

Cheryl Doe, Episode One
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A note to readers

This work portrays a number of themes and concepts, some which may cause discomfort in one way or another. As such, this page contains warnings for content which include, but are not limited to:

Mental Illness

Gender Dysphoria

This morning was like any other in the modern office setting: beautiful, and utterly depressing because it was so. Starting at seven, on the dot, employees – animal and human alike – filed into the building owned by Glocomovations Inc., mindlessly clocking-in, preparing themselves at their multi-monitor displays, or single monitor computers with phone. The air inside was nothing short of sterile with vague hints of cheap coffee as employees reluctantly mingle with one another and management, having crafted the chore of small talk to an art form.

Gossip, conversely related to the initial chatter of weather between cubicles on the production floor, was in an excess in the break room, and started by even the most obscure and banal of tangents – with such conversation revolving about the “hot eye candy” being the office's new mail courier, or the elusive “frigid squirrel.” Middle-management openly condemned this kind of talk: “It serves nothing more than as an added headache for HR” (but while saying this, many supervisors had been known to ask more of this “frigid squirrel” during one-on-one evaluations).

Jamie Rockwell worked there, as part of the company's customer service department. Her position had her on a project taking calls for a big name retail chain, one of the their clients. She'd habitually come in at around eight-thirty, two bags hugging her left side – one filled with daily items and the other hooked on with her lunch. Garbed in black slacks and buttoned blouse with office appropriate ballet flats and nylons, she would park and lock up her bicycle (being the only one at the bike rack) adjacent to the parking lot. She would pull open one of the double glass doors in line with the surrounding glass panes that tiled the building with a smoky tint – often holding it open one or two moments longer for someone else, who more often than not, was exceptionally caught up in a hurry of some sort. She'd then give an understanding nod in such situations despite them being long gone by that point, and walk in afterward, flashing the ID badge hanging from her purple lanyard to the security positioned at the front desk without as much as slowing her pace without as much of a greeting glance; in fact, she couldn't remember the last time she looked a guard in the eye.

After security was the production floor, and a short trot to her cubicle. She would always keep her head down on her way there as she made her brisk walk to her station. There, it was unadorned and lacked any sense of personality: no framed photographs of anyone, not even small trinkets lying around, save for an innocuous stress ball.

Jamie then sat in her chair, which was already uncomfortable at first glance, and pulled her mobile phone from her black messenger bag with hot pink accents. “08:32” it read; she had twenty-five minutes to herself. Before making full use of her time, she poked her head over her cubicle: everyone seemed busy – surprisingly; the busybodies here were notorious for skulking the cubicle hallways. It was then she slipped off her flats in front of her chair and crossed her legs in her seat, kneading the ball of her right foot methodically. Getting comfortable, she rummaged through her bag a second time to do a spot check for all her day's items. She was late waking up, and had to make a rush, so naturally, she started filing through its many, messy compartments for only a hushed “Yo!” in her general direction to send a chill up her spine and her heart to skip a beat.

She turned around to see the somber face of her friend, Jim. He was a bear whose resting smile was tragically caught between a grin and a sneer, earning him the title of "Worst IT Tech" within a week's time starting his position.

Jamie made a muted squeal in surprise. She swiveled to meet his dark pits for eyes, surrounded by greasy and slightly musty fur. He drummed his fingers on the outer edge of her cubicle, making visible his ill-fitting white button-down and blue clip on tie as the shirt cuffs choked his forearm.

"So?" Jim tried to begin in a casual manner, thick palm outstretched.

"Huh?" Jamie said emptily, her eyes peering aimlessly into the distance, and then caught herself, "Oh, yes!" she exclaimed, minding her volume. "Yes, yes, yes..." she mulled, rummaging through her messenger bag yet again. Within a couple moments, she took hold of a small metal brick, scuffed on the top. A screw was missing from its housing. She plopped it in Jim's hand with a dopey smile on her face. It quickly faded as she said some hesitation, "Sorry, I kinda lost a screw putting it back together. It *is* functional again, though. I made sure of it!" And then her face went morose. "Hope you don't mind." She shut her eyes and the smile came back, but sheepish this time. Jim snickered audibly, and Jamie's confidence returned to her eyes.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "Thanks for repairing it, still don't have any idea how you do it. Not for the life of me—"

"Well, it's pretty simple," Jamie began interrupting, her eyes lit up saying this, "Which is weird when you think about fixing transistors. You'd never think you could do it in an apartment of all places, but boom – home remedy! I did, however, use an anti-static band, always have to be sure..." Jamie went on for two minutes more; she could never bring herself to stop talking about a subject when she seriously got to thinking about it. Jim found it mildly irritating, but indulged her with non-verbal confirmations; despite her droning, he found her too endearing to stop when she went on such tangents. "Actually," she continued, "I think I brought that band with me; you should use it to put the drive back in so it won't short out."

She once again rummaged around her bag, and suddenly stopped – without reason or rhyme. Then her search became more fervent, and stopped again, her face now sullen. She checked a compartment again, then another, and then another. Her face was now deep in worry, visibly obvious.

"Jamie, are you okay?" he asked, now a bit concerned himself. "Hey, it's okay if you forgot the wrist band. Really, I don't use them anyway."

"No," Jamie mumbled, gesturing with her hand making Jim lean in closer in turn, "I think I forgot my medicine." She began to shrink down in her chair.

"Oh Jamie, don't worry about that, you seem fine right now." Jamie's eyes were watering; the sudden change in affect made Jim uneasy. "Come on, you've been doing well for a couple weeks now – really well! And you'll do well today, okay? You'll do well – don't worry about it." Jamie's head fell into her hands, and her eyes became lost in her thoughts. Jim surveyed the production floor: the busybodies were staring to stir, but didn't appear

vigilant. He leaned in closer and wrapped his arms around her, patting her shoulders. “Let me know if you need anything, dear. I’ll come over ASAP, promise.”

Jamie sniffled, and nodded. Jim gave her a final two pats on her back, and then walked off to his station. Jamie tried to shake the new found paralysis, and broke it after for what seemed like hours, sighing heavily – accidentally letting out a squeal which she suppressed before it got too loud.

There were still ten minutes before she was to clock in for her shift. She pulled out her portable gaming system: a small rectangle the dimensions of three candy bars, wide ends adjacent to one another, coated in a glossy purple. Opening the system with its clamshell design, she tinkered around the main menu, and made sure to switch off its wireless functions. Her hands were still trembling, but used deep breathing to lessen it somewhat. Five minutes remained until she was to clock in, according to her smartphone.

She quickly logged into her computer and set a browser tab to the company’s punch system. It was then eight fifty-seven. She mindlessly clicked on a punch and immediately cringed as she, by accident, clicked the “Out Punch” button. Hurriedly, she clicked the “In Punch” button and was met with bold red text that read “You may not have duplicate punches.” Her heart sank, and her eyes watered again. She knew there was no logical basis for this reaction, but the heat in her upper throat and pit of her chest was overwhelming. Her hand again found itself slipped into her bag – in a futile attempt that she’ll take a hold of her medicine bottle – but she had sorely remembered again that her medicine was not there. She tried deep breathing again, but felt utterly suffocated. Jamie felt not only this constriction, but her thoughts started to burn at the back of her head. The electronic punch system read “8:58 AM” as the current time. Jamie swallowed her unease and frustration, quelling the tremors that were budding all over. She felt her throat burn worse as she gulped down all of these problems. Her vision stung, but it was no longer blurred. Slipping her nylon feet back into their shoes, she clocked in at two minutes to nine, and prepared to take calls for her shift.

It had been about two and a half hours, and Jamie was withdrawn into a corner of the break room. She sat parallel to her coworkers in the opposite corner speaking amongst themselves jovially, but words sharp and hushed. Jamie had not even looked in their general direction; she was instead fiddling with a water bottle – the contents reddened with powered punch mix. The hushed conversation inched up in volume as now faint giggling could be heard.

Just then, a squirrel walked in. Black hair with a healthy luster and sheen, a deep chestnut toned fur with her bushy tail adorned with a honey ombre streak down the center stole Jamie’s attention as she strolled by. The sight of her forced Jamie to smile bashfully in her presence. The squirrel, from what Jamie had overheard from snippets of constant gossip, had been working in the same department as Jamie for about a year and a half before Jamie started training. Heads turned from the social corner to meet this squirrel. Jamie, meanwhile, racked her brain to remember her name. She had stolen glances of her beautifully long tail here and there, but never could bring herself to engage the woman – she instead made sure to keep an appropriate distance.

"Jackie!" one of the members of the social circle greeted in a sultry manner.

"It's Jacqueline," she said brusquely, without batting an eyelash, "Get it right." She then poured some water from her bottle into an indigo mug, and placed it in the microwave to heat for one minute. As Jamie's eyes drifted about Jacqueline's tail as well as the rest of her form – and yet her tail seemed to have been treated with the utmost care – she locked eyes with her onlookers which she had then realized. Jamie retracted her gaze, looking back into her half-empty bottle of punch, trying to hide the embarrassment welling up inside her. A loud buzz prompted Jacqueline to take her mug as she dipped a teabag from a nearby tray, and dipped it a few more times before dunking it in the mug to stay. She left with Jamie stealing one more glance and sighing dreamily. The social corner erupted with stifled laughter which quieted itself as Jamie stood up and marched out. Her sense of being judged brought the atmosphere to an oppressive one; she felt she had no other choice – she had to leave.

At her desk, Jamie was once again whirled around by her thoughts of vanity, which had turned on her to instill a deep sense of self-consciousness. She drew her limbs into herself, noting her knees at chin height. She knew she would be taller than the other women for sure, long enough to get comfortable with the idea, but it was painfully obvious to her now; her proportions were lanky, and despite the softness of her facial features, it did not avert any attention from the monstrous size of her hands and feet. She knew that everyone was critical of themselves. She knew that learning to love oneself could be arduous at times. She had been over this, time and time again, from friends to support groups. Even with all this in mind, she felt her flaws were the only parts existent on her body as she drew her shoulders in and made feverish attempts to push down the nubs under her hair, between the ears atop her head. Her break was now about over and had to clock in. She did so, reluctantly.

With three more hours, and one too many angry customers she had to handle gone by, Jamie was now on lunch break. Her quarters were a bit cramped as she was perched on a toilet in a restroom stall, nervously biting into a tofu sandwich, fighting tears. Her whining was silent as her legs were drawn up so that any passerby would not see her feet under the stall. Her mind made her relive her days in high school, notably the major student functions and the relationship with her teenage sweetheart. Back and forth the days went – giving her a hard slap in the present as they went to and fro. She didn't want it again – she knew full well she would not want to see those days, even for a second. She had worked hard to get to this point in her life, far enough to put that all behind her, but in her current situation – cooped up, avoiding the view of judging eyes – those days seem almost nostalgic, feeling then exactly what she did at this very moment.

She checked her phone; Nat had sent her a text message, but Jamie's thoughts were spiraling – too much to even process her emotions, so replying was out of the question for her. The time on her phone read "14:25." She felt what was left of her composure crumble right then and there; the remainder of her shift felt too much: the customers, the feelings of exposure in the production floor hallways of cubicles. She contemplated: what if a coworker interrogated her during her second break? What if HR got involved for what would happen?

Or worse, what if they, or anyone here, started digging into her life? Jamie emerged from her thoughts with tears streaming. She looked under the stalls – through blurred vision – for anyone else around. With what appeared to be a clear escape, she slipped from the restroom back to her cubicle.

Jamie was at her seat again, petrified. Her voice was no good now; even though she was able to dry the tears and suppress the tremors – which had worsened – she couldn't bring herself to speak; all she could manage now was a grotesque blend of wailing and sobbing. Nothing could comfort her here, and she didn't have any medicine to quell the uncontrollable anxiety. She acted fast, and prayed what she was going to do would work out. She filed out an e-ticket with IT, stating “my phone isn't working, need an onsite repair.”

Minutes later, by some stroke of a miracle, Jim, specifically, was at her work station, rather irritated he was brought out for a “phone issue.” He knocked on the outer wall of Jamie's cubicle impatiently. Jamie, in turn, jumped in her chair and turned slowly, her features expressionless, but eyes pleading.

“What the hell kind of issue is 'my phone isn't working'?” he growled at her. Tears were pouring down her face again, her breaths short and gasping. Jim was rather shocked, and sprang into action – nudging her aside to investigate her station. Without as much as a wiggle of the mouse, he simply stated, “Not a phone issue, we need to take the computer in for an overnight repair, go home.” He turned his head round to lock eyes with Jamie, and gave the warmest smile he could muster. She was despondent. “It needs work,” he reiterated, “Go home.” Jamie tried to express the fullness of her gratitude, but could only return with excessive nodding. She wiped away her tears for a second time, and filled out a ticket to leave with Jim.

On her way out to the front desk, she caught one more glimpse of Jacqueline, their eyes meeting for a split second. Jamie pulled her gaze – flushed, ashamed, and her heart shattering with the sudden influx of emotion. She made her way outside and her heart lifted just a bit as she was unchaining her bike. Pedaling uphill, all the crying she had bottled up now came out unimpeded, but reduced to a pathetic mewling. However, this was better for her. She felt better; she was going to be all right.

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