

Cheryl Doe, Episode Seven (Part 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:

Substance Use

Racism

"I tried calling you before I got here – didn't think you'd wake up late." Jim ceased his musing and checked on Jamie: she was mostly dry, save for her flats which she had slipped off, her legs crossed in the passenger's seat cradling a bunched-up teal hoodie that was slightly damp. "Are you alright?" he asked, "We can turn around if you need to change your clothes." The doe didn't respond; she gazed wistfully at a morning sky painted with a translucent layer of melancholy gray. Not even sighing once, and her eyes without their usual absence during their rides, Jim could figure she at least wasn't lost – at least by no other account he could verify – but most possibly distracted. "Jamie?" Jim prodded with trepidation.

"Huh?" Jamie snapped out of her train of thought, now fully with the bear.

"I asked if you wanted to head back – we have plenty of time." The dashboard clock read "6:36" with the colon pulsing on and off.

"Oh! No, no. I'm fine," she declined meekly.

"You sure? What about your shoes?"

"I can dry them out in the restroom. Don't worry, I'll be fine!" She tried reassuring him with a bright grin that highlighted her cheeks.

Jim nodded, and pressed on in his car with only the sounds of rainfall and metronome-esque movement of the windshield wipers.

Inside the building, Jim entered the break room – Jamie squishing and squeaking alongside. The doe set down her bag with hooded sweatshirt stuffed inside, and pulled out her handheld, turning off its wireless functionality.

"You sure you don't want to go back for your phone? We still have enough time for a quick trip."

The doe shook her head. "No reason to – it's dead."

"Ah, my bad then," said Jim, surprised by her response.

"Meh, phones die; hopefully, it'll be charged when I get back."

"Oh wow, no phone in this dump for eight and a half hours? Pffft, the hell are ya' gonna do then? Y'know, unless you wanna..." Jim made a puffing gesture with his lips.

"Wanna what?" The doe asked, perplexed. Jim repeated the gesture – this time with his index finger and thumb to his lips. Jamie now recognized the offer with the added hint: "Oh! No!" she scolded in a whisper, "You can't do that here!"

"Sure ya' can," Jim countered placidly, "I get a bowl in every once in a while." Jamie crossed her arms. "What? I've been doing it over since I got here! No one's busted me on it. Like, even Nestor, you know Nestor? He smoked with me in the bathroom last month."

"And no one's mentioned the smell? Even once?"

"Heh heh," Jim chortled, "Toilet paper rolls, air freshener, and dryer sheets."

"You're joking." Jamie's mouth was agape. The bear snickered at her expression. "Well," she began again, straightening her face, "While you screw around, I have to take care of some business in the bathroom as well."

"Have at it," croaked Jim, plugging in his earbuds.

Jamie slid into the restroom and shut herself in the stall closest the door; the doe

making sure to have taken some paper towels before leaving the break room, and used them to dry the inside of her flats – while also managing to get out some moisture from her nylons. The door swung open with a heavy creak just as she dabbed the last bit of dampness out of her second shoe. There was chatter between the new entrants; Jamie put her flats back on and perched herself on the toilet seat.

“And like, that tree-rat went 'How is Jacqueline that hard?' and I told her to chill out,” said one as she came in.

“And she wonders why no one invites her to Perdu Place,” squawked the other.

“Or anyone, anywhere!” They shared a moment of cruel laughter.

“Ahaha wait, shit...” one said, catching her breath, “Didn't Jim ask her out?”

“Who's Jim?”

“Bear? Really big? Obnoxious?”

“Ohh!” she said in realization, “Really?”

“Mhm, and she turned him down!” The two roared cynically. Jamie was uncomfortable with the conversation at hand, but was too afraid to be seen leaving.

One of the women entered the stall adjacent to the doe. There was a knock on her stall asking “Is anyone there?” Jamie tensed up, and farted loudly. Footsteps went off to the stall further down muttering “Disgusting...” A few minutes passed and both women left the restroom; Jamie took an additional minute before slipping out herself.

At her desk, Jamie booted up the computer at her station. The time read “7:12 A.M.” She took out her gaming portable and started up a role-playing game; she hadn't touched it in months, and there was a save file with twenty hours on it; instead of continuing her previous game, since she wouldn't have had any idea what was going on, she made a new save file to get back into it. Three minutes into an ordeal of unskippable cutscenes, she exited the game and picked a different one – an action-platformer with cartoon characters.

She found this title more enjoyable to play, and with about thirty minutes until her shift started, the doe was pitted against the major boss of the level with two lives left. She was doing well in taking its health down until she was interrupted by a knocking on her cubicle by a tall, broad bear.

“Sup,” he said languidly. Jamie narrowed her eyes looking at him; Jim tried to suppress laughter.

“This explains so much,” she said, shaking her head. “So much.”

“Took ya' long enough, eh?” Jim was beaming as he peered into Jamie's eyes with no real focus. The doe couldn't help but chuckle at the silliness of his grin. Jim snickered in turn, walking away with a small tumble on his way off the floor.

Jamie's day had just as little eventfulness as any other, but was padded with more boredom: without a phone, she could neither text Jim nor Nat. Despite texting not being all she did with the downtime she could catch, it was especially noticeable in its absence. Compounded with the fact that there wasn't anything close to a queue at this hour – a rarity – the four or five minutes between calls served nothing more than opportunity to make progress in her game – only for the unceremonious tone in her headset to alert her of an

incoming call. A notably strange one involved an order Jamie could not find despite her best efforts.

"Did that bring it up?" the customer bleated.

"No, sir – it didn't."

"But I bought this shirt from your store!"–Jamie seldom could access store transactions given the client's system– "...so how can you say 'I can't find it?'"

"Mister Emerson, we don't sell clothes here..." responded the doe, able to interject.

"You're saying you don't?" He was irritated by her reply.

"No sir, we don't."

"But I bought this from your Glendale store!"

"We don't have any locations there, sir."

"Yes, you do! There's a John Leslie's outside my work!"

"We aren't John Leslie's, sir. We're Green Electronics."

There was an awkward pause – peppered with the sounds of shuffling papers. Then, he spoke again: "Shit... seriously?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh..."

"My apologies for the inconvenience, Mister Emerson."

"No, no – it's my mistake,"–more sounds of shuffling papers–"Guess I'll have to figure out where to call them..."

"I can give you their number, sir."

"Oh, that'd be great!"

Jamie read off the clothing retailer's phone number. "Of course, sir – and thank you for calling Green Electronics!"

"Thanks, bye."

"Take care!" And the call ended with a faint click. Jamie slumped over her station, sprawled out from boredom and pressed her nose to the computer screen, blinking. Two minutes passed and Jamie was blowing raspberries at the monitor. "Bored," she moaned, "So bored..." Jamie's shift held to the theme – added with remaining out of Jacqueline's line-of-sight.

The doe's last break was coming to a close, and Jim stopped by to thump against her cubicle wall. She snapped round to his sneer-grin, pulling her expression into one of discomfort.

"Nah, I'm sober," the bear guffawed. Jamie pouted. "I'll be in the break room when your shift's over." Jamie gave him a thumbs-up as she she donned her headset, and turned back to her computer. Several more boring calls later, and Jamie was off for the day. She took to the break room to see Jim on his smartphone playing some game. Tapping him on the shoulder, Jim started about accessing a company virtual machine, and its importance to the site's digital infrastructure. She patted him on his cheek, causing him to disengage from his game, and he commenced their departure with a boisterous "Let's go!"

The two rode in silence, with the familiar sounds of their morning commute – only the

addition of the infrequent tremors of thunder to extract a startled yelp from the doe. They arrived at his house: windows lit, with ropes of rainwater draped over the roof. A flash of lightning reflected off a glossy sign in front of the house adjacent. In bold, red letters was printed "FOR RENT". The house itself seemed to have fallen into shambles: chipped paint flaked off the walls revealing battered walls. The mailbox had an odd newness to it, as well as the windows shimmering with an immaculate brilliance – revealing a dusty and disheveled interior containing dented boxes. Its appearance – in its entirety – had an alluring and enigmatic charm, but was subverted by foreboding tones. Jim tapped the doe on her shoulder; she was caught in the house's aura – the only instance she would use such a word.

Jim made his best effort to shield Jamie from the rain as they got to his doorstep. They entered and Jamie shook off drops of moisture.

"Ma, Jamie's here!" Jim bellowed. Shuffling came around the corner; Miss Brummel came up to hug Jamie wearing a mauve nightgown and matching slippers. She pulled the doe into a deep embrace with a nuzzle.

"Jamie, dear," she began sweetly. "How have you been?"

"I'm well, Miss Brummel," chimed the doe, "I think,"—she paused, pushing her thumbs together—"I might have a date."

"Oh my, that's wonderful!" Miss Brummel exclaimed. "Come in the kitchen and tell me all about it – I'm making cake."

Jim and Jamie walked into the kitchen with Jim pulling out a chair for the doe. She sat, her shoulder perpendicular to the table. Miss Brummel came in with supplies – attempting to steady herself to give Jamie her injection. She slipped twice while trying to find her vein, and consequently kicked off her slippers.

"Oh poo," she whined, "Jimmy, I know it's the thought that counts, but I can't even stand up straight in this damn— er, darned things." Finally steadied, Jamie got her injection. The oven's buzzer sounded, and the old bear trotted away to tend to it. The doe turned to Jim, her cheeks blazing under her fur.

"S-so, Jim, what's up with the house next door?" Jamie asked to get her mind on the topic she proposed.

"That house? Been like that for years. You just noticed it?"

"Mhm, the new mailbox seemed... off, against the old paint job and all."

"Oh shit, she replaced the mailbox *again*?" Jim scurried to the window, searching for it. "Well damn, she did."

"Language!" Miss Brummel admonished.

"Sorry, mom," Jim apologized quickly. "But holy crap, she replaced the mailbox again – second time in three months." Jamie sat idly by, bemused.

"He's talking about our neighbor, Miss Nader – or is it Carol now?" Miss Brummel took a second to think about it. "But that would be the neighbor, yes: her husband passed, and the poor soul couldn't stand to live there any longer. It's been vacant for some time now," she mulled, drumming her fingers on the counter while waiting for the cake to cool. "Jimmy, how long has it been?"

"Two? Three years?" Jim postulated.

"Sounds about right," she agreed. Miss Brummel cut three slices from the cake; the fudge icing was glossy with a tree bark tone – a larger slice cut for Jamie. Jim took her plate and his own and invited her up to his room. Stopping just short of the entrance, Jim took an air freshener from the bathroom and did spraying to cut some of the odor. They walked in, taking bites of their cake, finishing their plates quietly while sat on Jim's bed. The doe lied down and relaxed to the gentle pattering upon Jim's window pane. The bear got up, sitting at his computer desk while Jamie fell asleep to the calming sound of rainfall.

The doe woke up from her nap to a darker – blood orange – sky, and Jim with headphones on, scrolling through some website. She scratched her head lightly and blinked.

"Muhh, Jim?" Jamie squeaked groggily.

"Wakey-wakey, sunshine," murmured Jim, waving his hand, his back to her.

"Bwuh, what time is it?"

"About ten to eight, got anything coming up?"

"No, nothing I can think of."

"How's about staying a while longer?"

"Well, I gotta get back before midnight or so – wanna at least get some rest before work."

"A'ight, I'll have you back at a reasonable hour." Jim motioned for Jamie to come closer.

"C'mere, I got a pass into this team multiplayer beta – me and Priscilla were gonna give it a shot."

"Who's Priscilla?"

"P-kitty? We had a game together a while ago."

The name finally clicked; she'd only really spoken to her once, remembering the conversation as rather awkward, but she appeared to be a decent individual. Jamie came to Jim's side and observed: Jim didn't appear to be very good at this game – in a lobby of forty players, he hadn't broken above thirty-third place. Jamie teased him the whole time with the frequent use of the term "scrub."

"Jiiiiiiim, what the fuuuuuuuuck?" Priscilla groaned over the bear's headset (loud enough for Jamie to hear as well).

"Failing at life!" Jamie butted in gleefully. Jim covered his microphone whilst making a rude hand gesture towards the doe. Two rounds later, and Jim was in dead last for the lobby rankings.

"Jim, what are you even doing?" Priscilla was cackling over the microphone.

"Sucking!" Jamie dropped the pitch of her voice in jest for effect.

"Fuck you! Both of ya'!" Jim bemoaned.

The game came to a close, and Jim's rankings were among the lowest of the participants. He decided to call it a night and drop off Jamie by her apartment. She texted him, at his request, when she got inside, and the doe was left wide awake with two hours to midnight.

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