

SPENT LIVES

by
Ayobami Adebayo

a Gambit Short

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SPENT LIVES

Ayobami Adebayo

She recognized the new tenant from her dreams, but she did not know this. She assumed that she simply remembered his face from so long ago, remembered the way his shirt hung on his thin shoulders like it might on a plastic hanger. The truth was that he had been muscular when she knew him and his hair had been black like a moonless, starless night sky. It was now grey all over like hers and half of it was gone. What was left lay on the sides above his ears and looked like it would fall off if the fan blew too hard.

Seated next to the fat estate agent who had come to introduce him to her, the new tenant looked malnourished. His clothes hung loose as though he had recently lost a lot of weight, and she thought that his wife must be too old to cook good meals for him. It never occurred to her that he never married, that in the end Ayandele went about playing his drums from city to city, following a band around, kissing women who stared too long at him when he played, and hoping to hear her laughter from their mouths. She had no reason to imagine he would not marry because her smile was lodged somewhere in his brain. When a woman left you, you found another woman; it was what one did. You do not fall from a horse and refuse to climb another one all your life, how would you go about? On foot from city to city? She had gotten married within two years from the last time she saw him.

She was married to her husband for nearly five decades before he inconvenienced her by dying before she did. She was sitting in his favorite chair, an old armchair he had refused to let go of whenever they changed their furniture. Ayandele sat opposite her on a large leather couch. She had never loved him enough to hate him, or to spend too much time in murderous rage over what he did. Her rage had not even been murderous; it had been fleeting,

forgotten in a few weeks. He had faded from her mind gradually until she forgot that the beads she wore on her wrist until that day when she saw him again had been something of his that she had tried on and liked.

Still, she often dreamt of him, not just the young man she had known, but the man he became and the old man whom she now saw and recognized immediately. She had seen his first grey hair and the hairline that receded till it disappeared, she had even seen the glasses he now wore, all in her dreams. Only that in the dreams the glasses had green frames. The ones he actually wore had brown frames that matched his skin. She did not know all of this because her mind banished the memories of the dreams before dawn, so that on days she dreamt of Ayandele, she always thought she woke up from dreamless sleep. It was from those dreams that she recognized him.

When he said to her, “Good evening, our mother,” she laughed because it was strange to hear him talk to her so reverently. He had never been polite enough for her. He had a terrible habit, saying exactly what he thought about a matter or a person. He never mastered that necessary art of smiling at people while cursing them in his mind.

“Ayandele, son of Ayankunle, you don’t remember me?” She did not look at him as she spoke, she stared at a picture that hung on the wall directly opposite her. Her husband had hung that picture so that it was always in his line of sight whenever he was in the sitting room.

He scratched his eyebrow. “Alake? The one who sings *rara*?”

“It is Alake, but I don’t sing *rara* anymore. That was child’s play.” She leaned back in her chair and smiled.

“Child’s play? Alake, it was your spirit; *rara* was your life.”

She bit her lip. “It was child’s play. Don’t talk to me about it again. It was child’s play.”

Ayandele nodded. “So this is your face.”

“Abi, can’t you see? An old face too, not as wrinkled as yours though.”

“You know that this rag was once a fashionable dress. Surely, you remember

when my face was smooth.”

“Do I remember?” She tapped her forehead with a finger. “I don’t think so. Your face was always a rag.”

He laughed. There was no awkwardness, perhaps because too much time had passed, perhaps because he knew that the man she had married was dead. The agent had told him the landlady was a widow. He wondered if things would have felt different if he was to be the husband’s tenant and was grateful that the man lay six feet under a concrete cross in the front of the house.

“Our mother, so you know the new tenant?” the estate agent asked.

Alake nodded. “When we were young, we attended the same secondary school.”

“People really are water.” The agent said.

“The stream that flows out of a river will meet the river again further down the road,” Ayandele said.

“So should he bring his things? Our mother, you wanted to speak with the new tenant, but since he is a known person, the words...”

“... have spoken themselves.” Alake nodded “Abi, Ayandele? Have the words not spoken themselves? The house is yours, bring in your things when you are ready.”

*

It was not a house though; it was a room and a parlor downstairs. Alake’s sons had lived there as teenagers before they left for the university. The girls lived upstairs, so their parents could pay surprise visits in the middle of the night to make sure they were not out dancing in a disco. The apartment hadn’t been occupied since the last boy went off to study engineering in Ukraine.

Ayandele tried to avoid touching anything in the parlor. The room was very dusty and even the green walls looked as though they had been topped off with a light brown coating. The men who were helping him move his things kept coughing.

“Will you help me clean some of the dust?” he said to them as they brought in a settee.

“Baba, you did not pay for that one. You will drop some change.” One of the two men replied.

He sighed. He had no money to spend unnecessarily. It was a strange world now, and everything was about the money. He had hoped that the men, both of them barely thirty, would have some respect for his grey hair and spend some minutes cleaning the dust.

“Don’t worry, leave the dust,” he said.

The movers shrugged.

*

That night, Alake went downstairs to see her tenant. She was eager to meet his wife. She waited impatiently until it was around 8:00 p.m. for the new tenants to come upstairs to greet her, but they did not show up. She hissed under her breath as she knocked on the door, but it was something to do, somewhere to go, some people to speak to other than the house help her children had employed to take care of her.

“Our mother, you have come to greet me,” Ayandele said when he saw her on the other side of the door.

Alake laughed. “Is it old age that has done this to you? Who is your mother?” She looked left and right. “Are you seeing ghosts?”

“Come in,” he said.

She started to cough immediately after she entered the room; it was still dusty. She concluded that his wife must be a slob; whatever woman could stand in the filth for more than an hour had to be.

“I hope you are enjoying the place.” She sat on the only settee in the room. He nodded.

“How is your wife? Is she enjoying the place too?”

“My wife?” He removed a lantern from its place on a stool.

She put a hand to her throat, thinking the wife must have died. But when? It couldn't be in the period since the agent had first told her about him. Could it?

"Ehn, your wife."

"I don't have a wife." He placed the lantern on the floor.

"But, the agent said you have a wife. Has she taken the earth as her blanket?"

He sat on the stool. "Maybe he thought you wouldn't rent the house to me if I had no wife. They say you are a Deaconess, *Iya Ijo*."

He was right, she would never have agreed to even meet with him if she had thought he was widowed.

"Iya Ijo, should I begin to pack my things?"

The lantern wasn't bright and she couldn't see his face clearly. Still she was almost sure he was mocking her. He had never accepted Christianity. Her parents would never have allowed her to marry a pagan.

"You are a known person, there is no need."

"Thank you, Iya Ijo." He did not sound grateful, he sounded tired.

"What happened to her?"

"Who?"

"Your wife. How did she pass away?"

"She did not die."

"She left you?"

"I never married."

She was speechless; it was strange even for him. It was unimaginable, like saying a man existed but he was not born by a woman. It was what people did; they were born, if they lived long enough they got married and then they died, it was a fact of life. She could not think of any man she knew who had never married. Women? Yes, if they were too ugly, too stubborn, too lazy, or even too beautiful. She had been taught since she was a child that a mortal danger awaited any woman, the possibility of being too-something for any man to want her, the possibility of living life unmarried. As far as she knew, men were not in that

danger, they would marry even if they were too-everything.

“But, but how have you lived? Without a wife all your life?”

“I have been eating, drinking water, sleeping, waking up, breathing...”

“I am not playing a child’s game. How have you lived without a wife?”

“I have always lived with a woman—women—until now.”

“A woman?” She spoke as though she had never heard the word.

She hadn’t changed at all. There was still only one world for her. A world where people, all people went to church and did what the vicar had instructed all week. When they had been together, they had never even kissed. Perhaps, he thought now, for the first time, that was why he never forgot her.

“Different women,” Alake said. In her mouth, the words carried too much weight, the weight of regrets he hadn’t known he had until he heard her. “How did you meet them? Who were they?” she asked.

The lights came on suddenly, the way they often did when people had already forgotten there was something called electricity. They both flinched as the light of a lone fluorescent lamp flooded the room. For a while they did not speak. She looked around the room—it looked so terrible. She fought the urge to grab a broom and start cleaning; it was easier to fight the urge now that her knees could no longer be bent without considerable pain. He saw the beads on her wrist. The ones he had given her when they were barely adults, when he had thought for a few days that he might marry her, the way he thought about every woman he had met until he got to know them and marriage didn’t seem so necessary anymore.

“You are wearing my beads.”

She looked away from the cobwebs that covered the ceiling and squeezed her face.

“On your wrist.”

She looked at her wrist and tried to remember where she had gotten the string of beads, from whom she had gotten it. “I can’t remember who gave them to me. It was you?”

He nodded.

“They are beautiful.”

“They are royal beads.” His brother who played drums for the royal family had gotten a dozen of the bracelets as gifts from the king. He had given Ayandele one, the one Alake now wore.

“How did you meet them, the women?”

He could see her face clearly now.

“At parties where I went to play.”

“How did you do it? Did the women have no parents? How did you just live with them?”

“Have you not heard of it before?”

“Yes, children of today. But in our time?”

“Some just came to live with me, some had their own houses and I moved in.” He felt weary. He wished she would leave.

“Without *idana*? You never asked for their hand?”

“Correct.”

“They were not just concubines you went to or who came to you? That one is normal. They actually lived in your house without *idana*?”

“Yes.”

“What happened to your house?”

“I never built one.” He looked into her eyes when he said this, without shame, without regrets.

“Why not?” It was a reflexive question, she knew why already. It was because he never married a wife. A wife would have given him the common sense he needed to build his own house.

“Why should I build one?”

“Are you... serious?” She had wanted to say crazy but it would not have been proper.

“*Iya Ijo*, did you bury this house with your husband when he died?”

She flinched but he did not apologize. She got up then. It was time to leave.

“I will send my house help to clean this place tomorrow,” she said as she hobbled out of the sitting room.

He went to sit in the depression her buttocks had made on the settee; he could still feel her warmth there.

*

Alake did not see him for a few weeks, although she did hear him drumming at different times during the day. She went downstairs in the mornings, to the bathroom in the backyard to take her bath, 5:30 a.m. as always. Except for Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings when she went to church, she spent her days watching television and talking to her children on the phone.

She also thought about the man downstairs. She thought about the life he had lived. It appeared to her as though he had reached for something intangible and managed to get a hold of it while she had never known that such a thing even existed. She imagined his women to be free and happy, she wanted to know them, to meet them and ask them if they would face death knowing they had lived.

It was by chance that she saw him again. She was on her way to take her bath as usual, was passing by the kitchen when she noticed that a candle was on. She hadn't entered the kitchen for over a year. Her help did all the cooking now. She stood by the window and watched Ayandele bent over a green kerosene stove. He was holding a wooden stick and stirring something in an iron pot.

She had never known a man who could cook. It was something that had simply never occurred to her as a way that men could live. She had never taught her sons to cook or even to wash their plates because she assumed that they did not have the ability. It was a fact of life; it was not their fault. It was simply something they couldn't do, just as they couldn't menstruate. Those sons now cooked in their homes, but their wives were careful to hide the fact when their mother-in-law visited, even the Ukrainian woman that the last boy had married, never allowed him to even make toast whenever Alake was in their home.

Watching Ayandele, she was sad that she had never taught the boys how to cook *asaro*, that when the girls had gone off to university she had done all the cooking alone. How could she not have known that it was possible for a man like Ayandele to hold the hot lid of an iron pot without dropping it and injuring himself? Her whole life in that moment felt suspended on that lack of judgment, that one mistake she had not known she had made. Who knew how many other mistakes there were? The questions she had suppressed all her life dominated her mind; could she have had a different life? Had another life always been available to her that she had never known?

She groaned. Ayandele turned and saw her; she noted that he had not been startled. She would have been alarmed and would have overturned the pot. He radiated a kind of peace, a steadiness she never had. She thought that he knew something and because of it he was not afraid to be without a wife, a house, or even children. She wondered if this was what happened to people when they had truly lived, if they developed this quietness that refused to be shaken.

“Iya Ijo, good morning.” He said.

“Good morning. Did you wake up well?”

“I am grateful that my eyes opened when I willed them to.”

“Thanks be to God. What have you woken up so early to prepare?”

“It is *ewe*, it has been on the stove all night. I said I should come and see if it is cooked.”

“Have you added palm oil?”

He shook his head. “It is not ready for palm oil; it still needs to drink a little more water.”

“My house help can do these things for you; you just need to give her the foodstuff. She will cook everything.” She drew her wrapper tighter around her chest.

When he said nothing she added, “The girl hardly does anything anyway. It as though we have set the money we are paying her on fire. She needs more work so our money won’t waste.” She spoke in a rush and was breathless when

she stopped.

“That will be good. Thank you. Can she come for the cooking materials today?”

She nodded and walked away, a little disappointed in him. She had thought he would refuse her help, that he would remain a shining example of self sufficiency, an embodiment of the life she imagine she could have lived.

*

When Ayandele played his drums, he went from one drum to the next. He played and played and stopped only when his arms ached. Even then he did not let the drums go. He traced their taut skins, allowed his hands to caress the wood or twist the twines of antelope skin at the sides of whichever drum happened to be the last played for the day. On some days, the days he felt like crying, he cradled a small one against his chest, lay on his back, closed his eyes, and willed the spirits to come.

Like bored lovers, the spirits of the drums had left him without a backward glance. He still saw the drums but he knew that there was nothing in them anymore. The sounds that came out when his hands slammed their skins floated into the air, circled above his head and left the room. They did not touch and envelope him like before. The beats did not drown him, did not own him. Still he beat the drums each day, waiting, hoping. Even when the sound that came out irritated him and sounded like a dozen mosquitoes circling his ears, he waited. He waited for the moments he lived for since he was a child—moments when his hand touched the skin of a drum and the sounds that came forth wrapped themselves around him until the world disappeared and nothing else existed besides the beat and him.

Day after day, the world refused to shift away. He could still hear the world. He could hear a goat bleating in the back yard, Alake telling one of her children what she had for lunch. The wall clock ticking away, counting down the time he had left on the earth.

*

Every Wednesday, Alake invited Ayandele to attend the evening's Bible study with her. She never invited him on Sundays; it would have been too aggressive, as though she was trying to convert him. She was not quite sure of what she would be converting him from, since he didn't seem to pay any attention to worshipping the gods of his father. Alake went to him every Wednesday, but not because she had any hope that he would change his mind. The invitations gave her an excuse to enter his sitting room, see the holes in his single settee, and reassure herself that her life had been good. She also got a glimpse of the drums that her hands itched to touch but told herself that they must be dusty and degenerating like everything in the room, like Ayandele himself with his face of crumpled paper.

He always declined with a smile and a request that she pray for him. She never prayed for him, the only prayers she did not read out of a book were for her children. She seldom prayed for herself anymore, and when she did, all she asked was that she would die a good death. She had taken up this prayer after an old friend was mangled in a car accident. There was no lying in state. It seemed so unnecessary that someone so old would die like that when she could have gone in her sleep or after a brief illness. Alake prayed to die in her sleep, in the afternoon after a good meal of *amala* and *ewedu*. She wanted to leave with a full stomach because she suspected that in heaven, there would be nothing to eat except dry sandwiches cut in perfect triangles. The missionary sisters who had taught her in secondary school loved those miserable sandwiches so much.

The church she attended was an old church, most of the members were old. Many were dead or about to die and every other week there was a fresh obituary fixed to the notice board at the church's entrance.

Transition to Glory

With heavy hearts but also with immense gratitude to God for a life well spent, we regret to announce the passing on to glory of our Mother,

Grandmother, and Great Grandmother...

Since Ayandele moved into her house, Alake thought more about her life. How it was like money, currency. What had she spent it on? Had it been well spent? It had been enough before that she was mother, grandmother, great grandmother, but now she felt she could have been more and she hadn't. She was dismayed that though she had some currency left, she had nothing to spend it on. Even her children did not need her help. They always had reasons why they could not visit for the holidays—work, vacation, their children were sick. She hadn't seen any of them in over two years. Even when she spoke to them on the phone, they didn't sound like they were listening. There was always noise in the background, traffic, their children screaming, or just the television. While she prayed for them, she now prayed more for herself. Alake began to pray to spend the rest of her life well, although she was not sure what that would mean in the little time she had left. She continued to plead that the flaming hot deaths that came in accidents and disasters would pass her by, that when death finally came for her it would be of the cool variety.

When one Wednesday Ayandele said he would go to church with her on Sunday, Alake was happy. She heard nothing in the church that evening and for the first time in decades had no contribution to make during the Bible study. She kept thinking of Sunday, thinking how on God's own day she would generously spend some of the little currency she had.

*

Ayandele was ready to be saved, from his badly lit room and parlor, from his drums empty of life and spirits. He was ripe for some kind of ritual, a form of communion that no longer existed in the beat he had lived for. Since the spirits had left his drums, perhaps the peace they brought would be found within the walls of a church. Even if—as he had always suspected—the church was filled not with the warmth of the spirits he sought but the frigidity of too many human spirits, he was ready to have a place to go during the week. He was ready to have

the priest pay occasional visits to say prayers, to say anything. He was the last child in his family and his only living sibling was bedridden. No one came to visit him. The few friends he had now lived with their children in Lagos or some other big city. He was still agile. He could walk for miles before getting tired, but he had nowhere to go.

When Sunday came, he was waiting outside his door for Alake and the house help by 9:25 a.m. It was the help alone who came downstairs. “Mama no well, O’, she want rest. She say make I follow you go church.”

“What is the matter with her? Won’t she need you to look after her?”

The girl shrugged. “She say make I follow you go.”

“Let me go and check her.” He started toward the stairs.

“Mama don’ sleep. Maybe she no fit sleep for night.”

He stood for a moment longer beside the stairs, and then followed the help out of the house.

Alake stood by her bedroom window and watched him disappear into the distance with her house help. She left the window open, breathless with the possibility that they would turn and see her standing there wide awake. There was sweat between her fingers, like there had been on her first day of school, her first day as a primary school teacher, her last day as a virgin. It had been long since she sweated there. She picked up her keys and went downstairs.

The keys fell from her hands twice before she opened the lock on his room. When she entered, she did not look at the holes in the settee; she went to the corner where he kept his drums. Alake went on her knees and caressed each one, ran her hands over the smooth skins that covered their faces, twisted the twines of antelope hide at the sides of a few of them. She took the smallest one, the size that had been slung around Ayandele’s neck from the day he took his first step. She cradled it under her shoulder and left the room.

In her room upstairs, she sat on her bed and began to beat the drum. She didn’t sing at first because she knew her voice was too wearied with age to rise to the impossible pitch of a *rara* singer. Like a fish, she opened and shut her

mouth several times; only air made it past her dentures, but her hands kept hitting the drum. When a song eventually made its way out of her mouth, it was a hymn.

Ayandele was sweating by the time he got to the church. The sun had risen early that morning and was already at work in the sky. He entered the church as the congregation rose to take the processional hymn. He heard the distinct beats of *gangan* merge with the deep tones of the pipe organ. His eyes went to the boy in choir robes who was beating the talking drum with a curved stick. He held his breath and let the beat hold him. He felt a presence rest on him, like a wet cloth placed over his sweaty face, and he imagined it was peace.

AYOBAMI ADEBAYO was born in 1988. Her short stories have appeared in *The Weaverbird Collection*, *Farafina Magazine*, *Saraba Magazine*, *East Jasmine Review*, and *African Writing Online*. Her work was highly commended in the 2009 Commonwealth short story competition. In 2012, she was a writer in residence at Writers Omi International (Ledig House), New York. In 2013, she participated in the 5th Femrite residency in Uganda. Her first novel, *Stay With Me*, was shortlisted for the *Kwani?* Manuscript Prize and is forthcoming. She holds B.A. and M.A. degrees in English literature from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife. She is currently pursuing her M.A. in prose fiction at the University of East Anglia.

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