




MY SISTER, THE SERIAL KILLER





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For my family, whom I love very much:

Akin, Tokunbo, Obafunke, Siji, Ore





**MY SISTER,
THE SERIAL KILLER**



WORDS

Ayoola summons me with these words—Korede, I killed him.

I had hoped I would never hear those words again.

BLEACH

I bet you didn't know that bleach masks the smell of blood. Most people use bleach indiscriminately, assuming it is a catchall product, never taking the time to read the list of ingredients on the back, never taking the time to return to the recently wiped surface to take a closer look. Bleach will disinfect, but it's not great for cleaning residue, so I use it only after I have first scrubbed the bathroom of all traces of life, and death.

It is clear that the room we are in has been remodeled recently. It has that never-been-used look, especially now that I've spent close to three hours cleaning up. The hardest part was getting to the blood that had seeped in between the shower and the caulking. It's an easy part to forget.

There's nothing placed on any of the surfaces; his shower gel, toothbrush and toothpaste are all stored in the cabinet above the sink. Then there's the shower mat—a black smiley face on a yellow rectangle in an otherwise white room.

Ayoola is perched on the toilet seat, her knees raised

and her arms wrapped around them. The blood on her dress has dried and there is no risk that it will drip on the white, now glossy floors. Her dreadlocks are piled atop her head, so they don't sweep the ground. She keeps looking up at me with her big brown eyes, afraid that I am angry, that I will soon get off my hands and knees to lecture her.

I am not angry. If I am anything, I am tired. The sweat from my brow drips onto the floor and I use the blue sponge to wipe it away.

I was about to eat when she called me. I had laid everything out on the tray in preparation—the fork was to the left of the plate, the knife to the right. I folded the napkin into the shape of a crown and placed it at the center of the plate. The movie was paused at the beginning credits and the oven timer had just rung, when my phone began to vibrate violently on my table.

By the time I get home, the food will be cold.

I stand up and rinse the gloves in the sink, but I don't remove them. Ayoola is looking at my reflection in the mirror.

"We need to move the body," I tell her.

"Are you angry at me?"

Perhaps a normal person would be angry, but what I feel now is a pressing need to dispose of the body. When I got here, we carried him to the boot of my car, so that I was free to scrub and mop without having to countenance his cold stare.

“Get your bag,” I reply.

We return to the car and he is still in the boot, waiting for us.

The third mainland bridge gets little to no traffic at this time of night, and since there are no lamplights, it’s almost pitch-black, but if you look beyond the bridge you can see the lights of the city. We take him to where we took the last one—over the bridge and into the water. At least he won’t be lonely.

Some of the blood has seeped into the lining of the boot. Ayoola offers to clean it, out of guilt, but I take my homemade mixture of one spoon of ammonia to two cups of water from her and pour it over the stain. I don’t know whether or not they have the tech for a thorough crime scene investigation in Lagos, but Ayoola could never clean up as efficiently as I can.

THE NOTEBOOK

“Who was he?”

“Femi.”

I scribble the name down. We are in my bedroom. Ayoola is sitting cross-legged on my sofa, her head resting on the back of the cushion. While she took a bath, I set the dress she had been wearing on fire. Now she wears a rose-colored T-shirt and smells of baby powder.

“And his surname?”

She frowns, pressing her lips together, and then she shakes her head, as though trying to shake the name back into the forefront of her brain. It doesn’t come. She shrugs. I should have taken his wallet.

I close the notebook. It is small, smaller than the palm of my hand. I watched a TEDx video once where the man said that carrying around a notebook and penning one happy moment each day had changed his life. That is why I bought the notebook. On the first page, I wrote, *I saw a white owl through my bedroom window*. The notebook has been mostly empty since.

“It’s not my fault, you know.” But I don’t know. I don’t know what she is referring to. Does she mean the inability to recall his surname? Or his death?

“Tell me what happened.”

THE POEM

Femi wrote her a poem.
(She can remember the poem, but she cannot remember his last name.)

*I dare you to find a flaw
in her beauty;
or to bring forth a woman
who can stand beside
her without wilting.*

And he gave it to her written on a piece of paper, folded twice, reminiscent of our secondary school days, when kids would pass love notes to one another in the back row of classrooms. She was moved by all this (but then Ayoola is always moved by the worship of her merits) and so she agreed to be his woman.

On their one-month anniversary, she stabbed him in the bathroom of his apartment. She didn't mean to, of course. He was angry, screaming at her, his onion-stained breath hot against her face.

(But why was she carrying the knife?)

The knife was for her protection. You never knew with men, they wanted what they wanted when they wanted it. She didn't mean to kill him; she wanted to warn him off, but he wasn't scared of her weapon. He was over six feet tall and she must have looked like a doll to him, with her small frame, long eyelashes and rosy, full lips. (Her description, not mine.)

She killed him on the first strike, a jab straight to the heart. But then she stabbed him twice more to be sure. He sank to the floor. She could hear her own breathing and nothing else.

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BODY

Have you heard this one before? Two girls walk into a room. The room is in a flat. The flat is on the third floor. In the room is the dead body of an adult male. How do they get the body to the ground floor without being seen?

First, they gather supplies.

“How many bedsheets do we need?”

“How many does he have?” Ayoola ran out of the bathroom and returned armed with the information that there were five sheets in his laundry cupboard. I bit my lip. We needed a lot, but I was afraid his family might notice if the only sheet he had was the one laid on his bed. For the average male, this wouldn’t be all that peculiar—but this man was meticulous. His bookshelf was arranged alphabetically by author. His bathroom was stocked with the full range of cleaning supplies; he even bought the same brand of disinfectant as I did. And his kitchen shone. Ayoola seemed out of place here—a blight in an otherwise pure existence.

“Bring three.”

Second, they clean up the blood.

I soaked up the blood with a towel and wrung it out in

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the sink. I repeated the motions until the floor was dry. Ayoola hovered, leaning on one foot and then the other. I ignored her impatience. It takes a whole lot longer to dispose of a body than to dispose of a soul, especially if you don't want to leave any evidence of foul play. But my eyes kept darting to the slumped corpse, propped up against the wall. I wouldn't be able to do a thorough job until his body was elsewhere.

Third, they turn him into a mummy.

We laid the sheets out on the now dry floor and she rolled him onto them. I didn't want to touch him. I could make out his sculpted body beneath his white tee. He looked like a man who could survive a couple of flesh wounds, but then so had Achilles and Caesar. It was a shame to think that death would whittle away at his broad shoulders and concave abs, until he was nothing more than bone. When I first walked in I had checked his pulse thrice, and then thrice more. He could have been sleeping, he looked so peaceful. His head was bent low, his back curved against the wall, his legs askew.

Ayoola huffed and puffed as she pushed his body onto the sheets. She wiped the sweat off her brow and left a trace of blood there. She tucked one side of a sheet over him, hiding him from view. Then I helped her roll him and wrap him firmly within the sheets. We stood and looked at him.

"What now?" she asked.

Fourth, they move the body.

We could have used the stairs, but I imagined us car-

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rying what was clearly a crudely swaddled body and meeting someone on our way. I made up a couple of possible explanations—

“We are playing a prank on my brother. He is a deep sleeper and we are moving his sleeping body elsewhere.”

“No, no, it’s not a real man, what do you take us for? It’s a mannequin.”

“No, ma, it is just a sack of potatoes.”

I pictured the eyes of my make-believe witness widening in fear as he or she ran to safety. No, the stairs were out of the question.

“We need to take the lift.”

Ayoola opened her mouth to ask a question and then she shook her head and closed it again. She had done her bit, the rest she left to me. We lifted him. I should have used my knees and not my back. I felt something crack and dropped my end of the body with a thud. My sister rolled her eyes. I took his feet again, and we carried him to the doorway.

Ayoola darted to the lift, pressed the button, ran back to us and lifted Femi’s shoulders once more. I peeked out of the apartment and confirmed that the landing was still clear. I was tempted to pray, to beg that no door be opened as we journeyed from door to lift, but I am fairly certain that those are exactly the types of prayers He *doesn’t* answer. So I chose instead to rely on luck and speed. We silently shuffled across the stone floor. The lift dinged just in time and opened its mouth for us. We stayed to one side while I confirmed that the lift

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was empty, and then we heaved him in, bundling him into the corner, away from immediate view.

“Please hold the lift!” cried a voice. From the corner of my eye, I saw Ayoola about to press the button, the one that stops the lift from closing its doors. I slapped her hand away and jabbed the ground button repeatedly. As the lift doors slid shut, I caught a glimpse of a young mother’s disappointed face. I felt a little guilty—she had a baby in one arm and bags in the other—but I did not feel guilty enough to risk incarceration. Besides, what good could she be up to moving around at that hour, with a child in tow?

“What is wrong with you?” I hissed at Ayoola, even though I knew her movement had been instinctive, possibly the same impulsiveness that caused her to drive knife into flesh.

“My bad,” was her only response. I swallowed the words that threatened to spill out of my mouth. This was not the time.

On the ground floor, I left Ayoola to guard the body and hold the lift. If anyone was coming toward her, she was to shut the doors and go to the top floor. If someone attempted to call it from another floor, she was to hold the lift doors. I ran to get my car and drove it to the back door of the apartment building, where we fetched the body from the lift. My heart only stopped hammering in my chest when we shut the boot.

Fifth, they bleach.

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SCRUBS

The administration at the hospital decided to change the nurses' uniform from white to pale pink, as the white was beginning to look more like curdled cream. But I stick with my white—it still looks brand-new.

Tade notices this.

“What’s your secret?” he asks me as he touches the hem of my sleeve. It feels like he has touched my skin—heat flows through my body. I hand him the chart of the next patient and I try to think of ways to keep the conversation going, but the truth is, there is no way to make cleaning sound sexy—unless you are cleaning a sports car, in a bikini.

“Google is your friend,” I say.

He laughs at me and looks down at the chart, then groans.

“Mrs. Rotinu, again?”

“I think she just likes seeing your face, Doctor.” He looks up at me and grins. I try to smile back without betraying the fact that his attention has made my mouth go dry. As I exit the room, I swing my hips the way Ayoola is fond of doing.

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“Are you okay?” he calls after me as my hand reaches the doorknob. I turn to face him.

“Hmmm?”

“You’re walking funny.”

“Oh, uh—I pulled a muscle.” *Shame, I know thy name.* I open the door and leave the room quickly.

Mrs. Rotinu is seated on one of our many leather sofas in reception. She has one entirely to herself, and she has used the excess space to settle her handbag and makeup bag next to her. The patients look up as I head toward them, hoping it is now their turn. Mrs. Rotinu is powdering her face, but she pauses as I approach her.

“Is the doctor ready to see me now?” she asks. I nod and she stands, clicking the powder case shut. I gesture for her to follow, but she stops me with a hand on my shoulder: “I know the way.”

Mrs. Rotinu has diabetes—type 2; in other words, if she eats right, loses some weight, and takes her insulin on time, there is no reason for us to see her as often as we do. And yet here she is, half skipping to Tade’s office. I understand, though. He has the ability to look at you and make you feel like you are the only thing that matters for as long as you have his attention. He doesn’t look away, his eyes don’t glaze over, and he is generous with his smile.

I redirect my steps to the reception desk and slam my clipboard on it, hard enough to wake Yinka, who has

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found a way to sleep with her eyes open. Bunmi frowns at me because she is on the phone booking in a patient.

“What the hell, Korede? Don’t wake me up unless there’s a fire.”

“This is a hospital, not a bed and breakfast.”

She mutters “Bitch” as I walk away, but I ignore her. Something else has caught my attention. I let the air out through my teeth and go to find Mohammed. I sent him to the third floor an hour ago, and sure enough, he is still there, leaning on his mop and flirting with Assibi, she of the long, permed hair and startlingly thick eyelashes, another cleaner. She makes a run for it as soon as she sees me coming down the corridor. Mohammed turns to face me.

“Ma, I was just—”

“I don’t care. Did you wipe the windows in reception with hot water and one-quarter distilled vinegar, like I asked you to?”

“Yes, ma.”

“Okay . . . show me the vinegar.” He shifts from foot to foot, staring at the floor and trying to figure out how to weave his way out of the lie he has just told. It comes as no surprise to me that he can’t clean windows—I can smell him from ten feet away, and it is a rank, stale odor. Unfortunately, the way a person smells is not grounds for dismissal.

“I no see where I go buy am from.”

I give him directions to the local store, and he slouches off to the staircase, leaving his bucket in the

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middle of the hallway. I summon him back to clean up after himself.

When I return to the ground floor, Yinka is asleep again—her eyes staring into nothing, much the way Femi’s did. I blink the image from my mind and turn to Bunmi.

“Is Mrs. Rotinu done?”

“No,” Bunmi replies. I sigh. There are other people in the waiting room. And all the doctors seem to be occupied with talkative people. If I had my way, each patient would have a fixed consultation time.

THE PATIENT

The patient in room 313 is Muhtar Yautai.

He is lying on the bed, his feet dangling over the end. He has daddy longlegs limbs, and the torso to which they are attached is quite long too. He was thin when he got here, but has gotten thinner still. If he does not wake soon, he will waste away.

I lift the chair from beside the table in the corner of the room and set it down a few inches from his bed. I sit on it, resting my head in my hands. I can feel a headache coming on. I came to talk to him about Ayoola, but it is Tade whom I cannot seem to get out of my mind.

“I . . . I wish . . .”

There is a comforting beep every few seconds from the machine monitoring his heart. Muhtar doesn’t stir. He has been in this comatose state for five months—he was in a car accident with his brother, who was behind the wheel. All the brother got for his efforts was whip-lash.

I met Muhtar’s wife once; she reminded me of Ayoola. It wasn’t that her looks were memorable, but she seemed completely oblivious to all but her own needs.



“Isn’t it expensive to keep him in a coma like this?” she had asked me.

“Do you want to pull the plug?” I returned.

She raised her chin, offended by my question. “It is only proper that I know what I am getting myself into.”

“I understood that the money was coming from his estate . . .”

“Well, yes . . . but . . . I . . . I’m just . . .”

“Hopefully, he will come out of the coma soon.”

“Yes . . . hopefully.”

But a lot of time has passed since that conversation and the day is drawing near when even his children will think shutting off his life support is best for everyone.

Until then, he plays the role of a great listener and a concerned friend.

“I wish Tade would see me, Muhtar. *Really* see me.”

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HEAT

The heat is oppressive, and so we find ourselves conserving our energy by restricting our movements. Ayoola is draped across my bed in her pink lace bra and black lace thong. She is incapable of practical underwear. Her leg is dangling off one end, her arm dangling off the other. Hers is the body of a music video vixen, a scarlet woman, a succubus. It belies her angelic face. She sighs occasionally to let me know she is alive.

I called the air conditioner repairman, who insisted he was ten minutes away. That was two hours ago.

"I'm dying here," Ayoola moans.

Our house girl ambles in carrying a fan and places it facing Ayoola, as though she is blind to the sweat rolling down my face. The loud whirring sound of the blades is followed by a gust of air, and the room cools very slightly. I lower my legs from the sofa and drag myself to the bathroom. I fill the basin with cold water and rinse my face, staring at the water as it ripples. I imagine a body floating away. What would Femi think of his fate, putrefying under the third mainland bridge?

At any rate, the bridge is no stranger to death.

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Not long ago, a BRT bus, filled to the brim with passengers, drove off the bridge and into the lagoon. No one survived. Afterward, the bus drivers took to shouting, “Osa straight! Osa straight!” to their potential customers. Lagoon straight! Straight to the lagoon!

Ayoola lumbers in, pulling down her knickers: “I need to pee.” She plops herself on the toilet seat and sighs happily as her urine pitter-patters into the ceramic bowl.

I pull the plug in the basin and walk out. It’s too hot to protest the use of my facilities, or to point out that she has her own. It’s too hot to speak.

I lie on my bed, taking advantage of Ayoola’s absence, and close my eyes. And there he is. Femi. His face forever etched into my mind. I can’t help but wonder what he was like. I met the others before they lost their lives, but Femi was a stranger to me.

I knew she was seeing someone, the signs were all there—her coy smiles, the late-night conversations. I should have paid closer attention. If I had met him, perhaps I would have seen this temper she claims he had. Perhaps I could have steered her away from him, and we would have been able to avoid this outcome.

I hear the toilet flush just as Ayoola’s phone vibrates beside me, giving me an idea. Her phone is password protected, if you can call “1234” protection. I go through her many selfies until I find a picture of him. His mouth is set in a firm line, but his eyes are laughing. Ayoola is

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in the shot, looking lovely as usual, but his energy fills the screen. I smile back at him.

“What are you doing?”

“You got a message,” I inform her, swiping quickly to return to the home page.

INSTAGRAM

#FemiDurandIsMissing has gone viral. One post in particular is drawing a lot of attention—Ayoola's. She has posted a picture of them together, announcing herself as the last person to have seen him alive, with a message begging anyone, *anyone*, to come forward if they know anything that can be of help.

She was in my bedroom when she posted this, just as she is now, but she didn't mention what she was up to. She says it makes her look heartless if she says nothing; after all, he was her boyfriend. Her phone rings and she picks it up.

"Hello?"

Moments later she kicks me.

"What the—?"

It's Femi's mother, she mouths. I feel faint; how the hell did she get Ayoola's number? She puts the phone on loudspeaker.

"... dear, did he tell you if he was going to go anywhere?"

I shake my head violently.



"No, ma. I left him pretty late," Ayoola replies.

"He was not at work the next day."

"Ummm . . . sometimes he used to jog at night, ma."

"I know, I told him, I told him all the time it was not safe." The woman on the line starts to cry. Her emotion is so strong that I start to cry too—I make no sound, but the tears I have no right to burn my nose, my cheeks, my lips. Ayoola starts crying too. Whenever I do, it sets her off. It always has. But I rarely cry, which is just as well. Her crying is loud and messy. Eventually, the sobs turn to hiccups and we are quiet. "Keep praying for my boy," the woman says hoarsely, before hanging up.

I turn on my sister. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"What?"

"Do you not realize the gravity of what you have done? Are you enjoying this?" I grab a tissue and hand it to her, then take some for myself.

Her eyes go dark and she begins to twirl her dreadlocks.

"These days, you look at me like I'm a monster." Her voice is so low, I can barely hear her.

"I don't think you're—"

"This is victim shaming, you know . . ."

Victim? Is it mere coincidence that Ayoola has never had a mark on her, from any of these incidents with these men; not even a bruise? What does she want from me? What does she want me to say? I count the seconds;

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if I wait too long to respond, it will be a response in itself, but I'm saved by my door creaking open. Mum wanders in, one hand pinned to her half-formed gèlè.

"Hold this for me."

I stand up and hold the part of the gèlè that is loose. She angles herself to face my standing mirror. Her miniature eyes take in her wide nose and fat lips, too big for her thin oval face. The red lipstick she has painted on further accentuates the size of her mouth. My looks are the spitting image of hers. We even share a beauty spot below the left eye; the irony is not lost on me. Ayoola's loveliness is a phenomenon that took my mother by surprise. She was so thankful that she forgot to keep trying for a boy.

"I'm going to Sope's daughter's wedding. The both of you should come. You might meet someone there."

"No, thank you," I reply stiffly.

Ayoola smiles and shakes her head. Mum frowns at the mirror.

"Korede, you know your sister will go if you do; don't you want her to marry?" As if Ayoola lives by anyone's rules but her own. I choose not to respond to my mother's illogical statement, nor acknowledge the fact that she is far more interested in Ayoola's marital fate than in mine. It is as though love is only for the beautiful.

After all, *she* didn't have love. What she had was a politician for a father and so she managed to bag herself a man who viewed their marriage as a means to an end.



The gèlè is done, a masterpiece atop my mother's small head. She cocks her head this way and that, and then frowns, unhappy with the way she looks in spite of the gèlè, the expensive jewelry and the expertly applied makeup.

Ayoola stands up and kisses her on the cheek. "Now, don't you look elegant?" she says. No sooner is it said than it becomes true—our mother swells with pride, raises her chin and sets her shoulders. She could pass for a dowager now at the very least. "Let me take a picture of you?" Ayoola asks, pulling out her phone.

Mum strikes what seems like a hundred poses, with Ayoola directing them, and then they scroll through their handiwork on the screen and select the picture that satisfies them—it is one of my mum in profile with her hand on her hip and her head thrown back in laughter. It is a nice picture. Ayoola busies herself on the phone, chewing on her lip.

"What are you doing?"

"Posting it on Instagram."

"Are you nuts? Or have you forgotten your previous post?"

"What's her previous post?" interjects Mum.

I feel a chill go through my body. It has been happening a lot lately. Ayoola answers her.

"I . . . Femi is missing."

"Femi? That fine boy you were dating?"

"Yes, Mum."

"Jésù sàánú fún wa! Why didn't you tell me?"



“I . . . I . . . was in shock.”

Mum rushes over to Ayoola and pulls her into a tight embrace.

“I’m your mum, you must tell me everything. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma.”

But of course she can’t. She can’t tell her everything.