

# In Perpetuum

## by Jack CJ Stark

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In a run down bedsit in a town that exists as a shadow of its former self, Jesse closed the laptop. It had been an hour since she tweeted about how shit the day had unfolded. Two likes and not a single mention. That's how things had been for a while. There was a time when people would respond to her when she fished for compliments and attention, but it would appear that most of her followers have either muted her or just ignore her continued cries for help.

Jesse stood up from the table that functioned as her writing desk, dining table, and craft station. Space was valuable in her one room accommodation. She was bored. This was nothing unusual. It was still too early for her to go to bed, and too late for a nap. So instead, she turned to grab a book from the bookshelf. As she did so, she caught the first glimpse of the man dressed in black.

It was his boots that she saw. He was doing a good job of staying very still, hiding under Jesse's single bed. Jesse was not sure how he got in the room, or how long he had been there. He wasn't there this morning when she changed the bedsheets. He must have come in earlier when she went to get some food. That was several hours ago, and he must have been in the room with her for some time. She could not help but admire how smart this guy had been. Hiding under a bed may seem like a sure fire way of being found, but that's not the case.

When Jesse was younger, she would play hide and seek with her cousin. Under the beds was one of the first places they would look for each other. But as an adult living alone, nobody thinks to look under the bed unless they go to get something. When people go into a bedroom, they may look in a wardrobe, or into an en suite bathroom, or glance behind curtains as they close them. People get in bed, as a place of safety, all the while assuming nobody is hiding just inches from them. It's the perfect hiding place for the room they were in.

As Jesse looked closer, she could see the man under the bed was wearing black cargo trousers, a black hoodie, black leather gloves and a black balaclava. No wonder she didn't see him before now, he was essentially a shadow hiding in the shadows. Jesse leaned down slightly,

and made eye contact. He didn't move. Jesse didn't scream. This was unexpected. Jesse hadn't had a man anywhere near her bed since she and Callum broke up 8 months, 2 weeks, and 3 days ago.

"Hi there," Jesse said as cheerily as she could manage. She didn't want to be rude or scare him off. He didn't answer. "It looks very cramped under there. Wouldn't it be better if you came out?" she asked.

The man dressed in black didn't respond. He stayed perfectly still, without breaking eye contact.

"I know you're there now. I've seen you. So you might as well come out," Jesse said, trying to persuade the intruder. It was getting awkward.

The man dressed in black initially continued with his stance of showing no response, and then slowly, he shuffled out from under the bed. Jesse couldn't help but let out a giggle. He looked like a drunk caterpillar doing a poor impression of a crab. There is no elegant way to creep out from under a bed. Once he was out he stood, being careful to not make any sudden movements. He was a tall man. He rose to over 6 feet, and was as broad as any man Jesse had seen. He blocked the light, casting a dull shadow over Jesse.

A silence filled the air. Jesse looked around the room, and then back at the man. "Would you like a cup of tea?" is all she could think of in the moment. Although she couldn't see the face of the man dressed in black, she sensed a confused frown had come across it.

"I mean, I haven't got any coffee in. I don't like coffee. I just drink tea and squash. There's some squash if you would prefer?" Jesse asked, pointing to the kitchen area.

The man dressed in black shook his head slowly. Jesse felt a little rejected. He could of at least accepted the drink out of politeness. The awkward silence returned between the two. Jesse sat back down at her desk.

"I should probably get another chair in here for when people come round," Jesse pondered. "A fold up one, due to the lack of space. Although, not many people come round to sit on a second chair. Kelly would come round sometimes but she'd sit on the bed and I'd sit here. You can sit on the bed if you want."

The man dressed in black did not move.

“Kelly is my best friend. Well, she was my best friend. We used to refer to each other as BFFs. She even labelled me as BFF on her vlogs but yesterday she put a photo on Instagram of her and Molly and tagged it hashtag BFF so I don’t know now I guess we’re not.”

The look coming from the eyes of the man dressed in black softened. “Have you fallen out over something?” he said, finally breaking his silence. His voice was soft and raspy. Jesse felt a sense of achievement. She’d broken through his initial barriers.

“No, we haven’t really fallen out. We just don’t talk as much now. It’s like we’ve just grown apart. I text her at 5.07pm and she hasn’t responded, but she has tweeted three times since then. I’ve been left on read,” Jesse said with a sadness.

“Has something changed recently to cause the distance?” the man dressed in black asked as he slowly lowered himself to perch on the edge of Jesse’s bed.

“Yeah,” Jesse replied. “We were at the same college, but I didn’t go in this term and although everyone in the group chat said they wouldn’t forget me if I needed to take a break, they did.”

“In what way?”

“Well I just don’t get told when we are going anywhere now. Like, everyone went to the beach yesterday and I missed it because nobody asked me to go. I was just left out. It’s not fair because they know I’m here on my own.”

Tears started to collect in Jesse’s eyes. The man dressed in black noticed, but didn’t offer any comfort.

“It was before they had class,” Jesse continued without being prompted, primarily to fill the silence. “They must have arranged to meet up at the beach first. We used to do that a lot. We’d get some drinks, and some of them would swim in the sea. I wouldn’t. If we lived in Spain, or Greece, or France, where the sea is green and clear and clean then maybe. But the sea here is grey and filthy. You ain’t getting me in there. And after the beach we’d walk to college for class, stopping at the chicken shop to get some nuggets and a milkshake for lunch. But now, because I’m not going in to college, they don’t even invite me to the beach. I could still meet them at the beach and then come home from there. Instead they forget me and I’m sat here on my tod.”

“Do you have any family?” the man dressed in black asked after a moment of contemplation.

“No, not really,” Jesse responded. “My mum is in prison for stealing steak so I had to go and live with my nan, but she’s all the way in Frome. She rents this place and lets me live here so I could start college with my friends from school. I love my nan lots but it was difficult living with her because she lives a bungalow with just one bedroom so I had to sleep in the living room and I couldn’t see my friends anymore. I like having my own place, being independent and such, but I just wish I saw my friends a bit more. It’s the whole point of me being here.”

“Do you get to see your nan often?” the man dressed in black asked.

“Not much. She drives down sometimes but it takes her three hours, and she can’t stay so she has to drive back the same day. She’s not old, not really, but it’s too much for her to do all the time. And I can’t go to her because it’s a five hour train ride and costs a fortune.”

The man dressed in black remained stoic. Jesse started to get a little frustrated with him. She was sharing a lot and he gave nothing back.

“Would you like a babybel?” Jesse asked, desperate to get anything from him.

“No, thank you.”

“Well, I’m gonna have one,” Jesse said as she unwrapped the chunky disc of mediocre snackery. “I think most of the girls have forgotten about me. You know what they say, out of sight, out of mind. And now they have Bec in the group, like noxious gas polluting everything.”

It was partly a joke, and Jesse glanced up at the man dressed in black to see if he had got it, or if he was ready to show any emotion at all. He was still wearing the balaclava and Jesse found it difficult to read his body language. Was his face smiling or sad behind the knitted wool? There was no way to know.

“Tell me about Bec, who is she?” the man dressed in black asked. The question took Jesse by surprise. He was interested and clearly starting to feel sorry for her.

“She’s a bitch. She was never part of the group. But now she hangs out with my group, without me. She hates me because I was with Callum and she liked him but we aren’t even together anymore so I don’t know what her problem is.”

“How do you know she hates you?”

“Well, last week we went to Blackpool for Sarah’s 18th. It’s one thing I was still invited to, and Bec was there. Lottie drove us there, which took forever, and when we were setting off, Rachel said to Bec to sit in the back of the car with me and I saw her look at Rachel and shake her head like she really didn’t want to sit with me. So Rachel sat in the back with me and Bec sat shotgun. She didn’t really speak to me all weekend. Rachel posted 43 photos on facebook, and Bec liked every one except the ones I was in. She’s just a bitch, but everyone else likes her and I can’t say anything and it feels like she has replaced me in the group.”

“Why can’t you say anything? Have you tried speaking to your friends about this?” the man dressed in black asked.

“No!” Jesse snapped. “If I do that I’ll look desperate.”

The man dressed in black sighed beneath his coverings, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his legs. Jesse sensed he disagreed.

“It’s not that easy,” she started to defend her decision. “We were studying musical theatre and that means there are a lot of little times when we are all sat together chatting, waiting for our rehearsal spot. It’s in those bits when the friendships form and when we can have a laugh. I’m not there anymore so I miss all of that. And then when we do meet up and they ask what I’ve been doing, it’s like ‘Nothing, just working some days in the craft shop.’ There’s nothing interesting happening in a craft shop!”

“Why did you stop going to college?” the man dressed in black asked. The question had been hanging in the air.

“Boy problems! Callum is in our class and when we broke up we said we would continue to be friends, but it’s awkward. He’s now with Adam and I thought I’d be fine with it but I’m not! I couldn’t keep going in every day, well, three and a half days a week, and have to see them together. It’s not that I’ve got anything against Adam or Callum, they’re both lovely and I love them to bits. But... they’re like the popular couple. Seeing them every day reminded me that I wasn’t good enough for him. It was just too hard.”

Jesse felt the tears tumble down her cheeks. She wiped them away quickly. Nobody had directly asked about the Callum situation before. The other girls in the group avoided the subject. They didn’t want to take a side, and because the split was presented as being amicable there was

no need to have bitching sessions to work through the loss. Nobody had to take sides, and Jesse had to form a secret, acting casual about it all.

“Sometimes it is easier to avoid situations we find difficult instead of confronting them,” the man dressed in black said. “But in doing so, we can isolate ourselves from our friends and those support mechanisms that may otherwise be available to us.”

Jesse made eye contact with the man dressed in black.

“We are conditioned by movies and books that each story must have a hero and a villain,” he continued. “That message seeps into our subconscious. We take everyday situations, and think of ourselves as the hero. Which means there must be a villain. So when we find people around us that might have different views or opinions, we decide they are the villain. The reality is that people are much more complex than that. Nobody is inherently good or bad. People do what they think is necessary in each moment of their life and sometimes we will think it’s a positive act, and sometimes we’ll perceive it as a negative act. Even people that come across as the worst kind of person often feel justified in their actions. Nobody thinks of themselves as the villain. We’re all just trying to survive in this crazy world. If we take the time to truly listen to one another, especially when we disagree or feel victimised by someone, we will find we have much more in common than we may initially be aware of.

“We tend to judge ourselves based on our intent, but we judge others based on their actions. I think you’re probably right when you said, ‘Out of sight, out of mind.’ That’s not people being bad people, it’s something that naturally happens with all of us. How often do you think about the people you went to primary school with, or the people you formed a brief friendship with on a holiday, or the high school art teacher you don’t see around anymore? Probably not all that often.

“I doubt your friendship group has actively decided to push you out. They probably want to carry on doing their thing. Following the traditions that you all set. You’re situation is the one that changed, not theirs. Friendship groups tend to do one of two things. They either become closed cliques, shut off to the rest of the world, or they evolve and grow, with new people being accepted. Bec may see you as a threat, or an outsider to the group she has joined. She may not even be aware of it. She may just need some time to learn who you are, and see that you are not a

villain. But she can't do that if you are not around much. The group can't find it's new dynamic if you are missing a lot. If you want things to change, focus on what you can do to make that change. What other people do is largely out of your control, but what you do, is completely yours."

Jesse was unprepared for such a truth bomb to be dropped on her. She had a desire to instinctively put up barriers and shift the attention away from herself. But here was a man, dressed all in black, who had broken into her bedsit, and hid under her bed for hours, and then listened to her. He was the first person in a long time to really listen to her.

When her mother was taken away, nobody asked her what she was feeling. Instead, Social Workers, family members, friends, everyone, would tell her they knew it was a difficult time for her. They told her what she was feeling instead of taking the time to let her explore and express what she was feeling. It was the same when she moved into her own place. She was told it was an exciting time, when really she found it deeply nerve-racking. Yet again, the same happened when she and Callum broke up, and when she stopped going to college, and when she got a job at the craft shop. The man dressed in black was the first person to ask her how she was feeling, and really listen to her answer. Not once did he tell her she was wrong, or tried to correct her. He didn't take sides, or told her what to do. He listened, understanding both sides, and made a suggestion on what could happen to make things change. It was just that, a suggestion. Jesse felt like she was in control. It was her decision to make.

"You're right," Jesse said after a few minutes of comfortable silence. She was not sure if the man dressed in black really cared whether she thought he was right or not, but she felt the need to tell him either way. "I should've told the girls how I felt about Callum and Adam. And I should make an effort to be around them more. I think if I tell them how I've been feeling left out and isolated, they would help me. I'm out of their minds at the moment, but I could change that. I just need to try harder, and remind them I exist. I need to become more than just the girl that works in the craft shop and moans about things on twitter."

The man dressed in black didn't offer anything in return. He allowed Jesse to find her own way. Jesse stood from the chair and walked over to the bed.

“Thank you,” she said. “For listening and helping me. You’re a very kind person. Can I have a hug?”

The man dressed in black nodded as the stranger embraced him. He didn’t give much of a hug back, but Jesse didn’t care. She just needed some human contact. As the hug ended, Jesse reached for her phone.

“We need to take a selfie,” she said through a smile. Before the man dressed in black could protest, she had taken three. “I’m going to post this to instagram. ‘Don’t know who this guy is, but he’s in my little pad and helped me learn we are all the hero. Hashtag strangerintheroom hashtag creeperunderthebed hashtag livelifetothe full hashtag bethechange hashtag friendsareforever hashtag inspirational high five emoji peace sign emoji.’”

The man dressed in black stood up. He was much taller than Jesse. The shadow he had cast over her earlier returned. As Jesse turned her head to look at the man, she felt the energy change in the room. The softness in his eyes had gone.

“Oh my god! I’m so sorry,” she said. “I totally forgot that you have things to do. I got so wrapped up in sorting through my problems, I forgot about you. Is it happening now?”

The man dressed in black gently closed his eyes and nodded.

“Would it help if I screamed? I mean, would that be better for you?” Jesse asked.

“No,” the man dressed in black replied. “Someone might hear.”

“I could cry, and be scared, and beg for you to stop?”

“Yeah, that would work.”

“OK, cool.”

Jesse scrunched up her face. She started to breathe shallow, rapid breaths. Tears formed in the corner of her eyes. She stumbled backwards a couple of steps until she bumped into the table. An empty glass toppled over and rolled off the table. Jesse let out a stifled shriek as the glass smashed on the ground. She reached out her arm, holding her hand out as a barrier between herself and the man dressed in black.

“Please,” she begged, sobbing. “Please don’t do this!”

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