**BLACKOUT CITY: WE WHO LIVED BELOW**

By Sonia Benjoye

**📓 Tomiwa’s Journal — Entry 001**

**Chapter One – The Night It Died**

I don’t even know why I’m writing this. Maybe because it’s the only thing I can still do.

The light went off last night. At 8:14. I remember the time because Kelechi was watching cartoon and laughing. Then the screen just froze. Went black. He shouted like it was my fault.

At first I laughed. Then I stopped.

Usually the light comes back. Sometimes in thirty minutes. Sometimes in five hours. But it always comes.

This time it didn’t.

The fan slowed down and stopped.   
 The fridge made a tired sound and went quiet.   
 Even the air felt like it gave up.

At first it felt like just another outage. People opened windows. Someone played music from their phone. The estate group chat started jumping. Complaints, memes, voice notes.

Then silence.

By midnight, even the chat had died. No more messages. No more signal. No calls. Nothing.

I kept checking my phone like it would suddenly start working again. It didn’t. I opened the window wider. I stood on the balcony and looked around. No lights anywhere. Not in our compound. Not on the street. Just dark.

The kind that presses on your skin.

Kelechi fell asleep on the floor with the fan remote still in his hand. I didn’t want to move him. It was too hot to carry anything.

Mama had gone out just before the light went. She said she was going to get fuel. Only twenty minutes, she said. That was over twelve hours ago.

I tried not to panic. I boiled water with the little gas we had left. Ate plain bread. Used torchlight only when necessary. I kept thinking maybe she would walk in with a plastic bottle full of black fuel and say something like, “Did you miss me?”

But she didn’t.

The next morning the sun came up looking strange. Red. Not beautiful red. Angry red. I don’t know if it was dust or smoke or something worse. It made everything look tired.

I walked to the gate. Nobody was talking. Just quiet movements. Eyes that didn’t want to meet. I saw two cars at the junction that had crashed into each other. Their owners were standing beside them, not arguing, not shouting. Just... there.

Someone said the whole city was out. Another said it might be the whole country. I don’t know. I couldn’t confirm. Nothing was loading. Phones were dead. Even the radio was just empty sound.

Still no Mama.

I don’t know how long this will last. I don’t even know if I’m writing this for myself or for someone else. Maybe one day someone will find this notebook and know we were still here. That we tried.

My name is Tomiwa.

And this is the night everything started to end.

**📓 Entry 002**

**Chapter Two – Water First, Then Fear**

I thought we had more water.

I really thought we did. I filled two buckets from the bathroom the day the light went. I didn’t use much. I swear. Just a little to wash our hands. A small cup for Kelechi to drink. A few scoops to rinse my face. And now the bucket is almost empty.

I stared at it for a long time today. Just stood over it and watched the way the water moved when I breathed near it. It looked thin. Like it knew it was running out.

Kelechi asked if he could bathe. I told him no. He asked why. I told him the water was not safe to waste. He pouted and said I was being wicked. I told him to sit by the window where it was cooler. He sat there and didn’t talk to me for a while.

The fridge smells like heat and rot. The air is dry. The floor is dusty. The silence is different now. Not peaceful. Just tired.

I went down to see if there was water left in the compound tank. I saw the woman from Block B standing there with her wrapper loose and her eyes swollen. She looked like someone who had cried the whole night and then forgot why.

She asked me if I had water. I said no.

She didn’t believe me.

I went to the back tap. Nothing came. Just a cough of brown air. I hit the pipe like it would help. It didn’t.

Two boys came with empty paint buckets. One of them said we should try the borehole in Phase 2. I asked if it still worked. He shrugged and said it did two days ago.

Mama used to say never go near Phase 2. She said that part of the estate is where your slippers vanish and your phone disappears and the boys don’t smile with their eyes.

But I don’t have a choice anymore.

I told Kelechi we were going out to look for water. He looked up from the floor and said okay. Just like that. No questions. Maybe he’s also tired of asking.

We passed three people carrying gallons. One woman had a child on her back and two jerrycans in her hands. A man walked past us with something shiny tucked under his shirt. I didn’t ask.

The gate to Phase 2 was open. The security post was empty. A wrapper was hanging over the chair like someone ran and didn’t come back.

The borehole had a line. Quiet. Long. No talking. Just eyes and buckets.

When it got to our turn, the tap gave a slow, strong flow. Clean water. I wanted to cry but I didn’t. I filled our bottle and nodded like I was calm.

On the way back, Kelechi tripped. The bottle almost fell. I screamed a little too loud. He picked it up and said sorry. I told him to hold it like it was gold. He said, Should I call it baby. I said, If you drop it, baby will die.

He laughed.

I didn’t.

When we reached the gate, the woman from Block B was standing by our stairs. She looked at the bottle. She didn’t ask questions. She just stared. I didn’t offer. I walked past her and locked our door.

We poured the water into the big bucket. Covered it with a towel. Kelechi asked when Mama was coming. I said soon. He asked if I was sure. I said yes.

I don’t know if that was a lie.

But I said it like I believed it.

**📓 Entry 003**

**Chapter Three – Down Below**

I didn’t want to go down there.

Even with the smell in the air. Even with Mama still gone. Even when I heard the shouting from the next street and someone yelling thief, thief like their mouth was broken. Even then I thought maybe if we stayed in the flat, kept the door locked, we’d be fine.

But something shifted this morning. Something quiet. Not a big bang or anything.

I woke up and it just felt... wrong.

The kind of wrong your body notices before your brain does.

The fridge was completely dead. No hum. No light when I opened it. Just warm air and soft bread. The room was hotter than usual. The curtain wasn’t moving at all. No breeze. No sound from outside. No birds. No neighbours sweeping. Just this weird, pressing quiet.

I looked at Kelechi. He was still asleep, curled in the same hoodie he wore yesterday. The one with the lion that used to be bright yellow but now just looks like sand. His head was sweaty. He was holding the biscuit wrapper from the night before like a toy.

I got up slowly. Didn’t want to wake him. I opened the door and stepped into the passage. It smelled like dust and kerosene. I could hear voices downstairs. Not talking voices. Low, tired ones. The kind people use when they don’t know what to say anymore.

I came back inside.

And that’s when I decided.

I packed small things. Only what I could carry in one nylon. Two biscuits. One half bottle of water. The last bit of garri in a container. Kelechi’s inhaler. Mama’s scarf. My small comb. I almost packed the radio, even though it doesn’t work anymore. I don’t know why. Maybe because it used to be how Mama started every morning.

I didn’t tell Kelechi we were leaving for good.

I just said we were going downstairs to find fresh air.

He didn’t argue. He was quiet, holding my hand like he knew I wasn’t saying everything.

The compound felt strange. Not loud like before. Not even angry. Just... like people were pretending they were not scared.

A man I’d never seen before was sitting on the floor near the gate with his back to the wall, eyes closed. His shirt was dirty. His hands were shaking a little. There were slippers lying everywhere. One yellow one in the gutter. A wrapper hanging on the railing like someone left in a rush.

We didn’t go through the front. We used the back stairs. I held Kelechi close as we walked down. He didn’t talk. I could feel his grip getting tighter the lower we went.

The car park was darker than I remembered. Cold even though it was hot outside. There were people already inside. Not a crowd. Just a few. All quiet. Sitting against walls. Leaning on bags. Not talking. One woman was breastfeeding her baby with her eyes closed. A man near the back was sitting cross-legged, head bowed like he was praying or asleep.

We walked slowly. No one looked at us. No one asked questions. I found a spot in the corner near a pipe. I laid the wrapper on the floor and told Kelechi to sit.

He did.

Then he leaned into me and whispered, Are we staying here.

I didn’t answer right away.

I just told him to take a small sip from the bottle. Not too much.

We sat there for a long time. I watched as more people came down. One after the other. A girl with a swollen belly. A boy dragging a bucket. The woman who sells akara from two streets away. She had nothing in her hands. Just herself.

Nia came in last. She was holding a small mirror and a dead phone. She didn’t speak to anyone. Just sat across from us, placed her mirror on the floor, and stared at it like it was going to say something.

Nobody was making rules. Nobody was even making eye contact.

But somehow we were all doing the same thing.

Lowering our voices.

Keeping our feet close.

Looking at the ramp like something might follow us in.

This wasn’t just hiding anymore.

This was the beginning of something else.

**📓 Entry 004**

**Chapter Four – The Rules We Made**

We needed something to hold onto.

The second day down here, people started getting restless. Not loud. Just more movement. More glances. Whispering. People rearranging their bags. Some started making invisible borders with sticks and wrappers and bricks like, This is my space. That is yours.

No one said anything directly. But I could feel it.

The quiet was changing.

A baby cried for a long time that morning. The mother kept rocking him, singing in a dry voice that cracked in the middle. No one helped. Not because we didn’t care. Because we didn’t know if it was okay to. Everyone was waiting for someone else to go first.

That’s when the man with the whistle stood up again.

He didn’t blow it. Just held it in one hand and cleared his throat. His voice was low. Tired. But steady.

He said, If we don’t figure out how to live together, we won’t make it. Simple like that.

At first nobody answered. Then Sister Ruth nodded and said yes. Then another man said yes too. Then people started sitting up straighter, listening.

We didn’t vote. We didn’t argue. It wasn’t that kind of meeting.

We just started listing things out loud. Things we needed. Things we feared. Things that would break us if we let them.

Someone said no stealing. Everyone nodded.

Someone else said we need to share food, even if it’s small. Especially if someone has nothing.

Someone suggested someone should guard the entrance. Not all the time. But sometimes. Just in case. In case of what, they didn’t say. They didn’t have to.

Another person said no shouting unless there’s a real reason. Noise travels.

A woman said she saw someone cough too much. That maybe we should have a place for sick people. That maybe we shouldn’t sleep too close to each other. Another woman said we were already sleeping too close. So what should she do, lie on the roof.

People laughed a little. First time I had heard real laughter in days.

It didn’t last.

Someone asked if we should write the rules down.

Someone else asked with what.

Then the boy with asthma held up a piece of torn carton. Nia found charcoal. Sister Ruth wrote it.

Seven rules.

No stealing.

No hoarding.

Share food when you can.

Keep noise low.

Do not lie about being sick.

Help watch the entrance.

And if you learn something from outside, share it with everyone.

That was it.

She tore a piece of her wrapper and tied the carton to the pipe near the ramp. It moved a little when people passed but it stayed.

Kelechi asked me why the rules were written with charcoal. I told him because we don’t have a pen.

He said, But what if the charcoal fades.

I didn’t answer.

I think we all knew it would. Sooner or later.

But for now, it was something.

Something to hold.

Something to point at when things get hard.

We’re not a real group. We’re not soldiers or scouts or a family.

But we’re trying to be people.

And this is the only way we know how.

Something shifted today.

Not like before. Not something loud. But I felt it. I think everyone did.

The underground isn’t just somewhere we’re hiding anymore. It’s turning into something else. I don’t know what yet. A camp? A waiting room? A cage? We’re not sure.

But it’s not temporary anymore.

You can feel it in the way people lay out their things. Like they’ve stopped pretending they’ll leave soon. Nia spread her wrapper flat this morning and used stones to pin the corners. She placed her mirror beside it like it’s a bedroom table. A man used carton to build a divider around himself and his brother. One of the women, the one with the faded blue scarf, hung a mosquito net over her space like it was her right. Nobody complained.

And that’s how I knew. We’re settling. Not because we want to. Because we don’t know what else to do.

It started around mid-morning. The heat had crept in like a warning, not loud but steady. We were sitting quietly, too quietly, and then someone shouted.

Not a scream. Not panic. Just one word.

**Stop.**

Everyone looked up.

A small girl was crying beside the food stash — the shared corner where we put whatever we had that day. Biscuits. Garri. Two packs of Indomie. I think she had taken something. Maybe she was hungry. Maybe she didn’t understand the rules that didn’t even exist yet.

The woman with her, maybe her aunty, maybe not, was scolding her in Yoruba. Fast, low voice. Not shouting but deep. You could hear shame in it.

That was when the man with the whistle stood again.

He has a name, I’m sure, but no one calls him that. We all just know him by the sound he hasn’t used in days. The whistle hangs from his neck like a memory of something that used to matter.

He didn’t raise his voice. He just said, **If we don’t start now, it will fall apart.**

Someone muttered, Start what.

He said, **The rules.**

People shifted. Some looked away. But no one left.

He said we were too many now. More were coming every day. That if we didn’t agree on how to stay alive together, we would start fighting. Or starving. Or worse.

Then Sister Ruth, the one with the cracked glasses and church voice, said, **He’s right.**

That was enough.

We didn’t vote. We didn’t argue too much. It just began.

Somebody stood and said **no stealing**. Everyone nodded.

Another voice, I think it was the boy with the orange slippers, said we should share whatever we find. That if someone goes out and gets water, they bring it back and everyone gets small.

Someone else said, But what if people start faking sickness to get extra food.

That’s when the pregnant woman spoke. Her voice was quiet but her eyes were hot. She said, **If someone lies to survive, it’s because we didn’t give them a way to live honestly.**

That silenced everyone for a moment.

Then the conversation changed.

They said we needed someone to watch the ramp. Not a guard, just someone to signal if anything felt off. Outsiders. Strangers. Soldiers. Thieves. No one knows who is who anymore.

We decided to take turns. One at a time. Two-hour shifts. Not at night. Just during the day. Nights are too quiet to measure.

Someone asked if there should be a curfew.

Someone else asked with what clock.

People laughed. Kind of.

Sister Ruth found a piece of carton and broke it in half. Then she pulled out a small nub of charcoal from her cooking tin. No one asked why she had that. We just watched.

She wrote the rules.

The real ones.

1. No stealing
2. Share what you can
3. Take turns watching the ramp
4. No loud arguments or noise
5. Speak if you are sick
6. Respect space
7. Bring news from outside

When she finished, she looked around. Then tied the carton to a pipe with her scarf. It hung crooked, but it stayed.

Kelechi asked me, **What if someone breaks a rule. What happens.**

I didn’t know what to tell him. There’s no police here. No mummy to report to. No school prefects. No church warnings. It’s just us.

I said, **Then we talk about it. Together.**

He looked unsure. Me too.

But it was the only answer I had.

That night, the underground felt different. Not lighter. Just... more real. Like we’d all admitted something we were too afraid to say before.

That we’re not going back upstairs anytime soon.

That we have to become something else now.

That maybe surviving isn’t just breathing.

It’s choosing how we do it.

**📓 Entry 005**

**Chapter Five – What We Had to Eat**

It’s weird what becomes valuable when you’re hungry.

Things that used to sit in the back of your kitchen untouched. That old tin of powdered milk you forgot. The biscuit crumbs at the bottom of a nylon. Half a sachet of salt. Two cubes of Maggi. A single egg, if you’re lucky.

That’s the kind of stuff we started counting.

I remember Mama used to say hunger is a mirror. You see yourself clearly when your stomach is loud. You see other people too. You see who reaches for their pocket. Who pretends they didn’t hear. Who counts every grain of rice before sharing.

She wasn’t lying.

The first few days underground, people still had bits and pieces. A woman had a bag of chin chin. Another had four packs of spaghetti. A man brought out sardines and biscuits he had tucked in a cooler. Everyone brought something.

We made a corner for the food. Right near the second pillar. It wasn’t guarded or locked or covered. Just a shared place where things went. You put down what you could and took only when it was allowed. No hoarding. That was part of the rules.

At first it worked.

We boiled rice one day and passed it around in tiny plastic plates. The rice was dry but warm. I saw a man close his eyes while chewing, like it was the best thing he had tasted in months.

Sister Ruth tried to teach us how to cook with battery power. It wasn’t real cooking. Just heating tins by placing the wire ends of broken torches on metal. It took forever. But it worked. Kind of.

We tried to ration everything. Garri was measured with the bottom of a cup. No sugar. Just water if you had it.

Some people used wrappers to catch rainwater when it dripped from the broken ceiling at night. Kelechi and I helped collect in our plastic bowl. He tried to give some to the woman with the swollen ankle. She smiled but didn’t take it.

Said we’d need it more.

I liked her.

Then one morning, Nia noticed something missing.

It wasn’t loud. She just stood staring at the stash for a long time. Then she crouched and started counting. She was whispering the list like she was trying to make the numbers work in her head.

Two tins of milk were gone. And one sardine.

Not used. Gone.

No one had taken anything out officially since yesterday. No meals had been served. No announcement. But it was gone.

She looked up.

I felt it before she said anything. That shift in air. The kind of tension that makes you swallow hard before even asking questions.

She asked the group if anyone had moved the tins.

No one answered.

The man with the whistle walked over and checked too. He didn’t say anything. Just looked at the floor, then at the pile, then at everyone.

Sister Ruth said maybe someone made a mistake. Maybe someone thought they were allowed. Maybe someone was feeding a child.

Someone else said, Or maybe someone is just stealing.

The word sat in the air like smoke.

No one wanted to say it directly, but the suspicion was there. I saw how people started looking around differently. Watching each other’s bags. Holding their wrappers closer.

Kelechi whispered to me, What happens now.

I didn’t know. I told him nothing. That it was just confusion. That everything would settle.

But I knew better.

That night we didn’t eat. Nobody said it out loud, but we were waiting to see if the thief would feel guilty. Return it. Apologize. Do something.

Nothing happened.

So we added a new thing to the rules. Not written down. Just agreed silently.

Someone now always sleeps near the food pile.

And the rest of us started sleeping with one eye half open.

We’re still trying to be good.

But hunger is teaching us how fragile that really is.

**📓 Entry 006**

**Chapter Six – The Noise Above**

You start to hear things differently when you live underground.

Every footstep on the ramp sounds louder. Every cough echoes longer. Even when someone turns in their sleep, you hear the wrapper shift like it’s a warning.

But tonight... tonight was different.

It started with a sound like metal being dragged. Far. Distant but sharp. It came from somewhere outside, maybe the estate gate. Maybe beyond that. I sat up without meaning to. My ears felt awake before the rest of my body.

Nia looked up too.

Then the second sound came. Short. Quick. A crack.

Gunshot.

You don’t forget that sound once you’ve heard it up close. It's not like in the movies. It's thinner. Angrier. Like the air itself is being torn.

No one said anything. But everyone started moving. Slowly. Silently. People sitting up. Parents pulling their kids closer. The man with the whistle didn’t reach for it. He just stood and walked quietly to the ramp.

I followed.

We didn’t go up. Just stood near the slope, close enough to hear better, far enough to stay hidden.

More shots. Then shouting. Running. The kind of running that comes with fear. Not the playful kind. Heavy steps. Directionless.

I held the wall with one hand. It felt cool and solid. Like something I could trust.

Then came the generator sounds.

That was worse.

Because it meant somewhere, someone still had fuel. Still had light. Still had enough power to make noise when everyone else was surviving on silence.

The hum was steady. Not shaky like our old gen. This one was rich. Bold. It growled like it wasn’t afraid.

It came from far off. Maybe from the estate behind ours. The rich part with tall walls and guards in matching uniforms. We used to peep through the gate at their flowers and tiled roofs. Now it just sounded like a different country.

Kelechi woke up from the noise and came to find me. He looked up, blinking, and asked why the light was on again.

I didn’t know how to explain it wasn’t ours.

Someone whispered that the rich people had their own system. Solar panels. Diesel tanks. Men with guns. Another person said they even had boreholes and freezers still working.

It didn’t make sense to me.

If they had all that, why hadn’t they helped?

Then I remembered. They never did before.

The shots came again. This time closer. Then what sounded like a car speeding off. Tyres skidding. A shout. Then nothing.

I turned and saw Sister Ruth kneeling near the pipe, head bowed. I don’t know if she was praying. Maybe she just didn’t want to see anymore.

Kelechi asked what was happening.

I told him, They’re trying to survive too.

He asked, Are they the ones shooting.

I said I don’t know.

He looked at me for a while. Then said, I think we should stay here forever.

I didn’t know how to answer that.

After a while the generator went quiet. Not because they ran out. I think they just didn’t want to be heard anymore. Even the rich get scared eventually.

We went back to our corner. Lay on the wrapper. The air was thick. No one was sleeping. Just bodies lying still. Eyes open. Listening for the next sound.

Someone said quietly that some of the rescuers going around aren’t real. That they wear fake vests. Pretend to be military. Then take people.

Someone else said checkpoints are being set up by gangs. That if you try to cross to the mainland, you get taxed. Or worse.

None of us knows if it’s true.

But that’s the thing about the noise above.

It tells you what’s happening.

But never the whole story.

**📓 Entry 007**

**Chapter Seven – Signals in the Dark**

It started two nights ago.

Just a flicker. Small. Blinking. I thought maybe I imagined it.

There’s a broken window high up in the car park, near the ramp. The kind that used to let in sunlight during the day. At night it’s mostly useless. But that night, I happened to look through it. Just because I couldn’t sleep.

I saw the flash.

Short. Then gone.

I waited. Nothing.

Then again. Flash. Pause. Flash flash.

It looked like light bouncing off glass. But too intentional. Not random. It felt... planned.

I didn’t tell anyone at first. I just kept watching.

The next night, it happened again. Same pattern. One blink. A pause. Then two. Then quiet.

This time, I nudged Nia. She came and stood beside me, squinting.

She said, It’s just a torch.

I said, But why the same pattern.

She didn’t answer.

The third night, it came back. But this time, three blinks. One. One. One. Then nothing.

It was coming from one of the tall buildings across the street. I don’t know which floor. Somewhere in the middle. I couldn’t see anyone. Just the light.

I started to blink back.

I didn’t have a torch. But I had my small mirror. The one Mama gave me when I turned ten. It’s cracked at the corner but it still catches enough light.

I waited until the next day. When the sun was hot and hitting the broken glass just right. Then I used the mirror to bounce it.

One flash. Pause. Two flashes.

Then I stopped.

I waited the whole afternoon.

Nothing.

Kelechi asked me why I was playing with the mirror. I told him I wasn’t playing. I was asking a question.

He laughed and said, Who answers with light.

I said, Maybe someone like us.

The next night, I saw the flash again. But this time it was slower. Like they were thinking. Or afraid.

One blink. Then two. Then another long one.

I told the others.

The man with the whistle didn’t seem interested. He said we shouldn’t draw attention to ourselves. That light was dangerous. That people out there might not be friends.

Sister Ruth said maybe it was a trap.

But the woman with the baby whispered, Or maybe it’s someone like us. Waiting.

That’s when people got quiet.

I started to watch every night. I didn’t always flash back. Just watched.

Sometimes it blinked in patterns. Sometimes it didn’t come at all.

But it made me feel something. Not hope. Not exactly.

Just less alone.

We tried to send a message with the mirror and a torch the boy with asthma had. It barely worked. The battery was weak. But we spelled out H-E-L-L-O using blinks.

I don’t know if they understood.

The next evening, they sent one long flash. Then paused. Then again.

Kelechi said, That’s the same way I blink when I’m tired.

Maybe they were saying they’re tired too.

We don’t know who they are. Or if they’re safe. Or if this is stupid.

But for now, we keep watching.

Because when the world stops talking to you, even a flicker can feel like a conversation.

**📓 Entry 008**

**Chapter Eight – The Betrayer**

I thought it would be someone from outside.

If anything bad happened, I thought it would come from the streets. From those gangs people keep talking about. From one of those checkpoints where they say you get stopped and beaten and nobody ever sees you again.

But it was from inside.

Someone we’ve been sleeping next to. Breathing the same hot air. Eating the same dry rice. Pretending to be just like us.

It started with something small. Food missing. Not a lot. Just enough for you to doubt yourself. Maybe we miscounted. Maybe Sister Ruth forgot to write it down. Maybe the garri spilled. Maybe. Always maybe.

Then one morning, Nia said she saw new footprints on the ramp. And they were not hers. Not from the watch team. She said they were fresh. The dust had shifted. The side bricks we used to block the back exit looked touched. She didn’t touch them. I didn’t. No one admitted to it.

We didn’t say anything loud. We just sat with the feeling. The uncomfortable quiet that makes you start noticing everything. Who leaves early. Who sleeps close to the stash. Who never seems as hungry as the rest of us.

By evening, we found the wrapper.

It was tucked under one of the bricks. Like someone left in a hurry and forgot it. It still had a sardine oil stain on it. The brand we had just counted yesterday.

And then it started. The whispers. The glances. The quiet moving away. People sitting in tighter circles. No one saying it out loud yet, but you could feel it.

We were looking for someone to blame.

It didn’t take long. The man who used to run the phone shop. I never knew his name. Just that he always kept his bag close and barely talked. He had a charger head in his pocket the first day I saw him. Even though there was no power anywhere.

Nia said she saw him near the ramp three nights ago. Said he was listening. Not walking. Just listening.

The boy with asthma said he saw him once with the girl who left. The one who vanished without a word. Maybe he helped her. Maybe he didn’t.

No one had proof. But proof doesn’t matter when you feel afraid.

We asked him. Soft at first. Did you take the food. Did you move the bricks. Did you go outside without telling us.

He didn’t deny it. Not really. He just looked down.

Then he said something I can’t forget.

They said they’d bring food. If I helped them find a place to stay. That’s all.

That’s all.

He said it like it was a small thing. Like sharing the only place we had left wasn’t betrayal. Like bringing strangers to our door wasn’t putting us in danger. Like we wouldn’t be the ones they took from next.

Nobody shouted. Nobody cried.

Sister Ruth asked what we should do.

No one answered.

What do you do with someone who opens the door in a storm and invites the wind inside.

He didn’t beg. Just packed his things. Quiet. Folded his wrapper. Tied his sandals. We gave him water and a piece of bread. That was it.

He left at night.

No one followed him.

I didn’t sleep after that.

I kept looking at Kelechi and wondering what we’d do if it was me. If I was the one who made that kind of mistake. If I thought it would save us.

I wanted to believe I’d never do it.

But I’m starting to understand how thin the line is. Between right and desperate. Between survival and betrayal.

It’s not always a loud decision. Sometimes it’s just a whisper in the dark that says, Maybe this way is faster.

And the next morning, everything has changed.

**📓 Entry 009**

**Chapter Nine – The Day the Light Blinked Once**

It happened so fast I thought I made it up.

We were sitting still. Just sitting. Nobody was talking much anymore. We were tired of words. The food stash was almost empty again. Someone had started coughing nonstop and people were slowly shifting away from her without saying anything.

It was the forty-ninth day.

I know because Sister Ruth had been marking the days on the wall behind the food corner. With charcoal. Small lines. One for each day we stayed alive. There were forty-eight yesterday. She added another one that morning.

Forty-nine.

I remember thinking, what if we make it to fifty. Then what. Do we clap. Do we cry. Do we stop pretending we’re just waiting and finally admit this is it.

Then it happened.

Just a flicker.

Not from inside. From outside.

From somewhere far off. Through the cracks in the ceiling near the ramp. A light. Not the blinking kind. Not fire. Not torchlight. Real light.

White. Brief. Sharp.

And gone.

I blinked. Looked at Kelechi. He looked at me.

He saw it too.

Then someone stood up and said, The light is back.

And that one sentence changed everything.

People started moving. Running to the edge of the car park. Climbing up the ramp. The boy with asthma tried to get up too fast and fell. Someone pulled him up.

I followed. I didn’t want to be the last to see.

When I reached the ramp, I saw it again. Just for a second. A streetlamp. Faint. On. Then off.

Like someone somewhere tried to restart the world. Just once.

And the city blinked.

We stood there, holding the metal railing, like it was the edge of a new life.

One of the boys shouted, They fixed it. It’s coming back.

Someone else started laughing.

Kelechi started crying.

People were hugging. Whispering prayers. Some were already talking about going home. Saying things like, I left beans on the stove. Saying things like, maybe Mama will call now.

I didn’t move.

Because the light went out again.

Not slow. Not fading.

Just gone.

Like it was never there.

And that silence came back. The one we all know now. Heavy. Hot. Disrespectful.

People stood there, waiting for the second blink.

It didn’t come.

We waited fifteen minutes.

Then thirty.

Then Sister Ruth walked back down without saying a word.

One by one, everyone followed.

No one talked after that.

I watched as someone crossed out the forty-ninth mark on the wall and rewrote it smaller. Like even the days didn’t want to be remembered.

Hope is a dangerous thing to hold underground.

It makes everything feel louder when it disappears.

**📓 Entry 010**

**Chapter Ten – The Fire Below**

It smelled like something old catching fire.

Not at first. Just a hint. The kind of smell you get when someone lights paper too close to nylon. I thought maybe it was someone cooking again. I didn’t say anything. Nobody did. Everyone just kind of... sniffed and blinked like it would go away.

But it didn’t.

Kelechi was sleeping on my lap. His breath was hot and shallow. I didn’t want to wake him, but the air started to feel wrong. Like it had weight.

Then coughing. First one. Then another. Then two people stood up and started shouting.

I looked up. And there it was.

Smoke.

Not thick at first. Just a little grey crawling along the wall. But it moved fast. It didn’t rise. It spread.

I shook Kelechi. He coughed before he even opened his eyes. He tried to talk. I told him to breathe through his shirt. He was confused. I said it again.

Breathe.

Nia was already shouting. Move to the left wall. Left wall. Go slow. Don’t run. But people were running anyway. You can’t tell people to stay calm when they think they’re about to burn alive.

Someone knocked over the candle stand. That’s when the screams started. The fire caught a wrapper. Then it caught a nylon bag. It was like it had been waiting.

It lit up too fast.

The smoke swallowed the far side. I could hear someone shouting for their child. Someone else fell down and didn’t get up. I stepped over a bag. I think I stepped on someone’s hand. I didn’t stop.

We were near the middle, close to the pipe. I pulled Kelechi onto my back and pushed toward the ramp. There were too many people. Everyone trying to go up at once.

No room.

The man with the whistle was shouting orders, but I don’t think anyone was listening anymore. People were climbing, pushing, gasping. The smoke was behind us now. It smelled like plastic and rubber and fear.

I saw Sister Ruth trip. She dropped her bag. Someone stepped on it. She didn’t go back.

I couldn’t find Nia.

I kept moving.

When we reached the top of the ramp, it felt like someone had slapped me with light. My eyes couldn’t focus. I dropped to the ground and tried to breathe.

Kelechi rolled off me. I handed him his inhaler with shaking hands. Two puffs. Then again. He cried a little but didn’t make a sound.

More people made it out. Not everyone.

I still don’t know who didn’t.

The building looked the same from outside. Calm. Silent. But smoke was crawling out from under the metal like it was escaping too.

No one went back in.

Someone said the fire started from the stove. Someone else said it was an accident. Then another person said it was not.

I don’t know who’s right.

I just know we don’t have that place anymore.

The only place that felt safe. Gone.

We stayed outside all night. No wrappers. No walls. Just sky. I kept thinking about the girl with the baby. I didn’t see her come out. I told myself maybe she left earlier. Maybe she’s fine.

Kelechi asked if we were going back in.

I told him no.

He asked where we were going.

I didn’t answer.

I just held him.

And watched the smoke.

**📓 Entry 011**

**Chapter Eleven – The Walk to the Bridge**

We walked.

We didn’t plan it. We didn’t vote. There was no goodbye ceremony. No long talk. We just knew.

After the fire, there was no reason to stay. The underground still had its bones, but it didn’t feel safe anymore. It smelled like melted plastic and sweat and old fear. The smoke had touched everything. Even our blankets.

Even our breath.

We packed what we had left. A wrapper. A half bottle of water. Some beans tied in nylon. One by one, we climbed the ramp for the last time. No one looked back.

The sky was too bright. I hadn’t seen that kind of light in weeks. It made everything feel exposed. The streets weren’t empty like I expected. They were alive, but not in a good way.

People were out. Moving. Some with bags. Some with nothing. Most of them didn’t look at us. Everyone had their own direction. Their own loss.

Sister Ruth said we should head to the mainland. That if there was any real help coming, it would start from there. The bridge was the only way.

So we started walking.

The city didn’t feel like Lagos anymore. It felt like someone had dressed up the bones of the old place and left it for dead. Shops still had signs, but the shelves inside were stripped bare. Some places were burned. Others locked tight, windows smashed.

We passed a man selling bottled water for ten times the price. A boy offering one boiled egg for an entire pack of noodles. We didn’t have money. It didn’t matter anyway. I don’t think it meant anything anymore.

Some people joined us. Some walked ahead. Nobody spoke unless they had to. It felt like a funeral. But nobody said who we were burying.

The closer we got to the bridge, the more guarded people became. Some streets had ropes tied across them. Others had men standing with sticks, asking where you were from before letting you pass. We said we were just walking. That we weren’t carrying anything of value. That we weren’t sick.

They let us through.

But I saw how one of them looked at Sister Ruth’s bag. Like he was memorizing it for later.

We walked past what used to be a gas station. The pumps were gone. Not broken. Gone. Like someone came with a truck and lifted them out of the ground.

Someone said the military was on the other side of the bridge.

Someone else said no, it’s just gangs pretending to be the military. That they’ve set up tolls and checkpoints and camps. That if you get across, you either pay or disappear.

Kelechi asked if we were really going. I said yes.

He said, Even if they take us?

I didn’t answer.

The sun felt heavier than I remembered. The tar was soft under our slippers. My feet burned, but I didn’t stop.

When we finally saw the edge of the bridge, I felt something strange.

Not hope.

Not relief.

Just motion.

Like all we could do now was keep going. Even if we didn’t know where it ended.

There were others already there. Some resting. Some shouting across the water like someone might answer.

A man near the railing was writing something on the concrete with charcoal.

I peeked when he stepped away.

It said: **This city chose its children.**

I don’t know what he meant. Maybe I do.

We slept under a half-burned billboard that night. I kept Kelechi close. Sister Ruth prayed under her breath. Nia didn’t speak at all.

The wind was loud.

But for once, it didn’t feel like silence was trying to kill us.

**📓 Final Entry**

**Chapter Twelve – After the Silence**

I don’t know why I’m still writing.

The journal is soft now. The pages are bent at the corners. Smells like smoke and old beans. The ink is almost out. I’ve had to scratch some words just to see them clearly. But I’m still writing.

Maybe because I don’t want to forget what the quiet felt like.

Or maybe because when the world finally made a sound again, it wasn’t what we thought it would be.

We made it across the bridge.

It wasn’t easy. They stopped us halfway. Guns. Real ones. Real people holding them. Not in uniform. Not in anything official. One of them asked for money. Another for ID. Sister Ruth said we had neither. Just names and feet and prayers.

They laughed.

But they let us through.

Not because they were kind. But because we didn’t look like anything worth stealing.

That was the first lesson.

On the other side, the city was... louder. Not fixed. Just louder. Generators running. Markets trying to come back. People with megaphones selling things nobody needed. Powdered milk. Broken fans. Packs of expired paracetamol.

I saw someone wearing a t-shirt that said “The Future Is Bright” and I didn’t know whether to laugh or scream.

Some people said there was power in certain areas. For a few minutes at a time. Some said the government had started rationing fuel but only to VIPs and hospitals. Others said the President had fled. Others said he was dead. Or hiding. Or never existed in the first place.

The point is, nobody knows.

That’s what silence does. It makes everyone start guessing. And after a while, the guessing becomes gospel.

We found shelter in an old warehouse.

Someone had turned it into a holding camp. Not official. Just mats on the floor. Buckets near the walls. We stayed there three days. People came in and out. Some had lost everything. Others had come from farther than us. I met a woman from Aba who said she walked for eleven days straight. Her brother didn’t make it.

She didn’t cry when she said it. Just looked past me.

Like grief had already eaten through the part of her that used to scream.

On the fourth day, a van came with a small generator. Someone shouted, they have light. And we all gathered around like children.

It lasted four minutes.

Just long enough to see our shadows again.

Then it sputtered out.

Nobody even complained.

We’re all too tired now.

I heard someone say the government is sending messages through radio waves. I don’t know if it’s true. I haven’t seen a working radio in weeks.

But I did hear something else.

That the underground — the one we left — was sealed.

Not by people. By time.

That the city has started covering over the forgotten places. Building on top of them. Like they were never there. Like we never happened.

But I know we did.

I know we were real.

I can still feel the heat of that place on my skin. I can still see Kelechi’s eyes in the dark. I can still smell the boiled rice from that one lucky night we shared dinner with ten strangers and nobody fought over who got more.

We were real.

Even if no one ever finds this notebook.

Even if this is the last page and my name is forgotten and the city moves on like it always does.

We were real.

We lived when the world said we wouldn’t.

We stayed when even light refused to.

We waited.

We whispered.

We chose each other.

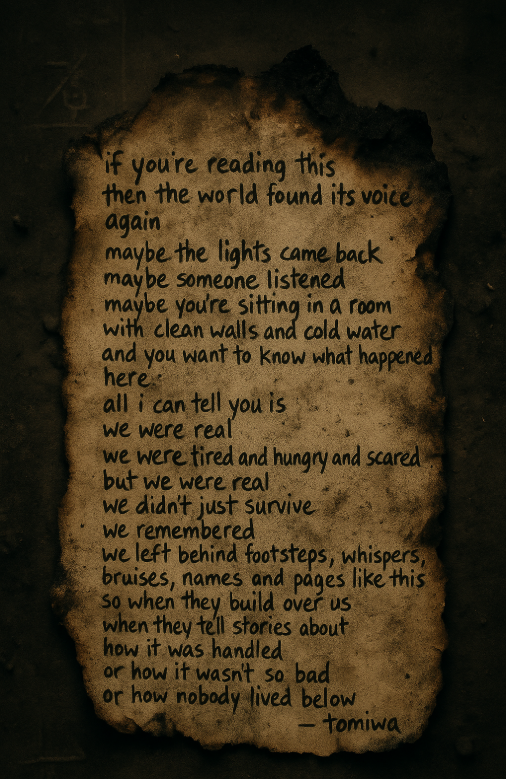
And when the silence finally broke, it didn’t come with music or fireworks or parades.

It came with footsteps.

Ours.

Leaving.

**My name is Tomiwa.**   
 And this is how I remember it.



**TOMIWA’S SURVIVAL LIST**

Scrawled on a piece of torn carton with charcoal. Kept folded in her bag*.*

**not in order. just what we learned the hard way**

• boiled water is a gift   
 • sugar is currency   
 • one wrapper can be a blanket, a curtain, a rope, or a coffin   
 • sleep where the wind can’t find you   
 • don’t eat when you’re angry   
 • noise travels   
 • light attracts   
 • trust takes time   
 • betrayal doesn’t   
 • write down what hurts — it makes it real, not bigger   
 • share when you can, even if it’s just a look   
 • if you hear footsteps at night, breathe slow   
 • don’t promise what you can’t give   
 • carry a cup, a knife, and something sharp to remember who you were   
 • the person you save might be the one who saves you later   
 • no one is useless unless you make them feel that way   
 • when you see a small fire, don’t ignore it   
 • if it rains, catch it   
 • if you cry, don’t hide it   
 • if you see light, don’t run to it too fast

**we didn’t have rules forever**   
 **just reminders**

**BONUS MATERIAL**

**TOMIWA’S MAP OF THE UNDERGROUND**

*drawn in her notebook, labelled in charcoal smears*

this isn’t a real map. there were no signs. no gps.   
 just memory. just how it felt down there.   
 but i’ll draw it with words the way i remember it

* **the ramp**   
   the only way in or out. it curved like a broken question mark. we blocked it at night with bricks and silence
* **main space**   
   wide, hot, filled with wrappers and people breathing too close. we slept here. we argued here. we forgave here
* **food corner**   
   back left, under the pipe that dripped every two days. sister ruth marked the wall there with days we survived
* **stash zone**   
   behind the old suv. that’s where we hid food. and hope
* **baby’s corner**   
   a quiet space near the old fire hose cabinet. the woman with the baby slept there. no one else went near
* **watch spot**   
   by the broken window up high. we took turns looking out. that’s where i saw the lights
* **exit we never used**   
   back wall, right side. we blocked it with concrete and fear. the man who betrayed us moved it
* **burn mark**   
   near the center. from the night of the fire. part of the floor still smells like plastic and prayers

**we didn’t name it while we lived in it**   
 but in my head   
 i call it *the belly*

because it swallowed us   
 but also kept us alive

**REDACTED GOVERNMENT NOTICES**

*found pasted on walls, torn, crossed out, and whispered by the ones who remembered hearing them*

**NOTICE: PUBLIC ORDER DIRECTIVE**   
 issued by the Ministry of [redacted] on Day 3

this is a temporary disruption   
 stay indoors   
 do not panic   
 electricity will be restored shortly   
 reports of sabotage are being investigated   
 any person caught spreading false information will be detained

**power will return**   
 **order will be maintained**

**GOVERNMENT OF [redacted]**

handwritten at the bottom:   
 “liars. they never came back.”

**URGENT HEALTH BULLETIN**   
 transmitted once on local radio, then never repeated

boil all water before drinking   
 avoid contact with exposed bodies or animal waste   
 do not consume perishables stored more than 24 hours without refrigeration   
 if you have symptoms of fever, blurred vision, or open sores, report to the nearest aid tent   
 [crossed out in charcoal]   
 “there are no tents”

**MILITARY CHECKPOINT SCHEDULE**   
 as seen on a half-burnt flyer found on the bridge road

checkpoint a: [no location]   
 checkpoint b: [blacked out]   
 checkpoint c: DISBANDED   
 evacuation buses have been redirected   
 civilians are advised to remain where they are   
 assistance is on its way

scrawled in the corner:   
 “they’re not evacuating. they’re taking people. don’t go.”

**WE ARE IN CONTROL**   
 printed on speaker vans that passed only once

we are aware of the situation   
 we are handling it   
 do not form unauthorized groups   
 do not store excessive rations   
 repeat: we are in control   
 repeat: we are in control   
 repeat: we are

[transmission cuts]

**BURNED LETTERS & NOTES FROM SURVIVORS**

*collected from walls, wrappers, and bags. some never finished. most never answered.*

**Dear Emeka,**   
 i don’t know if this will reach you. i stayed at aunty’s place the first week. then she sent us away. people were getting sick. i heard a van went to the school and took some students. was it yours. if you see this, please go to the yellow house by the junction. the one with the tin roof. wait there every tuesday. i’ll try to come.   
 – chika

**mama**   
 if you find this i waited. i waited for three days by the gate. i left rice inside the yellow bowl. kelechi said we should leave but i stayed. i saw your scarf on the door. i took it. i’m sorry. i miss you   
 – tomiwa

**he wrote this on the wall with his blood:**   
 they said the trucks would come   
 they came   
 but not for us

**note found wrapped in wet nylon under a stone**   
 we saw the light come back for seven seconds.   
 then it left.   
 we are not waiting anymore.

**THE LAST PAGE**

*written in the corner of a wrapper, folded inside the back of the journal*

if you’re reading this   
 then the world found its voice again

maybe the lights came back   
 maybe someone listened   
 maybe you’re sitting in a room with clean walls and cold water   
 and you want to know what happened here

all i can tell you is   
 we were real

we were tired and hungry and scared   
 but we were real

we didn’t just survive   
 we remembered

we left behind footsteps, whispers, bruises, names   
 and pages like this

so when they build over us   
 when they tell stories about how it was handled   
 or how it wasn’t so bad   
 or how nobody lived below

you’ll know better

because we were here

and this is what it took

— tomiwa