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Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: Ch. 20

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In *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*'s concluding chapter, Barbara Kingsolver and her family reflect upon the 365-day food journey that was soon marking its end. However, starting out as a promise to oneself and a challenge above all the rest, surviving on homegrown and locally produced sustainable food products eventually evolved into nothing more than everyday, normal life. How many different recipes can we create? How large of a dinner party can we throw? How many tomatoes is *just* the right amount to comfortably accommodate the demand until next spring? Is hard cheese really that tough to make? For Barbara Kingsolver, a once-attempt to merely survive off the basics of nature soon became a plan to flourish off of them; to provide her family with the healthiest, happiest, and best tasting memories of their lives, and in turn prepare her children to do the same for the next generation.

In this last chapter, Kingsolver amusingly succumbs to her failures and lovingly acknowledges her triumphs as she reflects on the experiences of the prior year. Never attempting homemade apple cider or vinegar, for instance, are among the family's top disappointments at the dinner table, while their major triumph is found in their desire to continue this alternative lifestyle, long after the 365 day period comes to a close.

“During my family’s year of conscious food choices, the most important things we’d learned were all about that: the wanting to. Our fretful minds had started us on a project of abstinence from industrial food, but we finished it with our hearts. We were not counting down the days until the end, because we didn’t want to go back,” (338). In fact, Kingsolver explains that the date in which marked the end of the experiment into what could be considered full food-freedom went hardly noticed by any members of the family. Their mentality had changed, right down to the kids; it had become a natural way of life.

The Kingsolver’s weren’t the only ones to observe this change, either. During this year and after, Kingsolver observed the development of a slow food movement in the mainstream. Farmer’s markets began to popularize across the nation, local and national newspapers were more frequently spotlighting local-food awareness articles, and locavore restaurants began popping up where least expected. Kingsolver jokes, “what a shock, we were trendy,” (337) as she and her family found themselves inadvertently a part of a national community, supplying pressure and opposition on the industrial food market. Although the movement is still in it’s early phases, Kingsolver believes the punches are strong, and will only continue to grow with numbers.

To Kingsolver, living off of the concept of local and sustainable food became not about making a grand public statement, but rather inspiring individuals to take *any* positive step towards making ours a better food culture and a healthier planet. She reveals her fears concerning the world we live in: the excessive use and waste of non-renewable resources, global warming, the total end of the family farm and ultimate monopolization of unhealthy, destructive industrial food conglomerates, and the overall

general yet terrifying fear of leaving an irreversibly hopeless planet to future generations. She compares this stage of human history to that of the Ivorybills, a breed of woodpecker that was presumed extinct for over half a century until a small group were discovered in the swamps of Arkansas. It's this notion of self-preservation and survival that will be key in influencing the promises of our future, says Kingsolver. She uses the examples of growing a garden, carpooling, or recycling as simple, easy, yet significant changes one can make in their lives that will prove beneficial, and is clear to not discount any person's attempts in improving. "It's the worst of bad manners—and self-protection, I think, in a nervously cynical society—to ridicule the small gesture...small, stepwise changes in personal habits aren't trivial. Ultimately, they will, or won't, add up to having been the thing that mattered," (346).

Kingsolver definitely sees hope for the future, however, as their second spring at the farm begins to come into bloom. The book ends where it began—with a new chapter of life. Same place, same family, new crops, and new baby turkeys. In addition to the practical reasons for breeding turkeys, the hatchings serve as a huge symbol of the nature of this chapter. Kingsolver watches her hard work materialize into a form or reward nothing else but her farm could produce: new life, and a new generation ready to take on the challenges, after, of course, a period of nurture and encouragement from a loving and protective mother. The hatchings represent a sense of hope and true accomplishment for their efforts, making it all worth their while; "crazed and giddy, there in the dusty bar, we held hands and danced: *babies!* That was all, and that was enough. A nest full of little ding-dongs, and time begins once more," (352).

(2)

Barbara Kingsolver's tone in this last chapter is, to say the least, heartwarming. Summing up nineteen chapters' worth of emotions and experiences, she uses these last thirty pages or so to display her irrevocable gratitude for how she and her family have lived. There is, like the rest of her book, a level of concern and seriousness to the major topic at hand, however, presented in such a way that it avoids being overbearing, judgmental, etc. Kingsolver seems to have an astute talent in which she can write a book that is clearly affiliated with major social, political, environmental, and economical subjects, yet manage to gracefully stay on the positive side of the spectrum, while at the same time, not sacrificing any of her scholastic respect. In a day and age where it seems that critiques are revered and the "positive" is mocked, often seen as cheesy or naïve, Kingsolver creates a balance in both. Her tone is fun, moving, obviously passionate and personal, yet at the same time converted into having a purpose. In this last chapter, the reader can really observe the author's personal nature unabashedly; with triviality sparse, Barbara Kingsolver writes every word with thought, meaning, and strive.

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As Humanities and Religious Studies majors, it is important to acknowledge the passion behind people's motivations. The field is often described as studying the legacy the human race throughout time, and with this type of knowledge it should be easy to recognize that this isn't a book merely about facts, farm log entries, this type of animal,

that type of plant...this book has a spiritual overtone that patterns throughout the whole thing, in hopes that it may provide some sort of legacy that will inspire those who read it to opt for the greater good and partake in what Kingsolver calls a “purification ritual, to cultivate health and gratitude,” (339); whether that be for sustainability, healthier diets, or stronger families. One can see the similarities between Kingsolver’s emotions and the ancient Hindu or Asian rites and rituals or even, for that matter, the urban garden in L.A. There is a level of power that comes from something being held in such high regard and so deeply believed in, and it is an important force to be acknowledged when studying sources like *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*.