I didn’t understand it and I don’t really think Mirelle did either. All my 14 year old brain could wrap itself around was the fact that I was standing outside my best friend’s house, nose and cheeks red, fingers and toes stiff with coldness, and she wasn’t letting me in.

“Come on, M,” I said, placing a hand on the front door to push the door wider than the six-inch sliver Mirelle had created for half of her face. This was met with a resisting force stronger than my friend’s body should have been able to exert.

“Hope. I can’t,” she said too shortly for it to actually have been coming from her. And with that, the door was swiftly shut in my face.

I wish I could say this caused a wave of hot fury to arise within me and warm my freezing cheeks. If I could do it again, I would slam my fists against that dark brown door until my knuckles were bleeding or Mirelle- or any of her five siblings- opened the door. I would demand answers. I would make her tell me that second what was going on. And I fully believe I would have changed the outcome for my friend and her family.

Instead, I felt hurt. My pride turned me around and guided me out of the white fence surrounding Mirelle’s house and towards mine just on the other side of town. As I started towards town I angrily curled my hands into fists and shoved them into my pockets. Fine, I thought, if she doesn’t want to hang out, I’ll find something else to do.

That something else ended up being sulking through town. As people’s lives continued around me- kids playing tag in the streets, customers negotiating prices, soldiers standing at each corner looking slightly uncomfortable with their new obligation to patrol the town streets- I wracked my brains for reasons why Mirelle could possibly have been so upset with me.

I came up with nothing except that I had taken the smallest piece of chocolate from her
lunch yesterday. I knew that couldn’t be the problem. However, the thought still caused me to stop outside of town’s candy store and look through the window. With that, I was met with my own reflection and cringed. My blue coat was making my blue eyes too blue, they were all you could see when you looked at me. Too big and too blue. I had always been jealous of Mirelle’s brown eyes. When they hit the light the corners turned gold. They were natural. Eyes should be brown, not blue. Aside from my too noticeable eyes and raw cheeks and nose, I hadn’t brushed my long blonde hair since the morning before. I sighed exasperatedly, causing a puff of smoke to form in front of me, and pulled my hood up to hide the blonde mess.

I didn’t get any chocolate. For me or Mirelle. I wish I did. Would have given me a reason to go back. Instead, I continued on my way home, quietly humming Christmas music under my breath. As I turned onto my street and my house came into view, I saw that there were clearly way too many people there. I started cautiously walking up the front steps, leading me to the porch where my dad and two other strong, serious looking men were conversing in abrupt whispers.

“Hi dad I’m-” I tried to say quickly.

“Not now, Hope,” my dad said shortly, shooing me away with a flick of his wrist as if I were a pesky bee flying around an ice cream cone.

I wasn’t going to ask questions. At that point, I had accepted that no one wanted to talk to me that day. But it didn’t kill my curiosity. My dad had been having lots of hushed, short, private conversations recently. I smiled at the two visitors, pushed through to the door of my house, and quickly turned into our living room. The front window had a little window well with cushions on it. I liked to sit there and read. And, the window was thin enough that if I just happened to lean
against it while reading, maybe even press my ear against it casually, I could begin to make out words from the conversation going on between my dad and the two men.

So that’s where I was when I found out. Sitting in a window well, pretending to read about “Hitler’s Plan for a New Germany,” while my dad acted as a pawn to the game that was starting in my country.

Hindsight is 20/20, and that has never felt truer than in that moment. My dad’s new uniform, his long hours, the visitors during dinner, the whispered conversations on our porch, my dad’s shorter than normal temper, his praise for our new leader. He was working for them. At the same time that this all clicked together like a puzzle in my head, I heard one of this visitors from outside say a muffled, “Levine.” I sat up stick straight in the window well and froze. Mirelle Levine. My head whipped around and I studied my dad. I shouldn’t have been surprised.

I guess I expected some reluctance in his countenance. He knew what he was about to do. Instead, I observed the cold as stoned look I had become so accustomed to from that man. He loved power and not much else.

Not long after muttering my best friend’s last name, the three men started for the stairs as if to leave. Panic rose from my stomach up- my heart raced, my tongue and throat vibrated, my fingers tingled. I was racing towards the door before I knew what I was doing. I had no plan. Just a sinking suspicion and the desire to stop it. I flung open the door and called at the men’s backs, “Wait!” Not even my own father so much as flinched. “Dad!” I called out as I ran down the stairs so quickly I nearly tripped over my own feet. “Where are you going?” I asked still to the back of his head.

My dad turned only enough for me to see his profile. I saw only half his mouth move as he said, “Inside. Now, Hope, go inside.”

With that, he continued walking and climbed into the car with the other two men. Tires
screeched as they pulled out and turned towards town.

I sat at the bottom of our front stairs, the cold cement eating my feet through my thin socks. I was shivering from the cold, from fear, from anger. Eleven.

My class had lost eleven kids already that year. We never talked about it that much, never had much warning that they were leaving either, just that they wouldn’t be back and to not ask any questions. Unfortunately, a lot of my questions like how, who, and why were being answered.

Every instinct in my body said to turn around and go inside. That’s what I had been taught. Don’t ask questions, don’t make a scene, let the adults deal with it. Easiest thing to do is trust that they know what they’re doing and things will work out. But at that moment I began to feel like their version of things working out was very different from mine.

What could I do? Can a 14 year old really make a difference? Was anyone going to be able to stop what was happening? Was it a safe idea to stand up against my dad and so many like him? I’m sure the answer is clear.

But that didn’t stop me from slapping my bare feet against hard, cold pavement, breathing air that felt like ice shards each time I inhaled, pumping my arms that stung as they rubbed against my numb body. I didn’t think out a plan, didn’t come up with some huge speech, wasn’t going for some miraculous, sudden change of heart from my seemingly heartless dad. From that day, came a new set of personal values, a new end goal, a belief that would cause me to leave home three years later. That day; however, I ran towards my best friend’s house wanting nothing more than to be the first one there.