

BARBARA KINGSOLVER
IN CASE YOU EVER WANT
TO GO HOME AGAIN



Barbara Kingsolver (b. 1955) grew up in the small town of Carlisle in rural Kentucky, where she returns in "In Case You Ever Want to Go Home Again." Kingsolver attended DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, where she studied classical piano on a music scholarship until she switched to a major in biology. After graduate work in evolutionary biology and ecology at the University of Arizona, she became an essayist, novelist, and poet whose works include *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998); *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007); and *The Lacuna* (2009). In her first novel, *The Bean Trees* (1988), Kingsolver narrates the story of a young woman who leaves Kentucky for wider horizons in Arizona. The following narrative, a complete section from *High Tide in Tucson* (1995), tells how that novel and its young author were received by the townspeople of Carlisle when she returned home for a book signing.



In November 1988, bookstoreless though it was, my hometown hosted a big event. Paper banners announced it, and stores closed in honor of it. A crowd

1

assembled in the town's largest public space—the railroad depot. The line went out the door and away down the tracks. At the front of the line they were plunking down \$16.95 for signed copies of a certain book.

My family was there. The country's elected officials were there. My first-grade teacher. Miss Louella, was there, exclaiming to one and all: "I taught her to write!"

My old schoolmates were there. The handsome boys who'd spurned me at every homecoming dance were there.

It's relevant and slightly vengeful to confess here that I was not a hit in school, socially speaking. I was a bookworm who never quite fit her clothes. I managed to look fine in my school pictures, but as usual the truth lay elsewhere. In sixth grade I hit my present height of five feet almost nine, struck it like a gong, in fact, leaving behind self-confidence and any genuine need of a training bra. Elderly relatives used the term "fill out" when they spoke of me, as though they held out some hope I might eventually have some market value, like an underfed calf, if the hay crop was good. In my classroom I came to dread a game called Cooties, wherein one boy would brush against my shoulder and then chase the others around, threatening to pass on my apparently communicable lack of charisma. The other main victim of this game was a girl named Sandra, whose family subscribed to an unusual religion that mandated a Victorian dress code. In retrospect I can't say exactly what Sandra and I had in common that made us outcasts, except for extreme shyness, flat chests, and families who had their eyes on horizons pretty far beyond the hills of Nicholas County. Mine were not Latter-day Saints, but we read Thoreau¹ and Robert Burns² at home, and had lived for a while in Africa. My parents did not flinch from relocating us to a village beyond the reach of electricity, running water, or modern medicine (also, to my delight, conventional schooling) when they had a chance to do useful work there. They thought it was shameful to ignore a fellow human in need, or to waste money on trendy, frivolous things; they did not, on the other hand, think it was shameful to wear perfectly good hand-me-down dresses to school

1. Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862).

2. Scottish poet and lyricist (1759–1796).

in Nicholas County. Ephemeral idols exalted by my peers, such as Batman, the Beatles, and the Hula Hoop, were not an issue at our house. And even if it took no more than a faint pulse to pass the fifth grade, my parents expected me to set my own academic goals, and then exceed them.

Possibly my parents were trying to make sure I didn't get pregnant in the eighth grade, as some of my classmates would shortly begin to do. If so, their efforts were a waste of a success. In my first three years of high school, the number of times I got asked out on a date was zero. This is not an approximate number. I'd caught up to other girls in social skills by that time, so I knew how to pretend I was dumber than I was, and make my own clothes. But these things helped only marginally. Popularity remained a frustrating mystery to me.

Nowadays, some of my city-bred friends muse about moving to a small town for the sake of their children. What's missing from their romantic picture of Grover's Corners³ is the frightening impact of insulation upon a child who's not dead center in the mainstream. In a place such as my hometown, you file in and sit down to day one of kindergarten with the exact pool of boys who will be your potential dates for the prom. If you wet your pants a lot, your social life ten years later will be—as they say in government reports—impacted. It was sterilizing on bladder control, but somehow could never shake my sixth-grade stigma.

At age seventeen, I was free at last to hightail it for new social pastures, and you'd better believe I did. I attended summer classes at the University of Kentucky and landed a boyfriend before I knew what had hit me, or what on earth one did with the likes of such. When I went on to college in Indiana I was astonished to find a fresh set of peers who found me, by and large, likable and cootie-free.

I've never gotten over high school, to the extent that I'm still a little surprised that my friends want to hang out with me. But it made me what I am, for better and for worse. From living in a town that listened in on party lines, I learned both the price and value of community. And I gained things from my rocky school years: A fierce wish to look inside of people. An aptitude for

3. Fictional town in New Hampshire that is the setting for Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938), a play about everyday life.

listening. The habit of my own company. The companionship of keeping a diary, in which I gossiped, fantasized, and invented myself. From the vantage point of invisibility I explored the psychology of the underdog, the one who can't be what others desire but who might still learn to chart her own hopes. Her story was my private treasure; when I wrote *The Bean Trees* I called her Lou Ann. I knew for sure that my classmates, all of them cool as Camaros⁴ back then, would not relate to the dreadful insecurities of Lou Ann. But I liked her anyway.

And now, look. The boys who'd once fled howling from her cooties were lined up for my autograph. Football captains, cheerleaders, homecoming queens were all there. The athlete who'd inspired in me a near-fatal crush for three years, during which time he never looked in the vicinity of my person, was there. The great wits who gave me the names Kingfish and Queen Sliver were there.

I took liberties with history. I wrote long, florid inscriptions referring to our great friendship of days gone by. I wrote slowly. I made those guys wait in line a long time.

I can recall every sight, sound, minute of that day. Every open, generous face. The way the afternoon light fell through the windows onto the shoes of the people in line. In my inventory of mental snapshots these images hold the place most people reserve for the wedding album. I don't know whether other people get to have Great Life Moments like this, but I was lucky enough to realize I was having mine, right while it happened. My identity was turning backward on its own axis. Never before or since have I felt all at the same time so cherished, so aware of old anguish, and so ready to let go of the past. My past had let go of me, so I could be something new: Poet Laureate and Queen for a Day in hometown Kentucky. The people who'd watched me grow up were proud of me, and exuberant over an event that put our little dot on the map, particularly since it wasn't an airline disaster or a child falling down a well. They didn't appear to mind that my novel discussed small-town life frankly, without gloss.

In fact, most people showed unsurpassed creativity in finding themselves, literally, on the printed page. "That's my car isn't it?" they would ask. "My ser-

4. A high-powered Chevrolet sports car that debuted in 1967.

Kingsolver / In Case You Ever Want to Go Home Again . . . 147

vice station!" Nobody presented himself as my Uncle Roscoe, but if he had, I happily would have claimed him.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Among the "social skills" that she and the other girls acquired in high school, says Barbara Kingsolver, was learning "to pretend I was dumber than I was" (5). Is Kingsolver correct to describe such behavior as a valuable skill? Explain.
2. According to Kingsolver, idyllic conceptions of growing up in a small town ignore "the frightening impact of insulation upon a child who is not dead center in the mainstream" (6). What are the implications of this statement? Is it true? Why or why not?
3. Kingsolver says her NARRATIVE of a successful author returning to her hometown for a book signing is "slightly vengeful" (4). What's vengeful about it?
4. The title of Kingsolver's homecoming narrative echoes that of Thomas Wolfe's 1940 novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*, in which the hero writes a novel about his hometown and receives death threats because the townspeople find his narrative unflattering. How did Kingsolver, as she tells the story, avoid such a fate?

STRATEGIES AND STRUCTURES

1. Kingsolver says that the day of her homecoming is etched in her memory of "Great Life Moments" (11). As a NARRATOR, was Kingsolver wise to save this statement until near the end, or should she have started her narrative with it ("I'm going to tell about one of my Great Life Moments"? Explain.
2. The PLOT of Kingsolver's narrative has a definite beginning, middle, and end. What is the main, beginning action of the narrative (1-3)?
3. Which paragraphs constitute the middle section of Kingsolver's narrative? What happens there? Why does she spend most of her narrative on these events?
4. How and where does Kingsolver end her narrative? With what particular words does she signal a turn in her narrative from the middle action to the ending action?
5. Kingsolver says she has "never gotten over high school" (7). To what extent is her narrative also an analysis of CAUSE AND EFFECT? Explain.