

## “Enthusiastic, you reckon”

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“Like I had to dash on her, but like she was enthusiastic about my bod” .

“Enthusiastic, you reckon” , Jess asked, sensing his ego performing.

“I was macho. Popping my muscles for her, I could see she was *into* me” , Casey replied.

“Oh yeah” , rolling her eyes as she glanced at his atrophied bicep. “Macho is you in a nutshell.”

Casey let Jess’ s jab hang in the air. He found himself stuck ever unable to admit that her insightful jabs had struck something deeper in him, a deeply important part that had to be hidden, no matter the cost. In that instant his mind flashed through thoughts: I’ m not some stud, I’ m not even hot, I’ m not even me. But before he could stop himself he recoiled in discomfort, striking back.

“What because you’ re such a babe?”

“Nice one, Case,” sarcasm dripping from her reply. “You always redirect. You know what man? It’ s your life, keep your weird hook-up stories, god forbid you talk about anything real” . Frustrated by his reluctance, and that they’ d worked each other back into a rut, she stood from the couch.

“Aw, Jess, I’ m sorry, I know I shouldn’ t let it get to me.”

“It’ s not that, Case, it’ s that you redirect whenever something real could come up. It feels like our conversations are forever on the edge of something meaningful,” walking towards the door, she threw a final blow.

“I’ m sick of waiting for you to get to meaningful.”

His immediate puppy dog eyes made her skin crawl.

She might’ ve phrased it more gracefully, but she was sick of setting aside her time for him to waste. Now profoundly sick of his shit, she knew his ‘hurt’ routine meant she’ d have to do the work to repair their relationship, and she didn’ t have it in her.

“I’ ve gotta go, Casey, I can’ t with this. Not again” .

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Her absence was felt, heavily.

He sat with his thoughts and felt utterly lonely, disbelief and familiarity with his lacklustre deflections from vulnerability.

For the first time in a long time he reflected. He thought about their friendship, the performative storytelling he’ d started just minutes ago. He saw the projection, exaggerated vanity, and the wedge he’ d cultivated between ‘him’ and the world.

It was a pretence, a way of being cold to the gnawing feeling inside. He wasn’ t happy. And he knew why.

It was just armour. A way to keep reality away: from himself, and to shield vulnerability from bullies, to placate people and systems which demanded a particular way of being from *him* for how *he* looked.

As t(he)y thought to themselves, a clear thought emerged. “I can’ t let the bullies win through my silence. There’ s nothing more hiding can solve.”

They thought about Jess, who'd known them since primary school. She'd always seen them. Even when they'd joke, act stupid, or just couldn't find the words. She knew the person beneath the mask, and liked that person –not the bravado.

Her abrupt departure, 'his' feeling of falseness behind recounted masculinities, and their sudden busting need to pee must have universally coalesced. They thought on, and in what couldn't have been more than 10 minutes since she'd left, they decided, "I'm going to make it right. All I need is to be the real me."

Like the rolling of the first snowflake down a hill, or the cracking of an egg, what had been started could not be undone. They promised themselves, starting today, they would **be** *themselves*. They would be KC.

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mind reader is sadly *on hiatus* due to life stuff, but if you don't mind I'll occasionally share things I create so I can feel like I've got a place for my creative energies.