

Fuel prices have gone up threefold but Mama Nkami's rice still sells at the same price. Every day she stands beside Lawanson bus stop selling food at the same rates she was selling them before the pandemic.

Sometimes I wonder how she gets the funds to subsidize her meals; and if there is no subsidy at work, where then does she get her items cheaper than everyone else? Is there something she's doing, or are the other vendors just taking advantage of the new policies and developments to extort money from us?

I sigh and step outside my mind, concluding that I might never know. I dust my feet against each other before fitting them into my fluffy work slippers. My day has just begun.

I open up WhatsApp to check in for the day. It's one of the first things I do before I start work officially. Since the pandemic, some companies have adopted the remote style of working, while others have decided to make it hybrid, meaning that employees would have to come to work on certain days of the week and work from home on other days.

When the pandemic hit, everyone was caught unaware. Everyone knows that living in Lagos leaves you more exposed to international disasters faster than normal. Yet, no one saw the Corona pandemic coming.

Up until it reached the state, it never crossed my mind that we too could be wearing face masks, and living in isolation like the people we saw in the news we watched. And even after it hit, I had no idea that it would change my life the way it did.

The first week after it got into Lagos, my company's HR, Saheed, announced that we could keep coming to work, but warned us in his familiar baritone that we should come to work with sanitizers and facemasks. He said the disease was deadly and that we should do all we can to keep ourselves safe to avoid any stories.

Those weeks were very uncomfortable.

Because I was a people person—one who liked to touch people while I spoke to them—the sudden switch in communication took a long time for me to get used to. What do you mean that I can't hug Ronke straight from the door like before? Or hit Afeez's shoulder while we laugh at memes on the internet? What's this new technique of rubbing elbows as a form of greeting, and who thought it was a wise thing to do? I had so many questions.

Just like I predicted, we all began to drift apart. Everybody began to stay on their own. The company had to build cubicles so that each worker would have their own private space. And because of that, we had fewer conversations each day. The sounds of our laughter no longer rang through the office during recess anymore. It was now every man for himself.

For me, the social butterfly who couldn't work without gisting occasionally with my coworkers, life became extremely hard. My job, which I used to love before, soon became a chore. And the whole security consciousness campaigns weren't helping matters. Instead, they gave me a different kind of anxiety; one that made me wonder if all these were ever going to end.

However, I would have chosen this version of life over what happened next.

About a month after the whole pandemic precautions had crept into the office, the Lagos government decided to take things a notch higher. They put out a notice asking for the shutdown of all the markets, churches, mosques, stores, and offices. No gatherings of more than 20 people were allowed, even at events. The once lively Lagos was put to sleep with no hopes of being awakened again. Activities were on pause. Saturday parties—popularly known as *owambes*—became a crime. And with any small transgression against these laws, the police would arrest everybody in the gathering and use that as a means to extort money from them.

Everything I'd planned to do that year was flushed down the drain with a new purpose assigned to me; to survive.

The raids were so bad that the only times I could leave my house was when I had to get more facemasks and hand sanitizers, and it was often such a drag. The queues were too long, and the space was usually

filled up. And if you eventually met facemask-to-facemask with the cashier, they would check your items, take your card, and give you a receipt before sending you on your way by signaling the next person to come up, all without saying a word to you.

As for work, we were now expected to deliver our tasks from home since going to the office was no longer an option. Every morning, we'd check in with Saheed, our HR, and proceed to do our job from 9-5.

Every meeting was held on a Zoom or Meet call with everybody's mic on mute while the Team Lead, HR, or CEO spoke. No snide remarks, side talks, or inside jokes. We all had to listen to their boring voices in silence as they read out our tasks for the week or gave us reports of how the month went.

This new mode of working was exceptionally hard for me because I needed to be around people to function. So, for many weeks I struggled, receiving endless queries, in the form of voice notes, from Saheed who noticed that I wasn't adapting easily to the new system.

However, whether I adapted easily or not, it didn't matter to Lender when they made up their minds to lay us off.

To summarize what they said—without all the formal jargon, of course—they didn't have the money to retain us, the staff, so they had to let us go. According to them, this was just a temporary setback. They promised that we'd be called back as soon as the pandemic was over.

To say that I was dazed was an understatement. I couldn't understand how a startup as big as Lender could do something as crazy and inhumane as this. How did they expect us to survive the pandemic without a job? Where did they expect us to get another job?

However, over time, I realized that business was business. And it didn't matter whether your sister was working with you, if you had to lay her off to save capital, you would do it and send her children gifts the next holiday to pacify her.

But as someone who had worked so hard to mark my footprint in that company, I knew I didn't deserve to be laid off like that.

So, just like that, I was rendered jobless during the pandemic because Lender couldn't afford to pay my bills anymore. But I soon moved on. With the great experience I had garnered in Lender and the other companies I had worked with before them, I managed to secure myself a job at a different tech startup, Quiver.

Quiver was a fintech startup that focused on making debit cards that allowed its users to make transactions anywhere around the world. The company had just begun in the pandemic, and they didn't have much funds to run with, so in a way, they were below my league.

However, I didn't have a choice. It was either I accepted it or got ravaged by hunger and lack, and I chose the former. The good thing was that, like Lender, they worked remotely too, so I could stay home all day eating biscuits and attending meetings in my pajamas.

In a sense, this was good, safe, something my mother would call wise. However, the extrovert in me didn't like it. I wanted to party. I wanted to flex. I didn't like to admit it, but I missed those club girls at G23 who could grind you for a few naira notes. I missed the proverbial Lagos life; the one that let me stay out from Saturday night till 5 am on Sunday mornings.

I was craving a mini party so badly, and just like the universe always does, it brought one my way before the end of August that year. Quadri, my guy from work, was celebrating his thirtieth birthday, and he was organizing a secret party at his house to celebrate it. He said there would be good music, booze, and most importantly, girls.

The good thing was that Quadri lived in a remote part of Lagos, and the pandemic restrictions weren't as tight for them as it was for us living on the mainland. So I went and had a good time, and returned to my house grateful that the whole thing went well, and that we didn't get in trouble with the police.

However, a few weeks later, I found myself sprawled across the floor, on Onipede Street, struggling to breathe.

I had been coming back from a pharmacy around the area one evening when I slumped and started gasping for air. There were a few people on the street, but no one came to my rescue. Some came around and poked their heads to see what was going on, but ran away as soon as they saw how bad it was.

Since they didn't know what was going on, they probably determined that it was best they stayed away to protect themselves from whatever it was that was going on with me. However, Jamal dared to be different.

Jamal was my neighbor who lived on the last floor and was somewhat friendly with me. He could speak very little English, so he avoided conversations with people. But I used to joke around with him sometimes and greet him whenever I was going out.

As far as I can remember, Jamal was the one who had carried me in his arms, running and cursing in Hausa while others watched from a distance in fear. The general hospitals were filled up, and nobody was being attended to. So, Jamal carried me in his arms and ran to the private hospital which stood ten streets away because there were no cars on the road to help him with that; the streets were empty as they had been since the spread of the pandemic.

We eventually got to see a doctor, and they placed me on oxygen immediately because I was slowly losing my breath. However, as usual, the treatments didn't begin fully until my sister paid the bills at the counter.

Jamal opened my phone with my fingerprint, found my sister's number in my contact list, and called her. And because his English wasn't solid, he gave the doctor the phone to explain what had happened.

I heard that she flew into a panic and ran down to the hospital, leaving her 3 children with her husband in a heartbeat. And when she was around, she made sure I got all the treatment I needed to get whole.

For the following weeks, I battled sore throats, body aches, migraines, and all kinds of pain. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't relax. At some point, I wanted to die, and at another, I was hoping that I would get to live.

And I did get to live. After a whole month of fighting for my life, I made my way home with my sister, only to find out that Quiver had also laid me off while I was away. So there I was, once again, with another apology merch box in hand and no job in sight. But that didn't matter. I was alive and well with enough food in my fridge to last me until I got another job.

A few days after I got back, I decided to leave my apartment and take a stroll down the street just like I used to. Along the way, I planned to stop by Jamal's place to appreciate him for all he had done for me.

But when I got to his place, I saw a few slender men dressed like Northerners, walking in and out of Jamal's place, conversing hastily in their language. Some were carrying boxes, some were holding bags, while some were carrying plates and cups. It looked like Jamal was packing out of the house.

I stopped and asked them for Jamal. They looked at me confused for a while until one of them—the only one who could understand English, apparently—stopped and told me that Jamal was dead; he had died of the virus.

In his broken English, he told me that Jamal had gotten the virus from a man he had rushed to the hospital who had the disease. He lamented to me, like I was his long-lost friend, asking me why Jamal would do something like that without putting his family into consideration. He then asked me after a while if I was Jamal's friend and I nodded slowly before walking away. He exclaimed and shouted condolences after me, as though it was their fault that he had died instead of mine.

I walked down the lonely streets, and for the first time, it hit me that we might never make it out of the pandemic alive. Now that Jamal was dead, I wondered who was next.

So many questions ran through my mind. Because my eyes went dizzy for a while, I remember stopping at some point and sitting on the floor so that I wouldn't fall. I assumed that the streets were empty and that no one was watching me. But even if they were, I honestly didn't care at that point.

I felt so guilty. It was my fault that I had caught the virus. If I had just stayed at home and avoided Quadri's party, maybe I wouldn't have gotten infected, and maybe Jamal would still be here.

I wondered why he put his life on the line for me, what his family would do now that he was gone, and how his wife and kids in Sokoto would cope.

For weeks I sat at home, drowning in depression, guilt, and self-hate. And even after the government lifted the bans on movements and gatherings completely, I still struggled to leave my house. I no longer took walks or went to the pharmacy. I stayed in until I couldn't anymore.

My food stash was running down and I still didn't have a job. So, to avoid putting any more pressure on my sister to provide for me, I upskilled and applied to a vacant role at a traditional company; I was done with tech startups.

Eventually, I got the job and was able to improve both my work and living conditions. However, till today, the cloud of guilt still hangs over my head, and every time I get an invitation to a party or a random event, I remember that Jamal would have been here if I hadn't gone to that secret party during the pandemic.