

August

By Latifah Namutebi

August

The hardest month, in my opinion, for any feminist activist or woman human rights defender in active rotation. Or I should say actively working. Surviving? We will get there.

For now, how are you?
No, really. How are you at this very moment?

Are you yawning as you read this? Nursing a headache? Is your neck a little stiff? Have you had enough water today? When did you last eat? How many hours did you sleep last night?



You probably have something for it.

One Panadol Advance in the morning because you have not eaten. Ibuprofen. Flagyl. Magnesium liquid. Cetirizine. Toff Plus. Cough syrup. Vitamin C. At some point, without quite knowing when it happened, you became a rookie pharmacist.

Check the second drawer from the bottom of your desk. If it is not there, try the travel mug. The one that has quietly found another purpose.

Headache? Panadol.

Body aches? Ibuprofen.

Cough? There is syrup somewhere.

Something feels like an allergy? Cetirizine.

Your stomach is acting up? Perhaps indigestion. You remember someone saying charcoal helps.

You have not slept properly in days? There is melatonin for that.

Anxiety. Nerves. Sweating. Perhaps you are tired. It has been a long day. A long week. You slept late. You will catch up over the weekend.

Your period came for two days and disappeared. You could be God's favourite. Or perhaps that is something worth paying attention to. Longer periods. No periods. Migraines. Acne. Rashes. Hair loss. Forgetfulness. Lethargy. A cough that never quite leaves. Random bruises and little wounds you cannot remember acquiring.

There is ointment in the drawer.

Somewhere along the way, we became good at finding explanations. The weather. Hormones. Allergies. A bad pillow. Something we ate. Something we did not eat. Too much coffee. Too little coffee. A bug going around. Age. Stress. Travel. The air conditioning at that conference.

Perhaps I need to constitute a clan to find the underlying cause of it. Scientists. Sociologists. Alchemists. Spiritualists. Traditionalists. Perhaps the environmentalists know something the rest of us do not.

Because August cannot possibly be the problem.

August is only a month.

And you are good at this.

You are dedicated. Hardworking. Self-driven. Ambitious. Reliable. You are the person people call when things are falling apart. Defender of women. Champion of gender justice. Employee of the movement.

You have kept going before.

So, you reach into the drawer.

Take something.

Drink water.

Open the laptop.

There is work to do.

At some point, without quite knowing when it happened, you became very good at this.

A rookie pharmacist.

And perhaps before we ask what happened in August, we should spend a little time with them.

The Rookie Pharmacist

You have become remarkably fluent in the language of perhaps.

Perhaps it is the weather.

Perhaps it is hormones.

Perhaps it is something you ate.

Perhaps it is because you have not eaten.

Perhaps it is stress.

No.

Probably not stress.

You are fine.

You have work to do.

And when the usual explanations fail, there is always someone who has heard of something.

Chew charcoal.

Magnesium citrate is good.

Try this supplement.

Someone sends you a TikTok.

Ashwagandha.

Or, as the joke goes, Ashwagandha warriors.

There is always another possibility. Another remedy. Another bottle. Another tablet. Another gummy. Marine collagen. Another way of negotiating with your body for a few more hours.

You become good at tactical triage.

What needs attention now?

What can wait?

What can be managed?

What can get you through today?

Sometimes you see a doctor.

Sometimes you ask a friend.

Sometimes you search online.

Sometimes you remember what worked the last time.

Sometimes you open the drawer.

And sometimes the explanation is correct. A cough can be a cough. A rash can be an allergy. A headache can come from a bad night's sleep. Bodies get sick. People get tired. There is no grand political explanation for every pain.

But there is something curious about how quickly we have learnt to ask:

What can I take for this?

Much less often:

What is my body asking me to pay attention to?

Perhaps that is because the first question has an answer that fits inside a working day.

Take the tablet.

Drink the syrup.

Apply the ointment.

Get some sleep tonight.

Feel better tomorrow.

Continue.

The second question is inconvenient.

It might require time.

It might require a doctor's appointment you cannot squeeze between meetings.

It might require cancelling something.

It might require admitting that three hours of sleep is not enough.

It might require saying no.

It might require telling someone that the report will be late.

Worse, it might require asking whether this is really about the report at all.

So, the rookie pharmacist keeps practising.

There is no judgement here. They are trying to get through the day.

They have deadlines. People depend on them. There are communities waiting.

Colleagues are stretched. Funding is uncertain. The work has not decided to become less urgent because they have a migraine.

They need to function.

So, when the body interrupts, they respond with the tools available to them.

Sometimes those tools are in the second drawer from the bottom.

The trouble is that the body keeps coming back.

A headache becomes migraines.

Restless nights become insomnia.

Tiredness becomes something you can feel behind your eyes.

You forget things.

You lose interest in things.

Your skin changes.

Your stomach protests.

Your body aches.

And still, somehow, the question remains:

What do I take for this?

Perhaps there is another question waiting underneath it.

What if the body is not interrupting the work?
What if the body is telling us something about
how we are working?

To answer that, we might have to go back.

Back before August.

Back to the beginning of the year.

Because August did not happen in August.

How Did We Get to August?

August is getting a bad name for something it did not do.

The year closed in mid- **December** and if you were lucky, you got two weeks off. Two whole weeks.

A great opportunity to catch up on work.

You meant to rest, of course. There were friends to see, family to spend time with, places to go, nowhere to go. But there were also those few things you had promised yourself you would finish before January. Nothing major. A document here. An email there. A report that needed one final read.

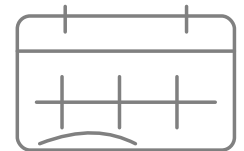
By 24 December, you could barely open your computer. Christmas intervened. Family intervened. Life intervened.

By the 26th, you were back at your desk.

Dedicated. Hardworking. Self-driven.

Employee of the movement.

January arrives and you are ready.



This year will be different.

You have a planner.

The audit is pending. There are fourth-quarter reports to close. First-quarter work needs to begin. Annual workplans need finalising. Budgets need approving. The institutional calendar needs sorting. And that annual report you promised would be published by the end of February?

This year, it will be.

You are going to be organised.

Reports will be submitted on time. The audit will start when it is supposed to. Activities will not sneak up on you. You will plan your days properly. Maybe even block time in your calendar for lunch.

January disappears.

February finds you in your activist groove.

Campaigns. Meetings. Calls. Budgets. Workplans. Reports. Concept notes. Conferences. A proposal with a deadline that somehow, always seems to be next Tuesday.

But you are doing well.

Busy, yes. Tired, perhaps. But good.

This is what commitment looks like, isn't it?

Then **March** arrives.

There is a headache that keeps returning. Nothing serious. You have Panadol.

The cough has been around for a while too. There is a bug going around. Everyone has something these days.

You have cough drops.

Cough drops have become a kind of candy.

Fatigue?

You recently read something about vitamin D deficiency among Africans. That is it. Gummies would be easier to ingest.

Besides, there is no time to be tired. The audit is under way. First-quarter reports are coming. That annual report still needs to leave the building.

April .

The reports are submitted.

Good.

Now you can breathe.

Except you have been so busy planning, reporting and preparing that implementation needs to move. Activities begin rolling out one after another.

April becomes **May** .

Flights. Field visits. Workshops. Meetings. Participants. Per diems. Accountability. Photographs. Reports.

Activities. Accountabilities. Reports.

Repeat.

Your back hurts.

Probably the chair.

Your wrists hurt.

Laptop.

Your joints?

Those long nights reporting.

There is an ointment for that.

It should settle now that reporting is done.

Except reporting is never quite done.

June .

Second-quarter reports.

Post-audit meeting.

Where is that annual report?

Your eye has been twitching for a while. Upper right eye. Good luck, according to someone. You decide to accept this explanation because the alternative requires attention you do not currently have.

At night, sleep is easy enough once you get the milligrams right.

Melatonin knocks you out.

An outrageously loud alarm gets you back up.

Three hours?

Four?

You will sleep properly this weekend.

Your neck is stiff now.

Maybe the pillow.

You have been working from bed lately, so that would make sense. You mean to buy a better one, forget, then remember while sitting in traffic. Someone is selling pillows at the lights.

Fine.

A pillow is a pillow.

July .

Your face looks funny.

You look again.

Something is different.

Your tongue feels tingly. Your face feels droopy. Your speech sounds strange. And that lucky eye, the one that has been twitching for months and bringing you good fortune, is now blurry and teary.

Perhaps you need six hours of sleep instead of three.

You try smiling.

Something is wrong.

Bell's palsy.

The doctor explains it. A sudden weakness or paralysis of the muscles on one side of the face caused by a problem with the facial nerve. There are different explanations. Viral reactivation is among them. Physical stress and a weakened immune response can create conditions in which dormant viruses reactivate.

Well, that does not make sense.

What infection?

You are not sick.

You have been working.

Those are vastly different things.

But here you are.

The doctor prescribes steroids and tells you to rest.

Fine.

You rest.

There is a mask now. It helps when you need to be around people while your face recovers.

And while you are resting, you occasionally check your email.

Occasionally.

Nothing serious.

You are keeping up with what is happening. Managing the smaller tasks. Responding where necessary. Making sure you do not return completely out of touch.

One week of steroids and you are feeling much better.

See?

Back to the office.

Two days later, you feel the weight of the world sitting on your head.

Gofen?

No.

The doctor says rest.

Go home.

Take your medication.

Rest.

You go home.

Lie down.

Thirty minutes.

Your body is still but your mind is not.

There are things waiting.

You get up.

Open the computer.

July ends.

August .

You are feeling better.

Slowly.

Your face is not completely back, so the mask is still part of you. But that is fine. There are pending funder check-ins. Reports. Things that stalled while you were away. That feminist monitoring, evaluation and learning process needs preparing.

You have lost time.

Time to catch up.

You make the to-do lists.

Done and dusted.

You are back in action.

Then there is a little cough.

Nothing dramatic.

The weather has been unstable and there is a bug going around.

Clarinase?

Toff Plus?

That should manage it.

Then you wake up one morning and your voice is gone.

Your throat hurts.

Your body aches.

You feel terrible.

Bronchial pneumonia.

Huh?

You were just bedridden.

Now you have what?

What about gender justice and women's rights?

You were tapering off steroids and now there are more medicines. More treatment.

Hydrocortisone intravenously.

Rest.

Again.

And there goes August.

The funder check-ins.

The reports.

The feminist monitoring, evaluation and learning process.

The carefully prepared to-do lists.

The things you were going to catch up on.

August does not wait for you to recover.

It simply ends.

September

September .

You are back.

Well, mostly.

Your face is not completely back to normal. The mask has become part of you now.

And still, some mornings, it is hard to leave the bed.

You do not know why.

There is no time for this laziness.

You have already lost enough time.

Pending funder check-ins. Reports. Activities. That feminist monitoring, evaluation and learning process you planned earlier in the year. Things moved while you were away. Other things did not move at all.

You need to catch up.

Five days off.

Five proper days to recover, get yourself together and come back ready.

So, you take five days.

And guess what you do?

Catch up with work.

Somewhere in those five days you even produce a great campaign idea for Women, Peace and Security week in October.

See?

You are feeling like yourself again.

Then the email comes.

Great news.



EMAIL



Congratulations. Your proposal has been successful.

As explained, implementation will need to begin immediately. The timelines are tight. Funds will be disbursed as soon as possible.

Fine.

You can work with that.

You begin planning.

September becomes **October**.

No funds.

You continue with everything else while you wait.

The campaign.

Reports.

Activities.

Meetings.

That feminist monitoring, evaluation and learning process.

Hold on.

Is it October?

How did we get here so fast?

The midterm reviews have not happened. The project you intended to complete before the new grant is still unfinished. There is work everywhere and somehow everyone seems to be moving too slowly.

You are working on a report with a colleague. They promised to send their part on Wednesday.

Wednesday passes.

Nothing.

By Thursday, you are irritated.

You have deadlines too. You have been working late. You could have finished this yesterday if they had sent what they promised.

By lunchtime, you have told anyone willing to listen that your colleague is unreliable.

They cannot meet deadlines.

They need too much following up.

You are tired of carrying people.

Except you both have access to the information.

You could finish the report.

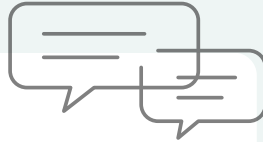
Or you could wait.

Waiting is difficult when you have become particularly good at moving fast.

Another morning, the office WhatsApp group lights up.

MESSAGES

Good morning colleagues. I hope you are having a great start to the week. I will be off this week. I am not feeling well.



You are among the first to respond.

Sending you healing energy. Please rest and take care of yourself.

Then you open their private messages.

Hi. I know you said you are not feeling well but I hope you can send me the report before you log out. Feel better xx.

We know this person.

Sometimes we are this person.

The same thing happens with annual leave.

Someone is away, but you need one small thing.

A document.

A password.

A quick approval.

A tiny clarification.

Something that will take five minutes.

Sorry to bother you while you are away...

Send.

Meanwhile, you do not feel particularly supported either.

You work weekends.

You stay late.

You answer messages when you are ill.

You can write five reports a day if that is what needs to happen.

Why can everyone else not step up?

Why can they not give it their all?

Are they even really activists?

Do they care?

Women's rights are human rights.

People are so slow.

A friend asks whether you have communicated any of this to your team.

Have you told them you need support?

What would support even look like for you?

You look at your friend.

Whose side are you on?

October is almost over.

Still no funds.

Meanwhile, there is that little dry cough.

And a rash that will not go away.

Ginger.

Turmeric and lemon tea.

Your period arrives.

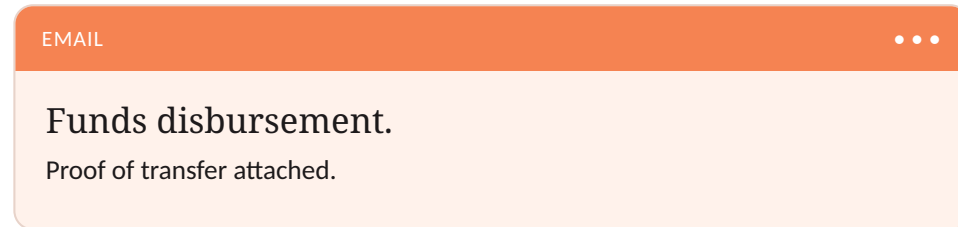
Perhaps it is hormones.

There is syrup somewhere and, conveniently, it helps you sleep.

You are on and off planes now.

Our globe-trotting, dedicated, hardworking, competent, self-diagnosing healer activist is back in circulation.

Then the email arrives.



Finally.

It is **November**.

There is another line in the email.

As explained, reporting is due at the end of December. We hope you are still comfortable with these timelines.

Of course.

You said you could do it.

And the funds matter.

The project matters.

The money will help cover gaps in salaries and health insurance. Perhaps we might finally get that by law passed in that community.

So, you make it work.

Get all hands on deck.

Can activities be linked?

Can teams support one another?

Can existing activities carry parts of the new work?

It might even demonstrate initiative and broader impact.

November moves.



Activities.

Accountabilities.

Reports.

Articles.

Social media posts.

Meetings.

Fieldwork.

You show up.

You show out.

Dedicated.

Hardworking.

Competent.

Creative.

Defender of the people.

Then December arrives.

Annual planning retreat.

You look at everything still open.

Uh-oh.

You thought you would get it done this year.

But there is still time.

A whole month.

The annual report can be finished over the holidays.

The new project can still be completed and reported.

It is fine.

You promised.

It is the only solution.

On 24 December, you return from the field.

Christmas Day.

On 26 December, you are back in the field.

Activities completed.

Accountabilities done.

Report sent.

You did it.

Then the automatic reply arrives.

AUTOMATIC REPLY

Out for the holidays! Let us reconnect in February!

Fine.

At least it is done.

January comes.

February comes.

15 March.

An email.

EMAIL

I acknowledge receipt of the reports. We will review and revert.

You look at it.

Then perhaps at the calendar.

What a cycle!

Slow Down

There is nothing you need to complete here.

No reflection exercise.

No five things to write down.

No action points.

Sit.

You have just looked at a year.

An entire year of activities, accountabilities, reports, proposals, campaigns, meetings, travel, deadlines, illness, recovery and starting again.

You gave.

A lot.



Thank you.

The campaign mattered. The community waiting for you mattered. The report mattered. The colleague who needed you mattered. Gender justice matters. Women's rights matter. Human rights matter. The work you have done has contributed.

You have contributed.

You matter too.

Perhaps that sounds obvious.

I am not sure we always behave as though it is.

Somewhere in that calendar, your body became something else to manage.

Feed it enough to get through the meeting.

Give it something for the headache.

Put it to sleep.

Wake it up.

Get it through the report.

Get it back into the office.

Get it better quickly because there is work to do.

And when it refused?

You negotiated.

One more email.

One small task.

Thirty minutes of rest.

Five days off, but perhaps we can catch up on a few things.

We have become exceptionally good at keeping ourselves going.

Have we become equally good at keeping each other going?

Check around.

There is another rookie pharmacist somewhere near you.

They might have the second drawer too.

They might be answering your message from bed.

They might be staring at the report they promised you on Wednesday and wondering how to tell you that they cannot do it.

They might be on annual leave with their laptop.

They might be the colleague you have decided is moving too slowly.

They might be the person who always says yes.

They might be you.

What would happen if we noticed each other before somebody's body had to make the announcement?

The report does not automatically become yours because your colleague cannot finish it.

Perhaps their exhaustion does not have to become your exhaustion.

Perhaps collective care begins earlier than that.

With communication.

I cannot carry this today.

I need help.

I can do this part, can someone take the other?

I am going on leave and I will not be available.

I know we promised Friday. We need Monday.

I cannot attend this meeting.

I am sick.

I need to rest.

And perhaps, sometimes:

We do not have the capacity to do this.

That one may be harder.

We solve things.

We find a way.

We stretch.

We improvise.

We get all hands on deck.

We link activities.

We make the budget work.

We make the deadline work.

We make ourselves work.

But collective care cannot mean moving an impossible load from one exhausted person to another.

Sometimes the load itself must change.

Something may need to wait.

Something may need to be smaller.

Something may need to be renegotiated.

Something may remain unfinished.

The world will continue.

The struggle will continue too.

That is part of what makes this difficult. There is no neat moment when gender justice is achieved and everyone can finally go home and sleep.

There will be another campaign.

Another case.

Another conflict.

Another funding call.

Another report.

Another person whose rights have been violated.

Another defender who needs protection.

Another reason to keep going.

How do we keep going?

And with whom.

Who knows when you are tired?

Who can tell you to go home?

Who can take something from your hands without you hovering over them?

Whose work can you carry for a while without making them feel guilty for needing you?

Who can say no to you?

To whom can you say no?

Who notices when you disappear into work?

Who are you noticing?

Maybe this is what it means to reserve our energy.

Not hoard it.

Not withdraw it from the movements and people we care about.

Recognise that it is finite.

Share responsibility.

Communicate.

Make room for different rhythms.

Let people recover.

Let people leave.

Let people come back.

Let yourself be one of those people.

And then there is rest.

Actual rest.

Not five days off to catch up.

Not working from bed.

Not checking email because you are only keeping up with trivial things.

Rest that produces nothing.

Sleep.

Do nothing.

Practise how long you can remain still without doing anything.

Stop fidgeting.

Put the phone down.

Sit there.

Do nothing.

Lie there.

Do nothing.

Okay, drink water.

But that is it.

Your rookie pharmacist may be getting restless by now.

There must be something in the drawer for this.

Leave the drawer closed.

Be patient with yourself.

There is a slowness to things that cannot be medicated, scheduled or made more efficient.

And when you are ready, come back to yourself.

What gives you life?

What is your purpose beyond your productivity?

Who is your community when nobody needs a deliverable from you?

Who are you when you are still?

You do not have to answer today.

For now, slow down.

You are doing fine.

And perhaps Billy Joel had the words for this all along:

“Slow down, you are doing fine. You can’t be everything you wanna be before your time.”

Maybe our rookie pharmacist can take that prescription for once.