



A SPELL OF  
GOOD THINGS

-- A NOVEL --

AYÒBÁMI  
ADÉBÁYÒ

AUTHOR OF *STAY WITH ME*

ALSO BY AYÒBÁMI ADÉBÁYÒ

*Stay with Me*

*A SPELL of*  
*GOOD THINGS*



Ayòbámi Adébáyò



ALFRED A. KNOPF

New York

2023

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

Copyright © 2023 by Ayòbámi Adébéyò

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, and distributed in Canada by Penguin Random House Canada Limited, Toronto.

[www.aaknopf.com](http://www.aaknopf.com)

Knopf, Borzoi Books, and the colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Adebayo, Ayobami, 1988– author.

Title: A spell of good things : a novel / Ayòbámi Adébéyò.

Description: First edition. | New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2023.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022011733 (print) | LCCN 2022011734 (ebook) | ISBN 9780525657644 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780525657651 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PR9387.9.A319 s64 2023 (print) | LCC PR9387.9.A319 (ebook) | DDC 823/.92—dc23/eng/20220426

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022011733>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022011734>

Ebook ISBN 9780525657651

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or

dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover art and design by Anna Morrison

ep\_prh\_6.0\_142470597\_c0\_r0

# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Also by Ayòbámi Adébáyò](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

## [Kinsman](#)

[\[Caro was angry...\]](#)

## [Part I: Everything Good Will Come](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

## [Part II: On Black Sisters Street](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

## [Part III: Waiting for an Angel](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

Chapter 20

Part IV: Every Day Is for the Thief

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Foreman

*[Caro glanced at...]*

*Acknowledgments*

*A Note About the Author*



*For JóláaJésù. 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 Eñiqlá.

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

Eniqlá 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 àgbálùmò. The fruit seller whose stall was next to his school had had a basket of àgbálùmò for sale yesterday, but Eniqlá 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 àgbálùmò'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, Eniqlá 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 Eniqlá called Ègbón Abbey, was still standing next to him, and the hand he'd pressed into Eniqlá's shoulder just before he cleared his throat and spat in his face was still in place.

Eniqlá 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 Ẹgbón 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 Ẹniqlá's face. And now these men who gathered here every morning to argue about the headlines were watching to see what Ẹniqlá 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 Ẹgbón Abbey's face. Ẹniqlá'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 sé sir," Ẹniqlá 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.

Ẹniqlá 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 Ẹgbón 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.

Ẹniqlá 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.

Eniqlá 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 Eniqlá 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, Eniqlá 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 Eniqlá's forehead was shaped like the thick end of a mango. Eniqlá 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, Eniqlá 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 Ẹniqlá passed by the house.

Ẹniqlá 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 Ẹniqlá 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 Ẹniqlá 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. Ẹgbón Abbey coughed, and Ẹniqlá 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 Ẹniqlá's father?

"You wanted *The Daily*, àbí? Óyá, take." The vendor slapped Ẹniqlá'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."

Ẹniqlá 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 Ẹgbón 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 Ẹniqlá’s chest with *The Daily*.

Someday soon, though, his father would have money again and Ẹniqlá 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 Ẹniqlá 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—Ẹniqlá 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 Ẹniqlá’s mother had fished out of the special box that held her collection of lace and aṣo-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 Ẹniqlá 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 Bàmami'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 Bàmami's head turned grey within a month. The grey had raced from Bàmami's temple, claiming every inch of his scalp, so that within weeks Èniqlá 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, Bàmami 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 Bàmami's name—Mr. Bùsúyì Òní. Bàmami stands straight with his shoulder pushed so far back, Èniqlá wondered if he wasn't smiling because his shoulder blades had begun to hurt. Over the years since the photo was taken, Bàmami had stopped staring directly at cameras or people. Only Èniqlá's mother still insisted that he look her in the eye while speaking to her. When he spoke to Èniqlá or his sister, Bàmami stared at their feet, eyes flitting around as though counting their toes over and over again.

Bàmami 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 Èniqlá. Face the newspaper, please. Have you checked it from beginning to end?" Èniqlá's mother said.

"Have you found something?" Èniqlá asked.

His father flipped the newspaper open without responding to either of them. Èniqlá 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 Bùsólá 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 Bàmami earlier.

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

Eniqlá leaned against a wall; it would not make a difference if gbùre 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 Bùsólá's school fees or his. He knew this from hawking gbùre 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.

Eniqlá'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 Bàmami'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?" Eniqlá's mother asked, rubbing her husband's back as the coughing subsided.

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