

Questions for *The Breadwinner*, by Deborah Ellis

Chapter One

1. What is Father's job and why is Parvana able to help him go to work and stay with him while he works?

Father lost the lower part of his leg due to a bomb and had sold his false leg. Parvana helped him walk to work and then waited on the blanket while he read and wrote for other people. The only reason that she, a girl, could do this was because there was no son at home except an infant. The Taliban had ordered girls to stay home and not attend school.

2. Who lives in Parvana's family, and what kind of housing do they have?

Father, Mother, Nooria (Parvana's older sister), Parvana age 11, Maryam (the 5 year old sister) and Ali (the two year old brother).

The family's house used to be nice, and the parents had come from respected Afghan families. The house was large with servants, and many rooms. A bomb had destroyed the first house, and the family had moved many times until finally they all lived in one small room.

3. How had Kabul changed due to war?

The beautiful city of Kabul had become a city of ruins and bombed out buildings. Many buildings had become bricks and dust. The restaurants and stores were gone. The streets had many holes in them and caused people to fall. The bombs had taken Father's health away.

4. How did the rule of the Taliban change the lives of Parvana's family?

The family could not take a walk outdoors in the sunshine, as the women had to stay home. The girls were not allowed to go to school. Women wearing burqas would fall in the holes in the streets (if allowed to go out accompanied by a male).

Chapter Two

1. Why does Parvana have to go to get water for the family? Why does the water have to then be boiled?

Parvana has to get the water, as no one else is able. Father couldn't carry water because of his leg; the little brother and sister were too small to carry water up three flights of stairs, and Mother and Nooria would stumble in burqas and they had no male to accompany them for safety from the Taliban. There is no running water or water faucets.

2. Why doesn't the family talk to the neighbors or invite friends over?

Father said it wasn't safe to talk to others because anyone could be a spy for the Taliban. Parvana feels that is safe but too lonely for her.

3. Why does the family sell their things? Why would they sell Parvana's good clothing?

Like many Afghan families, they regularly sold what they could for money for food. Parvana would not be going anywhere she could wear good clothes, so there was no need for the clothing. It also had to be sold.

4. Who was Hossain?

Hossain was the first-born and would have been the oldest brother in the family. He was killed by a land mine when he was 14 years old. The family misses him terribly. Mother saved his clothes. Parvana would have liked to be able to play with him now.

5. What was Father's lesson in his story tonight?

The lesson from the history story was that Afghanistan has always been the home of the bravest women in the world. He is telling his family this because they have to be brave.

6. Why do the four soldiers burst in the room and take Father away?

Because Father was educated in England. This means, there was really no reason to take Father but they just did. They put him in jail. Parvana threw herself at the soldiers because she did not want them to take Father's books and cause him more trouble.

Chapter Three

1. Why did Parvana want a light on in the night?

Parvana thought a light would help Father find his way home if he was let out of jail. Of course, that would not happen soon.

2. Why did mother decide to go to jail to try to help Father? What was the walk to jail like?

She wanted to ask for him to be released. Nooria had to write a note giving mother permission to be outside, as if she was the husband. Most of the Taliban couldn't read anyway, so it probably wouldn't help.

Parvana was afraid she could lose mother as all the women were wearing basically the same burqa, a regulation burqa. Mother showed the photograph of father to people to see if they could help. Photographs were illegal, so this was dangerous. The walk to Pul-i-Charkhi Prison was very long. The soldiers did not let Mother see or talk to Father, and one soldier ripped up the photograph. Soldiers beat Mother and Parvana.

Chapter Four

1. Describe how Mother and Parvana looked and felt after the long walk to and from the prison.

Mother and Parvana had bloody feet with broken blisters after the walk to and from the prison. Mother cried and stayed on the toshak for many days. On the fourth day, the food ran out. The dirty diapers had not been washed for four days.

2. Who had to buy food now?

The only person who could now buy food for the family was Parvana. Why? Discuss.

Chapter Five

1. Why was Parvana scared to go shopping alone? How were women supposed to shop? Why did the Talib hit Parvana with the stick for shopping?

Parvana was scared to shop alone as women were not supposed to shop without a male escort. Men were supposed to do all the shopping. Shopkeepers could be beaten for serving women in their shops. She didn't know if she would be considered a woman. She wasn't wearing a burqa and therefore could not stand outside a shop and call out her order. The Talib hit her for shopping without a burqa and being without a husband. (She is 11 years old, what do you think of her being without a husband?)

2. When Parvana ran away and upset some food along the way, she was clutching bread too tightly, and she ran into someone. Why did the person notice how she was carrying the bread? How did the person help Parvana's family?

The person noticed Parvana running and squishing the bread, and went home with her to find the mother unable to get out of bed. Mrs. Weera was a friend of the family and she was going to help them; she and her daughter stayed the night.

3. Why couldn't Parvana have a drink of water before it was boiled?

Water had to be boiled before drinking due to lack of sanitation and an unclean water supply with many germs. Parvana had shopped, carried seven pails of water up and down three flights of steps, and wanted a drink of water. She had to wait for the water to be boiled so she didn't get sick.

Chapter Six

1. In this chapter, Mrs. Weera, Mother and Nooria help to turn Parvana into a boy. Describe what they do to make her look like a boy, the story to help, and how Parvana feels about becoming a boy.

Although it had to be Parvana's decision, she had to decide to agree to become a boy or there would be no food. She needed to look like a boy to shop. She would wear her dead brother's (Hossain's) clothing. She had to have her hair cut. Parvana resisted but realized there was no choice. She began to feel like a different person when her face showed after having her hair cut. She liked having pockets, as her girl clothes didn't have pockets. She took the money and went shopping, and no one thought she was a girl. She had to dress as a boy inside her home, also.

Chapter Seven

1. In this chapter, Parvana takes over the job her father used to have. She goes to market, sits on the blanket, and reads and writes for people. She tried to sell a few items, and then she shops for food. She was to say she was Father's nephew, Kaseem, and not tell Father was in jail. Tell about the Talib who wanted a letter read and Parvana's feelings about the experience.

Parvana was scared trying to do Father's job, and worried someone would recognize her as a girl. A Talib who wanted a letter read surprised Parvana as she didn't realize he would have feelings at all, let alone feelings of sadness. Parvana was relieved when he paid and left. She didn't understand how a Talib who would beat and arrest women could feel sorrow like other human beings. She had to sell her beautiful shalwar kameez, and that also caused feelings of sadness in her. She was very proud of herself at the end of the day.

Chapter Eight

1. When Parvana returned home from working in the market, who was moving in?
Mrs. Weera moved in and she and mother were planning to work on a new magazine.
2. What did Parvana show Mrs. Weera and Mother?
She showed them the money she'd earned. It wasn't as much as Father would have earned, however.
3. What do Parvana and Mrs. Weera use to move Mrs. Weera's things?
They use a Karachi for the afternoon. It helps them move many things at once.
4. What happens when Maryam finally gets to go outside with Parvana after a year inside the room?
Maryam's sandals do not fit after a year's time. So, Mrs. Weera tied several layers of cloth around the child's feet so she could go outside.
5. Why can't Parvana stay outside very long in the market? Why does she have to go home at noon?
There is no way for a girl to go to the bathroom at market.

6. After the family realized Parvana could help them go outside, tell about some of the things they did outside.

Nooria could walk around the neighborhood, and flip up her burqa and feel the sunshine when it was safe. Nooria had forgotten how good sunshine felt. Ali had been shut up in the room for a year and a half. It was easier to wash Ali and Maryam at the water tap, and there was less water to carry. Mother finally went shopping at the suggestion of Mrs. Weera.

7. Tell about when Parvana thought she saw her father in the market.

Parvana called out to a man she thought was her father in the market. The man was not her father but said a few hopeful words to Parvana.

8. What was happening from the window near the market place?

Sometimes a small item was on Parvana's blanket. Someone was watching and wanted to talk to her, but it must have been a woman who could not go outside. This was a strange friendship where the two women couldn't talk together.

9. Who did she see at the end of chapter eight?

A tea boy who was a girl from her class.

Chapter Nine

1. Tell about the friendship between Shauzia and Parvana, the "boys" who worked to feed their families.

Shauzia and Parvana had not been close in school, but now things seemed different. This was the one friend Parvana has in this entire book. She can't watch her friend as staring at someone might raise suspicion. Shauzia's father had died. She has an unhappy life and wants to go to another city. Parvana insists her Father will return. They plot to buy trays to sell things in the market, so they could make more money and not have to wait for people to come to them. When Parvana took Shauzia home, everyone embraced her as if she had been a great friend even though they had never met before.

Chapter Ten

1. What is the new job Parvana and Shauzia have decided to try? They plan to not tell their families, and to save part of the money for something other than food. Why?

Parvana and Shauzia decided to dig up bones because it paid more than their other jobs. They want to save money for trays so they can go into the crowd and sell things from the trays. They hope they will make more money this way. They don't want to tell their families because they think their families might not let them continue with such work. They keep part of the money to buy the trays or perhaps they won't have enough money left to get trays otherwise.

2. Parvana had her father's writing things and blanket with her. Why? Why did she wash her clothes and hair as best she could at the water tap before going home at the end of the day?

She had not been able to tell her mother about bone digging. She was very dirty after bone digging and didn't want her family to guess what she was doing.

3. Why didn't Parvana go home for lunch, and would her mother be worried when she arrived home late?

Parvana usually went home at noon so she wouldn't be seen going to the bathroom by anyone who might notice she was a girl. There was nowhere for a girl to go to the bathroom in public. The bone digging area was too far to walk home at noon, and perhaps more importantly the girls were making too much money to quit. Parvana knew her mother would be worried and had to think of what to tell her mother.

4. Why were the girls possibly in danger just having to go to the bathroom?

The girls had three choices about going to the bathroom: hold it (which would have been impossible) go in a less sheltered area and possibly be seen to be girls, or to go in private and possibly have a land mine go off. Parvana knew some land mines were disguised as toys. Parvana was shaking just to have to make the decision, which had to be made which was to go in private. A land mine did not go off. (If they had been seen to be girls, they would have been beaten.)

5. What became the mascot of the girls as they pulled bones out of the earth? What did the girls think about the bones and their job?

A grinning skull became the mascot of the girls (Mr. Skull). They found five the first day. They also decided that mean people would probably be mad their bones were being sold to the bone broker, and nice people would be glad to help them out. They said someday they would be old women and tell this story and no one would believe them.

6. Did they know what the bone broker did with the bones?

No. They didn't ask either.

Chapter Eleven

1. Parvana's family knew something was wrong when she arrived home late and wet. Parvana was planning to show only part of the money to her family, thinking she would save the money for the tray. Why did she cry when asked about her day, and why did she show all of the money?

Maryam noticed Parvana was all wet, and Mother was worried because she hadn't gone home at none. They were worried Parvana had been arrested. Parvana stood with her face to the wall to explain, not bearing to face her mother. She put all of the money on the floor for everyone to see to show digging bones paid well. She knew they needed the money.

2. Did Mother want Parvana to continue digging bones? What did Nooria say about it?

No, Mother did not want Parvana to dig for bones. Parvana wanted to continue to get enough money to buy trays. Nooria felt that if Parvana could make more money that way, she should be allowed. Parvana was surprised her sister supported her.

3. How does Mrs. Weera help talk Mother into allowing Parvana to continue digging for bones?

Mrs. Weera says the times are unusual and call for ordinary people to do unusual things to get by. Mother finally agreed, but wanted to write about it for the magazine.

4. At the end of two weeks, when the girls had trays, they could follow the crowd to earn more money. Where did they follow the crowd? What terrible things did they see and learn?

The girls went into a crowd as it went into a stadium, thinking they could sell gum and cigarettes at a soccer game. No one was buying, however, and there was no happiness or cheering in the stadium. They thought people were waiting for the game to begin, and were scared so planned to leave at that point. However, they witnessed the chopping off of seven hands of people the Taliban thought were thieves. One young boy puts four hands on a string (like fish on a string) and waves it around. The girls had no idea this kind of thing was going on.

Chapter Twelve

1. Why did Parvana stay at home for a few days?

Parvana stayed at home saying she didn't want to see ugly things, but really couldn't face the world at all at that time. Mother and Mrs. Weera already knew about the stadium events. Parvana worried Father would be taken there.

2. When the bread ran out, did the family members tell Parvana to go back to work? No, they did not. Parvana just went back to work knowing there was no real choice.

3. Had Shauzia also stayed at home a few days? What was her secret?

No, Shauzia had been working and was glad to see Parvana return. Shauzia's family argued with each other and were often angry. She felt better when working. Her secret was that she was saving money to run away in the spring.

3. Where did Shauzia want to go? Why? How would she get there?

France, because she thought she would sit in flowers and not have to think about terrible things. She planned to travel with nomads to Pakistan and then take a boat to France. She thought everything would be easy when she was away from Afghanistan.

4. What was happening to Shauzia?

Shauzia was beginning to become a woman and would not be able to pretend to be a boy much longer. It would become obvious she was not a boy.

5. What would happen to Shauzia's family if she left?

They would not be able to have food.

6. Does Parvana want to go with Shauzia? What does she wish?

No, because she loves her family and they get along better than Shauzia's. She just wished she could go to school and have her Father around. She wants a normal, boring life.

7. What secret does Parvana share with Shauzia?

Parvana tells Shauzia about the tiny gifts that appear on her blanket or hit her on the head, from the woman in the house.

8. What did the secret school teach about? Who was the teacher?

Nooria was the teacher of five girls including Maryam. They had no books or supplies. It was only a few hours a week and the students didn't learn very much with such limitations.

9. The Window Woman continued to toss tiny gifts to Parvana. One afternoon, what did Parvana hear from the house?

Parvana heard angry sounds coming from the house with the Window Woman, her secret friend. The woman was crying and screaming and the man was shouting. Parvana heard thuds. She looked to the house and a customer told her it wasn't her business.

Chapter Thirteen

1. What news did Parvana hear when she went home?

Parvana heard that Nooria was getting married and moving to Mazar-e-Sharif. At that point in time, Mazar-e-Sharif was not under Taliban control. Nooria thought she could return to school there, and tear her burqa into a million pieces.

2. Did Nooria want to get married and move?

She thought her life would improve, so yes, she did.

3. Was the entire family planning to go to Mazar-e-Sherif for the wedding? Were they planning to take Parvana with them?

Yes. Parvana didn't want to go with. Mrs. Weera though she would stay to tell Father where the family had gone.

4. Parvana was mad for three days. Finally, mother decided to leave her there, but not because of her behavior. Due to Parvana's boyish appearance, it would be too difficult to explain to anyone. They couldn't take the chance. Parvana was scared for the family. What gift did she buy for Nooria?

She finally bought a pen in a beaded case so that Nooria could use it at the University and later as a teacher. It would make her remember Parvana.

5. Parvana missed her family even though she had more room and more free time. What did she do with some of her time?
She read some of Father's hidden books.

Chapter Fourteen

1. Parvana is sitting in a dark building after curfew in the rain. She is waiting to go home when it is raining less. She hears a cry, and lights a match from her cigarette tray. She found the woman. She told her she was really a girl. Why didn't the woman answer?

The woman wasn't covered and didn't have a burqa. She was too upset and tired to speak.

2. Parvana offered to go home and get Mrs. Weera's burqa. The woman would not let go of Parvana. After giving the woman some food, what decision did Parvana have to make?

Parvana needed to go home to let Mrs. Weera know she was safe, but also needed to help the crying woman. She decided to take the woman, uncovered, through the dark Kabul streets. The woman agreed.

3. How long had Kabul been under curfew? What was it like before that time?
Kabul had been under curfew for 20 years of various wars. Before that, it was a wonderful city with lights, progress, and excitement. Parvana had only known it under curfew.

4. What did Parvana think to herself to feel brave and take the woman through the city streets to her home?

Parvana thought, "I'm Malali, leading troops through enemy territory. She smiled in the dark although no one could see to help her feel brave. They saw headlights and hid, almost tripped, and even thought they were lost but they kept moving. Finally they ran.

5. Mrs. Weera was relieved when they arrived home. She wondered why Parvana had brought the woman without a burqa. What did Mrs. Weera do for the woman?

Mrs. Weera welcomed the woman and helped her wash and eat. Parvana helped.

6. How long did it take before the young woman, Homa, talked? What did they learn from the woman?

It was after supper the next day before she could speak. She told them the Taliban had captured Mazar-e-Sharif. That was where Parvana's mother and brother and sisters were, for Nooria's wedding. The Taliban had killed Homa's family and hundreds of people. She hid and then ran away by hiding in the back of a truck among the bundles. She didn't care where it was going. Mrs. Weera told Parvana to believe her family was alive and not give up hope.

7. What did Parvana do after learning the Taliban had captured Mazar-e-Sharif? She took over the spot where her mother had collapsed, before, and wanted to stay there forever. After two days, Shauzia appeared at the door and asked Parvana to go back to work so she didn't have to be alone. Parvana did return to work and go through her days feeling like life was a nightmare.

8. Who was in Parvana's apartment late one afternoon?

Two men helping a man up the stairs to the apartment. Parvana's father was back from jail. Part of her nightmare was over.

Chapter Fifteen

1. How had the men brought Parvana's Father home?

The men had found Parvana's Father outside of jail. He was released but unable to walk anywhere. They used a karachi and took him home.

2. Parvana was crying and clinging to her father. What was she supposed to offer the two men?

She was to say thank you. She didn't remember to say thank you until after curfew. Mrs. Weera had given the men tea.

3. Father was very ill after being in jail. Mrs. Weera nursed him until he was well enough to travel. What did Father say about Parvana when he was well enough to notice?

Father said, "Now you are both my daughter and my son."

4. How did all the women help Father during his recuperation?

Homa kept Mrs. Weera's granddaughter quiet, Parvana made many extra trips to the water tap to keep Father's bandages clean, and Mrs. Weera was the nurse. Homa spoke English with Father. Parvana found she was more motivated when working in the market to earn money to help Father. Parvana had more hope.

5. What were Shauzia's plans?

Shauzia was earning money to run away because her grandfather had picked a husband for her. The grandfather wanted the money the husband's family would pay him. She felt she would die if that happened.

6. What did the visitor tell Mrs. Weera about Mazar-e-Sharif?

The visitor was one of the members of the women's group told her many people had fled Mazar-e-Sharif. The people were staying in refugee camps outside of the city.

7. What did Father plan to do?

Father planned to go to the refugee camps and look for mother and the children. He would never really be well enough to travel, but would ask the men who helped him home from jail to help him get to the refugee camps.

8. What did Father say when Parvana asked him why the Taliban let him go?

Father said he didn't know why he was arrested or why he was let go.

9. Where did Mrs. Weera plan to go? Who was she taking with her?

Mrs. Weera planned to go to Pakistan and take Homa with her. Homa was educated and could work with the women's group. They would start a school there. Parvana suggested taking Shauzia with her, but Mrs. Weera thinks that it would be bad for Shauzia to desert her family.

10. How does Parvana say good-bye to the Window Woman?

Parvana plants a flower, which will not grow outside the window, and waves. She thinks she sees a quick wave back to her. She never actually met the Window Woman but they were friends despite the Taliban.

11. What does Mrs. Weera show Parvana as they are getting ready to leave? Why does she hide it under her burqa?

Mrs. Weera quickly showed Parvana Mother's magazine, which was being sent to women all over the world. She tells Parvana to be sure to tell mother more writing is needed for the next issue, and she is needed in the women's group. She hides it under the burqa because women should not be able to read and write. Parvana hugs Mrs. Weera and Homa; she can tell despite their burqas which person is which.

12. How does Shauzia leave Afghanistan? What does she give Parvana?

Shauzia leaves Afghanistan with some nomads who will take her to Pakistan as a shepherd. She and Parvana plan to meet in 20 years on top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. They do not say good-bye but "until next time." Shauzia gave Parvana a bag of dried apricots.

13. Parvana rode a truck with her father to go to find her mother and siblings. As they left Kabul, what did they see?

As they drove away, she could see the mountain her father had called "Mount Parvana" when the family knew better times in Kabul.

F is for Freedom - Comprehension Questions

1. Who are the characters in the book? Where and when do they live?

Amanda, her mother, her father, and her brother live in Pennsylvania. They live in a peaceful area. The family of runaway slaves (Williams) (Hannah, her mother, her father, and her brother) stays with Amanda's family and has to hide from the County Constable.

2. Why is the slave family hiding? What could happen if they are found?

What is a bounty hunter?

The runaway slaves won't be considered free until they reach Canada, but to a law of 1850. The jail time would be six months for anyone involved in hiding the family, with a monetary fine. A bounty hunter is a person who would find any slaves just to turn them in and collect reward money.

3. Why does Amanda's family take a risk and help the slaves on their way to Canada?

What are these type of people called?

Because they feel it is the right thing to do, including allowing Amanda to playact and lie to help protect the slaves. It is estimated that about 1000 slaves per year escaped, and others were caught and returned to their masters by bloodhounds, bounty hunters, slave patrols, and informants.

These people are called abolitionists or sympathizers. Many worked along the "Underground Railroad" to help slaves escape. The Underground Railroad was secret organizing efforts organized by northerners and some southerners. It was especially busy from 1830 to 1865. The abolitionists were both black and white people.

4. Did Pennsylvania allow slaves?

No, but the law covered slaves who escaped to Pennsylvania so the slaves still weren't safe.

5. What was the Mason-Dixon Line?

The boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland. It used to be the line between free and slave states, and still is used to refer to the difference between the northern and southern states.

6. Why is Amanda awoken in the middle of the night?

She heard a wagon outside the window and saw a strange delivery---people in burlap bags!

7. The family who is let out of the bags is a slave family who is going to be hid in Amanda's house. Amanda didn't know this sort of thing had been going on, and suddenly found herself having to playact to protect the slaves. Where do they hide? How does Amanda stop the Constable from using the key to open the door to that part of the closet?

In the back part of a closet behind an extra door. Amanda says her Christmas gifts must be in the closet and that stops the Constable from looking behind the secret door.

8. The Williams Family is running to escape what?

Slavery.

9. Hannah Williams was not allowed to learn how to read because of what?

She was a slave, and reading could help her achieve freedom. There was no school for slaves.

10. Why does Amanda go outside with Hannah when it is so dangerous? Was she trying to be mean?

Amanda didn't mean to be cruel to Hannah or put her in danger by going outside. She wanted so badly for Hannah to experience the freedom she felt outside. She thought they could get back in time to not be noticed and that it would be safe. However, she learned from this experience such an idea was truly risking their lives. Amanda probably did this not fully understanding the grave danger for Hannah. Hannah's protests indicated that she had a better understanding of the danger for runaway slaves.

11. What does the Constable do besides catch runaway slaves?

He collects taxes from the farmers.

12. True or False: When Amanda and Hannah are outside playing they hear voices so they run home but can't get home in time, so they climb a tree.

FALSE

13. True or False: Hannah and her family are going to stop and visit relatives and have a vacation on their way to Canada.

FALSE

14. Hannah and Amanda show they are friends. What does Amanda give to Hannah to help her?

Amanda gives Hannah lessons on the alphabet by drawing letters in the dirt.

15. Hannah tells Amanda about the time she was beaten for doing what?

Reading a book.

16. Hannah's grandmother was what in Africa?

West African Queen