

Freckles, Frames, and Fresh Starts

I have never felt true warmth. This realization lingers in my thoughts, drawing a faint smile to my lips, at least something's constant in my life. It is unfortunate how true this is, ironic even because I'm known for my "warm" smile by the peddlers of any and every information.

Struggling to open my eyes which are currently being attacked by the light rays seeping in through a crack in the wall, I groan and struggle to roll over. Bam! I land on the floor and my breath hitches, I had completely forgotten about the size of my precious bed. Lord knows I needed to save up for a larger frame or succumb to this every other day.

Lying on the floor isn't completely bad, I'm there most of the time so trust me on this. For starters the tiles are thankfully still in perfect shape and are almost always clean, well excluding the splotch of paint I still haven't been able to completely wipe off. I open my eyes and turn to look at the occupant of my thoughts, it seemed to emit a faint glow and I thought back to the day it happened.

Back from taking yet another long, long evening stroll with sounds from the cave blasting through my earbuds, I walk into the compound, stopping for a minute to say hello to the security man at the gate. He's a frail man in his early fifties, with prominent wrinkles on his forehead and laugh lines around his mouth and eyes, eyes that always look like they've traveled far and wide, and witnessed things too sacred to mention.

I proceed to take the five minute walk to my own side of the vast building; closer to the garden and further away from the main entrance, slightly hidden by banana leaves that had spread from over the neighbor's fence into ours. My landlord had complained times without number but the security man and myself shared an inside joke about how he most likely had a crush on the occupant of the compound and was too chicken to go over and lay a proper complaint, instead choosing to mumble and grumble everytime he walked past. I had "caught" him once gently caressing the large healthy leaves when he thought no one was looking. I use the word caught because it felt like I was intruding on a private moment.

Stepping into my flat I'm welcomed by the faint scent of lemon. My ever-hyper neighbor always liked to visit until he left county about a year ago, talking about "your house always leaves me feeling so happy and clean, warm even" I usually responded with a laugh and sometimes nursed a bit of envy; I

had never felt that way, I just like lemon scented stuff. I perform my routine of turning on the lights while flinging my socks and Nike slides to a corner, I'd sort that out tomorrow. Walking into the kitchen, I stand arms akimbo and think of what to fill my tummy with. Bread, mayo, eggs, half empty jar of Pringles, two jars of homemade chinchin from my mum.. I list them in my head as I look through each cabinet and the student-sized refrigerator I had. Chinchin and zobo it is then, it felt like the perfect choice since I was going to spend most of the night painting in my room. Reclining on the countertop, I proceed to feast and scroll on Twitter, liking each art post I come across and saving random images that caught my attention.

An empty jar and an hour later, I found myself in the shower, watching the droplets ripple down my chest, between my breasts and disappear between my legs. The shower was the only place I could really reflect on and replay the activities of the entire day. The danfo driver who screamed at me and proceeded to apologize after other passengers berated him for transferring his aggression to someone who hadn't spoken a single word besides a quiet "good evening" to the man seated beside her. The hawkker who got in my face and blew a trail of hot musky breath trying to get me to purchase something off her tray. The shop owners close to the bus stop who called out "my colour, black and shine come now I get cargo trouser in your size" The middle-aged man with a distinctive accent who said "fine girl, my customer you wan buy gold today?" Mind you this is someone I had never met. The lanky man who kept walking beside me, trying to shove framed pictures of curtains in my face saying "I get any type of curtain you want"

I let out a low chuckle as the events replayed themselves in my mind and smiled as the water washed all of that away, from the top of my head, and in-between my toes. I walked out feeling tired but clean, I'll take that as a good thing. Picked out a comfortable tee and stood in front of my canvass. I'm neither an artist nor talented in that field but I had always felt drawn to paintbrushes and earthy colours.

A few thousand brushstrokes later, I was staring at something I couldn't decipher but I felt content. I felt thirsty and thought to stand, and didn't notice the splotch that had strayed from the protective layer I placed on the floor, next thing I knew, I was on the floor. Too weak to do anything about the situation I proceeded to fall asleep there with a paintbrush in my hand.

I look at that stain now and sigh, I could just as well stop trying to get it out, it doesn't entirely look that bad. For breakfast I decide on a mug of coffee, and cradle it in my hands, inhaling the calming and familiar aroma it emitted. At least that's another constant thing in my life. I had a long day ahead, an interview at 1pm and before that I needed to submit a couple of articles I had stayed up to edit.

At 12:45 pm, I walk past my reflection on the large framed mirrors positioned in parts of the building complex and take a step back to stare. Pants tailored to fit my 5'10 frame, paired with a long sleeved chiffon shirt, an inch high pair of black heels, braids up in a bun, freckles prominent in the bright light and my signature lip gloss combo. I plaster a small smile on my face and walk up the staircase, to the second floor.

It had been a week since the interview and I hadn't gotten any feedback yet, job hunting really isn't for the weak. I was working on yet another painting I couldn't decipher when my phone rang. I turned my head slightly and saw "mum ♡" flashing on the screen.

"Hello ma"

"Guy, how far" she mimics my usual response to my siblings and friends over the phone. We both laugh for a few minutes.

"Bawo"

"I'm fine ma, how are you?"

"We bless God. How far with your writing?"

"It's going slowly but we bless God."

"Maa worry, my God is able. He will send a helper your way and bring more jobs."

"Amen ma, thank you ma."

"I hope you're hearing from egbon and your siblings?"

"Yes ma, I spoke with them some days ago."

"Okay, ehen.." she proceeds to relay information about some people I'm supposed to know, and how one of them had lost a leg in an accident, going on about a new Hausa neighbor who had moved in and frequented the house with spicy dishes.

She signs off with a prayer and I hear the call disconnect. I hold on to the phone for a while longer and sigh, I should really go see this woman, it's been two years and some months already. I make a mental note to do that and continue to caress the canvass with my brush.

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It's midday when I'm woken up by spasms in my lower back and let out a long hiss of pain. My head throbs badly. I need to get to a hospital but not today. I lay still and breathe deeply, trying to channel my pain somewhere else. After forty-five minutes I open my eyes and feel sweat on my body, safe to say

it worked. My mother had always warned against sleeping bare chested, cautioning against leaving the windows open because I was and still very prone to cold. I never complied. I sat up slowly and rested my back on the head frame, today was going to be really long. Placing my hand on my face, I feel a stubble growing, I hadn't exactly shaved in three days so.. I twist my ankle to the left and right, it barely hurt anymore since the last time I sprained it playing football with the guys. Speaking of the guys, we were supposed to hangout at the bar later this evening. Hopefully I'm not burned out by the time I get back from the office, battling traffic and the gym. Thinking about all of that makes me groan but the smell of breakfast cleared my head for a minute. Wait, breakfast? I look towards the floor and it all comes back; hot sizzling romance. That's all I remember, trying to sieve out details of the activity and remember the face of the person that had followed me to my house, again. Dark, curvy and soft in the right places. I slap my thighs twice and stand up, trailing the aroma of coffee and fried eggs.

It's 6:45 pm and I'm on my way home. Before pulling out of the building complex I stop to say goodnight to the young men positioned at the security unit and drive out with the sounds of "oga sir!" in my wake. Throughout the day I couldn't get a face out of my mind, her features bold and soft at the same time, rushing past me on the staircase, towards the second floor. She mumbled a quick "good morning" as she took the steps two at a time, leaving me too stunned to respond. Her presence left a trail of something fresh and citrusy, and continued to linger in my thoughts the whole day. It had been three whole weeks and she hadn't left my thoughts for a second. Okay, okay that might be a stretch but you get my point. The thought of seeing her again made my insides warm and a smile remained on my face the whole ride home.

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It's Saturday again and I decide to go for a run. I suit up, pick up my headphones and leave. I almost bump into a neighbor I'd been avoiding for weeks and backtrack fast. She'd been trying to get me to visit for awhile and I wasn't about to do that anytime soon. There's no way I was willing to become a "fellow wife" to the same man. I watch her leave the compound and count to fifty. I had unintentionally memorized her "outside the gate" routine. We definitely won't cross paths again, at least not today.

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To run or not to run. I've been on the couch debating this for over an hour. After getting in pretty late yesterday from hanging out with these boys, I couldn't even get to my room and just decided to fall

asleep on the couch. This might not be practical but I liked to take walks to help with a hangover. I'm still debating on whether to stand up or not when my phone chimes, I look at the screen and see "Boniface" Why in God's name is this man calling me at, I look towards the wall clock, 6:45 am. The call ends and immediately resumes, I pick up weary and respond to his already booming question.

"Where you put phone? I don't call like five times"

"Bros, it's too early to lie"

He lets out a loud laugh and succumbs to a fit of cough for a few minutes, with me mumbling "sorry, sorry"

"I heard you left early yesterday, is everything alright?"

I'm about to deny when it occurred to me, I did leave the club early, but where did I go..

"Nothing actually, I just wanted to get in earlier than usual"

He makes a sound that indicates he didn't buy that but refrains from asking.

"Are you sure you're good?"

"Since when do you care" I jokingly ask

"Oh c'monnnnn, I'm the love of your life, I have to care"

"Wo, it's getting too bright, I need to prepare.."

"For what?" He cuts me off before I could proceed

"I'm going to take a walk, or run, or jog, whichever my legs can achieve"

"Alright no wahala, hit me up when you get back"

I nod, forgetting he couldn't see me then proceed to end the call.

Guess I was going for a walk then. I pick up my discarded tie and jacket as I walk towards my room, dumping them on the bed and hopping into the shower, whistling a tune I must have picked up on my journey home during the week. My mum used to find it funny how eager I was for bath time as a toddler, going as far as to question if she had accidentally asked a water spirit for a child during her numerous visits to prayer centers before I was born.

After about fifteen minutes, I eventually stepped outside and decided on a slow walk first before anything.

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I had been jogging/walking for more than an hour now, I should really begin to head back. A rumble came from my stomach as if in response to my thoughts, I guess I wasn't the only one tired. It would take me about forty-five minutes to get back to my street if I slow walked and that seemed fine enough.

I decide to checkout the new row of houses on the next street before mine, prolonging my journey by another fifteen minutes. It didn't take long to notice other people jogging, walking or straight up running. Everybody seemed to be involved in some form of exercise in this Lagos. I chuckle and bring out my phone to switch songs, missing a gutter, and a car reversing towards me by an inch and eventually falling flat on my back while trying to move back.

I curse angrily and try to stand up when my view of the sun was blocked by a shadow.

"Are you alright? Here, let me help you"

Before I could respond with a "Thank you" the individual exclaims

"It's you!"

I look up at him, confused but he had a grin that suggested he definitely knew me from somewhere.

Remember what I said at the beginning, about never having felt true warmth? Well, I have a feeling that's about to change.