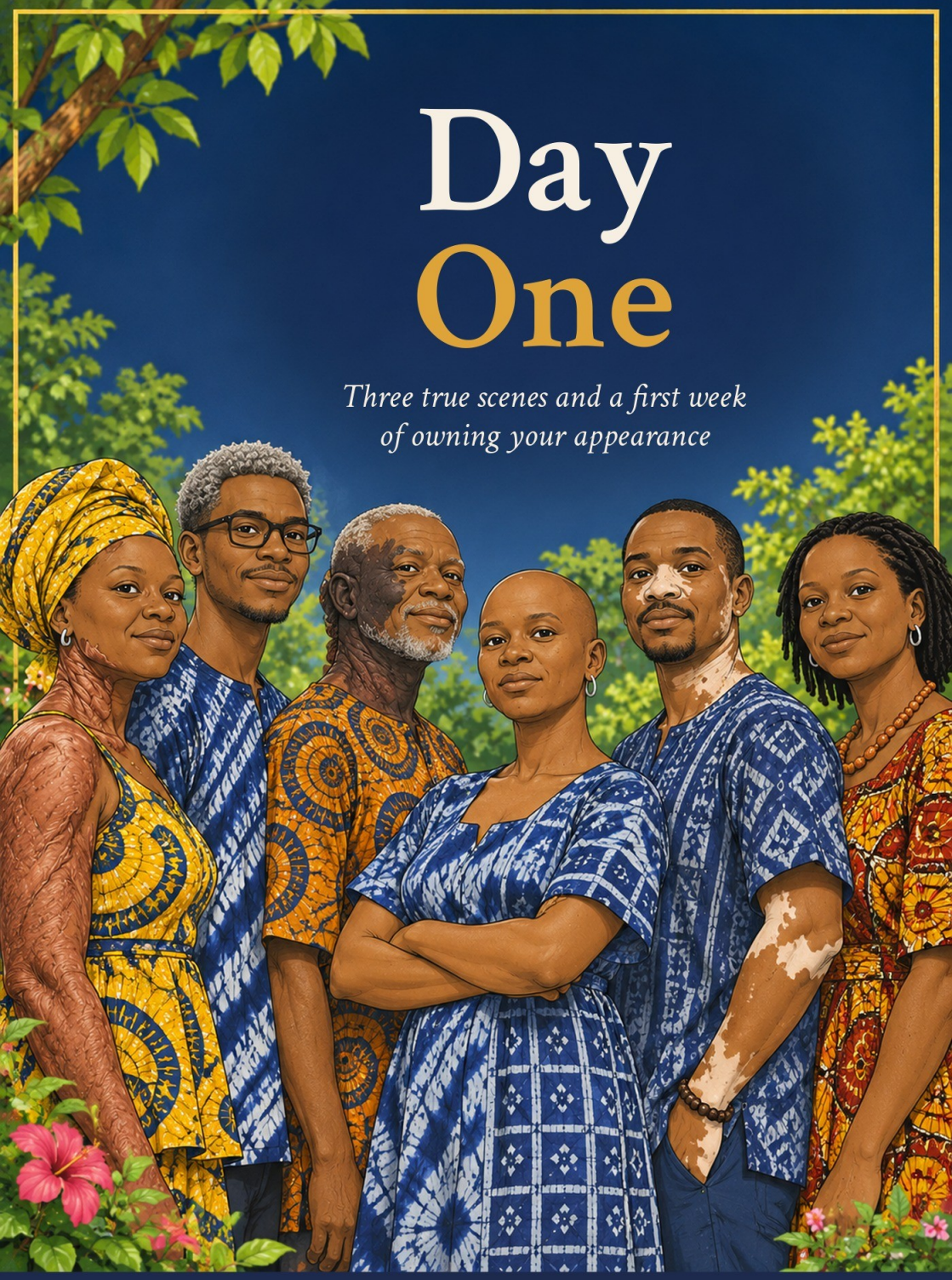
Day One

Three true scenes and a first week of owning your appearance



OGO MADUEWESI

Before the first scene

"My appearance is not a problem for society to solve."

This is a short book. Three true scenes from my life, and one week of small things to try. No lectures. Read a scene. Try the small thing at the end of it. Go slowly, if slow works for you. Slow is allowed.

I am Ogo Maduewesi. I am not a therapist or a psychologist. What I bring is lived experience. Since 2009 I have worked alongside people living with vitiligo. From 2018, I began working more with what I then called Visible Differences. Today I call them Appearance Differences: lasting differences in how a person looks. Skin conditions, scars, burns, hair loss, birthmarks, cultural marks, the changes that come with age and childbirth, and more.

If anything here gets heavy, you are not alone with it. Turn to **When it gets heavy** near the end of this book, or talk to someone you trust. Your psychosocial (social, emotional and mental) wellbeing comes first.

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Not only my story

Your story may be different from mine. Your difference may sit on your skin, your scalp, your hands, or somewhere only you know about.

But I would bet we share a few things. The stare that lasts one second too long. The conclusion people reach before you open your mouth. The job that went to someone else. The invitation that never came. The empty seat beside you on a full bus.

Over the years, I have heard the same stories again and again. People stop leaving the house. Parents hide a child when visitors come. A partner walks away because an appearance changed. A salon says it cannot do her hair because of Lamellar Ichthyosis. Your experience is not an isolated incident. It is a pattern.

And the strangest part? Most of us end up blaming ourselves. We cover up. We explain. We work twice as hard to make the next person comfortable enough to accept us. We wait for someone to tell us we are okay.

The belief that we somehow deserve this has a name. I call it **the Appearance Lie**.

We are not an afterthought. And we never will be, if we decide never to be.

The three scenes that follow are mine. The Lie inside them may be yours too.

Scene one: The mirror

February 2005. I woke up, walked to the bathroom and glanced at the mirror.

On the right side of my lip, the deep brown was gone. Not faded. Gone. Starkly white. I leaned closer and pulled my lip down. Inside my mouth, on that side, the dark brown had turned the same pale colour.

I did not freak out. Not yet. I turned on the tap. Turned it off. Looked again. Was it something I ate? A new cosmetic? There was nobody to ask. The mirror had no answer.

Then a spot showed up on my forehead. It is my oldest spot till date.

It was vitiligo. Nobody had warned me this could happen. Nobody could tell me why.

One question tore through my head, so loud that I still remember the tiles under my feet: *Am I defined by my skin? Am I defined by my appearance? Or is there more to me?*

I did not know it yet, but that was the morning I started refusing to hide. It took years. But it started there.

A few years later, as it spread.



> **Try this. One minute.** Stand in front of a mirror. Pick one part of your appearance that you usually avoid. Look at it for one minute. If one minute is too much, start with ten seconds. Do not fix it. Do not judge it. Then say one plain sentence out loud, like a label: *"This is my shoulder. It is mine."* That is all. Notice what your body does.

Scene two: The market

It had rained heavily in Lagos. The market paths were thick with mud. My foot slipped, and I went down hard.

The fall was not what cut me. What came after was. A loud chorus of laughter went up from the stalls. Women stood staring at my half-brown, half-white face and my pale palm, as if I were a curse that had finally been brought to its knees. One woman down the lane shouted for someone to help. Her voice was empty. Nobody came close to my skin.

I got up slowly, caked in mud.

I did not scream. I did not cry. I walked straight to one of the women who had laughed. I needed fruit. Her laughter stopped as I came closer.

I held out my money in my right hand, the hand the white patch had swallowed whole. She stared at the hand. She stared at the money. She did not move.

I moved the money to my left hand. Her face loosened. She reached out and took it.

I stood there for a second. What just happened? Where I come from, you do not hand anyone anything with your left hand. It is an insult. And she had just collected money from mine, happily. Ohhh. So the left hand is no longer a taboo? My skin was the bigger one.

I held my head up and bought my fruit. Then I went to another stall and bought water. I looked each woman in the eye. I put the money into their hands.

They had tried to deny my humanity. So I paid for it, in front of their faces.

That night, alone in my room, I did not perform strength. I gave myself five minutes.

I wept, quietly, then not so quietly. I wrote down everything I had swallowed in that market. I screamed into a pillow, twice. I put on music and danced in the dark. Then I breathed, slowly, until I could feel my own edges again.



> **Try this. Five minutes.** Give yourself five minutes of full permission, alone and safe. Cry. Write what you swallowed. Shout into a pillow. Move. No audience. No explaining. Then drink some water, or a glass of chilled zobo. Your anger is information. It tells you something crossed a line.

Scene three: The bus

A commercial bus in Lagos. Being stared at was nothing new to me: the low hiss, the not-so-quiet murmur.

One day, two women across the aisle were whispering behind their palms, heads tilted towards me, trying hard to look unbothered. One kept peeking. Their eyes moved over me as if I were a roadside accident.

Then a woman who had been lost in her own thoughts looked up. She saw the white patches on my face and screamed, "Ọ̀wà! Ọ̀wà!" (I am getting down here!) She wanted out of that bus, and away from me.

Days like that crushed me from the inside, again and again: the discrimination, the rejection, the exclusion, the gaze that followed me everywhere.

Then one day, on another bus, it happened again. Nobody jumped out this time. They were having fun instead, discussing me in hushed voices. I could hear every word.

That day, I turned. And I stared.

I did not look away. I did not blink politely. I did not smile to show I was harmless. I stared so long and so directly that they began to squirm. They looked at their laps, then at the window.

Finally one of them broke, her voice cracking: *"What did we do to you? Why are you staring at us like that?"*

For the first time, the weight of their gaze did not crush me. **It fuelled me.**



> **Try this. Eight seconds.** Only when you feel safe. When someone stares, do not lower your head. Meet their eyes and count to eight, without smiling. Let them carry the awkwardness. You did not create it. If you do not feel safe, walk away. That is also a win.

Words for when staring becomes talking. Say them out loud at home first.

They say	You can say
"What happened to your skin?"	"My appearance is a personal matter. Google is free."
"Is it contagious?"	"No. Ignorance is more contagious than this."
"You would be so pretty if you fixed that."	"I am not a project to fix. My value is not up for discussion."
"You are so brave to go out like that."	"I am not brave. I am living my life."
"Have you tried [remedy]?"	"Have you tried minding your business?"

Or say nothing at all.

- Walk away. Give it five minutes if you need them, then take your day back.
- Smile and ignore them. You owe nobody an explanation, however entitled they feel.

And when they say, "Ah, you are rude. I am only trying to help," do not fall for it. That is bullying dressed as care. Yes, some people truly care. But care does not give anyone the right to discriminate, exclude or treat you as less.

What I know now

Two lines from *The Appearance Lie Manifesto*, another of my books on the way. Carry them with you.

- **Your worth does not depend on your appearance.** Not at twenty, not at ninety, not with a scar, not with grey hair, not with skin that has changed.
- **The Lie does not always sound cruel. Sometimes it sounds like love.** It arrives as advice, as a compliment, as concern, as tradition.

What owning your appearance means

From my coming book, *Own Your Appearance: The Playbook*:

Owning your appearance means owning your sovereignty. It does not mean perfecting your disguise.

It means: I own my body, which means the world does not have a lien on it.

This body is my home. It is not public property up for community review.

That is what the week ahead is for.

Your first seven days

> *Don't perform your life. Live it, one day at a time.*

You do not have to do all seven. If a day is too much, repeat the day before. Skip anything that does not feel safe.

Day	One small thing
1. Look	One minute in the mirror. One plain sentence, aloud.
2. Name	Write down one line someone said about your appearance that stuck. Just the line.
3. Feel	Five minutes of permission, alone and safe. Then water, or zobo.
4. Say	Say one of the replies above out loud, at home, to the wall.
5. Log	Write five lines: what happened, who, how I felt, how I answered, what I will do next time.
6. Tell	Tell one person you trust one thing from this week.
7. Show up	One ordinary thing in public, without hiding. Buy fruit. Take a bus. Your pace.



Keep going

If you tried even one of these, you have started. That counts.

The full book, ***Own Your Appearance: The Playbook***, goes further, with more stories, scripts and rituals. Watch for it at ogomaduewesi.com.

> **When it gets heavy**
>
> A book cannot sit with you at 2am. ỌdịdịM can. She lives on **Appear+**, an AI companion shaped by the lived experience behind these pages. No judgment. No fake "be strong." If you need a professional, find one in our TAP Care Network. And please, talk to someone you trust. *Appear+ is not a medical, psychiatric or emergency service, and does not replace professional care.*

One small ask: share this with one person who needs it.

One day at a time

I have seen it again and again. A smiling photo goes up in the morning: perfect angle, soft filter, a brave caption. Hundreds of likes. That same night, the pillow is wet with tears.

Some of us say, “Ohh, I am fine. I get by.” If performing is the only way you have right now, I understand. It may carry you for a while. It will not carry you for long. Performance is tiring. Carry it too long, and it wears down your mind.

Getting by is not the goal. Come on, we can live. Truly live. With purpose, with inner peace, true to ourselves.

One day at a time. This is only Day One.

Existing is not the goal. Living is.

— Ogo Maduewesi

ABOUT

Ogo Maduewesi is the founder of The Appearance Positive (TAP). She founded the Vitiligo Support and Awareness Foundation (VITSAF) in 2009 and initiated World Vitiligo Day (25 June). She coined the terms Appearance Differences, Appearance Epidemiology and Appearance Intelligence, and is building all three, with Appearance Differences as the field that holds them. She is based in Lagos, Nigeria.

The Appearance Positive (TAP) is the founding ecosystem of the field of Appearance Differences — building the research, AI, cultural, and psychosocial care infrastructure to address appearance-based inequality at scale, rooted in Sub-Saharan African lived experience.

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DAY ONE

The stare that lasts one second too long.
The whisper on the bus.
The laughter in the market.

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and one week of small things to try.
No lectures. Slow is allowed.

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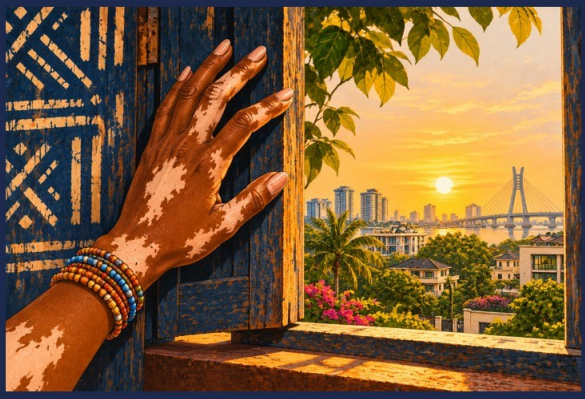
And we never will be, if we decide never to be.



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