

Purple Trees and a Will to Believe:

Plot Summary

Purple Trees and a Will to Believe is a young middle grade book which tells the story of sixth-grader Sybille Smith and her life in Temecula Valley, California, Southern California's wine country. Morine Smith, identified as 'Mom' or 'Reverend Smith,' has recently passed away from ovarian cancer and Sybille is left with her eight-year-old twin brothers Sander and Solomon and their abusive father, Randall Smith, identified as 'Dad.'

Dad is an alcoholic who regularly beats his three children using a worn leather belt, an ironing chord, and a small wrench in the garage, leaving Sybille to question how much abuse the body can handle. Between the death of her mother and the abuse she suffers at the hand of her father, Sybille struggles with accepting God into her life. Sybille's name is ironic. The reader learns that it means 'prophetess,' or someone who speaks for God. Presently, Sybille is agnostic or unsure about God.

After contemplating running away from home with her two younger brothers, Sybille learns that Grandma (Dad's mom) has been in a car accident and is forced to put her plans on hold. Sybille has grappled with the concept of whether or not a higher power exists throughout the first five chapters of the book; however, when she learns that Grandma has been injured in the car accident, she opens her heart and mind to the possibility of God.

She is afraid that if anything happens to Grandma, she will have fewer relatives left to protect her from her abusive father. She prays for the first time in chapter six.

Dad, who is 24-hours sober in chapter six, drives Sybille and her brothers to Temecula Valley Hospital to visit Grandma. Sybille is forced to wear a scarf around her neck, hiding an imprint left from the small wrench in the garage. Sybille experiences a flashback to the intense beating while standing beside her father in Grandma's hospital room.

When Dr. Sullivan comes in to examine Grandma's broken wrist, he turns to Dad in hopes of clarifying a few things regarding her release from the hospital. Fearing that the doctor will become suspicious of the mark on his daughter's neck, Dad yanks the scarf Sybille is wearing even tighter.

Sybille is having difficulty breathing with the scarf so tight around her neck but is leery of adjusting it with her hand because her abusive father is standing beside her. She attempts to loosen the scarf by making small movements with her head and neck. In doing so, Dr. Sullivan becomes aware of her strange body language and excuses himself from Grandma's room.

The reader is left to infer that Dr. Sullivan's observant nature led to Sybille, Sander, and Solomon's rescue from their abusive father. In the next scene, the children are in a separate hospital room away from Dad and a nurse takes pictures of the bruises on their naked bodies.

After spending a week recuperating in the hospital, Sybille and her brothers are released to the care of Grandma (Dad's mom, who now wears a cast on her arm as well as a sling) and Nenek as the children affectionately call her (Mom's mom). Dad is being questioned by law enforcement and ultimately, the case goes to trial. Dad is found guilty on child abuse charges and sentenced to three years in state prison, mandatory drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and finally, six years of court supervised visits with Sybille, Sander, and Solomon AFTER his release from prison.

Sybille's love of nature and poetry (she enjoys writing poems about the leaves on the purple jacaranda trees outside Grandma's bedroom window), helps her sort through "big feelings" regarding the death of her mother (a reverend of a local church in town) and her now estranged relationship with her father.

At the close of the story, Grandma takes Sybille to get her ears pierced at a tattoo parlor in town. Although she is nervous, the piercings are symbolic of Sybille's bravery and courageousness in pushing through tough obstacles and coming out on the other side, a stronger 11-year-old girl. Previously, Dad took away Sybille's freedom, having control over every aspect of his daughter's life. When Sybille makes the decision to have her ears pierced, it is a turning point in the story because it is the first time she is in control and able to make decisions for herself.

Taylor, the professional body piercer becomes an important character in the story not only because of his good looks (Sybille is rather smitten with him upon first glance) but because of his bedside manner. He is kind and empathetic, teaching Sybille that she need not be afraid of trusting others. He teaches Sybille through his actions as he walks her through each step of the procedure, that there are still good people in this world.

Sybille, who is healing from physical and emotional scars returns to school a more confident, self-assured pre-teen who learns to love herself for who she

is on the inside and not just what she looks like on the outside. She concludes that her father never did have her best interest at heart, admitting that it was God all along who was watching out for her.