Superior, 9-10

The breeze blew my hair behind me as I sprinted barefoot through the cold, green grass. I reached my hand out and stopped abruptly as I touched the house. Willie came up behind me, red-faced and out of breath.

"I win," I said to him, smiling proudly.

He sank down to the ground in exhaustion and panted, "I…let…you….win. I…shouldn't…beat …a girl."

I pouted at him as I grabbed his arm and pulled him inside my family's modest, plain white house. We found my mother humming to herself as she cooked in the kitchen.

"You two look thirsty," she said to us, smiling. She poured two glasses of lemonade and handed one to each of us. I grabbed mine greedily.

Mother frowned at me disapprovingly. "Now, Joyce! You are six years old now! You're old enough to remember your manners!"

I mumbled something that resembled a thank you and used one hand to drag Willie back outside and the other to tightly clutch my lemonade.

We lay down on the grass in my backyard, gazing at the clouds and sipping our lemonade for hours. After the last drops were gone, we wrestled through the bushes, hiked through the woods, and explored nearby creeks.

Willie and I had been friends since we were born. We did everything together and spent every moment we could together. Every day at school was spent whispering during class and every afternoon was spent exploring the outdoors together.

We were still best friends by the time we turned ten. Life became harder for us, and we had to constantly have each other's backs.

One evening, my father came home late from work with a distressed look on his face. He sat down in his chair and put is head in his hands.

I asked him, “What’s wrong, Daddy?”

He replied, “Oh, Joyce, the question is not what is wrong. But rather, what is right?”

I stared at him blankly, confused. When I asked him what he meant, he simply sighed and told me to set the table for dinner. I did as I was told, and the family sat down to the wonderful meal that Mother had prepared. We all bowed our heads as Father said grace, and then we began to eat.

“Alice, did you hear that Martin from down the street got robbed?” Father asked Mother between mouthfuls of chicken. “The police refuse to help him catch the bandit. Martin claims it’s because of anti-Semitism.”

Mother frowned. “There’s little doubt about it, dear,” she replied. “Beliefs of a ‘superior race’ are spreading like wild fire. Violence in the streets has increased immensely and the Nazis have become even more brutal.”

“Mommy?” I said quietly. “What’s antisemy…antisemitish…izam…?”

“It’s called anti-Semitism, dear,” Mother answered, “and it’s nothing that you would understand at your age.”

“I don’t think it can be understood at any age,” added Father.

Father was right. Eleven years later, the cruelty and unfairness of anti-Semitism still made no sense to me.

Willie and I, both now seventeen, were walking together down the street, gazing through shop windows and talking.

“Did they ask you to join again?” I asked. Wyatt had been asked to join the Nazis multiple times.

“Yes, they did,” he replied.

“Are you ever embarrassed to be seen with me, Willie?” I questioned. “I mean, because I am a Jew and you’re German.”

"I guess not," he answered simply.

"Why are you so much different than the rest of them?" I asked. "All the other Germans think themselves to be superior to all Jews. Why aren't you like them?"

Willie looked up at me slowly and replied, "I don't know, Joyce. It's hard to be different."

He said nothing more, his eyes suddenly filling with bitterness. We said our goodbyes and went our separate ways, heading back towards our homes.

As I grew closer to my family's home, I heard cries. I began to run, wanted to be able to help anyone who was in danger. When I finally reached my neighborhood, all of my family as well as all of my neighbors were standing out in the streets, surrounded by Nazi soldiers. I recognized Mrs. Plum, who lived right across the street from us. I knew her to be a cheerful, plump elderly lady whose house was constantly filled with the warm scent of baking bread. Now her eyes were wide with fear and her face red with anxiety. She tightly clutched the arm of Mr. Miner. Mr. Miner had always been very organized, neat, and well-dressed. But now, his clothes were slightly dirty and his hair was not quite in place. My own little brother stood between Mr. Miner and Mother, quietly sobbing into his arm. My father stood in front of my mother protectively with a look of concern on his face. None of the other thirty of us seemed to be ourselves either.

"You will all be boarding a train," announced a Nazi soldier bluntly. "Do as you are told and no one gets hurt."

I ran towards my Father and grabbed his arm as if I was six again. I was scared, though I knew what was about to happen.

"We are now going to march," another soldier declared, his voice bursting with irritability and impatience. "Follow us. No arguing, complaining, or disobedience will be tolerated."

We marched, unsure of where we were going or when we were going to stop. It felt like hours or perhaps days. Eventually, we arrived at an empty train. The soldiers pushed, shoved,

and crammed all of us into one train car. I was wedged in-between my parents, struggling to breathe the thick, hot air. There was not enough room to move.

After a few moments, the train lurched forward. I remained motionless and quiet in that spot for hours until the train came to a complete stop. Nazis opened up the door, and we all toppled out of the train into a giant heap of sweaty bodies on the ground.

I brushed myself off, stood up and found that I was standing in front of a camp of some sort. Smokestacks towered high in the distance, and many small buildings scattered the parched land.

I followed the others into the camp. I was welcomed by the scent of burning flesh and was surrounded by hundreds of other Jews waiting in a very long line. I was instructed to get in line with my family and wait.

As we waited, I tried not to think about my surroundings. I wanted to ignore the cries and shrieks I could hear coming from the depths of the camp. I didn't want to see the bone thin bodies that walked around on the other side of the fence. I wished so badly that the bodies and corpses that were everywhere were just figments of my imagination. So I stood in line without thinking or moving, without existing. If I blocked everything out, it became a little more bearable.

As we got closer to the front of the line, I could hear a soldier asking the prisoners for their name, age, and occupation.

It was my turn. The soldier who stood before me asked, "What's your name?"

I looked up at him and was awakened from my shock. I knew those hazel eyes and that dusty brown hair.

"Willie," I said. "You are one of them."

Willie looked up at me. His Nazi uniform was too big and didn't suit him well. He said quietly, "I couldn't take it anymore. You don't know what it's like to be different."

Angrily I replied, “No, you are the one who doesn’t understand. You’re not the one who has to be fearful when you walk down the streets. You don’t have to worry about being attacked and having no one to save you. No, you don’t know what it’s like to be treated so differently because you are not the same race as everybody else.”

Willie glared at me with more anger than I had ever seen him before. “You’re wrong, Joyce!” he shouted. “Do you know how I’ve been treated for being friends with you? I can’t sit with the other Germans at school. Even my teachers call me names! Even my own family considers me a disgrace and a disappointment! Don’t you talk to me like that! Remember your place!”

“Remember my place?” I questioned bitterly.

Without even thinking, he struck me once across the face. I fell to the ground and felt warm wet blood trickle down my cheek. Willie leaned down and put his lips right up against my ear.

“Yes,” he hissed. “Remember your place, Jew.”