

To: Nneka  
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*Content Warning: Suicide*

The second time death crossed my mind, I was seated in the fifth row of a train headed to a place I'd never visited before. I watched the clouds billow by, while cradling a wicker basket full of tropical fruits. The basket was topped with a sprawling bow and a card addressed to "Nneka."

Unlike the first time I had mulled over the prospect of death, this instance wasn't brought on by any painful experiences. No, this time it was spurred by a very important matter.

"Excuse me, miss, do you have your ticket?" The train attendant towered over me, holding out his gloved hand.

"Oh yes, of course." I shot a polite smile as I rummaged through my back pockets. Then my jacket pocket. Then inside the basket itself, where I found the ticket lodged between two large ripe mangoes. The attendant ripped the ticket and returned my half before moving on to the couple behind me.

I returned to my thoughts. Surprisingly, death was no longer a sad or scary concept to me. In my childhood, when storm clouds would come rolling in and the man on the television would say "stay safe folks, and stay indoors if you can," I'd hide under my bed. There I'd count down from ten over and over again, tears staining my cheeks, until the storm passed. Each time, I was convinced it was the end. And I was terrified of the looming prospect of the end of life.

As an adult, life scared me much more than death ever did. Storms and ghosts no longer sent chills down my spine. Rather, I'd grown much more frightened of the zombie I, and others, had become. We mindlessly shuffled our feet to and fro, here and there, hungry for *something* but never satisfied. Haunted by our guilt. Haunted by our worries. Haunted by the ever-present feeling of loneliness that followed behind us like a shadow.



At the train stop, I watched people tearfully reunite with family, or stop and check the map hanging on the wall for directions to their final destination, or hurriedly shuffle about as if they were late for a very important meeting. Meanwhile, I sat on a bench with a map open and my basket beside me, hoping to gain some sense of direction.

As I sat, a burly man with a thick, coily mustache sunk into the bench beside me. He wore a dark trench coat that swept the floor as he moved and his kinky hair had a sharp part cut into it. I brazenly watched as he pulled a cigarette from his breast pocket then fumbled around in various pockets looking for something. "Hey," he looked at me now, examining my basket. "You happen to have a lighter in that basket of yours?"

I shook my head. "Only mangoes and guava." I had forgotten about the papaya.

"Mangoes, eh?" He ceased his search and rubbed his palms on his thighs. "I hate to ask but— mind if I have one?"

I avoided the man's gaze and pulled the basket closer to me. I wasn't a selfish person in any way, and had the basket been mine I would have surely handed over a mango, maybe two, but they had belonged to my mother and now they belonged to Nneka.

"You could just say no." The man huffed and sat back into the bench. His foot began to nervously tap.

"Well, no. Sorry."

"I get it. I get it." The man exhaled deeply. "Listen, I'm just nervous, is all. I've got my big interview coming up— and I know I shouldn't be smoking or, or stress eating but...this interview, it's driving me crazy."

"Don't worry," I assured him, "I'm sure you'll knock it out of the park."

"Hey, thanks." He smiled briefly, "But you don't know me, or how I've lived, so being sure seems a bit insincere. Don't you think?"

"This is true."

"Well, now you're just being overly agreeable."

I shrugged my shoulders and stared into my basket for a moment. The two of us sat in uncomfortable silence before I got to my feet. "Well good luck with the interview. I hope you're able to move on."

The man grunted.



Outside of the train station were shiny yellow cabs lined up to whisk people away to whichever faraway place they were meant to end up. I chose a cab manned by a delicate-looking woman with large, desperate eyes and long, tiny braids. As I approached her, she rolled down her passenger side window.

"You know where you're heading sweetie?" The woman almost whispered as she spoke.

"I know where I'm heading but I don't know how to get there. Maybe this will help?" I plucked Nneka's card from my wicker basket and handed it to the driver. She opened it, gently, and read its contents. As she read each line, her face dropped from a look of almost sad resignation to that of complete devastation.

"Come on in. I've got ya." The driver unlocked the car doors and I slid into the backseat.

"You're a good daughter, you know?" The woman glanced at me through her rearview window as she spoke. "You came a long way when you really didn't have to."

"I had to. I didn't have a choice."

"We all have choices. Believe it or not. And most people choose themselves in the end. You chose family."

*I chose family.* Just like my mother did. Over the years her home was always full of life. Many cousins, uncles, and aunties used her house as a rest stop before journeying on. When they'd arrive we'd clean every corner of the place and prepare them baskets of fruit grown from her tiny garden. As time ticked on our yearly ritual turned into a monthly ritual. It was overwhelming for me, but mother always loved hearing voices in the halls and basking in the warm presence of family. But sadly, Nneka never stopped by. And she was all my mother cared about. Sometimes it felt she loved Nneka, even in her absence, much more than she loved me.

After what felt like an eternity the cab stopped in front of a tiny home surrounded by a lush, sprawling garden. Tropical fruits grew from every tree.

The woman turned to lay her desperate eyes on me. They seemed even larger now than before. "Here's your stop. Good luck dear."

I gave her a nod as a "thank you" and carried my basket to the front door of the house. The cab stayed parked behind me. I took a deep breath before knocking on the door. *Thump, thump, thump.* I stood back and waited.

A few seconds passed before I heard light footsteps grow louder and louder. Then a young woman's voice spoke through the door. "Are you here to force me to an interview? I already said I'm fine right here. I don't need to visit that place. I *need* to tend to my garden."

"Yes," my voice cracked as I spoke. "I'm here to convince you to interview. And to let me take your place here."

The door swung open and there stood Nneka. She was taller than I'd imagined, with wilder hair than her photos, and much sadder eyes. "Dami? What are you doing *here*?"

Although I knew she must know of me, it surprised me still that she knew my name. I fumbled with my basket a bit as I recited the speech I'd been rehearsing for years. "My entire life, mother couldn't love me wholly, because your absence filled up all the space in her heart. And all my life I knew she would *never* be whole if she couldn't see you again. So—" I stood up straighter for emphasis on my final point. "So I came here to convince you to take the interview and leave this place. Go and see mother like our uncles and aunts and cousins did when they passed. So she can die happy."

Nneka sighed heavily as she leaned onto the doorframe and crossed her arms. She looked down at her feet guiltily. "You know, I haven't visited but I've heard about you. I know the very thought of death used to have you shaking in your little boots. And now here you are, fearless. How did you get here?"

"I followed your footsteps." I handed Nneka her card. It was a handwritten note, from me.

Nneka's face twisted into a look of misery as she read and tears streamed down her cheeks. "Oh Dami, no. You didn't."

"I spoke to cousin after cousin as they passed by and bit by bit I learned about this in-between place. I knew this is where you must be, turning down their offers to take your place here so you can move on. I know you couldn't bear life on Earth, neither could I—" I held back tears before continuing on. "But please take the interview and visit mother one last time. She's sick, Nneka, and she *needs* to see you again."

“Look what I’ve done. To her. To you. I can’t face her—”

“You have to. She blames herself, you know. And if she dies with any guilt in her heart she’ll end up stuck in this place too.”

Nneka looked away. “I won’t pass the interview. I was selfish. They’ll turn me away.”

“You weren’t selfish. You were *hurting*. No one there will blame you for that.”

“I can’t leave you here. Mother will be devastated, just like she was when she lost me—”

I shook my head. “She’s on her deathbed. She’ll soon fade away and won’t ever notice I’m gone.” I forced a smile to reassure her. “And you can both come back here for me eventually. Then we can all move on together,” I lied. I knew there was no returning to the in-between once you take an interview. A successful interview granted you a one-way ticket to reconcile with the ones you left behind, and then you move on to your final destination—the After. I needed mother to ascend to the After. If she ended up in-between, with no one left on Earth to reconcile with, her heart would be so heavy she would never leave. “Take these to her. She said they were your favorites.” I handed Nneka the basket. “She’s always offering them to every soul who stops by before moving on. It’ll be a nice gesture.”

Nneka held the basket in her arms as she cried. “You know, I wish I could have lived to be the older sister you needed.”

“You can be that sister right now. If you go. Please, she doesn’t have much time.”

Nneka wiped the tears from her eyes and flashed a weak, but loving smile. “Ok, I’ll go. For you. And for her. And I’ll come back for you. I will.”

I could see a seed of hope growing behind her eyes. Meanwhile, the seed of guilt in my soul grew like a weed.



I waved goodbye with a warm smile as Nneka left in the cab, cradling her wicker basket in her arms. The driver gave me one last, sad look before disappearing into the greenery with my sister. I sat on the steps of my new home and let out a sigh of relief so heavy it felt like I’d waited a lifetime to release it. Mother would finally be happy. She would finally be with her Nneka.