

TLC Showcase

SABO KPADE

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Introduction to *Anyone's Ghost*

I began work on *Anyone's Ghost* in January 2014 after several failed attempts to write about the introduction of Sharia Law into Nigeria in 2000. One completed draft, of about 60 000 words, called *Wailing For the Fields* was about a hospital matron called Shiro who befriends a young patient who has escaped the rioting engulfing their city Kaduna, when Christian protesters clash with Muslim supporters of Sharia Law. The novel simply wasn't good enough so with the encouragement of Jacob Ross, my long time reader and mentor, I decided to abandon the project and approach the next one from a different angle.

I chose to set the next attempt in a world that was more familiar to me, and to write about characters and situations I felt I could better articulate. Nok and Muri, my two central characters in *Anyone's Ghost*, are first year students in a university who find themselves faced with the acrimonious division between Christians and Muslims over Sharia Law which they fear might turn into a religious war.

The novelist and critic, Adam Mars-Jones, gave me feedback on the first 20 000 words which encouraged me to bring the book to its current state of 80 000 words, two thirds of the projected total.

My first experience working with The Literary Consultancy was in 2008/9 when I won a place on their Free Read Scheme for *Shower of Shadows* my first ever attempt at writing a novel. Kerry Glencorse, my assigned reader, gave me detailed feedback on its strengths and weaknesses after which I set the novel aside confident in what I was fairly good at which, to borrow a word from Jacob Ross, was "storying" but also aware of where I fell short which was the architecture of the novel.

Seven years later and with as many failed attempts at writing a novel, TLC has offered me yet another free manuscript assessment following my submission to the TLC Pen Factor Writing Competition, which is going to be of so much help as I bring the project to completion. So thank you, TLC.

Anyone's Ghost, by Sabo Kpade

Extract

Me and Bikimi were almost at what was now Muri's own flat when it occurred to me that he might not allow me to take the blanket, even when we both paid for it, as we did the beddings and utensils. All I had left with were my clothes and my share of the rent. So coming back for the blanket should be no cause for trouble. If he refused to let me take it I would insist on my half of all what we bought together and paying shouldn't be a problem now that he'd sunk his hands deep into Jere's pockets. All the better if he wasn't at home, that way I would make a clean job of it.

Jere's Corolla wasn't outside the compound, but the caretaker Mallam Danlami was on a desk outside the boys' quarters, marking what looked like test scripts. He looked up with a flare of recognition when I greeted him, but then changed his mind and frowned, turning to his work, the pen-tip tethering aimlessly on the page when moments earlier it ticked and ticked.

This confused me because in my few weeks in the flat, I'd never known him to show any hostility. Neither had he made an effort to be pally with us. I put it down to my not saying any goodbyes before moving out. Inside the flat, the living room was as empty as I'd left it, each press on the cold concrete echoing softly.

The first bedroom on the right was locked. Inside the kitchen was a stench that came from a pool of unwashed cutlery and pots in the sink, and a waste bin that was presided over by flies. There was a new stainless steel pot that wasn't ours, a grater and whisk which Jere must have brought from home, seeing that beating eggs with a fork was too pedestrian. The other two bedrooms were also vacant, but now had floors that were dust free and louvers that were spread open. The mosquito nets I didn't recall being there before my departure. The old locks, bronzed with rust, were now a spangly silver. Muri must have changed them because of me, the prick that he was. He must not have counted on me coming that morning for the door was unlocked, the smell breezing from it making me think of pus which in turn made me want to retch.

There he was deep in sleep at 11am. If he thought growing an afro would suit him he was wrong; the tufts on his head made him look like a frightened owl. He was

covered in the blanket I wanted. I thought of zapping it off him and running away – or maybe suffocating him with it.

On the floor was as a Panasonic 3-CD changer that wasn't ours. I pulled the curtain to one side, not caring if the sunlight woke him. The rug had been changed to a new one though the colour remained orange. Who knew Muri had a sense for continuity. A total makeover of the room would have been in keeping with the fresh start Jere had always wanted. I opened the bathroom door to see if they had also installed a Jacuzzi when Muri stirred.

What do you want?

My blanket.

The blanket must have turned into a shoe rag judging from the scowl he took to it.

What do you really want?

The blanket. I don't have one where I sleep.

As you can see I'm using it.

I want it now.

If you came here to see if it's true then fine. Stop pretending you came here for a blanket.

If what is true?

I don't have time for this.

Muri closed his eyes and nestled his head deeper into the pillow.

Where is Jere?

He's gone.

Where?

University. In Malaysia. I still don't regret asking you to leave and I'm not going to beg you to come back. Besides, I'm leaving myself.

For Malaysia?

Leaving this flat. Danlami has given me till this weekend to move out but he's refusing to give me the rest of the rent. Did we sign a tenancy agreement when we moved in here?

What did you do?

He lifted the edge of the rug and brought out a plastic bag of rolled up weed and tiny yellow pills of which he swallowed a few, before sparking up.

We used to smoke weed even when Danlami was in the house, didn't we? He never complained about that or the loud music. But the moment Jere moved in everything became a problem. He must have heard us in the night.

Heard you and Muri?

I lied when I said I tried it with him in his house and he refused me. I just didn't want you to know about him.

Why you would hide it from me?

To protect him.

From me?

He wanted to keep it a secret.

We have all been keeping it a secret.

His father is an ambassador so news like this shouldn't get out. And I thought you might get jealous and take revenge.

This doesn't make sense.

I also didn't want you to be interested. He's gone now anyway. End of story.

Then why are you so angry?

I have to find a place by this weekend, but if Danlami doesn't give me my rent back I'm not going anywhere.

Didn't Jere leave you any money?

He knew all along he was going to Malaysia but he kept it quiet until the last minute. I told him I would tell his father about him if he doesn't stay. He got angry and dared me to do it. I told him not to but he threw his phone at me and called me a "wretched bastard" and a "money hungry fool". I must have slapped him and then we got into a fight. Danlami came to break us up and I think I also punched him just for all the trouble he has been giving us. When Jere tried to help him up I kicked him. He fell on the window and cut his arm. That was the last time I saw Jere and soon after Danlami served me a notice. His wife lost her head and since then she has been calling me all sorts of names. She even threw dirty water with kanzo on me but I kept quiet because I knew she was trying to provoke me.

So what else have you been up to?

This made Muri laugh. I pulled the rest of the curtain to a side when a broken piece fell on the ledge.

I'm sure you're happy to see me like this, said Muri.

You deserve it.

Take your blanket and go. The mattress too if you want.

He flung the pillow and blanket on the floor and shouted:

Congratulations, you've won.

The pity I felt for him and the sadness it brought on all hardened into hatred once again. I considered speaking to Mallam Danlami to see if he could refund the rest of the rent to Muri, but I also wanted him to feel the full repercussion of his betrayal for evicting me to house Jere. When he is kicked out and reduced to begging for a place to stay, maybe then his senses would return to him. And what was that yellow pill he took? It couldn't have been medicinal if it was stored in the same bag as weed. To leave the flat I had to walk past Mallam Danlami whose wife now stood beside him, shaking her head as if at a sorry sight, all of which was easy to ignore now that I'd seen Muri in tatters.

Back at the lecture hall, I told my new confidant Bikimi what happened, and the one

thing he thought to ask was if I was going to help Muri.

He brought it on himself, I said, irritated to have to point this out.

Nobody will blame you for refusing to help, he said, but you've been friends since secondary school.

We were just in the same year, not the same class.

Still, surprise him. My mother never married my father who was a doctor and a brigadier with 44 Army Hospital where she was a nurse, but he already had a wife and children. She was ready to be a second wife just so I grew up with a father, but he denied I was his and got her transferred to Ikom when she had never in her life left Kaduna. She resigned, got work in a private hospital and never married again. Years later when I was Evelyn, he had a stroke and was admitted to the private hospital where she'd risen to become the matron. She said she thought about killing him because of the shame and suffering he put her through. She didn't have to do any of that because he never fully recovered from the stroke.

All I did was leave Muri, I said.

And now he's on The Yellow. I stopped taking it when it gave me a nosebleed. My bunk-mate took me to the clinic where it was flushed out. I told the nurse it was expired paracetamol but she must have known because it's all over campus. You should help him.

Muri will never listen to me.

You said your caretaker wants to kick him out. So ask him to move into the new place with us. When we get it.

The same Muri who kicked me out?

He'll sleep on the floor.

As if to let me chew on it, Bikimi moved closer to the window where other students huddled, peeking into a lecture that was barely audible from this distance.

A rush of bile rose to my throat. All I wanted from Bikimi was a sympathetic ear and maybe some words of support. The last thing I expected was to be framed as the uncaring one if I did not help. But Bikimi now knew and so I had to act. Choosing

not to would deplete my stock in his eyes. It became clear that I may never get my full revenge against Muri because even at his lowest, he'd managed to soil my triumph. But if I did it and pulled Muri out from his pit of pity, it'd no doubt endear me to Bikimi (it had better).

I gave it some more thought. Seeing me in a union that is cast on equal footing, after rescuing him and showing him the kindness he knew he didn't deserve, would be hard for Muri to take. If I were him, it would be excruciating for me to watch. Bikimi's proposal didn't have to be so selfless after all.

I'd begun working out in my head what words to say to Muri, whether to gloat or, if the spirit took me, to charm him, when the wails and clatters from the flat severed that thought. Bikimi looked to me, and I must have mirrored his puzzled face before hurrying into the compound. There was Mallam Danlami with his son pressed to his chest and screaming his eyes out, his face filmed with tears and mucus. Being bobbed did nothing to soothe him, but our presence did.

Speak to your friend, said Mallam Danlami, the police are on their way.

Make sure it's MOPOL. I'm ready.

It was Muri's voice in muffled bursts. I hurried to the veranda and found him in a tangle with Amarya. I didn't rush to intervene, unclear as to what exactly was happening. Muri was trying to free his hand from Amarya's grip by locking her hand in his fist. She wrested free and rushed to enter the flat when Muri shoved her to the wall. He did so with no shame, the first sign that he was not himself. He'd lost too much weight. His vest was ripped through the middle and he struggled to pull up his slackened boxers while fending off Mallam Danlami's wife. I forced my way in-between them but they promptly withdrew from each other. He panted. She didn't. The glared into each other's eyes was cold. Very cold. She lost interest and massaged the bite marks on her arm.

She punched me in the stomach, said Muri, embarrassed.

He should just leave, she said.

The girls we rented the room to asked for their money back the next week because of all the shamelessness he and his friend do in the room. Filthy thing that you are.

It's your mother's vagina that is filthy, said Muri.

Imagine that. In my own house, she said to me, no wonder you moved out.

Let me talk to him.

He's leaving my house today. I've started helping him, she said, pointing to the floor that was strewn with pots, pillows and Muri's Timberland boots.

Mallam Danlami said something in Nupe, a plea I was sure to which she replied in a breathless rap, her head shaking with purpose. Muri, for his part, waited for her to attempt forcing her way into the flat again. The child resumed crying, hindering any clear thought beyond preventing another tussle. Muri slumped down the wall and this lit up Amarya's face.

He steadied himself, but only just. He did look funny trying to keep his eyes open as though it would sober him up. He soon gave up and leaned back on the wall, but this could not have induced the coughing that followed.

Cough until you die, said Amarya with sickening glee.

This pained Muri because he pushed me aside and began, in rapid successions, throwing punches and slaps, elbowing and digging his heels into Amarya with a precision he had lacked earlier. A rotten part of me was happy to see that triumph wiped off her face. I dragged him back but he threw me off with a ferocity that discouraged a second attempt. I went back in and this time I got thwacked in the belly so hard the breath in my throat heated up.

Mallam Danlami couldn't decide whether to hold on to his wailing toddler or place him on the floor to save his wife. Bikimi only pleaded for Muri to stop. I'd forgotten he was there.

I'd never seen anyone rage like that. At one point we must have just stopped and watched him. Even Amarya gave up defending herself and stood still, while Muri swung his arms in absolute fury. Mallam Danlami yelled at her in Nupe several times before she had the good sense to take out the keys from her bra and drop it on the ground. Right then Muri stopped beating her. Just like that.

He then calmly picked up the key and closed the door from inside. What followed would have been complete silence if it wasn't for the toddler won't stop crying.

About the Writer

Sabo Kpade is an Associate Writer at Spread The Word and a staff writer at *Okay Africa*. He has been a critic for Media Diversified and Royal Africa Society's whatsonafrica.com

His story 'Chibok', about one of the 219 girls who were abducted by Boko Haram in 2014, was shortlisted for the London Short Story Prize 2015. Other stories have been published in Gertrude Press, Sable, Glasschord and Verdad. He was also a sifter for the SI Leeds Prize for Literature 2016.



Have Mercy On Liverpool Street, his first play, is about a religious but devious shop owner called Mercy and her struggle to keep open a crumbling business in London's Petticoat Lane market. It was staged by Talawa Theatre Company in 2014 and later longlisted for the Alfred Fagon Award in the same year. *The Good General*, his second play, is about the military dictator General Sani Abacha and his decision in 1998 to become Nigeria's life president. It was a finalist for the Beeta Playwriting Competition 2016.

He has also been longlisted for the 2016 Old Vic 12 for his play *A Leg To Stand On* based on Carol Howard, the firearms expert who sued the London Metropolitan Police on grounds of gender and race discrimination and whose ruling brought a historic change to the way the UK's largest police force conducts its disciplinary hearings.

He has also been selected as one of 50 unpublished novelists, out of 1010 entries, for the Penguin Random House UK Write Now scheme. His submission was an excerpt from *Anyone's Ghost*, his novel about the introduction of Sharia Law into Nigeria in 2000 and its manifestation in the lives of Nok and Muri, two young men who meet in their first year in university in the weeks leading to the vote on the Sharia Law bill, and whose secret relationship, and the threat to their lives if revealed, is further endangered by their fear of living under strict religious laws.

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