

Cheryl Doe, Episode Four
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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:

Substance Use

Work had been monotonous the past two weeks, yet the mass e-mails had said otherwise for the IT side of Glocomovations. The customer care representatives had not received many calls due to an infrastructure blunder with changing VoIP systems. Employees on the production floor were, for the most part, none the wiser: there isn't much that they're told about internal affairs, and even less they were allowed to ask about. Curiosity, however, remained a core value of the Glocomovations brand, and was most certainly encouraged (except on the subject of internal affairs). Jamie followed the company value of curiosity religiously, almost childlike in its innocent expression. Human Resources met her persistent inquiries with the most scathing of written admonishments that were legally permitted. In some instances, Human Resources couldn't fathom that they were responding to a twenty-four year old doe, for her curiosity – in all of its voracity and expanse – rivaled that of a schoolkid. There was a reason to this, for not much had changed of her personality since she was four. Of course, the trials of her life made her grow up – whether or not she wanted to, but she held her childlike self with unabatted tenacity.

Jamie was at her station, chewing on undercooked noodles from a cup. It needed half a minute more to become tender, but Jacqueline had walked in to warm her lunch. Only the sight of her broad tail caused the doe to take her unfinished lunch out of the microwave, and herself out of the room.

She grimaced at her meal – it tasted of sand and smelled like seawater. Then suddenly, while consuming her meal, her phone buzzed. It was Nat, making this the sixth text message that had come unseen. She mashed gritty noodles between her molars, frustrated with herself for not having come around to reply. Taking a sticky note from her desk, she scrawled “TEXT NAT” in large handwriting, adding an angry frown doodle for flavor.

In conjunction with the busybodies, Jacqueline was on the doe's short list to avoid at all costs; her heart (and sometimes groin) was all too eager to speak its two cents before her mind got a chance to process anything. She had already put herself into the “weird” category for her first impression; there was no salvaging it, the doe resolved grimly. But the categories of “pervert” and “emotional” or “annoying” or “crazy” were unfathomable – just the idea of Jacqueline seeing her like that started a tempest in Jamie's stomach. She surfaced from her thoughts awash in a cold sweat, instinctively taking an anti-anxiety tablet, and began to feel her heartbeat once more as soon as its effects made themselves present.

Jamie was able to complete her shift, albeit with a few hiccups: her voice cracked at some inopportune moments during calls. As she clocked out, she made her way to the break room where Jim was waiting for her. He was on his smartphone, playing a video game, headphone buds plugged into his round ears. He didn't look up; he was locked into what he was playing. She politely tapped Jim on the shoulder; the bear scratched it, supposing it was an itch. She poked him next, near his neck.

The bear began droning: “I'm accessing a virtual machine from my mobile phone, and it is imperative that I am not disturbed as to maintain the integrity of Glocomovations' digital infrastructure, as such–”

Jamie waved a hand in front of his eyes, positioning her head to face him from the left.

Jim took an earbud out and looked to her with a blank expression.

"It's me, Jim," Jamie stated plainly, putting on an assuring grin.

Jim stared at her, blankly. Then the machinations of his brain started to turn again as he cried "Oh, Jamie!"—his eyes darted about, looking for words—"What are we doing again?"

"It's Tuesday," she confirmed to him.

"Oh, yeah! Yeah! Let's go, then," Jim said, now in full realization.

The pair walked into the parking lot, Jamie at Jim's side, and Jim unlocked his car (the only yellow car in the parking lot) from his keyring. Jim got into the driver's seat, and in turn, Jamie made herself comfortable in the passenger's seat – securing her seat belt.

Jim drove at a leisurely speed, with Jamie's head leaning out the window just slightly; the car's interior reeked of marijuana. Jim didn't like his car windows open – often rolling them up regardless of any extremities, but Jamie had told him that the smell gave her a headache, and Jim didn't question it when she rolled it down without asking.

They rode in silence; Jamie often seemed sad during their rides. Jim never thought for a second that it was because of himself – Jamie was often very forward with him. No, Jamie wasn't withdrawn from him exclusively – she shut herself out completely: no dopey smile, no pouting, no tongue being stuck out at him. He'd sometimes rub the doe's back to ease her mood, but conversely, she tensed up. He'd always ask, "Are you mad?" She'd shake her head. "Sad? Depressed?" among a slew of adjectives in the same line. Sometimes, she'd shake her head "No," other times, she would just say it – listlessly, absently. He'd then ask, "Are you okay?" and there would be a moment of stillness and silence – and then came a delayed "Yeah." He'd follow up with, "Do you wanna talk about it?" but her face was absent again by then, declining with "No, sorry." That was the way it had always been, and was now, and the only thing that ever changed was that Jamie's face got a little lonelier every time.

They arrived at Jim's house. It was a two-story colonial style home – the gutters were rusted, but clean. The door had a fresh coat of paint, and the lawn had a late summer's green despite the presence of early autumn leaves. Jim unlocked the front door, and stepped aside to allow Jamie entry. She stepped in to a smell not much unlike a bakery, minding the burnt, pungent odor emanating most likely from Jim's room. A faucet was running.

"Mom! I'm home!" he croaked.

"Where's Jamie?" came a screech from the kitchen.

"I'm here!" Jamie chimed, with a sudden pep in her voice.

The faucet stopped. Hurried footsteps came around the corner. An old bear with her black fur with much luster faded, her claws draped in a vintage red polish, doddered over to Jamie and took her into a deep embrace. Her head came right below Jamie's bust, her bare fur rustling on Jamie's blouse.

"Oh Jamie, it's so great to see you!" she lilted, hanging onto each syllable for dear life. "My dear, you've lost weight! Have you had any pie? I can certainly bake you a pie! Yes, let's have pie!"

"It's great to see you, too, Miss Brummel, and I would love some pie." Jamie smiled saying this.

"Good, I'll get it started and you can have it with your hormones. Okay, sweetie?"

"That sounds lovely. Thank you, Miss Brummel."

"Of course, of course..." Miss Brummel said, walking away to the kitchen.

Jim invited Jamie to his room upstairs. He opened a window before letting her in; it was largely dim. Posters of indie metal bands were taped on his walls. Two large computer towers stood under his desk, side by side.

"Thank God she's baking you pie – she keeps stealing my weed when it's just me and her," Jim groaned.

"Well, at least your mom's accepting of it – I would've been kicked out if I smoked as much as you did."

"Yeah, your mom's a grade-A bitch."

"Yup," Jamie replied, sighing. Her face became absent again.

Jim started again: "At least you're not being made to study for a math test like Nat, ha!" He hoped that changing the subject would ease Jamie's demeanor. Jamie giggled. Her smile looked uncomfortable as she felt Jim's observation. "And hey," he continued, "With you out on your own,"—he put an arm around her shoulder—"No one steals your weed!" Jim yelled out his door. His mom cackled grossly from the kitchen. Jamie still wasn't with Jim; he pulled her in closer, breathing warmly behind the doe's ears. Her lips parted, eyes were confused; and Jim took a chance, kissing the doe's cheek – the corner of his lips vaguely flirting with hers. Jamie's demeanor tensed, and Jim's heart sank as she curled inwards of herself, but her head fell into Jim's chest sobbing.

"I'm sorry. Jamie, did I upset you?" Jim's voice cracked.

"No," she sobbed.

"I—I'm sorry—"

"Don't apologize!" she snapped, tears falling, "It's not your fault!"

"Uh," the bear stammered, "How can I help, then? Please, just tell me."

"I don't know," Jamie whimpered. "I don't know." She was blubbering repeating herself.

Jim held the doe – rubbing her back in circles until the trembling stopped. He hummed a tune from his days as a cub in an effort to soothe her. Jim's phone vibrated; it was Nat. "Hey Jamie," he interjected softly, "Nat said he got a perfect score."

"He finally got his shit together, huh?" Jamie's eyes were bloodshot red, but she laughed heartily, slapping the bear's chest in jest. She pulled away, but rested her head on his shoulder. They spent a good half hour as Jamie dried her tears shooting the breeze on how much they hated their jobs, laughing all the while.

Some minutes more later, Miss Brummel knocked on Jim's door. "Pie!" she lilted, extending the word seconds more. Jamie and Jim walked downstairs into the kitchen, greeted by the aroma of warm spices with sweet undertones. Miss Brummel took out a chair and tapped it twice. Jamie sat and the old bear exited to return with some supplies and wearing gloves. She came to the doe's right side and Jamie instinctively rolled up the right sleeve of her blouse. Miss Brummel took a paw pad down Jamie's arm, feeling for her vein, and Jamie

looked down, tucking her feet under the chair and noting the color on Miss Brummel's claws.

"I like the color of your claws," Jamie remarked sheepishly.

"Oh, thank you, dear!" she replied, inserting the needle. Jamie didn't react, not even feeling it by this point. "Jimmy got it for me – it's the only thing I wear to be honest. Ha! Nail polish is the only thing I'll ever wear!" She guffawed. Jamie's cheeks burned hearing that.

And without a hitch, the deed was done. Jim and Jamie ate sweet potato pie. A couple more hours passed of idle conversation among the three; Jim let the doe pick up her things and took her home, but not before Miss Brummel yelled, "Don't be a stranger! Come back soon!"

The stars were out by the time Jamie was dropped off at her apartment complex – texting Jim when she entered her unit. The doe took a shower after her long day. Her newly crafted horns were smoother after several scrubblings. She pulled the covers over herself as she slipped into bed, falling sound asleep.

The next morning, Jamie was at her station, sending text messages to Nat – a crumpled sticky note at her desk. Her guilt from neglecting to do so dissipated as he told her about school in the span of several messages: students were already talking about their senior prom – Nat resolved not to go. He didn't want to go since the beginning, but couldn't ignore the stigma of being a supposed loner. Jamie and Jim were his only friends, it felt to him, and the only two who understood his situation – being in the minority of his school as a skunk. Jamie empathized with his sentiments: she was in the minority of animals in her senior year – especially so in her advanced level classes. Compounded with she and her then-sweetheart both presenting as male earned her the most abject of isolation while her name never seemed to be less than a passing mention of her classmates. She had told Nat this – time and time again – to remind him that he could survive his high school years, and then be free to dye his white stripe in the loudest color imaginable; he's mentioned yellow at several points.

Jim was leaning on Jamie's cubicle wall whilst she was texting. It took the doe several minutes to realize someone was in her general vicinity. His resting grin was less of a sneer, but now carried a cheesy quality to it. Jamie turned around, and without fail, jumped in her seat.

"Sup," the bear said, slicking back the fur on his head coolly.

"Nothing much," Jamie replied. Something read off about him today. It wasn't new to her, but infrequent enough to arouse suspicion.

"Cool," said Jim, "So, I'm gonna head off to..." he lost his train of thought, "...computers," he said, it returning lazily to his mind. He sauntered off the production floor, stumbling once on his way there.

Jamie was mulling over this during her lunch, asking herself, "Why does Jim act so weird at this time of the month?" She rifled through her lunch box for tofu crumbles, but instead found a cup of noodles. "Dammit!" she cursed herself under her breath. She peeked out of her cubicle into the break room: Jacqueline was eating a lunch of pasta salad and doodling in her sketchbook. "Why..." she whined in a hushed manner. The doe put on a brave face and marched into the break room, having steeled herself; she filled her noodle cup with

water, and set it in the microwave for a minute and a half. Waiting, she stole a glance of Jacqueline; she was still drawing. And then suddenly, the thoughts that had built up over the fortnight came to surface: Jamie had been acting strange, and her avoidance was rude – she had to apologize.

The doe approached Jacqueline. The squirrel turned around to face her. With an exhalation that did not measure up to the aggravation Jamie brought recently, she asked, “Yes?”

“Do you think I’m weird?” fell out of her mouth hastily, heart racing.

“Well,” she said, eyes bulging with annoyance, “Considering how you’ve been acting – yes.” It took all of Jacqueline’s self-restraint to bite her tongue.

“S-sorry!” she squealed, taking her noodle cup and trotting to her cubicle in a panic.

Jamie took half of an anti-anxiety tablet. Her tremors stopped, and went to her phone to text Nat.

Jamie: Ironie tragedy: My Love Life

Nat: ??

Jamie: I CAN'T GET LAID. LOL

Jamie continued to message him on the subject for the rest of her shift between calls. Jim gave her a second visit on her last break, seeming to be back to his usual self – sneer-grin and all. He poked her in the back of the head.

“He-yo!” she chimed. She expected him this time.

“Yo,” he said, “Any idea on what you want to play Saturday?”

“Not an FPS,” she replied, bluntly.

“Alright, I’ll look for something.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem,” Jim stuck out his tongue at the doe. Jamie reciprocated, and Jim was on his way.

Night hung overhead, as Jamie was pulling the covers over herself, lovingly trailing the edge of a cream colored fur spot on her left thigh. Her feelings for Jacqueline felt like a replay of high school, but she was happier now, when crawling into bed. Unlike then – here, she felt she had a normal life. And that was the biggest victory for the year in Jamie’s eyes.

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