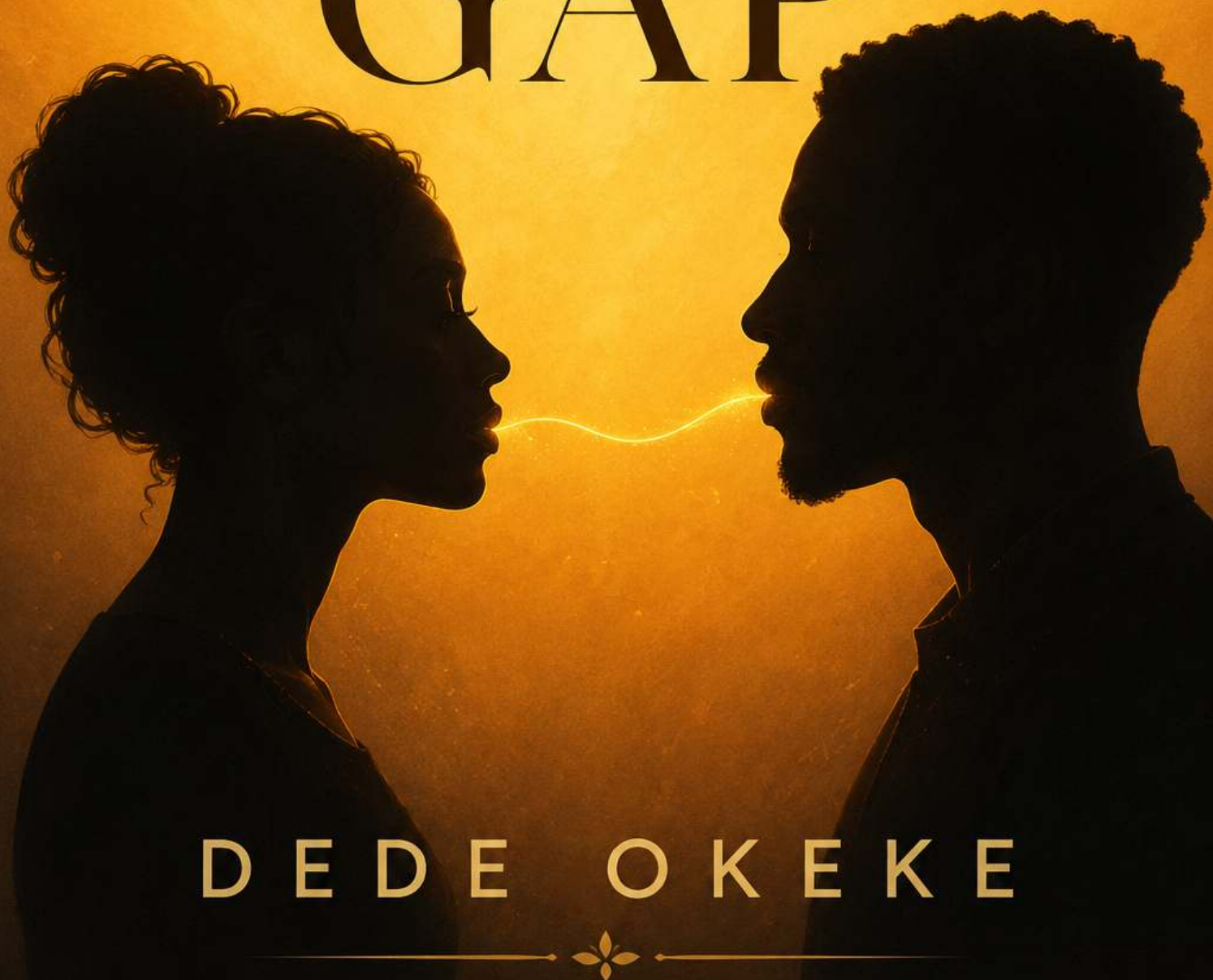


WORDS — THAT — CLOSE — THE — GAP



DEDE OKEKE

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Why The Right Words Fail At The Wrong Moment

You have said the right thing before and watched it go wrong. It was not the sentence. It was everything around the sentence.

Every woman in a cold marriage has rehearsed a speech. In the car, in the kitchen, at two in the morning. And most have delivered some version of it, and watched it turn into a quarrel or a shrug within ninety seconds.

So before I give you a single script, four rules. Break them and the best words in this guide will fail exactly as your own did.

Rule one: Never at night

Nothing important should be said after nine o'clock. You are tired, he is tired, the day's residue is in the room. Every serious conversation in this guide happens in daylight, on a day off, with the children occupied.

Rule two: Warn him it is coming

An ambushed man defends. A man who was told on Thursday that you want twenty minutes on Saturday arrives with something prepared, which is what you want.

Say: *"There is something I would like us to talk about on Saturday morning. It is not a fight. Twenty minutes."*

Rule three: Speak about yourself, never about him

This is the whole technique in one line. Any sentence beginning with *you* is a charge, and a charged man argues about whether the charge is fair instead of answering it.

Not: *"You have been ignoring me for months."*

Instead: *"I have been lonely in this house for a long time."*

He can argue with the first. He cannot argue with the second, because it is a report from inside you and he was not there.

Rule four: Say less than you want to, then stop

Women who have been silent for months speak for twenty minutes when they finally begin. By minute five he has stopped hearing. Say your piece in under two minutes and then be quiet, and let the silence sit. Do not fill it. The silence is doing your work.

HOW TO USE THESE SCRIPTS

Do not memorise them word for word — you will sound like you are reading, and he will hear it.

Read each one until you have the *shape*: what it does, what it avoids, where it stops. Then say it in your own mouth, with your own words.

Every script here is short on purpose.

The Opening

The one conversation the whole guide is building towards. Four parts, under two minutes.

THE FULL SCRIPT

Name the distance, without blame.

"Something has changed between us over the last year or two. I do not think either of us planned it. But we have become like two people managing a house together."

Say what it has been like for you.

"I have been very lonely. Not because you are cruel — you are not. Because I miss you, and you are right here."

Say what you want, plainly.

"I do not want us to spend the next ten years like this. I want my husband back. And I am willing to do my part."

Ask, then be quiet.

"What has it been like for you?"

Why each part is built that way

“I do not think either of us planned it” gives him somewhere to stand. A man who believes he is about to be sentenced will defend himself before you finish. This line tells him, in advance, that he is not on trial.

“Not because you are cruel” removes the accusation he is already forming an answer to. He is bracing for *you don't care about me*. When it does not come, he has nothing to push against, and the room stays open.

“I am willing to do my part” matters enormously. Most withdrawn men are carrying a private conviction that they are failing at home. If your speech confirms it, he closes. This line says the failure is shared, which makes staying in the conversation survivable for him.

“What has it been like for you?” is the whole thing. It is the first question in perhaps two years that invites him to speak without defending himself. Not *why have you been like this*, which is an accusation wearing a question mark. Not *do you still love me*, which is a test with only one acceptable answer.

Ask it. Then close your mouth and let him be uncomfortable. He may take a long time to start. Let him take it.

When He Deflects

He will probably not open on the first attempt. That is not failure, and what you say next decides whether there is a second attempt.

Here are the five deflections, in order of how often they come.

"I'm fine. Nothing is wrong."

"Alright. I hear you. I am not fine, and I wanted you to know that rather than keep managing it by myself."

Then stop. Do not argue with his "fine." You cannot win that argument and you do not need to — you have delivered the only thing that mattered, which is that *you* are not fine. Let it sit in the room.

"It's just work. I have a lot on my mind."

"I believe you. Can you tell me about it? I would rather carry it with you than watch you carry it alone."

This is generous and it is also a test, and it costs you nothing. If work is genuinely the whole story, he will feel relief and may actually talk. If it is a door, he will close it, and you will have learned something without accusing him of anything.

“You are overthinking. You always look for problems.”

This one stings, because it attacks your judgement rather than answering your point.

“I might be. But I am telling you how I feel in my own home, and I would like you to hear it rather than correct it.”

Calm, not defensive, and immovable. Do not defend your perception — the moment you argue about whether you are overthinking, the subject has been successfully changed, and you will spend forty minutes on the wrong topic.

“What do you want me to do?” (said with irritation)

This sounds like an offer. It is usually a challenge, designed to end the conversation by making you produce an impossible list.

“I do not have a list. I am not asking you to fix anything today. I wanted you to know how I have been, and to hear how you have been.”

Silence, or getting up and leaving

“Alright. I have said what I needed to say. I would like us to come back to it.”

Then let him go, and do not follow him. Following turns your dignity into a chase in about four seconds.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THIS CHAPTER

Many men return to the subject two or three days later, on their own terms, in the car or at night with the lights off, when nobody is looking at them directly.

If he does, say almost nothing. Listen. Do not produce the speech you have been rehearsing since Saturday. That second conversation, the one he starts, is worth ten of the one you started.

The Direct Question

If you need to ask about another woman, ask once, cleanly, and separately from everything else.

Do not fold this into the Opening. Do not lead up to it for twenty minutes. Do not lay out your evidence first like a lawyer — the moment you produce a receipt, the conversation becomes about the receipt, and you will spend the next two hours being told what a restaurant bill does and does not prove.

THE SCRIPT

"I need to ask you something, and I want the truth, whatever it is. Is there someone else?"

Then stop talking completely.

What to do with each answer

He says no, calmly, and asks what brought this on. Tell him plainly and briefly — the distance, the phone, the feeling. Do not apologise for asking. You are his wife and the question was reasonable.

He says no, and becomes furious. Anger is not proof of anything, in either direction. Some innocent men are insulted;

some guilty men perform outrage to make the question too expensive to ask twice. Do not escalate. Say: *"I have asked. I will leave it there."* Then watch what happens over the following weeks, which will tell you more than tonight will.

He says yes. Do not decide anything today. Say: *"Thank you for telling me the truth. I need some days before I know what I think."* Then take them. Whatever you say in the first hour will be the version of you that is most frightened, and you will be living with its consequences for years.

He does not answer. That is an answer, and you both know it. *"I notice you have not said no."* Then be quiet.

NEVER SAY THESE

"I know everything already, so just admit it." — If it is untrue, he will know you are bluffing, and you have handed him the moral high ground.

"Swear on the children." — A man who will lie about a woman will lie about anything else you name.

"Is it her? The one from the office?" — Naming a specific person turns the whole conversation into a debate about that person, and it is a debate you will lose whether you are right or wrong.

Holding Your Line

A line is not a threat. It is a plain description of what you will do, and it needs nobody's permission.

The whole craft of saying a line is in the flatness of the delivery. No raised voice, no tears, no warning, no *if you do that again then I will*. Say it once, in the same tone you would use to say the generator needs servicing, and then simply live by it.

The shape

"I am not willing to [the thing]. So from now on I will [what you will do]."

Notice that both halves are about you. Nothing in it requires him to agree, and therefore nothing in it can be refused.

WORKED EXAMPLES

"I am not willing to be spoken to like that in front of the children. If it happens, I will leave the room."

"I am not willing to keep pretending in front of your family that we are fine. I will not be unpleasant, but I will not perform."

"I am not willing to share a bed with you while there is someone else. I will sleep in the other room until that is finished."

"I am not willing to spend another year as the only person trying. I am giving this six months of my whole heart, and then I am going to look at it honestly."

When he pushes back

"So you are threatening me?"

"No. I am telling you what I will do, so that you are not surprised by it."

"You are being dramatic."

"Maybe it looks like that. It is still what I am going to do."

"Fine. Do whatever you want."

"Alright." — and nothing more. Do not explain it again. A line explained twice becomes a negotiation.

Then, and this is the entire point: **do the thing you said.** Every time, quietly, without announcement. One line kept

completely is worth five announced and abandoned,
because what you are rebuilding is not his behaviour. It is the
correspondence between your words and reality — first in his
mind, and much more importantly in your own.

The Small Words That Do The Daily Work

The big conversations turn a marriage. These turn an evening, and evenings are what marriages are made of.

The ninety seconds when he walks in

Whatever is said in the first ninety seconds sets the whole evening, and at the moment it is probably a problem — the generator, the fees, what his mother said.

Try instead: *“You look tired. There is food.”* Or simply his name and a look at his face. The problems can wait ninety seconds. They will keep.

Contact that asks for nothing

Count how many of your sentences to him this week carried a request, a complaint, or an item of admin. For most women it is nearly all of them, and he has learned that being available to you costs him something.

So send something with no hook in it. A funny thing you saw. *“This reminded me of you”* and nothing else. A hand on his shoulder as you pass, with no conversation attached.

If he does not respond, say nothing about it. The whole value

of a message with no hook is destroyed the moment you ask why he did not reply.

Noticing out loud

“Thank you for handling that.” “You were good with her today.” “I saw you sorted the car. Thank you.”

Small, ordinary, and specific. Not praise for basic duty — he will hear that as patronising and he will be right. Just noticing, in a normal voice.

Repairing after you get it wrong

You will get it wrong. You will snap, or bring it up at eleven at night, or break the Pause on a bad Tuesday. Repair quickly and without a performance.

“I was sharp with you this morning. I am sorry. It was not about you.”

Then let it go. Do not follow an apology with an explanation of what he did to cause it — that turns an apology into a second charge, and he will remember only the charge.

THE SENTENCE TO KEEP IN YOUR POCKET

When he says something that takes the breath out of you and you need to not make it worse:

“I need a minute.”

Then take the minute. Leave the room if you need to. Nearly every conversation that ruined a week could have been saved by a woman who said those four words instead of the ones that arrived first.

— *Dede Okeke*

Twelve Sentences To Never Say

Knowing what not to say is worth as much as any script here. Each of these ends the conversation you were trying to start.

“You never...” / “You always...”

He will spend the next ten minutes producing the one exception, and he will find one, and your actual point will be lost. Replace with a specific instance, once.

“Do you even love me any more?”

There is no useful answer. Yes is unprovable and means nothing said under pressure. No ends the marriage tonight rather than when you are ready. And silence — the likeliest response — will haunt you for years.

“Chinedu takes his wife out every month.”

Comparison confirms the private belief that is keeping him away. It has never once produced the behaviour it asks for.

“After everything I have done for you.”

This turns love into a debt, and nobody has ever felt affection for a creditor.

“Your mother has spoiled you.”

Or any version that reaches for his family. You will not win it, and you will be quoted at gatherings for the next decade.

“Just tell me the truth, I already know everything.”

If you do not, he will know you are bluffing within seconds, and the bluff becomes the subject instead of the truth.

“Fine. Do whatever you want.”

Said in exhaustion, heard as permission. Say nothing at all instead.

“I am done.” (when you are not)

Every threat you do not carry out teaches him that your words describe your mood rather than your intentions. Two of these and your real line, when it comes, will mean nothing.

“Is it because of my body?”

You are inviting a man who is already avoiding hard conversations to render a verdict on you. Whatever he says, you will not believe the kind version and you will never forget the unkind one.

“The children have noticed, you know.”

Using the children as evidence turns them into instruments. It also raises his shame, and shame produces distance, which is the thing you are trying to end.

“Nothing. I'm fine.” (when you are not)

Yes, he does this. When you do it back, you have joined him in the silence and there is now nobody left in the marriage telling the truth.

“Why can't you just...”

Every sentence starting this way is heard as *why are you like this*, whatever the ending. Ask for the thing directly instead: “I would like us to...”

IF YOU HAVE SAID ALL TWELVE

Most women reading this have said at least eight, some of them this week.

That is not a character failure. These are what frightened people say, and you have been frightened for a long time in a house where nobody would tell you what was happening.

Do not apologise for a list. Simply stop using them, starting today, and use the scripts instead.

— *Dede Okeke*