

The Dispute

The waves crashed gently against the pale sandy shore. My nose tingled, breathing deeply in the damp, salty air. Seagulls flew by shouting their annoying cry at each other. I laid on my back on a thin, purple and green beach towel. My head sat on top of my hands as the setting summer sun warmed me. The heels of my feet pressed small divots into the coarse sand through the semi-soft beach towel. A breeze blew, casting millions of small, pointy sand particles into my right side.

“There you are,” I heard a familiar, tired-sounding, annoying voice, “We’ve been looking for you.” The sand shifted with each step she took walking over to me. I sat up, my butt sinking ever so slightly into the sand. I looked up at her somewhat sweaty face, noting her furrowed brow and subtle frown.

“I needed some time to cool off,” I said, shrugging. She exhaled loudly and grabbed the bridge of her nose, using her other hand to support her elbow. She paused for a moment then dropped the gesture and looked at me with fierce eyes.

“Just tell someone before disappearing like that again,” she said. She sounded as though she wasted her time looking for me. She leaned forward sending hundreds of light brown strands cascading over her shoulder. She lazily held out her hand. I looked at it, squinting my eyes slightly. “Come on, Mike and the rest have calmed down a bit so, let’s head back an-”

“But I thought I was the manipulative dumbass who always finds a way to tag along and instigate problems,” I said, sarcastically. She narrowed her eyes, retracted her hand, and crossed her arms.

“What are you getting at?” she asked, harshly cautious.

“An apology, Grace,” I said, annoyed, “From you and the rest of them, specifically Mike.” She groaned, putting her hands to her head.

“This is why I called you a dumbass, Charlie,” she said, throwing her hands down, “You never know when to just drop it!”

“Well, sorry I don’t accept the abusive teasing I get from them, including you!” I said, raising my voice a little. She gritted her teeth.

“Don’t say shit like that!” she said, but more like yelled, “You know how they are when someone doesn’t go along with them! How was I supposed to know you were listening through the door!”

“You could have not said anything, yet you chose to speak!” I said, on the verge of shouting, “Here I thought we were friends, but friends don’t talk shit behind each other’s back!” Her eyes flashed a deep sadness. A small lump formed in my throat. I looked towards the ocean, away from her pained expression. I pulled my legs to my chest, wrapped my arms around them, and placed my chin on top of my knees. There was a long awkward silence. The waves seemed like they were crashing more violently.

Finally, Grace sighed. She sat down beside me, her back facing me, and leaned back against my right side. My thin red t-shirt and her equally thin white tank top were the only barriers separating us. She took a deep breath.

“Listen,” she said in a calm voice, “I... I’m sorry, okay, for all of it, especially what I said at the party. I just didn’t want to be cast out, but I know what I said about you was wrong. You know I didn’t mean any of it, I ju-” The breeze picked up again sending small amounts of sand hurtling towards us. “Agh!” She spat. I lightly chuckled. “Yuck!” She spat again. “Sand just flew straight into my mouth!” She spat again. I sighed.

“I forgive you,” I said, quietly, “And I’m sorry about what I said to you...” I watched the sun shine glisten across the blue-green water as it gently touched the horizon. She seemed to relax a bit against me.

“Thanks,” she said, softly. There was a comfortable moment of silence as the waves gently caressed the shore.

“Oooo, what are you two doing?” an instantly recognizable female voice teased. Grace and I immediately tensed up. She quickly sat upright and I turned my head around.

“Hopefully I wasn’t interrupting anything,” Rachel said with a soft giggle. She walked over to us. Her black and pink tank top lightly tousled in the wind.

“I-It’s not what you think,” Grace said, quickly. Rachel giggled and turned her attention to me.

“Anyway, how are you feeling?” Rachel asked, dropping into a crouch. Her beautiful long blonde hair elegantly fell onto her back. Her bright light green eyes staring straight at me made my heart skip a beat.

“Uhh, yeah, yeah. I’m totally fine,” I said with an awkward smile. She smiled back, causing my heart to skip again.

“Well then, we should all get on back to the party,” she said, standing. She placed her hands on her side above her white jean short shorts. Grace stood up beside me with a grunt. I looked out towards the ocean. The sun was just barely above the horizon, setting the sky ablaze with fiery reds, oranges, and yellows. It was absolutely breathtaking.

“What do you two think of the sunset?” I asked. There was a pause.

“It’s very…” Rachel said, “Picturesque.”

“It’s nice,” Grace said, “I like it.” There was a calm moment of silence as we watched the last bit of brightly shining sun dip behind the cold blue tides. I stood, stretching my back and then dusting off my black gym shorts.

“Ready to go back?” Grace asked.

“Yeah,” I said, bending down and picking up my beach towel. I flicked it a few times in the air before crumpling it up into a loose ball.

“Hurry up you two!” Rachel yelled, about twenty meters away on the sand hill, “The party’ll be over by the time we get back!” Her smile was as bright as the sun.

Grace and I looked at each other. She rolled her eyes and we laughed. She then turned and started jogging towards Rachel. I looked back once more at the deepening blue ocean. The tides seemed to roll in gently before crashing forcefully against the shore. The fiery sky began to slowly fade to a soft steely blue. I sighed, wished for more time to take it all in, and jogged over to them.

I caught up and we started up the small sand hill. Rachel took the lead as I walked alongside Grace. Rachel turned around and started walking backwards.

“So what are you guys wanting to do once we get back?” she asked. She put a hand to her chest. “I’m grabbing a couple of beers and trying to start some kind of game.” She turned back around, “Maybe charades or beer pong.”

Grace lightly bumped my arm with her elbow. I looked at her and she glanced at me. I could tell what she wanted me to say. *I can’t tell Rachel I’m going to demand an apology from Mike*, I thought. She nudged me again and I shook my head. She

gestured for me to speak. I mouthed, *no*. I crossed my arms. *She'll probably make fun of me*, I thought. Rachel turned around.

“So?” she asked.

“Charlie here,” Grace said, “Is going to ask Mike for an apology.” Rachel’s eyes widened slightly and raised both of her eyebrows up. My arms dropped defeatedly down to my side. *I want to go jump into the ocean and drown*, I thought. Then a slight smile appeared on her face.

“Really,” Rachel said, turning back, “Well, good luck with that, I’ve never once got an apology out of him.” I gave Grace my best death stare and she shrugged. She mouthed, *see*. I sighed and rolled my eyes. She smiled and I smiled back.

We had reached the road and I stepped directly onto a rather sharp pebble, forgetting that I was barefoot. I hopped off it cursing under my breath. Both Grace and Rachel giggled at me. We continued with me searching the ground carefully for rocks before each step. Three minutes later, we arrived at the short gravel road leading to the house Mike and some others had rented. Grace and Rachel walked on the gravel in their flip flops as I opted to walk on the grass along the side.

We reached an old off-white house. It was two stories with a not-so-stable looking wooden staircase running up the side to the second story entrance. Mike had only rented the bottom section, so we made our way to the small porch. I carefully maneuvered on the gravel path and up onto the short wooden staircase. Grace and Rachel teased me the entire time waiting at the dull green door. My feet felt the old, almost splintering wood of the steps. I walked up to them and stood next to Grace. Rachel grasped the dark gray door handle and I took a deep breath.

“Welp, this is it,” Grace said.

“Yeah, I wish you luck,” Rachel said. I took one last breath, tossed my towel aside by the door, and nodded.

“Alright,” I said. Rachel pushed open the door. The music was blaring and people were talking over one another. The whole place felt so loud, yet everyone seemed like they were having a good time.

We stepped in and Grace closed the door behind her. The music immediately stopped and it felt like all thirty plus people had their eyes on me. I saw Mike stand up from a small coffee table, beer bottle in hand. His dark red t-shirt had its sleeves carelessly ripped off. It had a trail of wet marks, most likely beer, from the collar down.

Rachel walked off into the crowd, blending in almost instantly. Grace stood a couple of steps behind and to the right of me.

“What the hell are you doin’ back here, straight-edge?” Mike asked. He took a sip from his beer. “I don’t even know whose dumbass decided to invite a square like you to tag along.” My breathing grew faster as I felt everyone’s gaze.

“I-I’ve come for an apology, Mike,” I said.

“Oh, so you’re gonna say you’re sorry to all of us for ruining the party,” Mike said, mockingly.

“No, you are the one who is going to say sorry,” I said, my voice slightly shaking, “To me.” His brow furrowed together and his mouth hung slightly ajar. He motioned for people to move out of his way and just like that there was a clear path between us. Then he laughed, a scornful and contagious laugh from the gut. A few others in the crowd laughed with him. I felt alone on an island slowly drifting away in the tide.

“Good one,” he said, “So a square can actually be funny sometimes.”

“No Mike, I’m serious,” I said, “I’ve had it with your treatment of me.” He laughed again, louder this time. Suddenly he stopped and stared directly at me. His blue eyes looked almost glazed over. His slightly reddened cheeks seemed to intensify. He smashed his beer bottle on the coffee table. Glass fragments scattered around him. Some in the crowd gasped and stepped back. The room fell silent as he held up the broken bottle, pointing it at me.

“And I’ve had it with you,” he said in a sinister tone. He tightened his grip on the neck of the broken bottle. His face twisted into a devilish smirk. He lowered the bottle and took a step forward, tiny glass shards cracking under his dirty brown hiking boots. I felt Grace’s hand on my shoulder. Glancing back at her, I saw the concern in her dark hazel eyes. She shook her head and lightly tugged my shoulder. I looked down slightly. *God I hate myself*, I thought.

“Say you’re sorry, Mike,” I said, looking back at him. He tilted his head slightly and took two steps forward. The crunching of glass sounded like bones snapping.

“You’ve got some nerve,” he said, “I’m never gonna to apologize to a straight-edge square like you.” I clenched my shaking hands into fists. My heart was practically beating out of my chest.

“Come on, Mike, just say it. ‘I’m sorry,’ it’s not that hard,” I said, pressing my luck. Grace tugged on my shirt a couple of times. He started walking towards me.

“If it’s so easy then you should apologize for ruining the mood earlier and now for makin’ me do this,” he said, stopping only a couple of meters away, “Go on,” he spread his arms out, “We’re all waitin’.”

There was a pause and he dropped his arms to his sides. He jerked his head and arm forward. I fearfully and instinctively hopped back, bumping into Grace and the door. He laughed in hysterics.

“Oh-ho, you thought I was gonna stab you, ha!” he said, holding his gut, “Haha! You should’ve seen the look on your face! Oh! And that reaction.” He mimicked a clumsy hop backwards. “What even was that!” He laughed for a second longer then got serious. He took three quick steps forward, less than a meter away. “But next time, who knows if I’ll do it,” he whispered. He started laughing again and took a step back.

Fuck this! I thought, An apology? From this psychopath? My hands felt the door for the knob. What was I thinking?! I’m no superhero, this isn’t some movie! I could have gotten stabbed and fucking died! My hand found and wrapped around the door knob. Get me the fuck out of here!

I quickly turned, flung the door open, ran out across the small wooden porch, and hopped down the short stairs. The wood changed to gravel under my bare feet. I stomped on dozens of sharp pebbles and rocks as I awkwardly sprinted away on the gravel road. Adrenaline filled my body, dulling the pain in my feet, and pushing me to go even faster.

A minute later, I was running up the sand hill, out of breath. My feet screamed in pain and discomfort with every stride. I ran across the sandy beach towards the ocean. My feet splashed into the freezing cold water. I doubled over, hands on my knees, breathing sporadically. I took deep breaths in and out, trying to calm down, but nearly crying on every out.

Once my breathing steadied, I checked the bottom of my feet. There were no cuts, but each had a maze of tiny and large red dots. I breathed a sigh of relief then sniffled. I walked uncomfortably out of the water to roughly where I was before, sand clinging to my semi-numbed feet. I sat down on the cool sand, pulled my knees to my chest, and looked out at the ocean.

It was a deep dark navy blue, reflecting the night sky perfectly. The ocean was so calm and devoid of waves that I could hardly tell that there was a horizon. I looked slightly up at the vast dark sky. There were no clouds and only a few small sparkling stars. I took a deep breath of the crisp night air, sending a chill through me. Afterwards, my thoughts started to roam.

Why did Mike straight up threaten me there? Why did no one try to stop him? Did anyone care what happened to me? How does Mike even have friends when he does shit like that? I thought, my eyes began to water, Why do they bully me? I'm no different from the rest of them, right? Why can't I just fit in? Why can't I have friends? Why am I alw-

"There you are," I heard a familiarly out of breath and calming voice. She jogged through the still sand and sat down to the right of me. "You okay?" I quickly wiped my eyes and looked at her.

"I was just threatened by a crazed lunatic holding a broken beer bottle and probably lost any and all chances for a social life, but yeah. Yeah, I'm okay Grace," I said, harshly sarcastic.

"Well you don't have to be an ass about it," she said, semi-jokingly.

"Sorry... I just have a lot going through my head," I said with a sigh.

“Like what?” she asked.

“Like why did Mike even do something like that?” I asked, “Like why didn’t anyone try to stop him? How come this happens to me? Why can’t I just fit in w-”

“Who’d want to fit in with that crowd?” she asked, “They’re all loud, annoying, and dumb. Well, all except Rachel, obviously.” I looked to the ocean and rubbed my knees.

“But my biggest question was why, why would Mike even do something like that?” I asked, glancing at her.

“Why bother worrying about an insane person like that? Just be done with him,” she said, “You don’t have anything to prove to him, he’s a terrible person who threatened to kill you, and he never even liked you in the first place.” She paused. “If someone did that to me or anyone I knew I would never speak or think about that person ever again.” I took a deep breath and lightly smiled.

“Yeah, you’re right...” I said, my smile fading, “But...”

“No buts,” she said, “We are never going near that guy again. Period.”

“What about the people who didn’t hear Mike whisper the threat to me? What will they think of me?” I asked.

“Who cares? You don’t want people like them as friends. They always talk shit about you and others behind their backs,” she said, “None of them even tried stepping in or tried to get you out of that situation.”

“You did...” I said, quietly.

“Yeah, but I should’ve done more because you’re my friend... I’ll always be there for you,” she said, shyly.

“Yeah...” I said with a sudden sense of accomplishment, “You and me, together forever.” The corny line lingered in the air for a moment. My face grew hot. Grace let out a small burst of soft giggles. I quickly looked out at the dark ocean and sky. She quickly composed herself and there was a quiet pause.

“Did you just ask me out?” she asked, a small giggle in her voice. I whipped my head to face her. She was trying her best to hold in her laughter. I stared at her, my mouth slowly curling into a smile. *What an idiot...* I thought. Then we both erupted into laughter.