

The modern youth was much too melodramatic, Nneka Njoku had early on decided. Emotional creatures.

But, oh, how she envied them!

Her brother once told her why he painted still lifes like fruit bowls. Said it was more than wrinkly grapes and rotting apples. Manet and Meléndez and Cézanne could peel the skin from the universe, chew and spit its tiny atoms back into the bowl.

Unfortunately for Nneka, grapes were grapes and apples were apples, of course. She was no emotional creature.

As such, she did not cry when she learned she was dying.

She'd found out thanks to WebMD. As it turned out, she had a deadly case of tuberculosis. Or perhaps a slight cold.

This was evinced by the following: a) She'd been coughing all night; b) Her forehead felt a bit hot when she pressed the back of her hand to it.

Most likely tuberculosis.

But when Nneka read her online diagnosis that fateful Friday morning, she did not shed a tear. Her maturity was something she prided herself on. She was always able to compose herself with grace even in the face of tragedy. Even in the face of death.

Jean-Paul Sartre said human beings need to undergo a “death consciousness” so that in reckoning with their own mortality, they'd be forced to confront what truly matters—experiencing life for themselves.

Nneka agreed. Or at least she told herself she did, for the sake of aligning herself with a French philosopher. She couldn't pretend that she had ever really experienced life for herself before, but perhaps she would now.

Was this what being an emotional creature was all about?

The grating noise of hard rock music—KISS or AC/DC or some other screeching band that men in need of haircuts always seemed to enjoy—began to blast through her walls. Her very considerate neighbors had woken up, too, it seemed.

Her roommate Julie had gone on two and a half dates with one of them, the owner of the loudspeaker himself, their freshman year. So they weren't allowed to go next door and tell them to turn the music down, or let on that they were aware they lived next door, or that they spoke English at all.

It was a very inconvenient situation. Nneka could never understand Julie's susceptibility to relationship drama. At least Julie's newest boyfriend didn't seem to be giving her any trouble yet. Still, Nneka certainly hated him. And he refused to leave their home. Julie's boyfriend stayed with Julie in their dorm every day. All day long. And then overnight. He was basically a boarder refusing to pay rent—and not even for any respectable Marxist reasons. Their suite was barely big enough to accommodate two, let alone three. He was just this great big blond leech. It was like that movie *Parasite* or something. . . Nneka never did get the chance to see it.

And Nneka never did get his appeal. She had come to the conclusion that Julie had a deeply concerning need for male attention. She wasn't particularly picky about what form it came in. Nneka was convinced she'd date a cockroach if it joined a fraternity and told her she had a nice rack. Julie was a gender studies major, so this sometimes made Nneka question the credibility of their school's department.

"Nneka, come get breakfast. It's French-toast stick day—you know how fast they run out."

Without asking if she could come in, Julie appeared in her doorway, head cocked at an angle that Nneka thought made her look like a duck. She watched as Julie's eyes quickly ran across the room before settling on Nneka's with determination. She'd been obvious, pretending not to notice the kaleidoscopic mess that had become of Nneka's bedroom. This, of course, came from a politeness that Nneka should have appreciated, but somehow irritated her instead. She knew Julie was a self-proclaimed neat freak: "I'm basically Monica from *Friends* but with worse taste in men." Nneka had never seen an episode.

But fruit-snack wrappers, empty plastic water bottles, and balled-up socks sat on the floor next to Nneka's bed. Two textbooks, two pens, and one box of Lucky Charms rested at her feet. A box of tissues, dirty tissues, a couple CDs—Erykah Badu and Lauryn Hill, a couple DVDs—*Steel Magnolias* and *Moulin Rouge!*, an unloved pet succulent, and an unauthorized pet fish found unorthodox homes elsewhere in Nneka's room. She doubted Monica From *Friends*—or most anyone—could be convinced to go anywhere near it all. Julie kept a safe and respectful distance. Julie's boyfriend lingered not far behind, hovering in the corner in back of her, breathing from his mouth.

"I'm tired, Julie." Nneka was still lying down. She wished her bed didn't face the door. She put on her best tired face.