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## Illumination

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# Illumination

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**Author Bio**

Kelsey Lamagdeleine is a sophomore majoring in English and minoring in education. Writing has been her hobby ever since she was a little girl. She is fond of this story because she considers it a step towards discovering her own writing style.

## Illumination

The scent of cheap vanilla perfume curled around Amy like a question she didn't want the answer to. Nevertheless, she turned to stare after the two retreating blondes, all harsh hair dye and orange tan. The streetlight sketched a weird halo about them and then they were off, into whatever other things L.A. had to offer them—pastel pumps, perhaps. Amy wiggled toes tucked into sneakers and consciously put the pair from her mind, returning to aimless buzzing thoughts and the plane ticket in her hand.

After all, there was no real reason to go anymore. She had initially agreed to a family vacation because it meant (inside her head if not quite in the travel guide) France and Paris and lights, all of which blended together like a Monet painting, a city daubed so delicate on the world canvas. And there had been that bitter rationale underneath, prompted by the little boy on the bus who told her that her name couldn't be Amy. She was a foreigner in her own country; she might as well be a foreigner in a foreign land. She and her parents had laughed and worked it out over dinner, planning to say they were from Canada, and thus avoid the "stupid American" stigma.

There were no lights in L.A. Not like in paintings, anyway, unless Jackson Pollock threw away a canvas after smearing it with mustard. All dripping dashes of paint with no meaning behind it. But at least it was some recognizable piece of artwork—all Iowa could ever be was one of those dime-a-dozen pastoral scenes. These sour ruminations kept her occupied on the walk home.

Her father asked, "How was your walk, Aimless?" as she opened the door, as if he were being clever. The grin was still infectious; the inevitable question remained not a tired joke but a sleepy one, all comfort and freshly-washed bedsheets.

"Positively fluorescent," Amy said, heading over to the fridge. "Where's Mom?"

"On the phone with her very own Agony Aunt."

"Dad."

"Conversing via telephone with her mother's brother's wife, Mrs. Agnes T.W. Lee, born in—"

"Dying this summer." Talking to her father could be exhausting, lobbing witty volleys back and forth. Frankly, she didn't have the muscle. Anyway, the Agony Aunt's past didn't matter so much as her near future, as it was that interfering with the perfect vacation. She sulked and drank orange juice straight out of the carton in revenge.

"Amy. We're the only relatives she has left. We have to do the right thing."

"I'm not one of her relatives." She slammed the carton back into the refrigerator, vaguely disappointed at the lack of comment on the action. "Paris, Dad, we could have seen Paris!" The lights winked in her mind, inviting.

"Then why are you coming?"

Anywhere but here.

"I have to do the right thing," Amy lied, and almost felt guilty when her

father beamed. Uncomfortable, she turned to go, and then stopped. Blurted, "Why did you name me Amy?"

He seemed surprised. "Because your mother and I think it's a lovely name."

"It isn't Chinese!" The shout burst from her mouth, a firecracker gone wrong. Sulfurous smoke hung over the kitchen. It stung her eyes and she blinked rapidly, snatching away her hand when her father reached out to grasp it.

"Did someone say something to you, honey?"

"No."

Just citizenship to a country that wanted nothing to do with her.

If I'm going to be different—

"Did you want to talk more about the family heritage? Your mother and I are always ready to listen."

"I'm going to finish packing."

After locking the door, Amy sat on her suitcase, zipping it shut. Turned her back from the window and looked at the wall instead. Her parents were so good at celebrating culture, reading her Eastern fairytales and explaining why it had been safer for her great-grandparents to change their surname from Li to Lee. They were so good, and knew so much, but what could she tell them about the way she felt? What could they possibly understand? What could they do to fix the world?

She cupped her palms as though they could contain the whole of her sorrow, like they could catch every tear she refused to shed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What do you think of Iowa?"

"It's flat," Amy said.

She might have made a more polite answer had her ears still not been ringing from the plane's landing, had Great-Aunt Agnes not come out to greet them looking not at all like an invalid, though Amy's personal picture of health would never have worn quite so much gray. The Agony Aunt was a woman of iron.

"Amy," her mother warned.

All the Aunt had to say was, "There's honesty and then there's smart honesty, girl."

Iowa stretched out under the sky like just another sunbather, brown for earth and blue for sky, streaks of white for clouds or metaphorical sunscreen, something along those lines. Amy gave up the search for a silver lining; she could not feel herself falling in love with the land, no matter the cinematic scope and certain stark grandeur. She ached for the Louvre in an almost physical fashion, as though some part of her soul were literally parched. She licked her lips and thought of wandering in the desert.

Unpacking included the indignity of being sentenced to sleep on the couch. "You're young," Great-Aunt Agnes proclaimed, as if issuing a royal edict. Amy looked at the ceiling to avoid meeting those gray eyes. "Your parents will sleep in the guest room."

"Glad to see you looking well," Amy said, now staring at the ceiling, tracing constellations in the little dimples.

"Still only have a few months to live."

Amy's mother promptly began wringing her hands and protesting, rattling off treatments and alternatives as though she were a doctor—which technically she

was, although pediatricians generally did not tend to the elderly. Her father only sighed and began to rattle around the kitchen, presumably to make dinner.

Amy had not fallen in love with Iowa, but this did not necessarily preclude an impulse to explore. She could perhaps create a museum inside her mind, an art gallery where hung great works of rustic and rural scenes, things never found in modern L.A. Even if no one ever remembered the names of the pastoral painters, the novelty was something at the very least. Taken with the idea, she set out to explore the little town, only to round the corner and see a 7-11. What quaint charm. Plans thrown into disarray, she shrugged in fatalistic acceptance.

"When in Rome, get a soda."

The staring was something new, though. Amy pretended not to notice just as they pretended not to stare, the woman picking up milk and the old man buying a package of cigarettes. Gazes bored into the back of Amy's head like drills, and just as noisy. She closed her eyes at the welcome coolness as she slid open the refrigerator door and retrieved a Coke. Can't get much more American than that. She turned just in time to see the man and the woman carefully look elsewhere, though the girl behind the checkout counter kept staring, lips not quite forming an O, just parted enough to show surprise.

Rather than let it bother her, Amy framed it in her mind, gave the painting the title *Backwards Small Town Girl Finds Diversity in the Middle of Nowhere*. Kind of like something by Norman Whatshisface, except more ignorant than charming. Amy placed the Coke on the counter, not feeling bitchy enough to fake a Chinese accent.

"That'll be all? The... soda, I mean? You call it soda, right?"

Amy's fist tightened around her five-dollar bill. "I speak English."

"Well, we call it pop here," the girl said, looking bewildered and upset at Amy's tone of voice. "But Mrs. Lee told us that her family from California was coming out to see her. Um. That'll be a dollar fifty."

Amy's grip on the money loosened, and she handed it over. The trouble with paintings was adjusting them afterwards, touching them up only to find that in the right light, the meaning was completely different. The girl was pretty after all, if in a plain sort of way. Her hair was long and sandy and flyaway and shone even in the 7-11, never the most glamorous of locales. Three dollars and two quarters dropped into Amy's hand.

"I'm Amy Lee," she said.

"Jenny Hodges." There was something brilliant about the hesitance in her smile, some portion of the Iowa sunrise climbing over the horizon.

Kind of like...

"Gotta get home for dinner." Amy twisted the cap off the soda, checked to see if she'd won anything (No—or maybe), and almost tripped trying to get out the door.

"Amy."

She had stopped almost before the first syllable of her name, glancing over her shoulder, natural as a flower turning towards the sun.

"See you around?"

"Yeah," Amy said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amy awoke to a jab in the ribs.

"Up," the Agony Aunt said. "I want to watch television."

Amy tried to sleep through the plastic smiles delivering the morning news, but around seven in the morning gave it up as a lost cause and stumbled from the couch, gritty-eyed and not at all pleased. There was nothing for breakfast but some packets of oatmeal and a box of Cheerios.

Without turning around, Agnes said, "You might want to pick up some milk at the store."

"Thought you were dying," Amy muttered.

"So are we all." She clearly had sharper hearing than she gave her credit for. Agnes folded her arms at this pronouncement and looked smug. "Ten dollars on the table. Get me some chewing gum, too. Mint, none of those fancy fruit flavors."

Amy wondered, as was her wont when out walking, about things. About having sensibly cut gray hair and un-tilted gray eyes, if looking like someone else would give her the power to shape and change the world just by speaking, by ordering people to do something and then expecting it to happen. She could sit down to get her portrait painted and look like every other famous figure. She could be anything, anything at all.

Humidity pressed against her like a slightly sweaty palm, though the sky was still tender with the day's youth. Amy continued along in her pocket of isolation, standing at a fixed point as the horizon shifted back and forth. Milk and gum. They orbited around her. What a town, tiny enough to give Amy her own gravitational pull.

And then at the midway point in her path, she looked up as she felt it cross with someone else's. Jenny Hodges was out and about, hair drifting and shifting around her head like a halo, sundress light green and a bit too large. She looked like a hope, a small and unnamed one, but a hope nonetheless.

"Hello again."

Stars aligned. It took only the briefest pause and adjustment to direction for them to fall in step with one another, an organic progression derived from the very nature of things, something as elementary as sun on seeds in the ground. Or at least that was how it felt to Amy, who let the glow wash over her and ignored its meaning.

"How long are you here?"

"Two weeks."

Quietly, "Mrs. Lee likes to pretend she isn't sick. I'm glad you came."

The two sentences were not entirely related to each other.

"So am I."

The silence that fell afterward did not feel like silence. It hummed. It gleamed. Looking around, Amy could practically see it as tangible as Jenny's bright, bright hair, and it was strange and wonderful and—terrifying. So she broke it.

"Heading in to work?"

"Yeah. The early hours suck, but it's the only way to pay for a car."

Amy grinned. "Where you gonna drive to?"

Jenny punched her arm, then shrank in on herself a little, reddening. "Sorry if I hurt you! But, well, there are things to do here. Maybe it's not exciting like L.A., but you can just drive if you want to." Her expression grew a little dreamy. "Plus there's a blue 1988 Cadillac waiting for me. Ever been in love before?"

"Not... really." Amy forced a smile.

"Sorry, I forget that not everybody's a car person. I'll stop boring you."  
Amy winced. "I don't think you're boring." I'm just terminally awkward.  
"I just need to pick some things up for breakfast, but we can maybe hang out later. Okay?"

"Sure!"

And so after making plans for later, Amy returned home with eyes not new but wise, wise enough to peer past the obvious. She saw the skin on Great-Aunt Agnes' hands was paper-thin as she took the gum with a nod of thanks or acknowledgment or both. Amy swallowed around the sudden lump in her throat; Agnes no longer seemed a caricature of herself.

"Saw you out walking," Agnes said, pouring milk over her cereal.

"Yeah," she agreed, more intent on the milk. Hunger had roared back at the sight of it, but of course the Agony Aunt had first dibs. (Well, it was her money.)

"You liking our little town?"

"Yeah." Then, feeling she ought to at least contribute something to the conversation: "The mornings here are pretty."

Agnes sighed, with an expression that might have been a smile. "Every hour out here is pretty. I don't hold with stereotypes, but crotchety old folk were meant to live out in the country. Suits me fine, at least."

Amy found herself a bowl and served herself her own Cheerios, feeling just a little odd. She didn't have any real objections to not hating her "vacation" so much, but the idea of enjoying herself in Iowa, even a little, was weird.

"Jenny Hodges comes from nice folks." After throwing out this calm non sequitur, Agnes went back to her cereal.

"Does she," Amy managed, and then picked up her bowl, now full. "I think I'll go eat this in my r—somewhere else."

\* \* \* \* \*

Iowa did not embrace her; it did not enfold her into its bosom like a mother welcoming back a wayward child. It felt like L.A. in some indelible, indefinable way. There was pressure all around her, pushing her in some vague direction she either couldn't or wouldn't go. Amy itched inside her skin.

Jenny's house looked more or less like what she had expected, homey and country with lots of gingham. The only real anomaly was that they had to walk through the garage to meet her parents. ("Momma and Dad are working out the transmission in their anniversary present. Don't offer to help, it's their project. Oh, right, I forgot! Well, if you ever want to learn anything about fixing cars, just ask me.")

There was a lot of soft pinkness to Jenny's room: pink-painted walls, a white bedspread with embroidered pink roses, sheer pink curtains, and a cushy pink rug. Gratifyingly, a bulletin board hung on one wall. There were the usual pictures of friends and family, but then came pictures of cars, cut out from newspapers or magazines. It was a jumble of bold color against pastel, and Amy reached up to touch one of the curling edges of the cutouts. "I like your room."

Jenny laughed. "You can tell it hasn't been painted since I was six, right? But I like it even so."

"Suits you." Amy turned, and there was something about Jenny that made Iowa a little less like L.A., a little more welcoming. At the very least it made her more

polite. "You want to tell me more about your future car?"

The boredom was really worth basking in Jenny's enthusiasm.

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"You've been out a lot these past few days, honey."

Amy froze in the act of buttoning her shirt, certain now her mother was going to sit her down for a nice long talk about Jenny Hodges, even though she had undoubtedly already grilled the Agony Aunt for every scrap of information. Much as she loved her mother, she could be a little overprotective. (She could already picture the conversation: "Mom, this isn't L.A. She's not a drug dealer. I can guarantee she's nothing but the wholesome girl she seems. Just let it go, all right?")

"Have you found a lot to do in Iowa?"

Blink, pause. "What?"

Her mother twisted her wedding ring up and down her finger, a sure sign of discomfort and possible guilt. "I don't like the idea of you always being off alone. Your father and I are sorry about Paris, we really are, and I hope you're not avoiding us out of anger. If there's something we can do to make it up to you—"

"I'm not mad at you." Words bubbled on Amy's tongue, little soda fizzes. Mom, I made a friend. Mom, I think we might be best friends. Yeah, it sounds crazy, friendship takes time, but—remember when you were five? And you didn't have to wait to know how you felt about someone? You just talked to them once and you knew?

"I just spend a lot of time thinking about stuff. I'm starting to think it's one of those phases. I'll snap out of it eventually." Amy shuffled past her mother, avoiding her eyes. "I'm gonna go now and think some more."

Her mother looked a little forlorn at the top of the stairs. "Don't stay out too late. We miss you."

Amy had her hand on the doorknob to go out before Agnes' presence in the kitchen registered. "Thanks," she said, and did her best not to sound grudging about it.

"Figured you would say something on your own time," was all that the Aunt said in reply, and then she turned a page of the newspaper.

\*\*\*\*\*

Amy measured her life in couples. A couple more days until she got to meet Jenny's brother, home from a road trip with a few of his college friends. (They took them both out to the bar. The bartender only laughed at the audacity and gave them both sodas, on the house.) A couple more hours until Jenny got off her shift, since her boss didn't like it when they stood around talking. (Or, Amy suspected, he just didn't like anyone who wasn't a WASP.) A couple more forkfuls of dinner until she could be off and away, even if her parents didn't look all that happy to barely see her. (They stayed in the house for the most part, helping Agnes get her affairs in order, a grim task Amy was thankful to leave to the adults.) A couple more friends of Jenny's to meet, who were the most part nice and welcoming. ("I like just you and me best, though," Jenny said once, with unusual boldness, and Amy agreed.) Eventually it became just a couple more days before they had to say goodbye.

"Sorry we didn't get to do much," Jenny said quietly.

"It's fine," Amy said, and did not add that sitting in Jenny's backyard and

talking had actually been her favorite part of the whole vacation. It was sunset, and the sky was alive, and so was she, so perhaps they were both parts of the other.

"L.A. must be nice. Taxi cabs going everywhere, bicycles, your occasional limousine. Always something to do." Jenny swung her bare legs. She had an endless supply of sundresses; today's was yellow.

"Not really. All it means is that there are more places to be lonely."

Jenny's legs paused, and she put a hand on Amy's arm. "Are you really so lonely?"

Amy shifted in her seat, a little uncomfortable. Looking up at the sky, she answered, "When kids grow up, they want to be special. They want everyone to notice them as they go. They don't realize... it means being different. I still don't want to be." She pulled away from Jenny's touch somehow despite the laws of gravity, tucking her knees under her chin, arms wrapping around her shins. "I hate it."

At this bleak pronouncement, silence fell. Amy closed her eyes and felt the light begin to fade to twilight gray.

"What's Los Angeles really like?" Jenny asked.

A breeze stirred the air around them.

Amy let go.

"It's noisy, and it's cluttered, and it's beautiful like an old rock star. I live there, but I never let it really feel like home. I never really let any place feel like home. I was always out of place. Until... until I met you, I guess."

Jenny's smile was sweet and sad at the same time. "I wasn't staring at you that time. Well, not because you weren't white. Because you were different."

"Because...?"

The shadows deepened but it still seemed as though there were no time, nary a tick tock to be found, all timers set to pause, a freeze-frame portrait of love as two young girls. Amy felt as though there were no blood in her face, as if it had all flowed into her hands, which tingled like waking limbs as she touched Jenny's cheek, Jenny who had tears in her eyes for some reason.

"You know what it means," Jenny whispered.

The impulse to hide herself away folded up like a fan and Amy was at peace and Amy understood the tears in the eyes, the eyes in the face she was nearing, and she saw her reflection in them as radiant. And Amy—

—kissed Jenny—

—not to be different, but only herself.

It was part of things, like gravity, like planets orbiting around the sun, like wheeling galaxies that seemed only points of light from Earth.

"Now finish your story," Jenny said, arms around Amy and tears dotting her shirt, because after all they had found each other across miles, which didn't change the world but helped it make a little more sense, a little less cold.

"It's hard enough to be one minority. Two hurt. So I hid one, and still hurt." There was pain in drawing these words out of her mouth, but Amy had thought them in the darkest recesses of her mind; vocalizing them seemed the next step. "But you... and what will everyone say?"

"Different things." Jenny looked up, in an almost mimicry of Amy's earlier motion. "But you're not alone now, right?"

So Amy walked through two more days, tiptoeing as a ballerina does, afraid to break an ankle by coming in at the wrong place. And Jenny was enough to fill her mind, Jenny who had a name like a song: Jenny, Jenny, you're the girl for me. Jenny who was mostly so shy until you got her started on Corvettes or engines or (and that had been a surprising argument) the merits of Coke versus Pepsi. Jenny who shone on the inside and all along the length of her hair.

But avoidance only made her nervous, and on edge, and it made her parents exchange worried looks and Great-Aunt Agnes, original agony aunt, give her long, measured looks.

And then she came downstairs to find both of her parents giggling.

"Mom? Dad?" she asked, amazed. Giggling. There really was no other word for what they were doing. She supposed the wineglasses and the open bottle held the explanation as well as the alcohol.

Her mother waved a hand. "We were discussing never having seen Paris. You weren't the only one a little disappointed, Amy, although of course we belong here and we are glad to be here. Never you worry, Aunt Agnes." In the corner sat the Aunt, previously unnoticed. Amy's eyebrows shot up as she saw the third glass.

"And then I said," her father announced, picking up the story, "that at least our very own California wines were better than France's. By reputation. So we decided to experiment."

Amy glanced at the clock, feeling rather like she was hallucinating. "And then you started drinking at ten in the morning."

Her father gave her an expression so deliberately solemn that there only could have been laughter behind it. "I want you to do as I say, not as I do." His brief composure vanished when Amy's mother slung a companionable arm around his shoulders. "Although I suppose you could do worse in the marriage department. We have decided, at this lovely hour of the morning you were so kind to point out, that this is our second honeymoon. Romantic, yes?"

There was the feeling of blood leaving her face again, but this time her hands shook and Amy feared that her legs would buckle, or perhaps her resolve, and she would sink to the floor and never move again. "Speaking of... speaking of romantic, I... met somebody in town." Two pairs of eyebrows went up and she wanted to be anywhere else, but love demanded truth and that demanded perseverance. "We're not going to start dating, but we'll still keep in touch, and maybe we can come back for a visit... Mom and Dad, I'm... with a girl named Jenny Hodges..."

There was a clink as, in unison, her parents set their glasses on the table.

And then there was her father, walking over to hug her and only stumbling a little, despite never being able to hold his liquor of any sort, and her mother with a thoughtful (and somewhat nervous) expression, saying, "You've been off all this time with someone from town? And with her how? You know that when two people love each other very much—"

"Mom!" Amy shrieked, thinking that perhaps sinking into the floor and never moving again would not be such a bad fate after all, provided it entailed being blind, deaf, and dumb as well. Her mother looked rather relieved at her embarrassment.

And over her father's shoulder, Amy looked at Agnes. The fear of expectation glittered in her mind's eye. Her parents were one thing, but her...

Great-Aunt Agnes raised her glass in silent toast, and Amy remembered that after all, she had been the white woman with the courage to marry a Chinese man, a very long time ago.

Amy closed her eyes and it was all peace, peace.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too."

"Jenny, I don't know how to say it."

"Then don't."

"Then you can't, either."

"I won't."

\* \* \* \* \*

As the plane began its ascent into the sky, Amy pressed a hand against the glass of her window. The sun beamed down and she felt as though she was going home, as though perhaps home and belonging were more states of mind than anything else.

"Jenny, Jenny," she sang under her breath, and closed her eyes.

FIN.

MARIA SOUTHERTON

## Villanelle

The world is asleep, yet awake she remains,  
Tossing and turning upon her bed,  
Alone with her thoughts and the sounds of the trains.

Old conversations and occasional refrains  
Of songs half forgotten clutter her head.  
The world is asleep, yet awake she remains.

Now cruelly the mind cuts to lingering pains—  
Loves that were lost and tears that were shed,  
Alone with her thoughts and the sounds of the trains.

Remembering times marked with more losses than gains,