A Spell of Good Things

ALSO BY AYỌ̀BÁMI ADÉBÁYỌ̀

Stay With Me

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For Ọlọ́láaJésù. Darling sister,
thank you for the great gift of friendship.

Kinsman

When an elephant walks over a hard-rock outcrop,
We do not see his footprints.
When a buffalo walks over a hard-rock outcrop,
We do not see his footprints.

—*Kinsman and Foreman* by T. M. Aluko

Caro was angry. After one of her apprentices read the notice of meeting out loud to her, she threw it across the room into a dustbin. Some politician's wife wanted to give a talk to the tailoring association, and their president had agreed to welcome the woman during their next meeting. And, of course, the president thought it meant something to mention that this politician's wife was the daughter of a tailor. Caro was almost sure this was a lie. Those people would claim to be your kinsmen if it would help them get into power. It irritated her that they would waste time listening to this woman campaigning for her husband. This was not why she paid her tailoring association dues.

Caro went to the dustbin in the corner of her tailoring shop. She retrieved the notice, tore it into tiny bits, and walked to her front yard to release the fragments in the air. She would let the association know what she thought at the next meeting. Not that anyone would listen or care. They all knew their president took money from politicians to host them at those gatherings. Closer to the elections, members of the association would get their own share of the sudden generosity of several contestants. Wives or sisters of contestants would come to meetings with bowls of rice, kegs of oil, yards and yards of ankara embossed with the contestants' faces and logos. The men themselves—and the contestants were mostly men—never came in person to answer any questions about what they intended to do in office.

Some of the other tailors accused Caro of arrogance, because she always refused to take the rice and oil or to sew a dress from the useless ankara fabrics. But she did not feel superior to any of them; most if not all had children to feed with the foodstuff. Besides, they knew this was all they could be sure of getting out of the politicians for another

four years. So why not gorge on the rice and the oil they brought if that was the only so-called dividend of democracy within reach? Caro understood the reasoning of her peers, but that did not make the whole thing less enraging. How many times had the representatives of those politicians promised that electricity would be fixed if only their candidate got into office? Wasn't everyone in the tailoring association still dependent on generators? Was it not just two weeks ago that one of them had died in her sleep after inhaling generator fumes? The third tailor to die that way in as many years. At the latest news, Caro could not cry. Instead, even though the dead woman was someone whose face she could barely remember, her head had pulsed with rage for days.

Elections were coming up in a year or so. In the next few months, campaign posters would begin to appear, littering every fence and wall in sight with the faces of men whose smiles already showed they should not be trusted. Last time, her wall had been covered from top to bottom with some senator's campaign posters because her front yard faced the street. She must remember to ask someone to paint POST NO BILLS on the wall soon. She'd ask one of her apprentices. Probably Ẹniọlá.

PART I

Everything Good Will Come

Muffled rage stalks like the wind, sudden and invisible. People don't fear the wind until it fells a tree. Then, they say it's too much.

—*Everything Good Will Come* by Sefi Atta

· I ·

Ẹniọlá decided to pretend it was just water. A single melting hailstone. Mist or dew. It could also be some good thing: a solitary raindrop fallen from the sky, lone precursor to a deluge. The first rains of the year would mean he could finally eat an àgbálùmọ̀. The fruit seller whose stall was next to his school had had a basket of àgbálùmọ̀ for sale yesterday, but Ẹniọlá had not bought any from her, and he'd convinced himself this was because his mother often said they caused cramps if eaten before the first rainfall. But if this liquid was rain, then in a few days he could lick an àgbálùmọ̀'s sweet and sticky juice from his fingers, chew the fibrous flesh into gum, crack open the seeds and gift his sister seedlings that she'd halve into stick-on earrings. He tried to pretend it was just rain, but it did not feel like water.

He could sense, though his eyes were downcast, that the dozen or so men who clustered around the newspaper vendor's table were staring at him. They were all quiet, stone-still. Like disobedient children transformed into rocks by an evil wizard in one of those stories his father used to tell.

When he was a child, Ẹniọlá would shut his eyes whenever he got into trouble, certain that he was not visible to anyone he could not see. Although he knew closing his eyes now and hoping he would vanish was as stupid as believing that people could become stones, he squeezed them shut anyway. And, of course, he did not vanish. He was not that lucky. The newspaper vendor's rickety table was still right in front of him, close enough for his thighs to brush the newspapers that covered its surface. The vendor, whom Ẹniọlá called Ẹ̀gbọ́n Abbey, was still standing next to him, and the hand he'd pressed into Ẹniọlá's shoulder just before he cleared his throat and spat in his face was still in place.

Ẹniọlá traced a finger up his nose, inching towards the wet weight of phlegm. Stunned into silence that something so unexpected had rippled through their routine, all the men, even Ẹ̀gbọ́n Abbey, seemed to be holding their breath, waiting for more. Not even one person was taunting Chelsea fans about the way Tottenham crushed their team last night. Nobody was arguing about that open letter the journalist-politician had written about other politicians who bathed in human blood to protect themselves from evil spirits. The men had all gone quiet when the vendor's phlegm struck Ẹniọlá's face. And now these men who gathered here every morning to argue about the headlines were watching to see what Ẹniọlá would do. They wanted him to hit the vendor, yell insults, cry or, better yet, clear his own throat, pool phlegm in his mouth and spit in Ẹ̀gbọ́n Abbey's face. Ẹniọlá's finger travelled all the way to his forehead; he had been too slow. The phlegm had already dribbled down the side of his nose, leaving a damp and sticky trail across his cheek. Flicking the glob away was out of the question now.

Something pushed against his cheek. He flinched, lurching forward into the newspaper stand. Around him, a few people muttered *sorry* as he gripped the table's edge to stop himself from falling. One of the men had been pushing a blue handkerchief against his face.

"Hin ṣé sir," Ẹniọlá said as he took the handkerchief; he *was* grateful, even though the hanky was already streaked with white lines that flaked when he pressed it against his cheek.

Ẹniọlá scanned the small crowd, straightening once he realised there was no one there from his school. The men clustered around the vendor's table were all adults. Some, already dressed for work, pulled at tightly knotted ties and adjusted ill-fitting jackets. Many wore faded sweaters or bomber jackets zipped chin high. Most of the younger ones, whose names he had to prefix with "Brother" or get a knock on the head, were recent graduates from polytechnics or universities. They would loiter around Ẹ̀gbọ́n Abbey's stand all morning, reading and arguing, copying job adverts from the newspapers into notepads or scraps of paper. Now and then they might help the vendor with change, but none of them would buy a newspaper.

Ẹniọlá tried to return the handkerchief, but the man waved him off and began browsing through a copy of *Aláròyé*. At least there was no one

here who could tell his schoolmates how the vendor had glared at him for almost a full minute before spitting in his face. The action so sudden he'd moved his head to the side only after he felt wetness begin to spread across his nose, so unexpected it had silenced men whose voices could usually be heard in every house on the street. At least Paul and Hakeem, his classmates who also lived on that street, weren't there to witness that moment. After seeing an old video of Klint da Drunk performing on *Night of a Thousand Laughs,* Paul had decided he wanted to be just like Klint. Since then, whenever a teacher skipped a period, Paul staggered around, bumping into desks and chairs, slurring insults at his classmates.

Ẹniọlá placed a palm against his cheek to press in any wetness and leave his skin unmarked. If there was any trace of saliva on his face when he passed by Paul's house on his way back home, the other boy's hour or so in front of the class this afternoon would be all about him. Paul might say the wetness was there because Ẹniọlá drooled in his sleep, had not taken a bath before putting on his school uniform, came from a family that could not even afford soap. There would be laughter. He laughed too when Paul tortured other people. Most of the jokes were not even funny, but, hoping this would keep Paul's focus on whatever unfortunate boy or girl he'd chosen that afternoon, Ẹniọlá laughed at everything Paul said. When Paul shifted his attention from one person, it would usually turn on a girl who hadn't been laughing at his jokes. Usually. There had been that terrible afternoon when Paul had stopped talking about some other classmate's tattered shoe to say Ẹniọlá's forehead was shaped like the thick end of a mango. Ẹniọlá had been laughing at the girl with tattered shoes and found that as the class erupted into a fresh round of laughter he would hear in his sleep for months after, he could not shut his mouth. He wanted to stop laughing but couldn't. Not when his throat began to hurt with tears or when his classmates became quiet because the chemistry teacher had stumbled in a few minutes before her period was over. He'd gone on laughing until she told him to kneel in one corner of the class with his face to the wall.

Without a mirror, there was no way to tell . . . no. No. He wouldn't ask any of the men around him to confirm if his face still had any streaks. He wouldn't. As his hand slipped away from his cheek, Ẹniọlá squinted at the three-storey building where Paul's family lived on the second floor.

They shared its four rooms with two other families and an old woman who had no known relatives. The woman was standing in front of the house now, scattering grain on the sand while chickens squawked at her feet. No Paul. Maybe he had left for school already. But then, he could also be on the staircase or in the corridor, ready to step out just as Ẹniọlá passed by the house.

Ẹniọlá cupped his forehead, pressing his palm against the point where it jutted forward to hang over the bridge of his nose as though to push it back, all the way back into his skull. Maybe he should just run past that house. This was all his father's fault. Everything. The things Paul might say, the men who eyed his now-clenched fists as though expecting him to punch the newspaper vendor, the vendor's rage. Especially the vendor's rage. It was his father who owed this man thousands of naira, his father who for months had collected Thursday's *The Daily* on credit so he could read all the job placements in the newspaper, his father who had insisted this morning that Ẹniọlá should be the one to go beg the vendor for a copy of the day's paper on credit. That stinking mix of spit and phlegm should be clinging to his father's skin.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and recognised the grip before he turned towards the vendor. The man was close enough for Ẹniọlá to smell his breath. Although, that could still be his own face. While the handkerchief had gotten most of the wetness, the smell stayed on. Ẹ̀gbọ́n Abbey coughed, and Ẹniọlá braced himself. What more could the vendor do? Punch him in the face so that when he got home there would be some unmistakable mark, a bruise or disjointed nose that would announce what had happened here to Ẹniọlá's father?

"You wanted *The Daily,* àbí? Óyá, take." The vendor slapped Ẹniọlá's arm with a rolled-up newspaper. "But if I see you or your father here again, ehn? Tell him. That your father—better tell him—if I see either of you here again, the wonders I will work on your face with my fist? Anyone who sees you will think a trailer ran over you. I'm warning you now, don't choose to be unfortunate."

Ẹniọlá wished he could force the vendor's mouth open and stuff the newspaper down his throat. He wanted to fling the newspaper on the ground and stamp it into the red earth until every page was shredded; he wanted at least to turn his back on Ẹ̀gbọ́n Abbey without taking it

from him. This was the kind of nonsense he got from older people all the time, even his parents. He knew there would be no apologies for the vendor's explosive rage; the man would rather drink out of the gutter than admit spitting in his face was wrong. This newspaper was supposed to double as an apology. He imagined an older person, his mother or father, apologising to him for any reason at all and he almost laughed.

"Have you turned into a statue?" the vendor asked, poking Ẹniọlá's chest with *The Daily*.

Someday soon, though, his father would have money again and Ẹniọlá would be sent to buy a newspaper. On that day he would walk all the way to Wesley Guild and buy one from the vendor whose stand was in front of the hospital. On his way back he would pass by this vendor's stand, flipping through the newspaper so that this wicked man could see. But before all that could happen, his father had to find the right job vacancy. And so Ẹniọlá took the newspaper, mumbled something that could be mistaken for a thank-you and began to run. Away from the vendor and his smelling mouth, past Paul's house where the old woman was struggling with a chick as she tied a piece of red fabric to one of its feathers. Faster and faster, downhill towards home.

❁

His father seemed to hold each leaf of *The Daily* with his fingertips as he turned its pages. Or just his nails—Ẹniọlá couldn't tell for sure from where he stood by the door. All this care after he had washed his hands twice and refused to dry them with any fabric, declining even the lace blouse Ẹniọlá's mother had fished out of the special box that held her collection of lace and aṣọ-òkè. Instead, he'd paced the room in every possible direction—wall to bed, bed to mattress on the floor, mattress on the floor to the cupboard that held pots, plates and cups—holding his arms aloft until all the moisture had evaporated from his skin. He'd even tapped each finger against his eyelids before asking Ẹniọlá to hand over *The Daily*. Once they had up to ten copies, the newspapers could be traded for money or food from the women who sold groundnuts, fried yam or boli on this street or the next. He preferred food, especially when it was from that boli seller whose plantains were roasted exactly how he liked

them, crunchy on the outside and moist on the inside. But his parents always wanted to exchange the newspapers for money, and the cleaner they were, the more those women were willing to pay for them.

His father was not old enough to have grey hair. Or so his mother said, the first time she plucked hair from Bàami's head, claiming that once she pulled them all from the roots, they would grow back even blacker than before. And yet, last year, every strand on Bàami's head turned grey within a month. The grey had raced from Bàami's temple, claiming every inch of his scalp, so that within weeks Ẹniọlá had to look at one of his father's old photos to remember what he had looked like when his hair was black.

In the creased and flaking photo, Bàami is beside a door, glaring at the camera as though daring the photographer to take a bad picture. His hair is black at the temple and elsewhere. A side parting on the left side reveals a slice of his gleaming scalp. On the door, fitting just within the frame before it is cut off at the edge, a black nameplate says "Vice Principal" in gold cursive letters. Below that, typed out on a rectangular sheet of paper that looked as though it had only just been stuck on that door and would soon be ripped off, is Bàami's name—Mr. Bùsúyì Òní. Bàami stands straight with his shoulder pushed so far back, Ẹniọlá wondered if he wasn't smiling because his shoulder blades had begun to hurt. Over the years since the photo was taken, Bàami had stopped staring directly at cameras or people. Only Ẹniọlá's mother still insisted that he look her in the eye while speaking to her. When he spoke to Ẹniọlá or his sister, Bàami stared at their feet, eyes flitting around as though counting their toes over and over again.

Bàami folded *The Daily* and cleared his throat. "The vegetable that is growing wild in the backyard, what if you sell it? I can help you to harvest . . ."

"No, no, no, there's no way that will sell, Bàbá Ẹniọlá. Face the newspaper, please. Have you checked it from beginning to end?" Ẹniọlá's mother said.

"Have you found something?" Ẹniọlá asked.

His father flipped the newspaper open without responding to either of them. Ẹniọlá wanted to go outside and wash his face, but he felt compelled to stay with his parents. Besides, bathing was done for the day and

his mother had stored the soap in one of her countless hiding places. If he asked her for the soap now, she would want to know why he needed it. She would not relent until he explained why he'd asked for it, not even if he changed his mind and told her he didn't need the soap anyway. She would make him reveal what had happened, she always found a way. And he knew that the minute he finished his story, she would rush to the vendor's and spit in his face until her mouth was dry. He did not want that. Yes, he would love to watch the vendor try to dodge his mother's wrath, but that would also mean that more people might hear about how he had been humiliated that morning. He did not really need the soap. Maybe he should just rinse his face and scrub it with a sponge the way he did when they ran out of soap.

He would have gone to rinse his face in the backyard right away, but Bùsọ́lá was not in the room. She could be sweeping the courtyard, washing plates or scrubbing the pot their mother had used to make àmàlà last night. It was best to wait until she came back into the room, since he did not want to leave his father alone with the newspaper. When he could, he stayed with his father and made sure he was not left by himself. His mother was here, but then she was acting strange. She sat at the foot of the bed, folding and unfolding the blouse she had offered Bàami earlier.

"Nobody buys gbúre," she said. "They're all over the backyard now, but nobody buys them. Even dogs and goats have gbúre leaves in their backyard now."

Ẹniọlá leaned against a wall; it would not make a difference if gbúre grew on every inch of the backyard and every surface in this room, sprouting even from his scalp and his parents' foreheads. How much could his mother get for them anyway? Not enough to pay Bùsọ́lá's school fees or his. He knew this from hawking gbúre during the holidays. Though he'd walked all the way past the hospital, crisscrossing through the market beside the palace and past the palace itself, then all the way down until he stopped in front of the Christ Apostolic Church next to the Brewery, he'd still returned home with more than half of what had been piled onto his tray.

Ẹniọlá's father coughed. At first it seemed as though he was clearing his throat, but soon his shoulders quivered with spasms as he struggled to catch his breath. His mother flung her blouse onto the bed and filled

a tumbler to the brim, leaving a trail of water in her wake as she went to stand with a hand on Bàami's shoulder. His father drank the water in one long gulp, but the cough persisted until he gripped his knees and sat on the bed.

"You, when are you going to school?" Ẹniọlá's mother asked, rubbing her husband's back as the coughing subsided.

"I . . . I'm waiting to know if Bàami finds anything in the papers."

"Carry your bag and go now, jàre," his mother said.

Bàami pointed a finger in Ẹniọlá's direction. "Don't worry, I already found something promising, it's very promising, Ẹniọlá. I will write the letter today."

"I can help you to post it," Ẹniọlá said.

"That won't be necessary—your mother will take it when she's leaving for the market."

"I thought she wasn't—"

"Why am I still seeing your shadow in this house?" His mother made a sweeping motion with one hand. "Tell your sister to stop whatever she's doing and start going to school. What's the point of looking for money to pay your fees if you're going to be latecomers?"

"Yes ma." Ẹniọlá picked up his schoolbag. "Please, I need some salt."

"Why is this child asking me for salt when he should be in school? Do you want to cook a pot of soup this morning, Ẹniọlá?"

"I—I haven't brushed my teeth yet."

His mother squinted at him as though just noticing that the space where his head should be had all the while been occupied by a large coconut. He held himself still, careful to look in her direction, knowing that if he glanced away, she would suspect he was lying. But he also made sure to look towards her without exactly meeting her eyes. Staring into her eyes would only be taken as evidence of his lack of respect for her, proof that he had grown wings and was now a wild bird prepared to fly into her face unless she stopped him with a well-placed slap. He did not realise he'd been holding his breath until she nodded towards the cupboard that held pots, plates and a small sack of salt.

Ẹniọlá measured a heaped spoonful into his left palm and balled his hand into a fist.

Bùsọ́lá had just finished washing a pot when Ẹniọlá entered the back-

yard. She let him have the large bowl of water she had not used so he did not have to fetch from the well that stood in one corner of the yard. Harmattan stung his arms from elbows to fingertips like a million pinpricks, coating his ankles with a thin layer of dust and cracking his upper lip. He splashed the water onto his face and rubbed salt across his nose until his skin felt raw, ready to peel. He rinsed his face again and again until the bowl was empty. But still he felt that wet weight. He could smell stale onions and eggs gone bad and something else he could not place but would spend the rest of his morning trying to name.