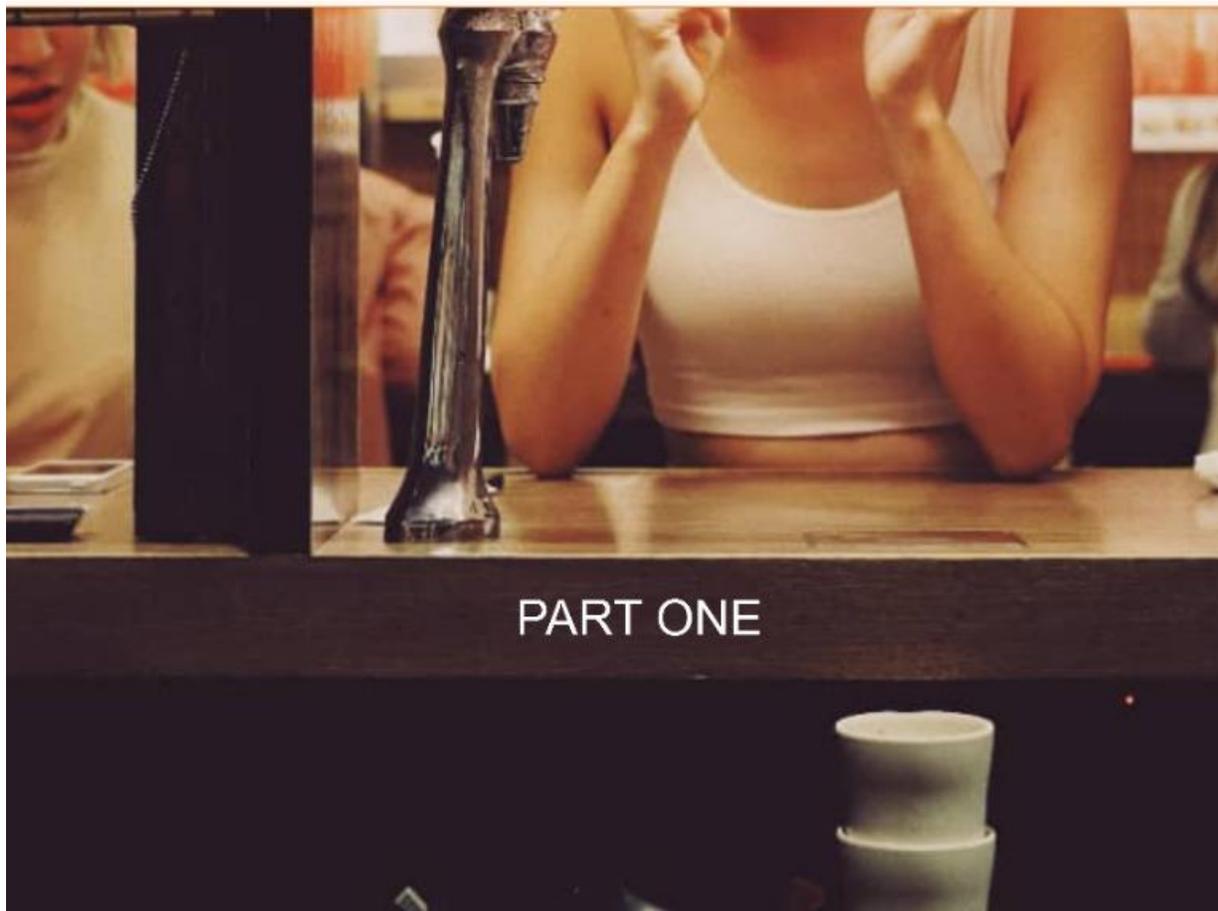


# WHAT THE PANDEMIC MADE ME DO

A COLLECTION



PART ONE

CATHERINE OKUNOLA

## GRATITUDE

Thanksgiving is always the best way to begin every deed. It sets things in motion and places things in their place.

Thank you, Holy Spirit, for teaching me to be more. Thank you for teaching me Love and thank you for the wisdom to trust you to always lead.

Thank you, Tell.africa for the 30-Day Writing Challenge!

Thank you, Dad, for the support, love and unending words of correction. You're my superhero.

Eunice, Precious, and Prince, thank you, for keeping up with this busy big sis. Thank you for understanding me and for the warm support. Thanks for silently cheering me on. I love you, guys.

Hope, thank you for everything. We still have a book coming. Thanks for the support. Thanks for the friendship and thanks for every encouragement. Thank you for being my cheerleader.

Funmillala, thank you for the beautiful artworks. Sofiltered is going places!

Demi, Sir Harry, Destiny, Petros, Sir Toheeb Ojuolape and everyone I disturbed at one point or the other to help this young girl with the perfectionist syndrome. Thank you guys for the support, the love and the encouragement. She'll get better.

And finally, Dear Reader, thank you for picking this up. I hope you find a word or a sentence to hold on to.

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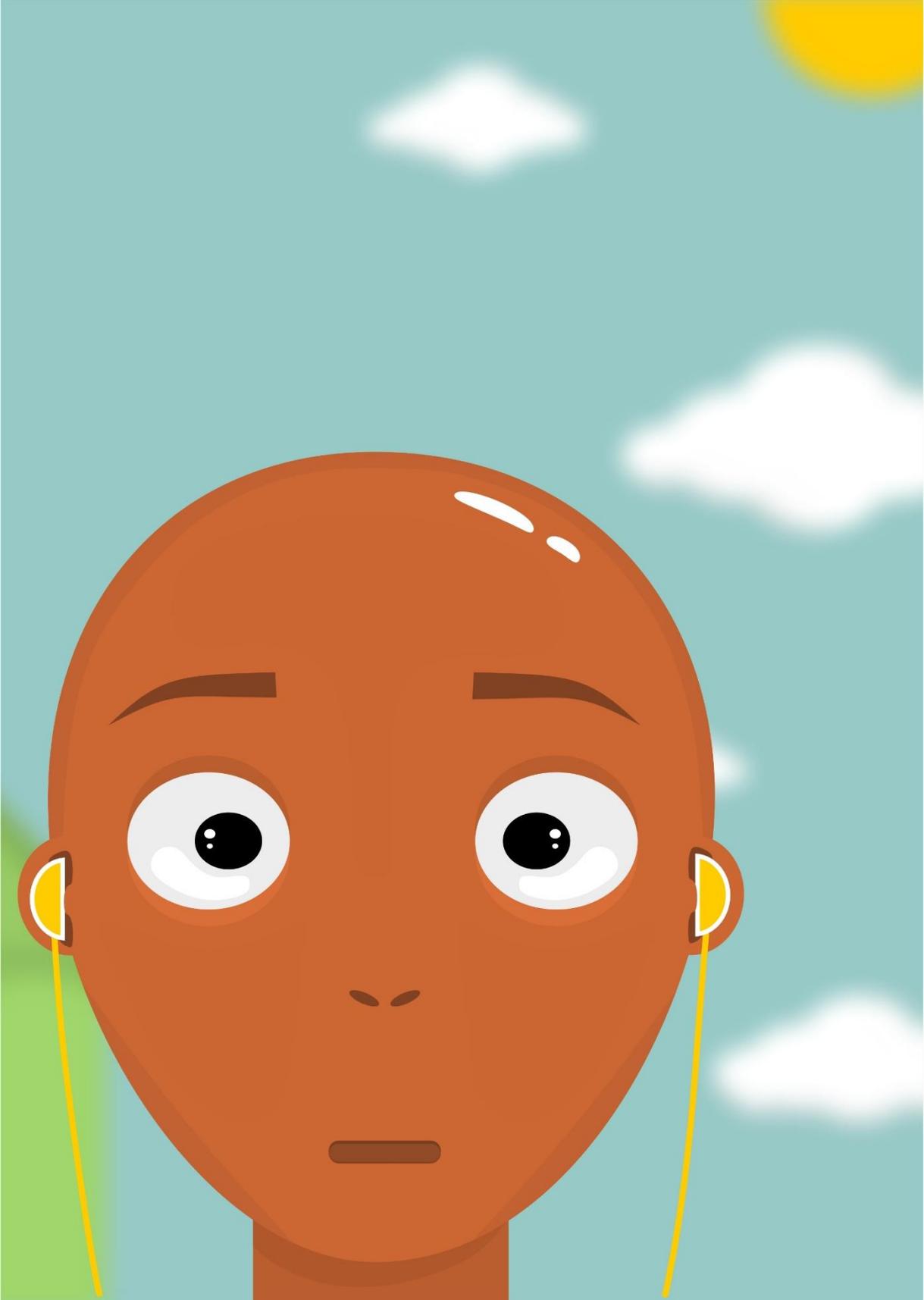
## PREFACE

Our stories will forever remain buried deep within us if we keep on waiting for them to reach perfection. 2020 has shown us that we all possess innate abilities to become an infinite number of things. There's a lot for us to be. There's plenty for us to do. And I believe this pandemic has given us the time to do just that—the time to be ourselves and explore our deepest hidden gifts. It has given us enough time to unravel and to come out of hiding.

We have time to try and make our mistakes. We have time to learn from them and become better. This is for everyone who believes that they possess potential to be more than they are.... You won't know if you don't try...

Finally, do not expect perfection from me, if there is even any such thing.

Expect truth. Expect imagination.... These, I guarantee.



## THE NIGHTMARE

Something was off. Ayo knew, but he couldn't place his sweaty hands on what it was. The rowdy, noisy Oshodi market was unsettlingly quiet. And as an experienced Lagosian that he prided himself to be, after barely seven years in Lagos, he knew there were places that were never peaceful. It was simply an aberration for those places to lack disarray. The noise, hassling, bustle and musical horns blaring from all the vehicles around gave these places their identities. Oshodi was one of those places, and it was never quiet.

Humans who used to crowd the pathways in Oshodi market, littering the market with their sweaty bodies and drowning out your thoughts by the unending plethora of voices emanating from every corner seemed to have assembled at some hidden place. Those bored conductors, and desperate hawkers, who gave the market its color were missing. It wasn't just a little reduction in the population of vendors and customers, it was a total blackout of human light. There were no animals nor humans. It was just him in the huge market.

Ayomide unplugged his earphones to see clearly. The previously soothing songs his girlfriend had recommended were suddenly too loud and they were preventing him from seeing. His eyes darted to and fro, surveying the market. Stalls were filled with several wares ranging from fruits, beverages, sweets, to phones, okrika clothes, phone batteries, wristwatches and almost everything sellable. They were lacking in just one thing – the sellers. Those who would shout at you pathetically, tugging at your shirt or whatever piece of clothing they could get their desperate fingers on, desperately pleading for you to take just one look at their wares, hoping that you might patronize them. They were all absent. The market was frighteningly quiet.

The silence echoed in his ears, but he had always been a lad ruled by good reasoning and common sense. Just like when the fire alarm went off in secondary school, and all his classmates had taken to the windows. He had calmly remained to survey the situation. He had noticed that there was no smoke, and everyone else had been too frightened to figure out what exactly had happened. Even his Indabosky principal had taken to his heels, like a chicken fleeing the knife. But Ayo had eventually found out that it was just a false alarm and that had earned him a heroic award. It had also earned him

Bola, his girlfriend. He was courageous and he knew better than to panic without a valid reason.

So, now, instead of giving over his peace of mind to the terrifying thoughts that plagued him as he walked through the market, he allayed his fears with the conclusion that there was a reasonable explanation for the seemingly deserted market. There was always an explanation. Or at least, that was what his Philosophy lecturer had said. "In the long run, logic always wins." Those were his words, while explaining the obvious reasons for God not being in existence. Ayo remembered his father's reaction when he declared the course of his dreams.

"Philosophy! Not in my house. You're just bent on embarrassing me, you this boy. You want to join all this people to start spitting rubbish all over the internet, abi? You want them to tell you that there's no God and an ape is your forefather. That's what you want to hear, sheybi? Ehn?! Answer me na or are you now deaf too?"

As a Nigerian child nurtured in a Nigerian home, Ayo had learnt that when your Nigerian parents were angry and requesting for a reply, the best way to save your head was to ignore that request and nod remorsefully. So, when his dad had rained down all those questions, Ayo knew he couldn't reply. His dad would not want to hear all the thoughts that plagued him. His dad would not want to know that he had never really being a Christian. His dad would not want to find out that the church was never in his heart. He wouldn't want to discover all of Ayo's jottings about evolution and the Big Bang Theory. He wouldn't want to read his blog posts on why there was no such thing as a Supreme Being. So, Ayo had kept quiet. Logic always wins.

"Maybe they have a meeting somewhere," he said. "Or maybe they were all summoned by the governor," he added when his doubts seemed to mock his explanations. "I'm sure something would have happened."

Dissatisfied with logic, he tried resuming his casual brisk pace but the whole situation was unsettling. He couldn't lie to himself; something had gone horribly wrong.

The Sunday School lessons he had taken when he hadn't yet gotten his independence and so, couldn't refuse going to church came back to haunt him. That woman's voice resounded in his mind. He had joked with his friends that she was just trying to "scare them out of hell" but the market now mocked his memories.

"Jesus is coming back again. And when the trumpet blows and He comes, it'd be too late for anyone who did not give their lives to Him. They would suffer on this earth for a long time before judgement finally befalls them. All of God's people who lived holy lives would ascend into heaven while the sinners remain on this earth. Markets would be abandoned..." The woman, who had once claimed to see a vision of hell never frightened Ayomide with her stories. They never got to him. He believed that hell and heaven would not matter once you were dead. But how would he know? He had never died.

He stopped as he remembered her words. Markets.... Markets... All his efforts to calm his pounding heart failed woefully. His long legs took control of his body. He was running. Running as fast as his legs could carry him, he hoped that when he got to the bus-stop, he would meet human beings like himself and all his fears would finally go to sleep. He got to the bus-stop panting and sweating profusely. Wiping the tears and sweat from his eyes, all he saw were empty yellow buses. The impatient drivers, the energetic conductors, and the dramatic passengers were all missing. What exactly was happening?

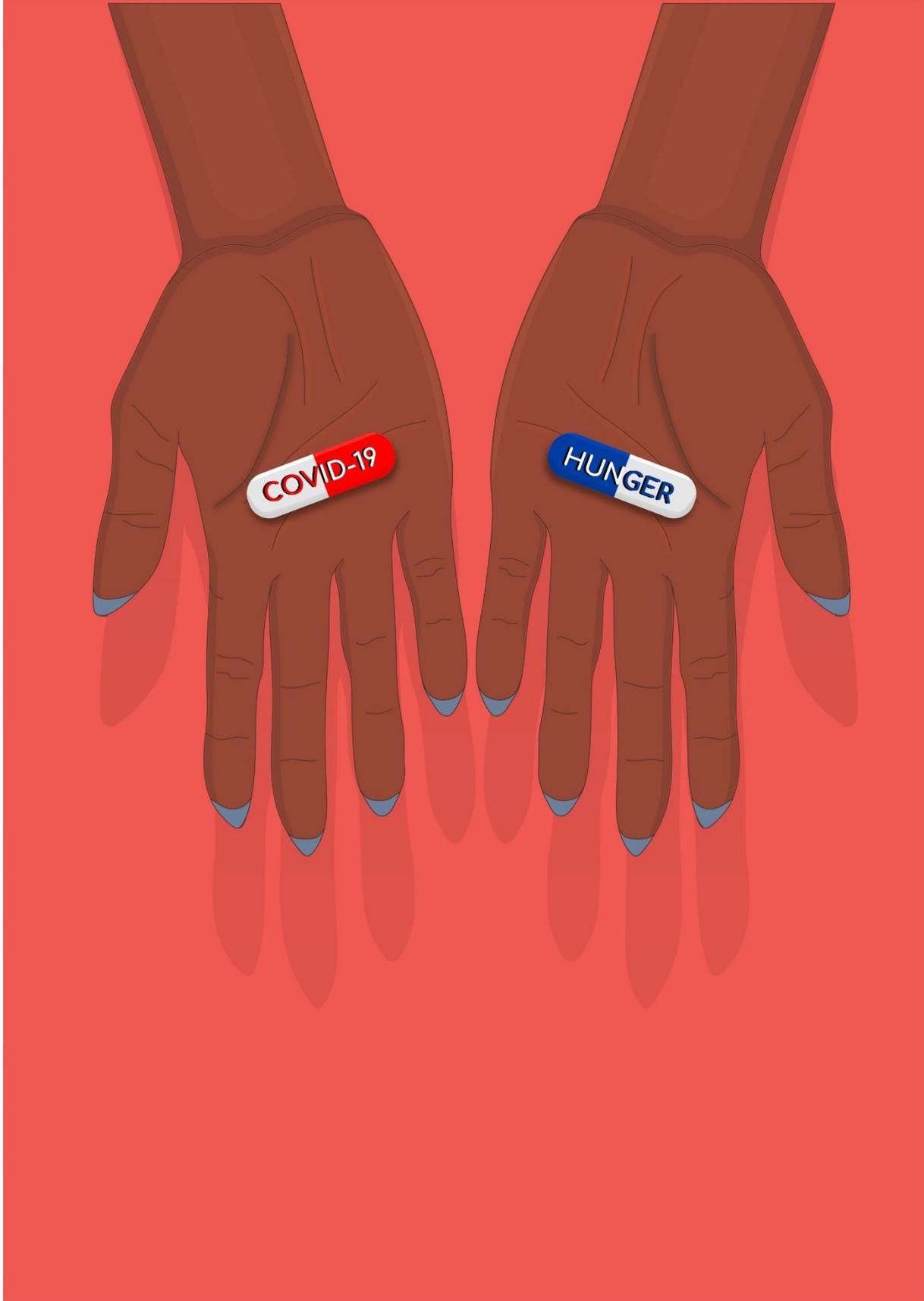
Had God really decided to step down from Heaven and teach him a lesson? Had his father's prayers for Deliverance finally been answered? Was today the day he'd descend into hell too? Would he get a second chance? What was to become of him? Ayomide knew one thing and one thing only. **THAT WAS THE END OF THE WORLD.** He was doomed. What was he to do? Was there a way out for him? He was definitely doomed.

He began to hear voices coming from the street down the bus-stop. Voices. Voices could only mean humans, and in one last desperate attempt to remain sane, he ran again. His sole goal was to get to where the voices were coming from and maybe he'd see where everyone was hiding. He ran and ran, the beeping on his wristwatch reminding him that he had been running for over an hour. He stopped when his watch beeped again and looked around. There was no living soul in sight.

Tears flooded his eyes as the voices filled his ears. Had he run mad? He continued running. But a cold hand reached his arm, stopping him dead in his tracks. The lump in his throat was now heavy. He couldn't cry. The tears refused to come. The hand tapped him again. He felt the hand but there was no human around. His heart was now making loud drumbeats in his chest, threatening to jump out. It was as if his heart was saying, "You're going to die. But I'm not dying with you," over and over again.

The hand tapped him continually, until he woke up. In a pool of sweat, amidst the loud pounding in his chest, he saw his sister who had saved him from the nightmare and he managed a weak smile.

"Of course, it was just a dream. Jesus is not coming back anytime soon," he muttered to himself and gently went back to sleep.



## HUNGER

Just like our grandfathers will always be haunted with chilly shivers by the stories of the World Wars and the Civil Wars, so will we never forget these dreadful times. Just as they showed us their carved scars, reflecting beauty from the warfront and told us the stories of the brave comrades who lost their lives in a war they knew nothing about, so will we always remember these times when hugs were forbidden, kisses were outrageous and romantic dates were unheard of.

In Lagos, when the world was still sane, you only stayed indoors if you were unfortunate or just lazy, or if you were nursing a child. Even if you were working remotely, you wouldn't think of spending all day at home, not to mention all week or God forbid, all month at home!

Now, though, we have taken on soldierly and we battle something lesser than humans but greater than us. Our heroes arose from the shadows of hospital passageways and decided to rescue us from the looming evil which ravaged our lands.

Armed with facial masks and lab coats as capes, they took to the warfront and battled the ugly virus with all they had. Isolated from their families, unable to do all they used to, with tears in their eyes, and their last ounce of strength failing, they beckoned on the rest of us to arise from our lazy slumbers and be responsible about the danger that threatened to swallow us all. All they pleaded with us to do was STAY INDOORS.

That was the instruction. It was their only instruction. It was their only plea, "Stay Indoors!"

"It definitely can't be that hard," we thought in our ignorance.

It can't be that hard for you to close your shop and stay at home. It can't be that hard to stay indoors and lock your doors. It can't be that hard to join the fight against this ugly virus and protect the rest of us left. It can't be that hard to lie on your couch all day while they risk their lives for you.

It can't be too difficult to do that project you've always wanted to do from the comfort of your home. We thought we were armed to do this like the courageous soldiers we were. We thought we could stand strong in unity and fight this by staying in our homes like we had been warned to. What we didn't know was that life was a long tunnel with dark hideous surprises hiding in every corner.

When he came, obviously sent by the raving ravenous beast, he met us in our homes. We were doing what our heroes had asked us to do. We were staying indoors when this beast came to assault us at home.

Here's how he attacks. He puts his hands on you, and you feel pangs in your stomach. Because he's unrelenting, he whacks you till your senses become numb and dizziness overwhelms you. Unable to endure for one more day, we cried out. Yes, we wanted to stay indoors like we were told to, but Hunger would not let us be. It had taken some of our children and our grandfathers. It had destroyed every bit of strength and loyalty we had in our bones. It had ruined us.

Soon, we became zombies, unable to listen to the warning cries of our heroes. Our feeble hands stretched out in front of us; our frail legs moving of their own accord, we defied all laws and went outside. We looked our heroes in the eyes and told them, "We're sorry, but we need to live to fight another day. We're sorry but we have to fight this hunger. We're sorry but we can't stay indoors."

*IF*

TMMRRW

*NEVER COMES.*

## IF TOMORROW NEVER COMES

Dear Friend,

I write this letter because I couldn't help but notice how you seem to love walking in my ugly footsteps. You do it even more devotedly than your mentor—me. I have been such a bad influence on you and it's up to me to try to change that.

"The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow." Are you familiar with this statement? No? Does Annie ring a bell? Still no? Well, never mind then.

This statement has always given hope to people in their darkest times. Or should I say it has always given me hope on those really dark days. Those gloomy days when it seemed like the sun had taken a vacation from all that shine, without realizing that she was leaving us all in darkness and gloom.

The sun really is a lady. How'd I know?

It's her mood swings. You should definitely have noticed that by now. When she's just fine, she shines warmly, hiding all her heat within the foamy clouds and giving you only a bit of temperature to prevent you from feeling too hot or too cold. She keeps you warm, like you should be as the warm-blooded being that you are.

When she's too happy, she forgets that she should be in hiding within the clouds and she comes out in all her splendor and fiery-ness. You're left wondering what you did wrong to be punished with such a "hot weather". And when she's too sad, she stays away, leaving you with a dark day and a gloomy atmosphere. It's on these days we try to console ourselves with, "Oh! The sun will come out tomorrow" and we go on and on singing about how much we love tomorrow.

At least that's how it was in that movie.

But, what if tomorrow never comes?

I know you said you'd start that life-changing project tomorrow. I remember you decided that you'd ask her how out tomorrow . I know you promised to end things with that toxic friend or toxic lover tomorrow. But darling, what if tomorrow never comes?

I'm sure God looks at us from where He abides in all Supremacy and Glory and can't help but laugh sadly at us, when we postpone the things that matter till tomorrow like we all now see the future. We think we know for sure what tomorrow holds, but the sad truth is we don't.

You don't know if you're going to be a millionaire by tomorrow, neither do you know if tomorrow's rain would take your roof with it. All we have is today and that's why Master Oogway made this clear; Yesterday is the past, so stop worrying about it because it really won't change anything. Tomorrow is the future and you can't predict that either. But Today is the gift we have and we should treasure it. That's why it's called "The Present."

I know I'm just a young lady who still lives with her parents and all, but here's my little advice. Live every day like it was your last. Yes, tidy up those loose ends. Make up with that friend. Speak to that lover. Call your mum. Find your purpose. Do everything you can do today so that if tomorrow never comes, you'd have little to no regrets.

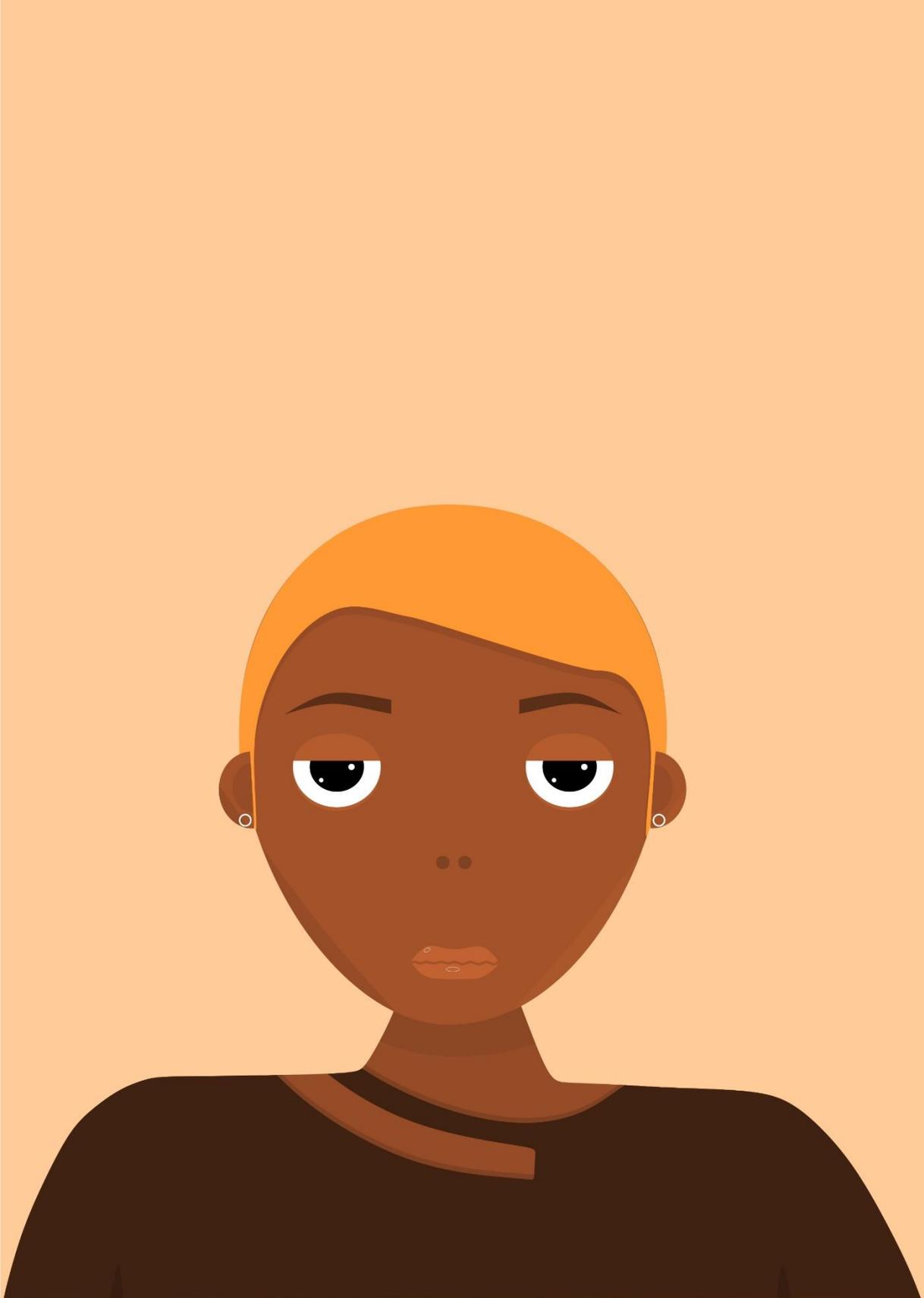
PS: I should probably post this letter today, but I'll definitely do it tomorrow. Yeah, I know I've been saying that for two weeks now but tomorrow is the day you'll get this letter. And if tomorrow never comes?

I can't answer that, my dear friend.

Yours Faithfully,

The Unrelenting Procrastinator.





## BOREDOM, HER INSANITY

Tola and I had been friends right from our first years at the university. We bonded after a game of scrabble and nothing could separate us. Despite our contrasting personalities, we maintained this understanding and unbreakable friendship.

I was an unrepentant introvert. I would rather spend all day with my head buried in books than to risk interacting with people, while Tola was the jovial one who couldn't stay two hours indoors. She always joked about how she'd run mad if she had to stay indoors for a whole day and although I didn't believe her then, now, I couldn't help but fear for my friend's sanity. Boredom was driving her mad.

Yesterday, when she called, we spent almost two hours on the phone. Most of the time was spent listening to her curse China and every other person she suspected for having a hand in the unfortunate pandemic that had condemned her to a life of "introvertism". And when she suddenly switched to a serious round of prayer, begging God to forgive her sins and just take the pandemic away, I knew something was way off. This one month had been beyond torture and she just couldn't take it anymore.

Personally, I was engrossed in a book I had been wanting to read for a long time, "God's Generals" before she called and although I truly love her, I just wanted to get back to my book. This was why when she called today, I let the phone ring for two minutes before I finally picked up.

"Look out your window and what do you see?" she asked me. As always, she ignored the conventional use of Hellos and went straight to the matter of the day.

"Birds, trees, houses, and sunshine." I replied, wondering what she was up to this time.

"Are you sure?" she asked again.

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