

Purple Trees and a Will to Believe: Comprehension Questions

Chapters 1-4

Chapter 1

- 1. When Sybille cries at her mother's funeral, she feels as though it will be the last moment that she will ever have alone, or to herself. Why does she feel this way?**

She knows that Dad is not good at handling these types of situations so she figures that she will be the one cooking, cleaning, helping the boys with their homework, and making sure they get on the school bus from here on.

- 2. How does Sybille's friend Kelly Ann try and cheer her up and how does she react?**

Kelly Ann sends a picture of herself trying on swimsuits prior to attending a pool party. It is sent to Sybille's phone which she keeps in her dress pocket. She feels sad that she is unable to experience those things because she is in Vermont at her mother's funeral.

- 3. How are boys different from girls through Sybille's eyes?**

She says that boys show their emotions differently, noting how her brothers never shed a tear when their mother passed away. She is also grossed out by their behavior, providing evidence that they burp and blow snot bubbles at the dinner table. She often wishes she had two SISTERS, instead.

- 4. When the doctors officially pronounced Mom dead, what does Sybille find weird?**

She finds it odd that her twin brothers never shed a tear.

5. Why wasn't Mom buried in California?

Mom wanted to be buried next to her twin sister, who lived in Vermont prior to her passing.

6. How does Sybille feel about alcohol?

She hates alcohol and hopes she never takes a drink as long as she's alive.

7. What does the name Sybille mean, and why is its meaning ironic?

Sybille means 'prophetess,' or one who speaks for God. It is ironic because up to this point in the story, she does not have a relationship with God.

8. What does the name Sander mean, and why is its meaning ironic?

Sander means, 'to defend or help.' It is ironic because he is only 8 years old and unable to protect anyone in the household from Dad's drunken rages. They are simply too much for him to handle at that age.

9. What does the name Solomon mean, and why is its meaning ironic?

Solomon's name means 'peaceful.' It is ironic because he has ADHD — attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

10. What keeps Grandma from taking action to protect Sybille, Sander, and Solomon from their father's abuse?

Fear keeps Grandma from taking action. She is unsure of what Dad (her son) is capable of doing to her or her grandchildren.

11. What does Mom offer as one contributing factor to why Dad is abusive?

His father abused HIM growing up (Sybille, Sander, and Solomon's grandfather who they never met was also abusive. He passed away before the children were born.)

12. What did Mom do for a living?

She was the reverend at a church in town.

13. Why can't Sybille accept God?

In her mind, God allows terrible things to happen to her family without jumping in to save her or her brothers.

14. What is it about Dad's porcelain veneers at the memorial service that make him appear on the outside, to be a friendly, nice guy?

The veneers are fake, symbolic of his own 'fake' personality and how he tries to hide who he really is...a sign that he is ashamed of who he really is. It is the family's dark secret.

15. Why doesn't Mom question Dad's win at the casino?

Mom doesn't question Dad's win at the casino because Dad is happy and thus doesn't abuse her or the kids. The reader is left with a six sense that much of Dad's abuse is a direct reflection of his own misery and unhappiness.

Chapter 2

1. **What is Dad's relationship with Lula Belle, the cat?**

Dad understands Lula Belle in a way that he doesn't understand or connect with the other members of his family, or extended family. Lula Belle is treated so well that even during Dad's drunken rages, she is never abused.

2. **Why doesn't Sybille wish her father would go to Hell?**

Sybille doesn't wish her father would go to Hell because Heaven and Hell are for believers and she is not a believer.

3. **What does Dad's incident with changing the lightbulb say about his personality?**

Dad's incident with changing the lightbulb shows how he has two sides to him — his evil side, and his genuinely caring and normal side where he can do routine, household tasks much like anyone else his age.

4. **What is Sybille still waiting for?**

She is still waiting for her first zit to appear.

5. **Why did everyone at Mom's church gravitate toward her?**

Everyone at Mom's church gravitated toward her because she was non-intimidating, not a threatening person, and made everyone feel "heard," unlike how she felt back at home.

Chapter 3

1. Describe Dad's personality in dealing with others.

Dad is a hothead who always feels the need to be right.

2. In chapter 3, it is intimated that the garage is where many of the beatings take place. What does Solomon returning from the garage licking a popsicle represent?

When Solomon returns from the garage licking a popsicle, it represents how he has become non-reactive to the beatings. It has become such a normal occurrence that he is numb to the pain and thus, able to move on fairly quickly after getting hit.

3. What is one potential reason Sybille offers for why Dad is against putting Solomon on ADHD medicine?

Dad is afraid the doctor will suggest doing a routine physical examination, notice the bruises on his body, and then report him to social services and is thus, against putting his son on ADHD medicine.

4. According to Nenek, what did Mom see in Dad?

According to Nenek, Mom saw Dad's good heart.

5. If you have a bad example set for you, do you think you have to follow in that person's footsteps? Why or why not?

Open-ended answers.

6. If Sybille doesn't believe in God, where does she think a child comes from?

Sybille thinks babies, or children come from the clouds. She is also vague in saying that they come from "above," however she won't specify the details by using any religious words.

7. When does Sybille say she will reevaluate her belief system?

She says she will reevaluate her belief system when pigs fly.

Chapter 4

1. What type of scars take the longest to heal?

Emotional scars take the longest to heal.

2. What word does Sybille use to describe how she felt around her mother?

Sybille says she felt safe around her mother.

3. Why does Sybille refer to the church as 'Mom's church'?

At this point in the story, Sybille is agnostic, or unsure about God and does not want to be associated with the church.

4. What is one reason Sybille doesn't care much for God?

Sybille thinks that God picks favorites and thus, does not care much for Him.

5. Who does Sybille believe is one of God's favorites and why?

Sybille thinks that Pastor Guldehen is one of God's favorites because he lives in a big, fancy house with a beautiful wife, and two daughters who look like models and have pierced ears.

6. What physical insecurity does Sybille have?

Sybille is insecure about the tiny bit of baby fat she still has.

7. Describe Dad's behavior at Reverend Guldehen's house.

Dad is a womanizer who is checking out all the pretty single ladies. Sybille describes it as, "Dad wasn't in 'grief-mode;' he was in 'schmooze-mode.'"

8. According to Sybille, why wouldn't the single women at Reverend Guldehen's house want Dad?

The single women at Reverend Guldehen's house wouldn't want Dad because he is nothing more than a dead-beat who can't even take care of his own kids when he's hungover.

9. What was the last memory Sybille has of a "happy family?"

Sybille reminisces about a family trip taken to Arizona. They stayed at the Wigwam Hotel and Golf Club when Sander and Solomon were two years old, and she was five.

10. What "changed" Dad?

The stress from Dad's construction management job changed him.

11. Why does Sybille think she has been TOO honest when in the presence of her peers?

Sybille thinks that her blatant honesty is a direct result of how she always wished her mother had been more honest about what wasn't working in her marriage.

12. If Sybille were religious, what does she say she would pray about?

If Sybille were religious, she would pray that she never said anything offensive to another person. (Ex: When Sybille's friends ask her, "How do I look in this swimsuit?", she is thankful that she has yet to answer, "You look fat!").

13. What 'bugs' Sybille about religion?

The one thing that 'bugs' Sybille about religion is how her father tells everyone he is a Christian but does not live his life as a Christian. (Ex: Drinks excessively, beats his children, can't make the house payment...)

14. What does Sybille think about explosions?

Sybille thinks that explosions are too loud, admitting that if it gets any louder at home from her father's drunken rages, she thinks she'll go deaf. She also says that explosions would shatter her delicate self, and she likes who she is on the inside.

15. How does Sybille Describe herself?

Sybille describes herself as creative — a dreamer, a writer, and a nature-lover.