

Cheryl Doe, Episode Ten (Part Two)
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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

It was Friday evening, and Jamie found herself at odds with her cell phone; her text messages to Francine as of late never exceeded ten words, and seldom passed five. In response, she received concerns about how distant she had been. Christmas was only one week away, and Francine's grievances boiled over into an ultimatum: either Jamie states her holiday plans so she can prepare accordingly, or the relationship is over.

Jamie still wasn't over Jim's leaving; she had instantaneously withdrawn into herself the Friday he wasn't there. Not one soul had looked her in the eye for some time since then: in conjunction with avoiding interaction and eye contact, she also had styled her hair to allow her bangs to partially obscure her face. Additionally, Jim was assigned a training schedule where he was working when Jamie's end-of-shift came, so she rode her bike to his house instead. Miss Brummel, out of worry, elected to pick her up from work for her hormones, with the doe's affect nearly flattened at that point. It had been two weeks of that when Jamie concluded that she would stop taking hormone injects, and hadn't the heart to say it in person, so she wrote her a letter.

Dear Miss Brummel,

First, I want to say thank you. There isn't enough I could do or could say to express my gratitude. However, I must inform you that I will no longer be taking injections. I will instead take my hormones in pill form. As such I can do all management and administration by myself, and will oversee my medical needs,. I offer my apologies in lieu of this.

Best regards,

Jamie L Rockwell

With her signature, Jamie sealed the letter in an envelope – addressed and stamped. As she deposited the letter in a mail bin outside her building, a sickness welled up in her core that made her both dry heave and gasp for air as her eyes burned, but no tears fell.

The following Sunday, Jamie had went to the laundromat at the crack of dawn with an exceptionally large pair of laundry bags. She methodically separated the whites, light colors, dark colors, and delicates into a series of bins lying about. At around eight, she had recovered her dark colors from the dryer, taking her teal hoodie, and wearing it while it was still warm. For the remaining loads, the doe made an attempt at reading *Les Miserables* – the original French version – still trying to figure out the clamor behind it that she heard back in school, and considerably more effort in comprehending the book in its mother tongue. Despite how many pages she was able to whittle away from it, the novel, as a whole, remained impenetrable. But it was what she had since Nat had his internet access restricted for semester exams.

It was half past noon when she had returned and was in her room – making a stop by her favorite doughnut shop beforehand to get a treat of a half-dozen doughnuts and soy milk coffee, all the while pulling herself apart over what future there was to be had in the relationship she was in. And in its tow, there was her missing Jim; work had been quiet since

his departure, but rumors and gossip of him had been more lively than ever. Most of the talk speculated the circumstances of his leaving – the office's conclusion being that he had been fired, save for IT who said he left of his own volition. HR, in a surprising move to everyone, squashed the talk in a timely manner, with employees and supervisors alike being reprimanded in one-on-ones over the course of three days.

Eventually, however, the conversation changed, and Jamie was again a part of it. She heard about it through Jacqueline, who had pulled her aside one Monday afternoon to a restroom and was visibly irate. Jamie was surprised, but explained she had nothing to do with it, and they both saw another one of the floor's ploys at work, which they were able to laugh about afterward.

The December winds were blowing harder, with Jamie again on the roof of the apartment complex, burrowed deep beneath her hoodie and woolen scarf around her neck; her fashioned horns protruded through a woolen cap. She burped – remnants of her lunch with Jacqueline at Perdu Place came up, heaving a clear fluid, and wiped her chapped lips with a gloved hand. She audibly retched, almost missing the feeling of her phone vibrating trying to quell the revile: it was Francine, calling. With that came a resigned sigh, cognizant of what she had to do, and she answered the phone with a sobering “Hello.”

Her nerves were calmer than when she'd received calls before; the breakup happened, and the cold wasn't present for a moment. Her holidays were vacant, but she wasn't going to do anything – and that was that. Jim had probably invited for over for Christmas as he normally did for Thanksgiving, but the doe never bothered to check the texts and voicemails he left. It usually was preceded by, “I can't be left alone with my family! You've seen them, they're weird!” Instead, her Thanksgiving, like many of her other nights, was spent behind her desk, typing away words, phrases and notes on which she was sure could be edited into something worth reading in her eyes.

This bled into her work, too: stealing what moment between calls she could to continue writing and editing her projects. Jacqueline and Jamie hadn't spoken face-to-face in light of this, but the squirrel reassured her actions with a tacit sympathy: as she was often in a sketchbook of some sorts at work.

Jamie remembered that Jim was out of training this week: she'd been counting. She often tried pushing the thoughts out as to not fixate, but was dragged back over and over to the Monday that he broke the news. However, over time, she stopped fighting it and accepted it as fact. She removed from the memories a fabricated judgment of her character that was assessed by the announcement. As sad as it was, she had to remember the simple fact that things change. Her phone rang, and took a second looking at the caller ID, sighing as she answered reviewing her own behavior.

“Hello?” Jamie said meekly.

“Finally decided to answer your phone, eh?” she could hear his sneer-grin as he spoke.

“Yeah, I guess so.” The doe let out a hard exhale, then continued, “I was a jerk, not that it'd be anything new to you.” She held her breath for his response.

Jim chuckled, “Nope, not new – but you're my friend: we look out for each other.” The

doe's upper lip quivered as another gust blew by her face; Jim did not utter a word either. Jamie tried speaking again, but all that was heard over the line was a squeak as she inhaled, with her exhalation staggered. "Hey," Jim started again, "I'm not doing anything tonight. Wanna chill?"

"Th—that sounds nice." Jamie's voice was a harsh whisper in her normal volume – its timbre faltering.

"All right – see you soon." The call ended with a faint click.

Jamie and Jim arrived and went straight to his patio. They each took a seat on a tree trunk; Jim pulled a joint from his slacks pocket, lighting it as it was to his lips, inhaling with a sucking noise as he took a deep hit. He giggled and held it out to Jamie, offering.

The doe's head was held in her hands. She lifted it and saw the lit marijuana cigarette. Her expression was quizzical, and Jim encouraged with an exuberant, "Want a hit?"

Jamie sneered, and plucked it from his fingers. She pulled smoke into her with a long breath, holding it, and tilted her head upwards – two streams of smoke blasting from her nostrils, and a puff from her lips as she parted them. They passed the joint back and forth, exhausting the homemade cigarette in five minutes, and simply sitting in one another's company for the next thirty. The doe broke the silence, speaking languidly: "I just remembered something: I never got to finish that game."

Jim was staring at the night sky, and looked to Jamie. "Huh?" he replied, not aware of the context.

"You know, *that* game."

"No."

"Aw man, that sucks." Silence ensnared the conversation for a moment.

"I started a new game, though," Jim piped up.

"Really? That's cool." Jamie paused for a second. "How's Kitty liking it?"

"Who?"

"P-Kitty, or something similar."

"Ohh," Jim smacked his face, "Yeah, we broke up."

"Really?" Jamie's expression turned mildly wry, "Why?"

"She had forest fever. I drew the line at a honey jar in the bedroom."

"Aw man, that sucks," replied the doe, holding out the last word for as long as she could in one breath.

"Pretty much, how about you and Fran?"

"Same boat: turned out I wasn't ready for a relationship since I spent most of it avoiding her." She sighed.

Jim stood up and walked straight to Jamie, patting the doe on the back and brought her into a hug. Jamie curled into him. She felt his phone buzz. He checked it, tapping out a reply, and tucked the device back into his pocket.

"Who was that?" Jamie inquired.

"Nat, they want to play a game with me."

"Weren't there semester exams or something like that?"

"But this is Nat we're talking about."

"True," Jamie admitted, giggling. The tree near Jim's fence rustled as more nightly winds howled. The sky was darker than they remembered: the moon was gone. On instinct, Jamie made the suggestion to go back inside.

Miss Brummel was watching the television in the living room. She saw Jamie and waved for her to come over, reaching over the sofa and hugged her, cooing, "I've missed you so much, darling."

Jamie was at a loss for words, but settled on, "I missed you, too, Miss Brummel. I'm sorry."

The old bear patted her on the back, rubbing in circles, and let her go, returning to her program. Jim and Jamie went up to his room; it had the addition of a waste basket half-full with plastic snack wrappers. They sat on the bed.

Jamie was the first to speak, asking, "So, how's the new job?"

"It's okay." Jim took a few seconds to think, "People don't know how to use the internet."

"Pfft, I could've told you that." They shared a laugh.

Jim's smile faded, and paused before asking: "So how's work – without me, that is?"

"It's... bearable," Jamie's eyes fell somewhat sullen.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I started talking to Jacqueline."

"Oh?"–Jim started back in shock–"And how's that?"

"It's nice. She's nice." The doe's lips pulled into a smile.

"Meh, all right." Jim rolled his eyes.

"Eh?"

"Nothing, nothing – I'm glad you're happy."

"Thanks."

Jim pulled another joint from his pants pocket. "Up for round two?" he offered.

"No thanks."

"A'ight then – want me to hold off on this one?"

"Nah, go ahead." Jim lit the marijuana cigarette.

The two contemplated in silence. Outside, flurries and frost kissed Jim's window, the air in the room becoming cool. Jamie pulled her arms in her hoodie. Jim lied on his bed, exhaling slowing with smoke, closing his eyes.

Jim reached out and tugged at the doe's teal sleeve as her eyes seemed a bit distracted and checked up on her by prodding, "Jamie, are you okay?"

Jamie's eyes fell, but the smile did not vanish from her lips. With a bout of confidence, she opened her mouth, but faltered. Then she opened it again, giving a weak laugh for doubting the words that left her lips. "I think I'm gonna be all right, Jim." She slid her hand through the hoodie's empty sleeve, taking hold of Jim's fingers, pushing them into a soft fist, then released, leaving it at his side. "Yeah. And I'm gonna be all right right, too."

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