

The Message

One late evening at the Stone Trail Apartments, Aaron, a young student newly living on his own, had finished a modest dinner. Afterward, he lit incense, dimmed the lights, and—to complete his little piece of paradise—began searching for his favorite album. Everything was almost perfect. Just as he was about to reach for the record player, his phone buzzed. The vibration, amplified by the old ring-stained coffee table, shattered the calm like glass.

“Wonder what that was,” thought Aaron as he crossed over to the dark green couch, sat down, and reached for the phone.

The phone lit up with a faint, distracting glow. The message was from Gabriel, a relatively new friend from the university.

“Hey.”

Aaron stared at the screen, puzzled. A wry smile flickered across his face. “Maybe he’s typing a follow-up,” he told himself. He waited, trying to ignore the simmering tension in the pit of his stomach, but the second message never came.

“But that just doesn’t make sense,” he muttered.

The silence grew heavier. His thoughts, once still a moment ago, began to churn. His mind had taken the reins.

“Just ‘hey’? That sounds off... but why say it like that?” He began to think to himself. “Gabe and I have always been fine.” He stood up and paced across the cramped living room. “Is he upset because I didn’t go to his party last weekend? I had to study and he knew I had exams. Any other weekend and I would have gone. Why did he throw a party during the week of my exams?”

The more he pondered and paced, the more he dug around for reasons.

“I’ve bought him lunch plenty of times and not once did I ask for money! What about all the rides when we go out? Did I ever ask for gas money? Never! Whenever he’s too drunk to go home, whose couch does he sleep on?”

Suddenly, all the possible ways Aaron felt slighted or offended came flooding to his mind. The white sage incense burned on, its mystical aroma going unnoticed as Aaron continued to search for some hidden meaning.

“Well, he is obviously upset at something I did. What? I don’t know, because I didn’t do anything.”

Left hand on his hip and the right hand holding his patchy chin between his thumb and index finger, Aaron decided his next move.

“Clearly he's mistaken. Is he waiting for a reply? Okay then, let's reply!”

Now with both hands firmly on his phone and with an air of defensiveness, he began to type out his response. Despite his best intentions, personal pride got in the way. The most petty of thoughts lurking in the dark crevices of his mind made themselves known. Quickly deleting what he had written, a cordial and respectful reply, he began to scold himself.

“Why should I spend the energy to give him a thought-out reply when he only felt I was worthy of a single word? I'm not an idiot. I'll match his energy. Why shouldn't I? You get what you give, and I'm not giving more than what I got.”

“Hey” he sent, satisfied with himself.

The silence grew louder as Aaron quickly placed the phone onto the table, sat back, and crossed his arms. Unsettled by the anticipation and the mounting anxiety that began to accumulate, he now wondered if he had been too rude. Like clouds gathering water until they become too heavy and burst open, the same was happening deep in the middle of Aaron's chest.

With a desire to distract himself and keep from fidgeting, he began to fill the stillness with mundane tasks. Shooting up off the couch, he raced to the kitchen and began to wipe down an already-cleaned counter. Once that was finished, he began to clean dishes he had already washed, all the while carrying what felt like a heavy rock inside his rib cage. The tormenting idleness was gone, but there was no relief from the racing stream of thoughts dashing through his mind.

“He must really be upset at something if he's taking THIS long to answer,” concluded Aaron. “Well, I don't care! Once I show him logically that it was he who is wrong and that his attitude toward me is baseless, he's gonna feel really dumb. He'll apologize and I'll accept his apology.”

Becoming more animated, he continued to wrestle with the fake scenarios he created through his pride.

“I've always treated him with respect. Maybe I don't always say things in the best way, but I certainly don't mean to offend anyone! He knows that, so why is he coming at me like this? If he was here and faced me like a man, instead of hiding behind a text, I'd tell him he's a...”

BZZZZT BZZZZT.

Slowly, he turned toward the living room. All his thoughts and inner dialogue came to a stop as he once again approached the coffee table and reached for his phone.

“A few of the guys are getting drinks tomorrow after class. You should come! I owe ya a couple of beers ;)”

The indignation flushed from his body as his face burned red with humiliation. Mouth agape and with a bitter sense of inner relief, he mechanically began to type his reply.

“Sounds good brother, thanks for the invite!”

Sometimes, words cannot explain our deepest shame. Yet, sitting with the awareness of our behavior and ugly thoughts is punishment enough. Gabriel will never know how his noble invitation was almost met with insecure venom. And Aaron will take those feelings to his grave.