

who is jamee?  
by riley lashea

Everybody knew Jamee, but nobody liked her. Her parents were just strange enough to give her an extra 'e' where most people would put an 'i,' but Jamee was different. Not just different from her parents, but *really* different. She was weird. Some people even called her a freak. Like I said, nobody liked her.

The summer she started packing was strange. She was out more around town than usual, walking slowly down our small, narrow streets, like she was drinking in scenery with her eyes, but yet somehow outside, or maybe above, the world around her. Sometimes I would be on the street when she passed and I would watch her without hesitation, without fear, and without turning away. She was too lost inside herself to notice me staring at her anyway. Once in a while though, she would look up and our eyes would meet. Her eyes were always sad then, always filled with unanswered questions and unfulfilled needs. She never looked at me for long though, retreating to the comfort of her inner self as quickly as she had come out of it.

Sometimes she would walk down the street carrying a new necessity for the trip she was planning. Sometimes she would carry a bag out of her house that she would drop outside of the donation center off of China Street. I watched her carry the backpack she is loading up now when she bought it at the general store. She didn't look up at me that day.

I don't know why I can't stop watching her as she folds the few clothes that she's taking, or why she even let me in here. I see her put a picture in her bag. It's old and tattered, and I want to ask her about it, but it doesn't seem appropriate since I have rarely asked her anything in the past. Suddenly, I feel so out of place in her room, but I don't want to leave... not until she does anyway.

Most people think that Jamee is a snob. She doesn't say much to anyone, ever. Not on the streets and not in the quiet recesses of our old buildings. When she does have to speak, like when she is buying something from one of the shopkeepers, she is polite and well-mannered, but she never says more than she has to.

Even an hour ago, when I couldn't stop myself from asking if she was really leaving and if it would be okay if I helped her pack, she didn't say anything. She just took my hand and led me into her room. So here I sit. I haven't really helped her pack though, unless constant gazing can be considered helpful.

I still don't know where she's going. No one knows. And she still hasn't spoken since we've been in here. I want to ask, but I am afraid of what she might say. I don't know why I'm afraid, but I am.

When the latch on her bag clicks shut and she pulls the bag off the bed, letting it dangle from her hand, I know that it's almost time, and I follow her back out of her house. I'm even more scared now. Why? Why am I scared? And doesn't this silence intimidate her at all?

The cool fall air hits my cheeks and I pull on my jacket. Hers is corduroy. It looks soft, but I stop myself from touching it. I have the oddest feeling that if I do, I will grab a handful and never let go. I know she doesn't want me to ask, but the questions weigh so heavily, and I know that when she goes I will never see her again.

"Where are you going... Jamee?"

"Los Angeles," she says quietly, almost as if she is telling me a great secret that only the two of us know. I suspect that's exactly what it is. This is the first time that I have ever heard her speak directly to me. I'm glad for the two words.

Her eyes look different now. They're no longer sad. They are vibrant and shiny, and something else. There is an emotion in them... something that I can't place. I'm just not used to it. People don't get that look around here.

"Are you scared," I ask, wondering if it's the right question. I've never watched someone leave before. People don't leave here. They just don't.

I wonder if Jamee is aware that she is breaking some unwritten law. She never does answer me, but she smiles. I don't think that she would admit her fear to me even if it existed, so I decide to rephrase to keep her talking. I loved the sound of her voice and I want to coax it out again.

"Is it big? I mean..." I continue, breaking into a shy smile that I can't seem to stop. "Is it a lot different to be there... in Los Angeles?" I am pretty much certain that I didn't need to include the last part, but for some reason I had descended into ramble mode and hadn't been able to stop the flow of words leaking out of my lips. The smile that forms on her face tells me she noticed.

"I don't know," she replies to my question very gently. Her lips stay set in the small, expectant smile and her eyes glow with the excitement of an adventure I wish I could understand. "I've never been."

And with that, she throws her canvas backpack over her shoulder, turns her, for once, genuinely joyful eyes my way, and allows that warm, full smile to rest on me temporarily. Then, just like that, she spins and sets off on her way.

A feeling I don't quite recognize spreads like scorching lava through my veins. I always thought that I was complacent in my opinion of Jamee. No one liked her. I just didn't care. That's what I told myself.

But as her footfalls grow softer in my ears and her image smaller in my eyes, I realize it was never complacency. I'd been torn.

There was part of me, the part like all of the others who hated Jamee, that could never understand her. Why was she so unusual? Why wasn't she like the rest of us?

But there was another part, a bigger part, a majority majority that allowed itself to be ruled by the much more influential minority part, that loved Jamee in a way I had never fully comprehended until that moment. The moment she walked away, the moment she would never come back.

She was fading completely, a dot in the distance. In a single instant, she would be no more. And I knew. I hated Jamee. I loved Jamee. And I never really knew her.