown medical history.

Leaving Turtle to page through a magazine looking for pictures of **veggies**, Taylor goes to tell the nurse that she can’t answer the questions about Turtle’s medical past. The nurse hears Taylor say that Turtle is not her real daughter and assumes that Turtle is in foster care with Taylor. She just tells Taylor to bring the foster care paperwork next time and gives Taylor a much simpler medical history form.

Roosevelt Park is named for a woman, a surprising fact when most of the monuments in America honor men. Eleanor’s speech highlights Mattie’s shame over American lack of compassion for others. Yet the unfortunate poverty of the neighborhood also allows Mattie to keep her relief work safe. Her sanctuary belongs in this neighborhood because everyone is down on their luck.



Mattie calls herself a city vet, displaying again her high regard for nature. Her birdwatching is code for going to meet the immigrant families that she helps find new homes and jobs in the United States. Like all the birds in the novel, these people are in a vulnerable position and they need specific effort to stay safe. The woman folding pants in the window presents a tense look at a domestic task. Taylor takes her laundry for granted, yet this woman must put careful attention into the most mundane jobs.



Taylor is confronted with two things that remind her of the fragile state her chosen family is in. Angel has the potential to take Lou Ann away from Tucson, while Turtle’s doctor visit reminds Taylor that she really has no official connection to Turtle. Taylor will never truly know about Turtle’s past, a fact which may present a threat to Taylor’s status as Turtle’s mother.



Turtle is doing well, as evidence by her happy chattering and the veggies that signal her continued growth. But Taylor is on risky ground. She previously assumed that she could automatically be Turtle’s mother, but now is demoted to a temporary “foster” mother.



Turtle retreats into her old, clingy, self when she sees Dr. P. The doctor pronounces Turtle a healthy two-year-old, and Taylor clarifies that she brought Turtle in to check up on some things that happened to Turtle in the past. Taylor tells Dr. P that she is Turtle's foster parent, and is worried that Turtle was sexually abused by her biological family. He starts to examine her again, but tells Taylor that it is more likely to see behavioral damage than physical damage after this long. He recommends an X-ray and an update to immunization, so Taylor goes to the x-ray room with Turtle.

Taylor and Turtle wait for Dr. P to read Turtle's x-rays, with Turtle still hanging tightly to Taylor. Dr. P comes in, looking shaken, and holds Turtle's x-rays against the light of the window. Taylor feels a chill at seeing Turtle's bones, which only worsens once Dr. P points out the healed fractures in Turtle's arms and legs and explains that Turtle looks two but is actually closer to three. Dr. P calls this slow growth "failure to thrive" due to Turtle's lack of support in her previous home. Taylor is relieved that Turtle is growing now, even though it means she is growing out of her clothes. Dr. P continues to explain Turtle's past injuries, but Taylor gets distracted looking out the window at a **bird** that has made a nest in a cactus.

After Turtle's doctor appointment, Taylor and Turtle meet Lou Ann and Dwayne Ray at the zoo. On the bus there, Taylor tries to ignore the words "failure to thrive" and prepares herself for all the zoo disaster stories that Lou Ann will tell. When Taylor gets there, Lou Ann is crying and can barely explain to Taylor that Angel has told her that he is leaving to join the rodeo again. Confused, Taylor leads Lou Ann into the zoo to sit next to the giant tortoises and calm down.

As they sit on the bench, Taylor shows Turtle the big turtles (hoping that the little girl won't be confused by the name) and Lou Ann explains more about Angel's desire to leave Tucson for the Colorado-Montana rodeo circuit. An older woman leans in to listen in to their conversation, and Lou Ann is embarrassed when Taylor tells the old woman outright about their problems so that she will stop eavesdropping. The woman goes back to her tabloid, a story about an infant mother.

When Lou Ann tells Taylor that Angel talked about divorce papers, Taylor warns Lou Ann that she may have to think about getting a job soon. Lou Ann laments that she has never had a job in her life, then complains that the worst part is that Angel didn't ask her to go with him, even though she never would have been able to take Dwayne Ray on the road like that. Lou Ann thinks this means that Angel never fought for her, but Taylor suggests that he was just being practical about taking a 4-month-old to a rodeo.

The doctor, one of the few men that Turtle has interacted with since Taylor became her mother, clearly reminds her of sexual assault, and his presence seems to undo all the progress she has made. Dr. P's reference to behavioral damage calls back to Lou Ann's cat, who constantly tried to cover up bad behavior that he hadn't actually done. Turtle is also at risk for low self-esteem and guilt because her birth family treated her so poorly.



Turtle's abuse is actually still recorded on her body, especially in the way that she stopped growing because of the lack of emotional support. This "failure to thrive" is the ultimate sign of how necessary a loving family is to their children's growth. Yet the bird in the cactus shows that Turtle may yet be able to make a home out of a hostile birthplace. If the vulnerable bird can live in a cactus without getting poked by the spines, Turtle too can thrive in spite of the danger she once lived in.



In another view of nature in the novel, the zoo keeps animals on display in an unnatural urban environment. Taylor anticipates that Lou Ann will see disaster in all of this, but Lou Ann is actually dealing with a real crisis for once. Angel's plans to move out of town force Lou Ann to confront the fact that her marriage is truly over and that she is in some sense on her own.



The woman's tabloid magazine references the confusion in the back of Taylor's mind. She too feels like an "infant mother," unsure what to do for her daughter.



Lou Ann's lack of employment is another sign of how much she depended on her husband instead of being a complete person on her own. Taylor has to remind Lou Ann of her duties as a mother. If Lou Ann can't mature for her own sake, she must do it for the sake of her son.



Turtle interrupts Lou Ann and Taylor’s conversation to present Taylor a **peanut** she has dug out of the ground. Taylor tells Turtle the name for peanuts and marvels at the scars hidden inside Turtle that no one can see. Lou Ann, unaware of Taylor’s preoccupied thoughts, asks why Taylor is taking Angel’s side now that he has left, and Taylor says that she is just trying to save Lou Ann’s dignity in case Lou Ann decides to get back together with Angel later. Lou Ann insists she is completely over Angel, but that she just can’t get over how Angel left her. Taylor reminds Lou Ann that Angel left her six months ago, given that he left in October and it is now April.

At the word “April,” Turtle looks up at Taylor intently. Lou Ann comments that Turtle did the same thing once when she mentioned the April phone bill. The two women realize that Turtle’s birth name was probably April. Though happy at the discovery, Taylor thinks that Turtle should still go by Turtle. Lou Ann questions the practicality of that once Turtle gets older, but Taylor responds that Turtle is “Indian” and can have a strange name.

Uninterested in Lou Ann and Taylor’s conversation, Turtle delightfully feeds **peanuts** to a **duck**. Taylor leans back and listens to **bird song** in the trees, a sound she has missed since moving to Tucson. Lou Ann goes to the bathroom, muttering again that she looks terrible, and Taylor notices two giant tortoises beginning to have intimate relations as Lou Ann leaves. When Lou Ann gets back, she wonders how turtles can have sex when their shells are like panty girdles. A teenage couple walk by, see the turtles, and laugh. A woman with a baby refuses to let the baby watch the turtles. Lou Ann and Taylor laugh until they cry.

Peanuts, a plant that grows under the ground, are unseen from the surface, just as Turtle’s abuse is unseen on the outside. Taylor is a wonderful friend to Lou Ann, anticipating her feelings in the future rather than selfishly trying to avoid a fight now. The bond between Taylor and Lou Ann is much more important than the bond between Lou Ann and Angel, even if Lou Ann still isn’t fully ready to let Angel go.



Turtle’s birth name, April, references the rainy part of spring that allows the flowers to finally grow. Turtle too will have to make it through rain (i.e. hardship in life) in order to grow. Taylor wants Turtle to keep the name that she gave her, a sign of how Taylor feels that Turtle now belongs with her—even though Taylor tries to tie the name back to Turtle’s Cherokee heritage to justify it.



Turtle, though often compared to a bird herself, has reached a point where she can give nourishment (a peanut) to a different vulnerable bird (the duck). The mating turtles reveal how humans come to a zoo supposedly to see nature, but are actually uncomfortable with what nature really is. Lou Ann and Taylor choose to find amusement in it where other people find it scandalous, because they accept nature on its own terms.



CHAPTER 9: ISMENE

Estevan rushes to Taylor’s house to tell Taylor that Esperanza has attempted suicide by overdosing on baby aspirin. Mattie has taken Esperanza to a clinic that doesn’t require papers, something Taylor has never considered before. Estevan insists that Esperanza will be okay, though he has no way of knowing this, and explains what will happen at the hospital. Taylor suspects this has happened before.

Estevan and Taylor go into the kitchen, with Estevan lost in grief and Taylor unsure what to say. She offers Estevan food, the usual response Kentucky women have to a crisis, but he only wants a beer. Taylor says that she has to either make food or talk, so Estevan tells her to talk. He says, “It’s okay,” slang that Taylor has never heard him use before he started working as a dishwasher.

Esperanza’s life is in danger from many sources: both her own mental health and her immigration status. Estevan’s strength here seems to come from the fact that he has confronted and survived the threat of death before. Taylor respects his calm demeanor in the face of this crisis.



Taylor’s domestic habits come back in a time of crisis. Though she tries hard not to be the feminine stereotype that she grew up with in Kentucky, Kingsolver again points out that these habits do not disappear overnight. Taylor blames this on the American culture that she grew up with, a culture that also seems to be corrupting Estevan’s perfect English.



Taylor starts to tell Estevan of unimportant things, explaining that Lou Ann has gone for the night with Dwayne Ray to her mother-in-law's house for a family reunion. Taylor mentions that Angel's family is Catholic, and considers Angel and Lou Ann still married because they don't believe in divorce, then realizes that Estevan must be Catholic too. Taylor suddenly switches the subject back to Esperanza's suicide attempt, telling Estevan there was nothing he could have done to prevent it. She talks about a friend she had in high school named Scotty Richey who killed himself on his 16th birthday.

Taylor delves into Scotty's plight, explaining that he had no friends in any of the usual Pittman cliques. Estevan compares these cliques to the Indian caste system, where people of different castes cannot mix. Taylor agrees with this, saying that Scotty's problem was that he was too poor to be accepted by the rich kids, but too smart to hang out with the other poor kids. Nervous at how much she is chattering, Taylor drinks half of her beer in silence before telling Estevan that Esperanza's situation is different because Esperanza has Estevan to support her. Taylor realizes that she is furious at Esperanza, while she and Estevan sit in silence.

Estevan suddenly breaks the silence to tell Taylor about the Guatemalan use of electricity in interrogation rooms. Taylor doesn't understand until Estevan spells out that the Guatemalan police take apart an old telephone and electrocute the people they are interrogating until they confess. Taylor is horrified, and feels even worse for chattering about Scotty when Estevan has this in his background. She goes to get more beer and realizes that her crush on Estevan is completely unrealistic; he has seen so many things that she will never understand. Taylor blames her ignorance of his experiences not on a lack of caring, but on her American upbringing that shielded her from many of the hardships in life.

Taylor admits that she has had it easier than Estevan because she is American, but she also tells him that Tucson is a foreign country to them both. Just then, Turtle appears in the doorway to the living room, and Taylor jokingly orders her to "hop" back to bed. Both Estevan and Taylor have to hide smiles as Turtle hops the whole way back to her bedroom.

Lou Ann, though no longer a part of the Ruiz family now that Angel is gone, chooses to maintain these links to a family she once belonged to. The role that Catholicism plays in Lou Ann's family brings Taylor back to Esperanza's suicide: both divorce and suicide are considered sins in the Catholic church. Taylor's reminder that Estevan could not have prevented this is both a comfort and a restatement of the novel's argument that no one can predict or prevent all disasters.



Estevan and Taylor's talk of cliques and castes are another way to interpret family. While these groups might be limiting in some ways, not belonging to one is even worse in this example about poor Scotty. Taylor's anger seems to come from how much Taylor honors her family. While Esperanza has valid reasons to feel hopeless about her life, Taylor can't handle that she is rejecting her family (as represented by Estevan) in the process.



While Taylor has certainly experienced hardship, she is also unable to fully appreciate the hardship that other people have had to go through. Taylor somewhat callously focuses on the effect that learning about Estevan's past has on herself. Previously, as with Angel and Lou Ann, the problem was that the man could not understand the woman he was in love with. Taylor flips that dynamic by being slightly insensitive to Estevan's struggles, as Kingsolver points out that men and women are equally capable of making emotional mistakes.



The privilege Taylor has by belonging in America becomes a tacit agreement with American policies, even those that cause pain for Estevan. Taylor attempts to distance herself from this country because of the mistakes that Taylor sees, but Turtle's appearance as a Native American child also seems to remind Taylor of the good parts of an American identity. Turtle's hopping makes her seem like a rabbit, an innocent creature of nature.



Estevan asks Taylor not to judge Esperanza too harshly until she knows what Esperanza has had to go through. Taylor, confused at how they arrived at this part of the conversation, simply admits that she doesn't know anything about either Estevan or Esperanza's lives. Estevan tries to hide his tears as he starts to cry and whispers, "Ismene." He explains that Ismene was the child in Guatemala whom Esperanza thought of when she met Turtle.

Estevan tells Taylor that Ismene was his and Esperanza's daughter, and that she was taken in a raid on their neighborhood in Guatemala City. Esperanza's brother and two friends were also brutally murdered because they were members of the teacher's union. Taylor is too shocked at this story to even cry. When she asks why Estevan and Esperanza did not try to get Ismene back, Estevan explains that he and Esperanza would have been forced to betray all the surviving members of the teacher's union to get her back. Ismene was probably taken as bait, he says, and then eventually adopted by a government family that could not have children.

Taylor is horrified that Estevan had to choose between saving his daughter or saving the lives of his friends. She finally starts to cry, realizing that such awful events happen in the same world that she lives in every day. Estevan holds her as she sobs, until she worries that she is getting snot on his shirt. Estevan does not know what "snot" means, and Taylor refuses to explain. Instead, she tells Estevan that her entire life, even the bad things, has actually been incredibly lucky. Chief among these lucky events are Turtle and Mattie, though Taylor previously avoided motherhood and tires at all costs.

Turtle appears again at the doorway, looking shell-shocked at her mother's tears. Turtle goes to cuddle in Taylor's lap and Snowboots the cat lays down in Estevan's lap. Taylor thinks that the four of them look like a family of paper dolls that she loved dearly as a child. She gets up to put Turtle to bed, then returns to sit close to Estevan on the couch. Taylor apologizes to Estevan for seeming ungrateful about the responsibility of motherhood, now that she knows of the tragedy in his past.

Taylor guesses that the human race would go extinct if people had the option to return babies after a thirty-day trial. Estevan laughs and says he would have kept Ismene, but Taylor reminds him that he, as the father, didn't do much of the hard work when Ismene was an infant. Estevan likes thinking of Ismene growing up somewhere else, and Taylor starts to dream unpleasantly about Turtle being raised by Virgie Mae next door. Estevan and Taylor drift in and out of conversation and sleep.

Estevan finally reveals that the tragedy in Esperanza's past is the loss of her child, one of the most catastrophic events possible in the novel. Kingsolver points out the depth of a mother's love by comparing the father's response to the mother's. While Estevan is definitely badly hurt by these events, Esperanza is absolutely shattered.



Ismene is essentially Turtle's twin in the novel. She was also "abandoned" by her birth family (though not by their fault) and given to a new family to start over. This perspective on Ismene's past helps provide sympathy for Turtle's birth family. Though the abuse that Turtle suffered was intolerable, her family might have been victim to forces outside their control.



Estevan and Esperanza essentially had to choose between their biological family (Ismene) and their chosen family (the other members of the teacher's union). They chose the teacher's union, supporting the novel's argument that chosen families are just as, if not more, important than blood family. While the knowledge of the physical torture the Guatemalan government carried out was hard for Taylor to hear, this news is even worse. The true crime of this government in Taylor's eyes is how it rips apart families.



Though Taylor imagines them as the "perfect" paper doll family, she also knows that each person has pain and guilt in their past that makes them human. Taylor has to learn that family, and motherhood especially, means accepting all of the things that are hard to handle about another person



Kingsolver never shies away from the intense burden that motherhood can be. This responsibility is hard, but it is also incredibly worth it. As much as Taylor finds herself unequal to the task of raising Turtle, she also does not want Turtle to grow up anywhere else. Estevan, a father, may be able to wish Ismene the best somewhere else, but Taylor can't even truly stomach the thought of having Turtle right next door.



When Taylor finally wakes up again, she and Estevan are curled together on the couch. Taylor holds his hand for a moment, then guiltily thinks of Esperanza struggling to stay alive in a clinic. She imagines Esperanza constantly searching for Ismene, a child who looks just like Turtle. Taylor kisses Estevan's hand once, then leaves him asleep on the couch and goes to her own bed. The moonlight in her bedroom reminds her of "moon soup," and Taylor hears a cat yowl and a **rooster** crow long before daybreak before falling asleep.

Though Taylor already knew that her feelings for Estevan were dangerous and probably hopeless, it is not until she realizes that she has a responsibility to Esperanza as a fellow mother that she finally lets her attraction go. The sanctity of marriage is not as important as the sanctity of motherhood. The rooster, though not generally a vulnerable bird, gives a wake up call that reminds Taylor of her duty to protect those who are vulnerable like Esperanza.



CHAPTER 10: THE BEAN TREES

Taylor recalls a saying that her mother told her: Even a spotted pig looks black at night. True to her mother's word, things look better in the morning. Mattie calls with good news of Esperanza, and Taylor sends Estevan home to his wife. Turtle wakes up and Lou Ann comes home in a good mood. Taylor marvels at the **birds** that sing every morning, even though the trees in their neighborhood park are so sickly. Lou Ann insists that one of the bird calls is saying "Who Cooks for Who?" a rare instance of Lou Ann sticking to her own opinion.

The harsh events of the night look much different by day, as the light softens these disasters into more manageable missteps. Taylor is able to remember that vulnerable birds are also hardy survivors, and that Estevan and Esperanza will likely survive as well. Meanwhile, Lou Ann's confidence seems bolstered by the experience of belonging to Angel's family and finding her place in the new family she forms with Taylor.



As the weather gets hotter, both Turtle and Dwayne Ray get more energetic, until Taylor takes them to play in the arbor. Taylor thinks of this spot in the park as a special haven from the tumble of downtown Tucson. Lou Ann is full of gossip after her enjoyable weekend at the Ruiz family reunion. Lou Ann likes all of Angel's family much better than she liked him, and is sad to hear that many of them are planning to move to San Diego. Lou Ann can't move there herself because she is too afraid of earthquakes, and Taylor reminds Lou Ann that these people aren't really her relatives anyway.

The park, though dingy, is still an important site of nature within the city. Kingsolver points out that the kids need these experiences in nature in order to grow up healthy. Lou Ann is in the midst of choosing who she wants her family to be. Though she was related by law to Angel, she is rejecting him and tying herself to his family instead. Taylor points out that she is not related to any of these people by blood, underscoring the role that choice has in making a family.



Turtle interrupts their conversation to call the **Wisteria vines** "bean trees." Taylor looks again and realizes that the wisteria seeds do look like bean trees.

The wisteria vines, now compared to the bean vines in Mattie's garden, are key to Turtle's character. Their similarity to bean vines calls back to Taylor's Kentucky roots, as Taylor tries to raise Turtle to be healthy and strong. Also like the wisteria, Turtle has to learn to grow in spite of the "poor soil" of her birth family. Taylor can help her do that, as she does here by supporting Turtle's vision.



On the way home from the park, Lou Ann buys a newspaper to keep looking for a job. Meanwhile, Taylor and Turtle go to get groceries from Lee Sing and run into Edna Poppy. Shocked to see Edna without Virgie, Taylor notices that Edna is holding a white cane. When Edna asks Taylor if she is holding lemons or limes, Taylor realizes that Edna is blind. This knowledge completely changes Taylor's estimation of the friendship between Edna and Virgie, as sour Virgie does so much to take care of sweet Edna.

Lou Ann is also shocked to learn that Edna is blind and feels guilty for never noticing before. She also worries about Edna "keeping an eye" on Dwayne Ray, but Taylor reassures her that Edna has her own special way of keeping an eye on things, using her hands and Virgie's help.

That Monday, Taylor asks Mattie if she can see Esperanza. The "sanctuary" upstairs is still full of Mattie's late husband's things, and Taylor is overwhelmed by all of the clutter. One wall is completely covered with photos of Mattie with many other people and children's drawings that features guns and bullets. An older woman nods to a door at the back of the room when Taylor asks for Esperanza.

Esperanza is sitting up in a small bedroom, looking out the window. Taylor comes in and sits down, miming a question about Esperanza's health by touching her stomach. Esperanza nods, and Taylor starts to wonder why she really came. Taylor glances out the window at Lee Sing's **garden**, then tells Esperanza that she has a beautiful name because it means hope in Spanish. Taylor regrets that her own name is just a person who sews up clothing.

Taylor realizes that Esperanza is like Turtle, able to understand much more than she can say. Taylor wishes that she could give Esperanza something to hold in her empty hands, then tells Esperanza that Estevan told her about Ismene. Esperanza looks away in pain. Taylor, still intensely unsure of what to say, just asks Esperanza not to give up hope. Taylor affirms that losing someone is horrible, but that not having anyone to lose would be even worse. Taylor holds one of Esperanza's hands, and says "He's crazy about you." As Taylor leaves, she sees the old woman sorting through a box of old mementos, then putting them back in the box.

It is fitting that Taylor learns of Edna's blindness in the grocery store of a Chinese immigrant, as it echoes Taylor's original blindness to the plight of immigrants in America. It also reframes the relationship between Edna and Virgie—while Taylor always imagined that the friendship between the two women was based on Edna's acceptance of Virgie's faults, it turns out that Virgie also contributes important care.



Edna has dealt with her blindness by finding alternate ways to do everything. Edna's blindness is not a reason to make her stop watching the kids, which might metaphorically remove her from the family. While this is a very nice gesture, it will have some practical consequences for Turtle and Taylor.



Mattie's office is filled with things from her legal family and the immigrant children that act as Mattie's grandchildren. These children have already had to live through more tragedy than Taylor has experienced in her life, but now have the dream of a safer life in America.



Esperanza is sitting up, a sign that her physical health has improved, and is looking at a garden, a symbol that her emotional and mental health will also start to grow. Taylor evokes the double meaning of Esperanza's name: it's Spanish for both "hope" and "to wait." Esperanza has to keep waiting and hoping that life will get better.



Esperanza and Turtle are consistently paired in the novel, and now we know that they have both unfortunately had to sever the bond between mother and child. Esperanza's empty hands are filled not by a material object, but by Taylor's hands—a reminder that Esperanza still has family here if she chooses to accept it. The old woman in Mattie's office reinforces the need to put old, painful events in the past and look forward to new growth in the future.



On Wednesday, Taylor meets Lou Ann. Lou Ann had just been on a job interview at a convenience store, but the manager refused to take Lou Ann seriously. The manager went on and on about the number of robberies at the store, and stared at Lou Ann's breasts even though Lou Ann dressed very professionally for the interview. Lou Ann complains about the pornography store next to Mattie's tire shop and Taylor tells her to get mad about the injustice against women rather than letting it poison her into staying silent. When Lou Ann asks where Taylor found so much self-confidence, Taylor tells her that it came from growing up poor in Pittman County.

Lou Ann has come against another instance of misogyny as the manager does not find her capable of a job because she is a woman. Taylor, fired up by her intense emotional conversation with Esperanza, encourages Lou Ann to also put these hurt feelings in the past and pour her energy into acting for herself rather than just giving in to a world that puts men first. Taylor's confidence may come from the life of hard knocks she had in Kentucky, but it is also thanks to Taylor's mother's constant support.



CHAPTER 11: DREAM ANGELS

The novel moves forward to the third week of May, with the news that Lou Ann has found a job at a salsa factory. It is sweaty, hard, packing line work that ruins Lou Ann's shoes and stings her hands with the chilies. The spice is so hot that all the worker's eyes water constantly. Lou Ann absolutely loves it. She is their most enthusiastic employee and starts bringing home salsa for Taylor and the kids for every meal.

Lou Ann's industrial job in a factory has a harsh bite even though it is supposedly making nourishing food. Yet Lou Ann loves all the difficult things about her job, in contrast to her usual pessimism and worry.



Though Taylor could do with a bit less hot sauce in their lives, she truly enjoys the new side of Lou Ann that has appeared. They leave the kids with Edna Poppy every day, having cleared the air after finding out that Edna was blind. As Lou Ann starts working an evening shift, Taylor puts the kids to bed and stays up to eat dinner with Lou Ann. The two women talk long into the night, mostly about the disasters that Lou Ann reads about every day in the paper.

Lou Ann has finally become the best version of herself now that she is no longer dependent on a man for economic support, even though she is still preoccupied with disasters. Taylor takes back some of the traditional duties of motherhood as the two women still share the job of raising a family equally.



One night, Lou Ann and Taylor talk about the day they went to the zoo, and Lou Ann wonders how a turtle can get pregnant, considering their shells. Taylor shares that Estevan told her that the Spanish phrase for giving birth literally means "to give the baby to the light." As Lou Ann keeps looking through the newspaper, Taylor envies the ease and coolness of Lou Ann's self-cropped hair.

Lou Ann and Taylor share some worries about motherhood, both feeling a bit too young to take on the responsibility of a child. Yet the beautiful Spanish phrase adds a new dimension of hope that there will also be light in their children's lives. Lou Ann's hair is another symbol of how she has finally rejected male opinions on her appearance and herself.



Lou Ann tells Taylor that she was worried sick that Dwayne Ray wouldn't be born "normal," which Taylor thinks makes sense given how much Lou Ann worries about him now. Lou Ann tells Taylor why she is such a worry wort: one week after Dwayne Ray was born, Lou Ann had a dream in which an angel in a brown suit told her that her son would not live to see the year 2000. Even scarier, Lou Ann believes this dream was confirmed by the horoscopes she read the next day.

Lou Ann's superstitions about disaster come from living under the constant worry that her fears will come true. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, Lou Ann's worries about Dwayne Ray might actually be what prevent him from living a long, happy life by limiting what he feels is safe, in the same way that Lou Ann thinks nothing is safe.



When Taylor tells Lou Ann that she always finds disaster because she looks for it, Lou Ann describes how, as children, she and her brother would look into a box and pretend to see themselves at different points in their lives, but Lou Ann refused to ever imagine herself more than a couple of weeks into the future because she was afraid she would see herself dead. Taylor speculates that this may be because Lou Ann's father died so young.

Lou Ann believes that she is irreversibly screwed up because of all her worrying, but Taylor tries to get Lou Ann to see her good qualities: that Dwayne Ray, for instance, will never feel neglected. Still, Lou Ann insists that she is going to screw up Dwayne Ray too, and refuses to even consider what Dwayne Ray might be like in the year 2001. Taylor puts the matter to rest by telling Lou Ann that dream angels aren't real anyway, except in the Bible.

In June, Angel sends a package from Montana with cowboy themed presents for Dwayne Ray and Lou Ann, along with a letter saying that he's changed his mind about the divorce and wants Lou Ann to come live in a yurt with him. Lou Ann doesn't know what a yurt is, and looks it up: a type of circular tent. Lou Ann asks Taylor if she thinks life in a yurt would be nice, but Taylor stays quiet. Lou Ann thinks about Angel's offer as she fiddles with her wedding ring, which she put on when she got the package from Angel even though she hadn't been wearing it recently due to her job at the salsa factory.

Lou Ann reminds herself that she has responsibilities at the salsa factory that she can't leave, having been promoted to floor manager after only three weeks. When she got the promotion, Lou Ann made the excuse that all the other workers were handicapped, or too young to be manager, but Taylor reminded her that there were plenty of people who could have taken the job – meaning that Lou Ann really was the most competent worker. Lou Ann remains ambivalent about moving to Montana with Angel, saying that she will wait to make up her mind. Taylor thinks that Lou Ann will eventually go.

Lou Ann's family background has had a huge influence on how she now sees the world. Her father's death, instead of leading Lou Ann to live whatever time she has to the fullest, has locked her in a constant battle to prevent the inevitable. Lou Ann needs to learn how to deal with disaster once it occurs rather than futilely looking for it around every corner.



Lou Ann is flawed, but Taylor insists that this doesn't make her a bad mother. The important thing is that she is always there for Dwayne Ray, not that she raises him perfectly.



The yurt again highlights the number of amazing cultures present in the United States, all of which belong here and make the country richer. Yet Lou Ann has to choose between that new start with a proven damaging relationship, or staying in her old home with a new family. Her wedding ring, forgotten when her job let her form her own identity, becomes a symbol of her possible regression into nothing more than Angel's wife.



More than just economic independence, Lou Ann also has power in her job that she would lose if she were to return to Angel as a housewife (yurtwife?). Lou Ann's confidence is still new, as Kingsolver points out that getting a job doesn't magically fix Lou Ann's insecurity. It would be very easy to revert to the old life and family that Lou Ann always thought she wanted. Yet this time, Lou Ann is at least able to decide for herself, rather than blindly following her husband.



Taylor feels as if the whole world is coming apart, as Mattie is gone more and more often on her “**birdwatching**” trips. The last time Mattie and Taylor talked, Mattie said that Estevan and Esperanza would have to be moved to either Oregon or Oklahoma to be safer from the threat of deportation. Taylor is outraged that they could be deported, knowing that the couple would be killed if they returned to Guatemala, but Mattie explains that the only way for refugees to stay in the United States is if they have hard proof of the danger to their lives. Mattie is as bitter as Taylor, but has had more time to get used to the unjust nature of this system. Taylor feels as though this truth is a snake waiting to bite her.

Taylor is afraid that both Lou Ann and Mattie, the two most important “family” members she has in Tucson, will leave her. This family is what makes Tucson feel like home for Taylor. Estevan and Esperanza too must deal with the threat of losing their new home, as their presence in America is not officially sanctioned. Taylor’s anger on their account allows Kingsolver to argue that America should be a place of protection for everyone—but the more practical Mattie knows that this is unrealistic.



CHAPTER 12: INTO THE TERRIBLE NIGHT

One day, Mattie closes the shop early and says that she is going to take Taylor, Esperanza, and Estevan somewhere. Taylor phones Edna to ask her to watch the kids a bit longer. Mattie explains that it is the traditional New Year’s Day for the Native American tribes of this region because it is the day of the first summer **rain**. In the desert, rain marks the new year because all of the plants and animals can come alive again.

The Native Americans, rather than celebrating arbitrary calendar days like Halloween or Valentine’s Day, tie their celebration to a natural event. The rain is the start of a new year and also offers a sense of rebirth to the characters.



A mile out of town, Mattie pulls over. The group hikes up a hill and looks down on the Tucson valley, watching the storm roll in. Taylor is amazed at all the unexpected life she has found in the desert, though she is not very good at remembering the names of the foreign, thorny **plants** that thrive in this arid land. Mattie reminds Taylor that all of the plants that look dead are just lying dormant, waiting for rain.

The animals in the desert are able to survive in a place that Taylor thinks uninhabitable, just as characters like Turtle or Esperanza live through events that Taylor thinks would not be survivable. The plants keep growing even though they get so little rain, just as people can make it through terrible events.



The **rain storm** reaches the hilltop, and the foursome is quickly drenched. The sudden cold is shocking and refreshing. Estevan starts to dance with Esperanza and Taylor thinks about how much she loves him and how happy she is. At that moment, Taylor starts to smell the rain. It is a pungent, clean odor, that Mattie explains comes from the greasewood bushes every time it rains. Taylor wants to bottle it, even as she knows that the smell might not be so wonderful when separated from the circumstances and emotions of the rain.

Once again, water reminds Taylor of her feelings for Estevan. However, this time Estevan dances with Esperanza rather than singing to her as she passively watches, reinforcing the fact that Estevan is in a committed relationship. Taylor accepts that she has to let go of Estevan, yet knows that this will be harder to actually do in the real world – just as the smell of the rain cannot be bottled outside of this moment.



After sunset, the little group heads back to the truck. They walk in darkness and navigate by flashlight as they are surrounded by the sounds of spade foot toads. Taylor can't believe that there are toads in the desert, but Mattie explains that the toads burrow under ground until the rain makes it wet enough for them to come to the surface to mate. Estevan devilishly agrees that only death and sex are worth making as much noise as the frogs currently are, and Taylor colors as she remembers an erotic dream that she had about Estevan a few nights earlier. Mattie tells the group that the toads have to mate fast because the puddles that their tadpoles will hatch in will dry up in about two days.

As they follow Mattie back to the car, Esperanza suddenly grabs Taylor's hand. A rattlesnake appears in the flashlight beam, as it hangs at eye level from a tree branch. Mattie calmly explains that rattlesnakes climb trees looking for **birds' eggs**. Taylor, determined not to be afraid, nonetheless feels her stomach tighten when she looks at the snake. Mattie just points out that every creature has to eat somehow.

When Taylor arrives home, she can tell right away that Lou Ann has been crying. Taylor asks Lou Ann if she's alright, and Lou Ann explains that something is wrong with Turtle. Taylor rushes inside to find Turtle on Edna's lap, with the same empty look that she had when Taylor took her in Oklahoma. Virgie appears in the kitchen doorway to tell Taylor that a **bird** has gotten in the house, confusing Taylor until Lou Ann explains that this has nothing to do with Turtle's current state.

Lou Ann tells Taylor that Edna and Turtle were at the park enjoying the cool air from the storm. Edna, being blind, didn't notice that it was starting to get dark and Virgie didn't come to the park to take the two inside. Lou Ann doesn't know exactly what happened from there, thinking only that they need to get a medical professional to talk to Turtle. Edna, also looking distraught, takes over the story to say that she heard an odd sound like a bag of flour hitting the ground and noticed that Turtle had stopped singing. Edna then swung her cane high over Turtle's head and connected with something, then felt Turtle grab on to her skirt. Lou Ann comforts Edna, saying that she didn't do anything wrong. Taylor bitterly thinks that Edna's blindness saved her from being too scared to swing at a man who may have had a gun or a knife.

The toads have to make the most of the moment that they have, knowing that waiting passively through the rain will spell certain death for the species. Likewise, Taylor is learning that she has to appreciate her life as it happens rather than dreaming about things that will never happen. Taylor is ashamed of her natural attraction to Estevan, as Kingsolver points out that humans have the same natural feelings as animals, but can choose not to act on them.



The snake, a metaphor for difficult truths, eats bird's eggs, symbolizing how harsh realities can destroy fragile, beautiful human dreams. Taylor wants to deal with this fact calmly and rationally, but she is not yet quite as accepting of nature's life-and-death stakes as Mattie is.



The disaster that Lou Ann has always feared has finally happened, but all of Lou Ann's worrying didn't prepare Lou Ann and Taylor to deal with it. Taylor occupies herself with the bird in the kitchen, a symbol of Turtle's natural freedom and vulnerability caught by the trap of corrupt human society.



Edna's blindness is both a blessing and a curse, as it kept them in the park too late but also gave her the courage to face a possibly very dangerous assailant. Humankind is also "blind" to many of the disasters that await them, and must blindly survive those tragedies when they come. The abuse in Turtle's past comes back as soon as she is touched by a man. Even though she has survived that past, it still has the power to hurt her, as Kingsolver points out that the road to recovery is often long and difficult.



A knock at the door makes Taylor, Lou Ann, and Edna jump. The police come in, with a social worker. The social worker asks Taylor if she is the mother, and Taylor nods even though she feels like a “dumb animal” at the moment. The social worker explains that they are trying to find out if Turtle has been molested, and assures Taylor that Turtle will recover from this. Taylor is not so sure, given Turtle’s turbulent history. The social worker insists that she can help Turtle talk about these things, and Taylor excuses herself to the bathroom.

In the midst of this crisis, Taylor feels she is no better than an animal. The social worker, a part of human society, is relatively unable to assuage Taylor’s fears. As Turtle has once again withdrawn from human engagement, Taylor is unsure whether anything but pure nature can help Turtle.



On her way to the bathroom, Taylor runs into Virgie, who is frantically swinging a broom at a **song sparrow** that has gotten into the house. Taylor takes the broom from Virgie and chases the bird until it smacks into the wall, while Lou Ann spells out Turtle’s doctor’s name in the living room. Virgie tries to coax the dazed bird into her hand and Taylor keeps it from going into the living room where the police are still talking to Turtle. Taylor tells Virgie to open the screen door and gets close to the bird, watching its heart beat through its chest. Finally, the bird swoops through the open door and into the “terrible night.”

The song sparrow is a delicate bird that cannot survive within the house. Taylor chases this bird out, enacting her own fears that Turtle too will not be able to thrive in her house or in her family. Lou Ann is left to keep up the appearances of human society with the social worker and the police while Taylor remains concerned with Turtle’s interior emotional state. Yet releasing the bird is not redemption either, as it simply goes into the “terrible” night. There is no easy answer of what will help Turtle now.



The medical examiner tells Taylor that Turtle’s shoulder is bruised, but that she was probably not molested. Turtle is still in a catatonic state and Taylor is miserable that all of the progress she made convincing Turtle that no one would hurt her ever again is lost. Lou Ann, surprisingly, reminds Taylor that a mother can never shield their child from everything. Yet Lou Ann is angry at Taylor for leaving Turtle with the police while she chased **the bird** out of the kitchen. Taylor is too unsure of her abilities as a mother to reach out to Turtle.

Just like the X-rays showed damage underneath Turtle’s physically happy exterior, the physical evidence from this assault does not match the damage it has done to Turtle’s interior. But Lou Ann, showing great growth, is here the one who reminds Taylor that being a mother is about being there for your child rather than being perfect for your child. Taylor is not yet ready to hear that though.



Taylor escapes the house by going in to work, leaving Lou Ann to try to rouse Turtle and comfort Edna and Virgie. Lou Ann also becomes determined to catch the man who tried to grab Turtle, questioning everyone in the neighborhood and blaming the pornography shop next to the used tire shop for creating perverts to roam the neighborhood. Taylor tries to learn more about all of this, but can’t think of anything except the fact that Turtle could have died.

In the wake of this disaster, Lou Ann and Taylor switch roles. Lou Ann takes on the active search for justice while Taylor becomes more passive. This role reversal in their relationship is not complete, as Taylor still finds solace in “masculine” work as Lou Ann takes care of the “feminine” nurturing duties. This underscores the complex ways that Lou Ann and Taylor complete each other in their partnership.



One night after the incident, Lou Ann comes in to Taylor’s room to try to coax her into eating some soup. Taylor finally breaks down and cries, lamenting all the pain and ugliness in the universe that she can do nothing to fix. Though these feelings were catalyzed by Turtle’s attack, Taylor is truly upset that the world at large constantly picks on the weak. Lou Ann’s advice is to start fighting back, but Taylor can’t hear her.

Kingsolver gives more evidence of the ways that Lou Ann and Taylor have switched roles as they try to work through this crisis. Taylor now sees disaster around every corner, while Lou Ann is the one trying to rally her friend into helping where she can.



Taylor continues to tell Lou Ann about all the ugliness she has seen in Tucson, and the way her heart breaks for the poor and homeless, those just trying to raise a family in spite of all the odds stacked against them. Lou Ann finally just listens as Taylor laments the lack of compassion that she sees in America, a lack that only gets worse with each generation. Taylor is scared that she won't be up to the job of keeping Turtle safe from all that pain. Lou Ann sits with Taylor, braiding her hair, and tells her that she doesn't have to do it by herself.

Taylor highlights the common humanity between all Americans that should lead us to help each other, but has instead only led to more divisions. The lack of compassion in the world makes Taylor's job as a mother even harder, especially as she now feels isolated even from the people that she considered her family.



CHAPTER 13: NIGHT-BLOOMING CEREUS

As the social worker predicted, it only takes Turtle a few weeks to start talking again. She seems fairly unscathed by the encounter. Cynthia, the social worker, is confused when Turtle buries the dolls that the social worker had given her to try to help Turtle explain where she had been touched, but Taylor knows that Turtle is just treating the dolls like the **plants** she loves. Turtle and Taylor go to see Cynthia every Monday and Thursday, a harder chore for Taylor than it is for Turtle.

Turtle is much more resilient than Taylor is—Turtle has survived much worse, whereas this is one of Taylor's first personal crises. Turtle buries the dolls, an act that Cynthia interprets as morbid but that Taylor sees as Turtle looking toward new growth.



Taylor is miserable, both due to the non-stop **rain** and her own depression in the wake of Turtle's incident. She compares simple sadness to a head cold, whereas depression is a cancer that makes it hard for her to breathe. Taylor is slowly unraveling as Turtle's earlier traumas come to light in Cynthia's therapy sessions, though Cynthia's insistence that this type of abuse, horrible as it is, happens often makes Taylor feel a bit better as it means that Turtle is not alone. But the true blow comes when Cynthia tells Taylor that Child Protection Services has realized that Taylor has no legal claim to Turtle.

Both the harsh reality of Turtle's birth family and the reminder that Turtle is not actually Taylor's family start to destroy Taylor's mental health. Taylor speaks about this mental anguish as though it is a physical ailment, as Kingsolver points out that emotional and mental health are as important to a person's well-being as their bodily health (and the two are very indeed often tied together and influence each other).



Taylor insists that Turtle is hers because Turtle's aunt told her to take the baby that night in the Oklahoma gas station. Cynthia is sympathetic, but knows that the verbal agreement won't mean anything to the legal system. The only option for Turtle is to become a ward of the state of Arizona, who could then be fostered with Taylor if Taylor could prove adequate income and stability.

Taylor's definition of family is not the same as the legal definition of family, though Taylor considers her definition more important. Sadly, the state probably will not consider Taylor a viable candidate for fostering.



Cynthia finally tells Taylor that Child Protective Services will be in touch in a few weeks. Taylor goes to leave, but asks Cynthia if the pin she is wearing is a family heirloom. Cynthia responds that she bought it at a thrift store. Taylor is not surprised.

Taylor feels as though Cynthia is ripping Turtle away from her family just as she bought a pin instead of wearing something with family significance.



Lou Ann is furious when she hears that CPS may take Turtle away. Yet Taylor is ready to stop fighting the inevitable, feeling helpless against the law. Lou Ann gets even madder when she hears that Taylor won't fight for Turtle, and tells Taylor that this isn't the person that she thought Taylor was. Taylor responds that she doesn't know herself anymore.

This crisis has stolen Taylor's self-confidence and fiery attitude, just as Lou Ann is becoming more comfortable in her own strength and independence. Like Taylor advised Lou Ann to fight for herself getting a job, Lou Ann now wants Taylor to fight for her family.



Lou Ann tries to inspire Taylor's bravery, but to no effect. When Lou Ann wonders where the real Taylor went, Taylor says that that "Taylor" was as imaginary as the meteor shower she never saw with Angel. Lou Ann's feelings are hurt and she stops fighting for a while. Lou Ann later keeps trying to convince Taylor to stand up for Turtle, but Taylor can't imagine raising a child in the bleak world that she has come to know.

Taylor throws Lou Ann's biggest fear back in her face, suggesting that Lou Ann really doesn't have any control over her life. Taylor feels that she can't take charge in her own life because the universe is constantly waiting to tear apart any kind of meaningful family bond.



Mattie is also worried, as her plans to get Estevan and Esperanza to another sanctuary in a safer state keep falling through. Yet Mattie still finds time to talk to Taylor about what to do for Turtle, as she is familiar with the loopholes in the system that might let Taylor adopt Turtle. Taylor confesses that she doesn't have a clue about how to be a good mother for Turtle, but Mattie reminds her that all mothers feel like that at first.

Finding a way to give Turtle a home with Taylor parallels Mattie's attempts to find safe homes for the refugees in America. Mattie continues to act as a mother figure for Taylor, giving her the advice that she probably would have heard early on from her own mother if Taylor had had a biological child.



Taylor wishes a fortune teller would tell her the right answer to how to raise Turtle, but Mattie tells her that she is asking the wrong question. Rather than asking if she can give Turtle the best possible upbringing safe from every harm (which Taylor, as well as the foster care system, obviously can't), Taylor needs to ask herself if she is willing to give her best effort to try. Taylor wonders if Mattie has ever had kids, but decides not to ask for fear of what tragedies she may find in Mattie's past.

Taylor wishes for a fortune teller, ignoring the fact that Lou Ann's experience with a fortune teller only made her more worried for her child's future. Mattie rejects that premise altogether, reminding Taylor that motherhood is based on the effort to do the right thing rather than always doing the perfect thing.



Taylor meets Cynthia without Turtle, to discuss her options. Taylor is intimidated by Cynthia's put-together appearance, and is further disheartened by the difficulties Cynthia describes in getting proof of abandonment for Turtle. Cynthia insists that Taylor needs a death certificate for Turtle's biological mother and a written statement naming Taylor as the new guardian, even though Taylor points out that birth and death certificates are rare on Indian Reservations.

Cynthia appears to be the perfect, capable woman that Taylor wanted to be. Cynthia also insists on legal definitions of family, though, while Taylor knows how difficult it is to force these legal definitions to apply to the messy relationships and bonds that form in the real world. Family is far more about feeling than paperwork for Taylor.



Taylor notices that Cynthia's office is tiny and has no windows. She asks Cynthia if she misses knowing the weather, inside all day with fluorescent lights. Cynthia is confused at the question, telling Taylor that she does plenty of field work and house visits. Taylor gets back to the matter at hand, asking how she can find out the exact requirements for proof of abandonment in Oklahoma.

Cynthia's lack of windows points to how she is out of touch with nature. Taylor sees this as one reason why Cynthia does not understand true family and insists that Taylor jump through legal hoops even though she and Turtle are already family.



Cynthia offers to help, and Taylor is surprised to find out that Cynthia wants to keep Taylor and Turtle together. Taylor notices Cynthia's bitten fingernails, and asks Cynthia why she has been so distant so far. Cynthia just says that she thought keeping Turtle should be Taylor's decision. Taylor thanks her, then asks about the pin that Cynthia bought from the Salvation Army. Cynthia refuses to answer why she shops at thrift stores, saying that a trained therapist knows not to answer those kind of questions.

Before Taylor leaves Cynthia's lobby, a secretary comes out with a note from Cynthia. In it, Cynthia thanks Taylor for being careful about discussing Turtle's custody in front of her. It also includes an address for Mr. Jonas Armistead in Oklahoma City. That night, Taylor watches Turtle instead of sleeping. Turtle silently moves her mouth and "talks" in her sleep much more than she does when awake. Taylor wishes she could be a part of Turtle's dream.

The next morning, Taylor leaves Turtle asleep and goes in to work. She finishes up a car and hangs out in Mattie's office making coffee and thinking of Estevan and Esperanza. She thinks about how women are usually the ones who must carry their families through tragedy. Finally, Mattie comes down to have coffee and talk with Taylor.

When Taylor gets home, she finds Lou Ann and the kids at the park. Turtle is playing at making a **garden**, and Lou Ann is forcefully trying to stop Dwayne Ray from eating a purple jelly bean. Taylor tells Lou Ann that she is going to drive Estevan and Esperanza to a safe house in Oklahoma, and try to see if she can find out any information about Turtle's birth family so that Taylor can try to get custody. Lou Ann worries what will happen if Turtle's relatives want Turtle back, but Taylor insists that they can't deal with that prospect until they find Turtle's relatives.

While Lou Ann worries about Turtle, Mattie is worried about what will happen to Taylor if she gets caught transporting undocumented immigrants. Taylor pushes that out of her mind, and tells Mattie to worry about Esperanza and Estevan. In any case, Mattie insists that Taylor take her truck instead of Taylor's old car, which might break down.

Cynthia then turns this idea on its head, revealing that she wants to preserve Taylor's unconventional family. Taylor notices Cynthia's flaw, finally realizing that Cynthia is just as human as she is. This distance allowed Taylor to realize for herself how much she wants to be Turtle's mother. But when Taylor tries to confirm that Cynthia really does care about family, Cynthia slyly dodges the question.



Cynthia applauds Taylor's efforts to keep Turtle's home life as stable as possible. Turtle has already had to lose her birth mother and leave her birth family, so she doesn't need to worry about leaving Taylor as well.



Mattie, Lou Ann, and Taylor's mother all had to pick up the pieces of their families when men passed away or left. Esperanza could be an exception, as she seems to be falling apart more than Estevan is. Yet Taylor identifies with Esperanza's loss much more now that Taylor has almost lost Turtle.



Taylor's decision to drive to Oklahoma will either secure or disrupt Taylor's family, as Lou Ann worries that Turtle's "real" family will want to take Turtle back now that she is doing so well. Turtle continues to focus on her own growth, now progressing to making her own garden beyond just caring for seeds. Taylor also seems to go back to her practical personality, refusing to worry about Turtle's family until they actually pose a threat.



Taylor's bravery finally returns as she pushes out all thought of disaster from her mind and focuses on how she can help her family. Mattie makes sure that Taylor is as prepared as possible, even if the right car can't guarantee that they will all be safe.



The night before Taylor is to leave for Oklahoma, Virgie comes over as Lou Ann and Taylor are arguing about what to pack. Virgie tells Taylor and Lou Ann that she and Edna have something to show the kids. On their porch are a bouquet of silvery-white flowers called **night-blooming cereus**. These flowers only open one night a year. Taylor had earlier noticed the spiny plant in its pot and, not knowing what it was, thought that it was ugly.

Turtle walks up to one of the **cereus** flowers, which is as big as her head. Taylor kneels beside her and tells Turtle the name of the flower, which Turtle pronounces “See us.” Lou Ann notes the delicate, lemony smell of the flowers. Edna says that she can smell it from inside the house, and Virgie adds that Edna’s sense of smell is the only reason that the two women catch the flower’s bloom every year. Lou Ann insists that the flower is a sign of something good. Virgie offers to cut a flower for Lou Ann to keep in the icebox, but Lou Ann declines.

The **cereus flower** seems to bode good weather for travel, as Taylor and Turtle go to meet Estevan and Esperanza for the trip. Taylor’s suitcase is bigger than the couple’s, even though their suitcase holds all of their possessions. A small crowd wishes Estevan and Esperanza good luck. Mattie slips Taylor a small sum of money for the couple and warns her one more time of the risks involved, but Taylor insists on doing this for her friends.

Mattie waves goodbye to Taylor, looking at Taylor the way that Taylor’s mother does. She then kisses Estevan, Esperanza, and Turtle goodbye as Taylor starts to cry. Taylor drives out of town, reaching the freeway without incident. On the freeway, Taylor has to resist the urge to stomp on the brake for a **blackbird** that has been run over on the center line.

CHAPTER 14: GUARDIAN SAINTS

Near the New Mexico border, Taylor, Turtle, Estevan and Esperanza are stopped at an immigration check point. Mattie knew this might happen, so she had Estevan and Esperanza dress in bright colors and stereotypically American fashions, as well as leaving Esperanza’s hair down and free instead of braided. Taylor is nervous, but tries not to show it as she shows her ID to the officer at the checkpoint. The officer asks Taylor who Turtle’s parents are, and Taylor hesitates so Estevan jumps in and says that Turtle is his daughter. Taylor is upset by this, but acknowledges that it was the most logical answer.

Lou Ann too is trying to prepare Taylor for any incident, but Taylor feels that Lou Ann is making her over-prepared. The flower Virgie shows them is both rare and much more amazing than it first seems. Taylor herself is like this flower, young and inexperienced at first but containing the potential for great strength and beauty.



Turtle’s mispronunciation of “cereus” sounds like the sentence, “See us”, potentially asking Taylor to see their family in the flower. Both Turtle and Taylor might not seem like much at first, but they contain miracles inside them. Edna’s blindness becomes an asset in catching the flower, as her special way of seeing the world notices the flower’s bloom. Lou Ann understands that part of the flower’s beauty is its rarity and fleetingness. If it could be saved for a long time period, it would not be as special.



The cereus flower continues to represent hope and good fortune for Taylor. Though Taylor may be taking a risk, Estevan and Esperanza are taking an even bigger one. They must rebuild in another new home, with fewer possessions to their name than Taylor is taking for a one-week trip.



Mattie continues to push Taylor to do things that are difficult but ultimately rewarding, in this case finding Turtle’s birth family. Yet Taylor worries that this trip will be like trying to save the dead blackbird: too little too late.



Estevan and Esperanza’s American clothes are artificially bright, while the Guatemalan dress contained colors from natural dyes, suggesting that the couple’s Guatemalan identities are more natural (at least for them). Meanwhile, Estevan claims Turtle as his daughter, confirming the fact that American officials easily believe that Turtle and Estevan are blood relations simply because they have similar skin colors.



Taylor stops for lunch at Texas Canyon, a rock formation that she and Turtle had loved when they first came to Arizona. The rocks are stark, and Estevan comments that this is what the earth would have looked like if God had stopped creation early. They keep driving straight through the first night, planning to reach Oklahoma on the second night.

Taylor and Estevan talk as Taylor drives. Estevan tells Taylor about **the quetzal bird** that is the symbol of the Guatemalan Indians. Taylor feels as though she is driving home to Kentucky, and asks Estevan if he misses his home and his language. Estevan reveals that even Guatemala City was not his first home, and Spanish was not his first language.

Taylor learns that Estevan and Esperanza actually speak dialects of Mayan, and that they chose the Spanish names “Estevan” and “Esperanza” only when they came to Guatemala City. Taylor tells them how she, too, chose a new name when she moved to Arizona.

As they continue talking, Taylor describes how her father abandoned her mother before she was born. Estevan tells Taylor that Esperanza also grew up without a father. Meanwhile, in the backseat, Esperanza sings traditional Mayan songs to Turtle until Turtle falls asleep on her lap.

Taylor realizes that her picture of Guatemala as an endless exotic jungle is not the full story of the place and does not capture the hardships that the Guatemalan people face. She wonders aloud why everyone always tries to remove Indians from their own lands, and Estevan sighs that he hates how he never feels like he belongs anywhere. Thinking of the plight of her own Cherokee great-grandfather, Taylor tells Estevan that it is wrong to call any person “illegal.”

The second night on the road, Taylor reaches the Broken Arrow motel where she worked during the month that she first found Turtle. The old woman who owned the hotel, Mrs. Hoge, has died and her daughter-in-law Irene lost hundreds of pounds to take on the business and get ready to have a baby of her own. After dinner, Irene tells Taylor that Mrs. Hoge wasn’t exactly kind, but she still misses the old woman.

The Texas Canyon is beautiful to Taylor but foreboding to Estevan. This place seems completely void of human intervention, as untouched as the day that God made it. This is a blessing for Taylor, who longs to escape human society.



The quetzal bird symbolizes the vulnerability of the Guatemalan Indians who are not safe in the new Guatemalan government, and are also endangered thanks to the deforestation of this country. Like the bird, Estevan seems more homesick for the rural mountains of Guatemala than his life in Guatemala City.



Estevan and Esperanza’s search for home has actually been longer than it seemed. This backstory adds more poignancy to Esperanza’s name, as she chose to call herself “hope.” Taylor compares this to her own search for home.



While the novel has already established similarities between Esperanza and Turtle, it now highlights the similarities between Esperanza and Taylor. At the moment it seems like Esperanza is a better fit for Turtle’s mother, but these comparisons actually suggest that Taylor is just as good a choice for Turtle.



Sadly, the Guatemalan treatment of the Mayan people is similar to the American treatment of Native Americans. They are constantly pushed out of their homes to the land no one else wants. Furthermore, calling immigrants “illegals” negates their basic humanity. Estevan has to insist on both his humanity and his basic human rights.



The Broken Arrow is the first sign of major change in Oklahoma, as the places they left have changed just as much as Taylor and Turtle have themselves. Irene is coming to terms with the complex relationship she had with her mother-in-law. Now that Mrs. Hoge is gone, Irene understands how important that family bond was.



The next morning, Estevan and Esperanza stay with Taylor as she searches for Turtle's family, instead of going straight to the new safe house. As she searches, Taylor notes that Estevan and Esperanza look like the local Native Americans here. Estevan comments that Cherokee and Mayan people do look different, but that white people certainly can't tell. Taylor glances in the rearview mirror and thinks that Esperanza and Turtle look perfect as mother and child.

Estevan goes over the back story he has invented for "Steven and Hope" as Americans, but he still needs a new last name. Taylor suggests the "family name" Two-Two, after the mechanic who fixed her car in Oklahoma. The little group finally reaches the bar where Taylor found Turtle. Estevan and Esperanza, as well as Turtle, give Taylor a hug for luck, and Taylor goes into the bar alone.

The bar has gotten significantly cleaner and nicer since Taylor was last there, and she discovers that the place has changed hands and no one who works there knows anything about the two men who were in the bar that night. Taylor decides to bring Estevan, Esperanza, and Turtle in for lunch while she thinks about what to do next.

As Taylor pays, she asks the waitress about Bob Two Two the mechanic, and learns that he moved to Oklahoma City. The waitress also tells Taylor that this bar isn't actually Cherokee nation land. She shows Taylor postcards of lakes in the Cherokee nation, which Taylor finds beautiful, and tells Taylor that the Cherokee nation is less a place than a people.

Totally unsure about what to do next, Taylor decides to go to Lake of the Cherokees and Estevan and Esperanza agree to accompany her again instead of going to the sanctuary house. Taylor calls it a vacation, the first vacation that any of them have ever had.

CHAPTER 15: LAKE O' THE CHEROKEES

As Taylor drives closer to the heart of Cherokee Nation, Estevan and Esperanza start to feel more comfortable as they find themselves surrounded by people with skin color similar to theirs. Taylor, though she knows she has Cherokee blood, feels out of place. Still, she enjoys the beauty of the land and proudly tells Estevan and Esperanza that the Cherokee nation has its own president.

Estevan and Esperanza chose to stand by Taylor just as she is standing by them by bringing them to Oklahoma. Estevan's comment about the difficulty of judging between Cherokee and Mayan features has already helped the group at the immigration checkpoint, and it will prove vital for Taylor and Turtle.



Estevan and Esperanza's new names help them belong to their new Oklahoma home. Taylor's suggestion of "Two-Two" references Taylor's first experience in Oklahoma, when she decided that Turtle was her family.



While the new ownership of the bar is a good thing for family businesses in Oklahoma, it is a very bad thing for Taylor's family. Taylor is happy that the bar is not as hostile as the first time that she went in there, but that change means that she has no chance of legally gaining custody.



All of Taylor's thoughts about her Cherokee "homeland" were actually mistaken. Cherokee nation land is not the Oklahoma wasteland that Taylor hated; it is the natural beauty of Oklahoma lakes and the community of the Cherokee people. This definition of home matches Taylor's: home is where the people you love are.



Taylor, Estevan, and Esperanza keep the family together a little longer, even taking their first "family" vacation. Due to their hard upbringings, any previous travel has been out of necessity rather than pleasure.



Estevan and Esperanza finally feel like they belong in America because they look like they belong to this community. They also look even more at home because of this new confidence.



Suddenly, Turtle points out the window and shouts, “Mama” at a cemetery, and Taylor wonders if this is the cemetery where Turtle’s birth mother is buried. This mention of Turtle’s “real” mother makes Taylor even more insecure in her role as Turtle’s mother. Turtle and Esperanza have bonded over the course of this trip, and Taylor feels somewhat jealous of the connection that these two have built.

At the beautiful **Lake of the Cherokees**, the group rents a small cottage for the night. Turtle plays in a little stream behind the house and Taylor drinks in all the greenery, not realizing how much she had missed it while in Arizona.

Esperanza also comes to life at this cottage. Taylor thinks that some ice in Esperanza has finally started to thaw. Estevan presents flowers to Taylor, Esperanza, and Turtle. Taylor is supposed to start calling the couple Steven and Hope, but she can’t bring herself to let go of their beautiful Spanish names.

The next day, Estevan and Taylor rent a boat on the Lake of the Cherokees while Esperanza and Turtle feed ducks. Taylor dabbles her feet in the **water** and Estevan takes his shirt off to feel the sun, making Taylor’s heart flip. She desperately wants to kiss him, but stops herself and just says that she will miss him. Estevan tells her to throw a penny in the lake to make a wish, but Taylor refuses to throw money away. The two wish on the pop-tops from soda cans instead, which Estevan says makes the wishes more American. Taylor says only one of her two wishes could possibly come true.

Later, Taylor, Estevan, Esperanza, and Turtle picnic by the **lake** and Turtle amuses them all with her three-year-old antics. Taylor lifts out of her sad mood and helps Esperanza practice her English. Turtle wanders off and starts to bury her doll underneath a tree. Taylor tells her that the doll won’t grow, but Turtle calls the doll Mama. Taylor realizes that Turtle must be trying to reenact her mother’s burial.

Turtle too is finding herself at home in Cherokee Nation. She connects the graveyard to her mother, making Taylor realize that Turtle must have seen her birth mother buried. While Taylor grieves for Turtle’s hardships, she is also sad for herself. If Turtle maintains a connection to her birth mother, Taylor cannot be Turtle’s “real” mother.



While Taylor loves her life in Arizona, this green interlude of natural beauty reminds her that she will always have a connection to her Kentucky home.



Taylor describes Esperanza in natural terms, comparing her happiness to the coming of spring. Estevan presents all the women with flowers, a familial gesture rather than a romantic one. Taylor cannot let go of the names that Estevan and Esperanza had when they began to feel like family, even though these new identities are necessary for the couple.



Taylor is again in water with Estevan, a site where she must always consider her romantic feelings. She still feels attracted to him, but is resolutely not acting on these feelings. The pop-tops of soda cans represent American consumerism as Taylor and Estevan attempt the American dream of a safe home. Presumably, Taylor’s two wishes are that she could stay with Turtle and that she could be with Estevan. Clearly, Taylor feels that she and Turtle are much more likely to stay together as a family.



Taylor’s love for Turtle allows her to put aside her longing for Estevan. Turtle’s habit of burying things so that they will grow at first blinds Taylor to what is really going on as Turtle plays. Yet, Turtle has to bury her birth mother so that Taylor and Turtle’s relationship can grow.



Taylor has no idea how to talk to Turtle about her mother's death, so she just hugs Turtle and tells her how much her mother must have loved her. They watch boats on the lake and Taylor remembers back to her childhood attempts to fish. Taylor knows that she still hasn't had to deal with all the loss that Turtle has already felt. She promises Turtle that she will do her best to stay with her forever. Turtle nods and tells Taylor that she wants to leave her doll here.

That night, Taylor asks Estevan and Esperanza to do her one more favor. She explains that it will be risky and gives them the night to think it over. Estevan and Esperanza agree on the spot, telling Taylor that they want to do it immediately.

All Taylor has to do is love Turtle with all her might to be a good mother. Thinking of her childhood attempts to fish also subtly recalls Taylor's mother's unconditional love for Taylor. When Turtle leaves her doll behind, she metaphorically leaves her birth mother in the past to make Taylor her real mother.



Estevan and Esperanza are willing to do anything for Taylor and Turtle, just like blood family is supposed to do. This chosen family is a strong bond for all four characters.



CHAPTER 16: SOUNDNESS OF MIND AND FREEDOM OF WILL

Taylor describes Mr. Jonas Wilford Armistead as a tall, awkward public notary who doesn't seem to know what to do with the small group who has descended on his office. He fiddles with his hearing aids as Estevan and Taylor spin persuasive lies about their pasts and explain how they want to make legal arrangements for Taylor to adopt Turtle from Estevan and Esperanza, who are the child's parents.

Mr. Armistead reminds Estevan and Esperanza that this adoption would be permanent, and Esperanza nods with tears in her eyes. They tell Mr. Armistead that Turtle had no birth certificate because she was born on tribal lands, and that they would like Taylor to be her mother on the new birth certificate. Estevan and Esperanza's lack of documents and ID are easily explained by their life on "tribal land."

Esperanza suddenly breaks in to say that she and Estevan love Turtle, but know that Taylor will be able to take better care of her. She starts to cry, saying that she and Estevan will have to try again to have children when they have a home. Turtle is confused at Esperanza's crying, and Estevan tell her to be "good and strong, like your mother." Taylor hopes that one of those mothers might be her.

Turtle runs into Esperanza's arms and the whole office watches her and Esperanza say goodbye as mother and child. Esperanza puts her St. Christopher medallion (St. Christopher is the patron saint of refugees) around Turtle's neck and puts the child in Taylor's lap. Taylor can only say thank you.

Mr. Armistead is the public notary that the social worker Cynthia recommended. Taylor has asked Estevan and Esperanza to act as Turtle's birth parents in order to draw up a document of legal custody for Turtle. While the history that Taylor and Estevan tell is a lie, the family bonds between them are real.



Cherokee Nation seems to be a part of America that doesn't follow American laws. In some sense, it is as foreign a country as Guatemala. This allows Estevan and Esperanza to state convincingly that they are from this land. The tribal lands have been more of a home to the couple than anywhere else in America.



Esperanza seemingly starts to believe that Turtle really is her daughter, using this opportunity to say goodbye to Ismene. Estevan ambiguously invokes Turtle's mother, possibly referring to Turtle's birth mother, Esperanza (her mother for the purposes of this legal document) or Taylor (Turtle's mother going forward).



Esperanza and Turtle's goodbye is no longer for show, and it gives real emotional closure to both mother and daughter. The St. Christopher medallion offers protection to refugees in the Catholic faith, and Esperanza gives this amulet of protection to Turtle as she sends the little girl to her new mother.



The public notary, with great effort, drafts a statement that grants legal custody of Turtle to Taylor from Estevan and Esperanza. Taylor thinks about the two secretaries who signed as witnesses, one of whom looks Cherokee, and wonders what they would do if they ever found out what it actually meant when they signed that document.

Taylor shakes hands with everyone as they leave the office, a strange new combination of friends and family. Estevan looks relieved, while Esperanza looks as if she has been made new. They both wear slightly worn denim clothing so that they look the part of a hard-on-their-luck Cherokee couple. Taylor regrets asking them to dress like refugees again, but the couple care more about helping Taylor than their pride.

The statement of custody uses all the names that all four characters have gone by, honoring their pasts as they move forward into the future. The so-called “witnesses” are actually blind to the miracle they have signed onto, as the real changes in these characters cannot be seen.



They are all still family metaphorically speaking, even though the legal definitions of family have changed. Estevan and Esperanza would still do anything for Taylor and Turtle, just as Taylor would do for them. Estevan and Esperanza are finally able to put the past behind them, as even their clothing represents their new belonging in Cherokee Nation.



CHAPTER 17: RHIZOBIA

Turtle continues to call, “mama!” at cemeteries as they drive Estevan and Esperanza to the new Sanctuary church where they will be staying. The church is cheerful and well-kept, and the Reverend and his wife are happy to see the travelers.

Turtle has fallen asleep, but Taylor insists that they wake her up for a last goodbye, so that Turtle knows that the couple has gone to a safe place. Turtle groggily waves and the adults also seemed dazed by the farewell. Taylor is afraid for the new life that Estevan and Esperanza will have to build, but Estevan insists that they will survive like they always have. Taylor feels that leaving them is the first true loss she has experienced, and she doesn’t like it.

Taylor asks Estevan to write when he can, sending letters through Mattie. Estevan tells Taylor to imagine him and Esperanza in Guatemala, happy with another baby on the way. Taylor asks if Esperanza had a catharsis in the adoption office, truly believing that she had found a safe place for Ismene. Estevan just tells Taylor that they all have to build the best world they can, and he kisses Taylor once. He then walks into the church and Taylor thinks that she too has buried a loved one in Oklahoma.

Turtle references her mother at every graveyard they pass, suggesting that the first graveyard was not the actual site where her birth mother was buried. Turtle and Taylor are both finally comfortable with Turtle’s past.



Taylor wants to give Turtle as much closure as possible to make up for the instability of her early years. This goodbye is equally important for Taylor, who wants to make sure that she is leaving her “family” in safe hands. Taylor takes Estevan’s advice, approaching this first loss with the grace that he has always shown even though she is falling apart inside.



Taylor hopes not to actually say goodbye to her family, asking Estevan to stay in touch. Yet Estevan reminds her that they are lucky to get to say goodbye at all. Again, it is better to hope for the best for each other rather than worrying about the bad things that might happen. Estevan may not have died, but Taylor still feels that she has said a permanent goodbye, as Esperanza said to Ismene and Turtle to her birth mother.



Taylor calls her mother from a pay phone, the first time she's called since Taylor found out that her mother was getting married. Taylor's mother is happy to hear from her, and can tell that she is upset about something. Taylor confesses that she just lost someone she was in love with. Her mother reassures her that she will find another love, when she least expects it. Taylor finally tells her mother that she is happy she got married.

Taylor's mother breaks more surprising news: she has retired from cleaning houses and told off all of her snobby, rich customers. Taylor laughs at the thought of her mother revealing all of these snotty women's secrets. Taylor's mother asks after Turtle, and comments again how much Turtle acts like Taylor's blood daughter. Taylor's mother says that kids will grow up into what people expect of them, just like Newt Hardbine did. In the few minutes they have left on the pay phone, Taylor tells her mother that she has officially adopted Turtle, and her mother promises that she and her new husband will come visit Arizona soon.

Turtle and Taylor stay in Oklahoma City waiting for the adoption papers to be finished. Turtle plays with her new St. Christopher medallion and Taylor tries not to think about Estevan. She and Turtle have their second "real" conversation (the first being about Turtle's mother at the Lake of the Cherokees) about the fact that Taylor is now Turtle's real mother in every sense of the word. Many people love Turtle, including Lou Ann, Mattie, Estevan, and Esperanza, but Taylor loves her best of all.

Taylor calls 1-800-THE-LORD on a whim from the Oklahoma City library. The phone number is simply an attempt to solicit donations to the Fountain of Faith missionary fund. Taylor feels freed once she gets off the line, and she and Turtle go to the local public library and look through all the horticulture books.

Turtle finds a picture of the **wisteria vines** she calls bean trees. The book says that wisteria vines actually thrive in poor soil thanks to a bug called rhizobia that helps create fertilizer for the plant. Taylor compares this arrangement to an Underground Railroad for plants, just like human communities pull together to support each other.

Now that Taylor is officially Turtle's mother, she starts to mend the rift that had formed between her and her own mother. Their bond remains as close as ever, especially now that Taylor better understands how her mother must have felt saying goodbye to a man she loved for Taylor's sake. Taylor finally lets her mother's husband into their family.



Even though Taylor's mother is taking on the traditional feminine role of a wife, she is also letting go of the domestic task of house cleaning. She still remains the independent woman that Taylor looks up to. Taylor's mother also reinforces that Turtle belongs in their family as well, even before she hears the news of Turtle's adoption. Taylor's mother reminds Taylor of the great responsibility she has: to always expect the best out of Turtle so that Turtle can live up to these dreams just like Taylor did.



Turtle's St. Christopher medallion reinforces how Turtle has finally found a permanent home that cannot be disrupted by any state organization. Taylor explicitly tells Turtle that she is her mother now, as she was always emotionally and practically Turtle's mother but now is also Turtle's legal mother. Turtle's family is important, but her most important family bond is her mother.



Taylor calls 1-800-THE-LORD only now that she is no longer in danger of needing drastic help. She is a survivor and she knows that she can take care of herself and Turtle through any disaster now.



Turtle's intelligence shines through now that she has a stable home to flourish in. The wisteria vines have always been a symbol for how Turtle thrived despite her poor start to life, but it now has the extra dimension of the rhizobia. Turtle's growth depends on her family, just as every child's does.



At 4 pm, Taylor and Turtle go to the courthouse to get the adoption papers. They wait in a room full of typing secretaries and Taylor is nervous that the whole thing will fall through. She calls Lou Ann, and Lou Ann tells her that she has decided not to go back to Angel, on the advice of Angel's mother. Lou Ann also tells Taylor that she finally found out that Angel made up the meteor shower that he teased her about for years. Lou Ann is now dating a Rastafarian man from the salsa factory. The new boyfriend is huge and has a huge dog, but he is very sweet with Dwayne Ray and Lou Ann is very happy.

Lou Ann confesses that she told someone at work that she, Taylor, Turtle, and Dwayne Ray are a family because they've been through hell and high water together. Lou Ann knows that nobody can guarantee that they will stay forever, but she says that she wants to enjoy what she has while she's got it. Finally, Taylor tells Lou Ann that she was able to legally adopt Turtle.

Taylor and Turtle leave Oklahoma City before sundown. Taylor lets Turtle hold the adoption certificate in the car and tells her daughter that they are going home. Turtle continues to sing all her vegetables into a soup, this time mixing in all the people of her family. Dwayne Ray, Mattie, Esperanza, Lou Ann, and everyone else are in there, but Taylor is the main ingredient.

When Taylor is nervous, she turns to Lou Ann for comfort, as a sign of how close these two women have become. Lou Ann returns that trust, finally choosing to stay in Tucson rather than running off with Angel. Lou Ann's new relationship is a sign that Lou Ann is finally confident enough to think that she is worthy of love from someone who is not emotionally manipulative like Angel, and who treats her with respect.



Lou Ann explicitly names the little group as a family. Whereas Taylor was once uncomfortable with accepting help from Lou Ann, she now knows that this family is exactly the support that she and Turtle need. Lou Ann, for her part, has finally been able to leave her worrying behind because she knows that her family can help her through anything.



Turtle's vegetable speech was always a sign of her potential for growth in spite of her unassuming beginnings. It now includes all the humans who are helping her grow. Taylor and Turtle end the novel secure in their identities within their family and the new home that they have built for themselves.





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