

WHEN A MAN LOVES A WOMAN

BY NANA-AMA DANQUAH

Cantonments

Every morning for the past five days, Kwame had woken up next to a corpse. Well, technically, Adwoa had not yet become a corpse. She was still a fully breathing, flesh-and-blood human being; but there was no way, in those first few lucid moments, that Kwame could have known this. So each morning he'd lean over, position his lips right next to Adwoa's ear, and whisper in a voice rough and gravelly, an odd mixture of fear and sleep: "Good morning, my love." And then he'd wait, the fear twisting his intestines into a tight bow of pain.

Each morning she'd return the greeting—meaning, of course, that she was not dead.

"Good morning, sweetheart," she'd mumble, turning to face him, her eyes wide open, the hazel pupils shimmering with life. She'd then softly, softly, place her lips on his, making him remember why he loved this woman with all his heart. And making him regret, at least momentarily, his decision to end her life.

Had this been before "the illness," as they still, for some reason, called his bout with cancer, Kwame would have received her kiss as the invitation it was. He would have pulled Adwoa to him and they would have made the sweetest, most tender love. That had always been their way, their ritual. Before breakfast with the kids, before the obligatory daily discus-

sion about the details of each person's day, then the school drop-offs and the long work commutes, before anything else, there had always been that—their love. It was elemental.

He sincerely believed that those lovemaking mornings had kept them together for twenty-five years. It wasn't simply the sex; it was all that informed it, defined it, drove them to it. Some couples observed date nights or planned regular weekend getaways as a means of checking in, making sure they were still in step. For Adwoa and Kwame, their time together each morning did the trick. It confirmed anew that they were still each other's priority, that even with all the things and people vying for their attention they still chose to greet every single day in each other's arms. And it was in that embrace, their passion spent, that they planned and dreamed, declared their commitment to one another. Their mornings brought to the fore a certain vulnerability, one that spilled over into the rest of their interactions, made them more willing to compromise, to forgive.

Kwame desperately missed that intimacy, especially now that they'd returned to Accra. And yet, whenever Adwoa inched her body closer to his and slid her hand inside his pajama bottoms, he immediately recoiled and pulled it away.

Adwoa suffered from hypertension. Hers was not an extreme case. She was thick, about a dozen kilos over the recommended maximum weight in the "normal" range on the chart posted in their doctor's waiting room in America. Kwame had always dismissed that chart, believing those markers were meant for non-African women, those who were built without fleshy thighs and full, round butts. That theory, however, had come crashing down when he'd seen the same chart in one of Dr. Agyekum's examination rooms.

Even though Kwame thought Adwoa looked fine the way she was and didn't need to lose a single kilo, he did think that she could eat a little healthier; they both could. His weight also fell beyond the "normal" range on the male version of that chart. He had a paunch. It was not exceedingly large, the size of a slightly deflated soccer ball, and perhaps would not have been too noticeable on a taller man, but on his five-foot-eight frame it stood out.

They were both fairly sedentary. Before the illness, when Kwame was still working full-time, he met with clients in the mornings then spent the afternoons writing letters and briefs and motions. As a bank executive, Adwoa also spent most of her days at her desk.

"The uneducated live longer," she often joked, "because honest work is corporeal. We should have become farmers. Each degree we've earned has probably taken ten years off our lives."

Before the children arrived, Kwame and Adwoa hadn't been so formal about meals, not during the workweek. They'd eaten heavy breakfasts—kenkey and fish—and packed their lunches. Dinners were more spontaneous. Sometimes they ate out at restaurants. Other times they prepared a bowl of gari, opened a tin of sardines, then threw some habaneros, a tomato, a sliced onion, and a pinch of salt into the blender and made fresh pepper to complete the meal.

On the weekends they ate like royalty. Like most people they knew in the small Ghanaian community of Washington, DC, they ate food from back home. Every other Sunday, they would take their old white cabriolet, the first car they bought in America, and drive to one of the African groceries in Northern Virginia. There, they would stock up on all the ingredients they needed to make jollof, kontommire, tinapa,

apɔnkyenkrakra. Then came the kids—Henry and Ama, their oburoɔni children—one almost immediately after the other.

Try as Adwoa and Kwame did to stay true to their culinary heritage, by the time the kids started school, their home had successfully been assimilated. It became, quite essentially, American. It was pizza on Friday nights; popcorn and double-scoop ice cream cones on Saturday afternoons; and brunch consisting of scrambled eggs, bacon, and pancakes after church on Sundays.

Whereas the excess weight, lack of exercise, and heaping platters of heavily salted french fries did not appear to have any obvious adverse effects on Kwame's health, with Adwoa they contributed to a constantly elevated blood pressure. Whenever she made an effort—started walking daily and eating healthier—her body rewarded her, and their doctor followed suit by reducing the dosage of her medication.

Adwoa made significant progress after Henry and Ama went off to college. They did away with the requisite family dinners on weeknights. Kwame invested the additional time in his law practice. Adwoa did the opposite: she cut back her hours at work and started taking various classes at the local gym—Zumba, Pilates, kickboxing, yoga. Before long, Kwame could tell the difference in her body during their morning lovemaking. She was stronger, had greater endurance, and, above all, showed more confidence. She moved her limbs with the grace and agility of an athlete. It made him self-conscious. He sometimes wondered what she thought of his body, which was still soft and sagging. Was she repelled? He wanted to ask her but couldn't bring himself to display such weakness in the presence of her newfound strength, so instead he'd turned the question into an accusation.

“Pretty soon,” he said as he entered her one morning,

“you’ll trade me in for a younger model, some fit macho man you’ll meet at the gym.”

She arched her back, received him with her entire body. “Never,” she moaned. “I will always want you. I will always want this. You are my everything.” Done with their morning lovemaking, they lay facing each other. She gently took his hand, laced their fingers together, and whispered, “Till death do us part.”

Kwame stared at her, and everything he saw brought him joy—her short-cropped hair, mostly pepper with traces of salt scattered throughout; her wide smile and perfectly straight teeth, the result of years of orthodontics; and that smooth butterscotch skin he so loved to caress. He wondered how he’d gotten so lucky. All of his male friends had girlfriends, women other than their wives, women who supplied whatever was missing in their lives—laughter, excitement, romance, attention, sex. He had Adwoa, only her, always her. He didn’t want or need anyone else.

Right then, Kwame had a fleeting image of her at his funeral, inconsolable, wailing to whomever would listen that she prayed the Lord would take her too because she could not live without him. Her grief was palpable. It nearly moved him to tears to imagine she loved him that much. He blinked hard to clear the image, then leaned forward and kissed Adwoa’s forehead, which was still moist with sweat, and repeated, “Till death do us part.”

“Homicide by suicide” is a term that Kwame coined while reading an article in his doctor’s waiting room. He didn’t even know what magazine it was in because someone had torn the cover and first few pages off. The article was about the number of deaths that occur every year as a result of people

inadvertently taking the incorrect medication. It was some ridiculously impressive number that he had since forgotten, though he'd immediately told himself the real number was probably much larger.

According to the article, pharmacies sometimes mislabel prescriptions, giving John the pills that were meant for Jane. Also, with so many new medications, many of which sound similar, there is the issue of simple human error—a patient is handed a prescription bottle containing a month's supply of zolpidem, a sedative, instead of Zoloft, an antidepressant; or Fosamax, which slows bone loss, instead of Flomax, a prostate medication that makes it easier to urinate. Though the names are similar, the medications usually look nothing alike. Still, as noted in the article, that is not the point; most people do not stop to look at what pill they are taking. They just trust that what is in the bottle is what is supposed to be in the bottle.

For the better part of a year, Kwame had been taking Flomax, yet no matter how hard he tried while reading that article, he couldn't picture the pill. Was it round or oval? Was it white, blue, pink? He didn't like to think of himself as average. He was hardworking and exemplary, and the life he'd led reflected that. He'd chosen an intelligent, beautiful, and loyal wife. Their children were bright, award-winning; they attended Ivy League universities.

And yet, in this instance, Kwame had to admit that he'd been as clueless and careless as the average person. Every day, he'd opened his pill bottle, shook a tablet into his palm, popped it in his mouth, and swallowed. He'd done it all by rote, mindlessly. He could have very easily caused his own death. The thought of it made him shudder. Then it occurred to him that this was the perfect way for someone to cause another person's death. "Murder by suicide," he whispered.

My goodness, he thought, *I have to tell Adwoa*. She'd be just as alarmed by the realization that she had also been absent-mindedly swallowing her medication, then she would laugh at what she called his "lawyer brain."

"Why must you always find criminality in everything?" she always asked. "*Ehbeiii!* If I didn't know you were such an honest man, I would fear you!" Then the two of them would laugh.

But he never told Adwoa about the article. By the time he'd arrived home, there'd been more pressing news to share.

For nearly a year, Kwame had been under the impression—the illusion, really—that he suffered from benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH), more commonly known as an enlarged prostate. That day at his doctor's appointment, after reading the magazine article, he'd learned that he had prostate cancer. That was the news he'd carried home with him.

There were tears. There was anger, confusion, disbelief. There were more trips to the doctor. More tests, more interpretations of the results. A second opinion, a third, and a fourth. They all agreed: it was cancer; it was aggressive; it had most likely not spread, but the gland needed to be removed immediately.

After the diagnosis, they made love every morning with a fervor that was almost bestial, as though they were two feral animals who'd just found one another. She was often late to work. He'd altogether stopped going into the office. They spent every morning making love as if their lives depended on it. They made love in the evenings too. Adwoa no longer went to the gym. After work, she would come straight home. They'd have dinner delivered, eat the food in bed, then tend to another, more primal hunger. He loved that her body was growing softer, that the angles of her face and shoulders and

hips were smoothing and rounding, becoming curves again. He dreaded the day when he would no longer be able to enjoy them like this, when he would not be able to explode the whole of his love and joy and longing for her.

“They’re going to turn me into a eunuch,” he cried the day before his surgery.

“Don’t be so dramatic.” She laughed. “The doctor said that after you recover, you’ll eventually be able to do everything again.”

“Not everything,” he sighed.

“Everything except ejaculate.” She kissed him on the lips. As though it did not matter. As though it were nothing at all. She did not understand.

Kwame wanted to die at home.

He wanted to take his last breath in Accra, surrounded by the sights and sounds that had ushered him into this world.

He knew he wasn’t dying. Not yet, at least. But the illness had brought him face-to-face with his mortality. His body had never before failed him, but he knew that while this failure was the first, it would not be the last. It was the beginning. No matter how long it took between that beginning and the inevitable end, Kwame knew that his body would only continue to fail him.

Their time in America was supposed to have been brief, only until they’d completed their education. But then they’d had children and decided to stay, only until the kids started school. And then it was only until the kids reached high school. Only until he’d built the practice up enough to sell it for a mint. Only until they could start collecting Social Security because, after all, they’d paid into the system. Only until they finished building their perfect retirement villa. Only. Only. Only.

It was time. They'd agreed before the surgery. As soon as his wounds were healed, they would go home.

They'd rented a house in a gated community, just behind the new American embassy in Cantonments. "That mighty building," a taxi driver had called the embassy. And he was right, it was. Kwame resented it. He resented America. He had come to associate it, however irrationally, with the illness, the failure of his body, the disappointing state of his manhood.

They'd been building a house in Prampram, about an hour outside of Accra, right by the ocean. There, they could wake up in each other's arms and listen to the roar of the waves. For five years they'd dutifully sent Kwame's younger brother, Fiifi, regular remittances so that he could oversee the construction. He would send them updates, e-mails with detailed descriptions of what the contractors had accomplished. Sometimes he'd include pictures. They'd hoped that once they were on the ground, actually living in Accra, they could speed up the process and be able to move into the house within a year. When they finally repatriated, what they discovered, instead, was that their retirement villa was nothing more than an empty plot of land. Fiifi had been lying. Believing that they would never actually return, he'd been pocketing the monthly remittances. Not even a single brick had been laid. Fiifi's photos were of a nearby home, one that belonged to white expats. This one detail, the fact that the home Kwame had been envisioning himself and Adwoa in actually belonged to white Americans, somehow made his brother's betrayal hurt all the more.

"It'll be all right," Adwoa assured him. "No use getting angry. The plot is still ours. We can still build the house. I'm sure we'll soon realize that there's a blessing in this somewhere. We're alive, we're back home, and we're together. That's all

that matters.” His wife was ever the optimist. And because he loved her so much, he allowed himself to believe her.

Even so, he couldn’t summon optimism. Thankfully, nothing else caught them by surprise. Kwame hated surprises. Their life back home fell easily into place. They’d been smart about their savings and pragmatic with their plans. They maintained a modest existence, one that easily exposed them as the returnees that they were—no full-time driver, no live-in help. They shared one vehicle. If it was gone, the other made do with a taxi. They shopped for their own groceries and prepared their own meals. Once a week, a young woman, Mawusi—an Ewe name meaning “in God’s hands”—came to wash their clothing and clean. It was the beginning of a new life, their new life. He sincerely looked forward to living it. Still, he could only feign optimism; he could not yet feel it.

Weeks passed. Months passed. Kwame’s body continued to fail him. His American doctor had told him it would take time. His doctor in Accra had echoed the same words. Neither had been able to tell him how long, to give him a concrete number, something that he could hang his hopes on.

The surgery had, predictably, disrupted their morning routine. In the first few weeks of his recovery, he’d slept in late, drowsy from the pain and the medication he’d been given to relieve it. Adwoa took excellent care of him. She tended to his every need while single-handedly organizing their move. By the time they’d settled comfortably into their home in Cantonments, he was feeling much better. The pain was gone, and he was anxious to move forward. But try as he did every morning when Adwoa greeted him with a kiss, those beautiful eyes expressing a specific yearning, he could not rise to meet her desire.

Every morning they tried and tried, and there were many days when, for a few moments, Kwame reached the level of “almost.” Half-cocked. Almost ready. Almost able. Almost the man he’d once been.

“Be patient,” his doctor advised. “These things take time.”

In all other ways, his life was perfect, even idyllic. Kwame had reconnected with Mr. Johnson, his best friend from childhood. His name was Kojo but everyone called him Mr. Johnson in crèche; whenever an adult had asked him his name, he would respond, “My name is Mr. Johnson.”

Growing up, Kwame and Mr. Johnson lived in the same compound. They’d spent their entire lives side by side, from crèche to primary and secondary schools. They’d both married their sweethearts, the first girls to whom they’d pledged their hearts. In many ways, Mr. Johnson felt more like a brother than Fiifi.

While Kwame and Adwoa had attended university in America, Mr. Johnson and Naadu stayed in Accra to complete their studies. They’d later moved to London and had three children, all girls. When their children were young, the couples vacationed together once or twice. The men stayed in touch throughout, but as both of them left the logistics of family vacations and such to their wives, and the women did not share as close a bond, those few instances never turned into a tradition.

Naadu was killed in an accident. At the request of her family, Mr. Johnson brought her body home for the funeral and burial. When it was all done, he saw no reason to return to London. The children were busy creating their own lives, and without Naadu, there was nothing there for him. He figured it would be easier to remain in Accra. He’d been living there for nearly a year when Kwame and Adwoa returned.

Several times a week, Kwame would meet Mr. Johnson at +233, a popular jazz club, to talk over drinks and music. On the way home, Kwame would sometimes stop at the Cantonments roundabout. It was a mile or so from the entrance to their housing complex, and a popular gathering spot for prostitutes. He would pick up one of the women and drive her to a secluded spot on a nearby side street. He didn't consider it cheating. It was, in his mind, a therapeutic exercise. What else would he want with a common whore?

When he was with Adwoa, the weight of his inability to perform, to please her as he had for so many years, was crushing. With the whores, there was no tenderness. There was no expectation, no disappointment. There was only a straightforward transaction. Be that as it may, his body still continued to fail him.

Adwoa started going to the gym again. At least that's what she'd told Kwame.

"I feel like I've let myself go," she'd said. "I want to get my body back."

For whom? he wanted to ask, but didn't. "I love you just the way you are," he said instead.

"Our birthdays are coming soon," she whispered, as though revealing a secret. "I want to be able to slip into something sexy." She grinned and winked. He smiled politely, then turned around and walked away.

They'd been born two weeks apart, he in late October and she in early November. This year, they would both turn fifty-three. He imagined that by their birthdays, he'd be back to normal. He hoped that he could whisk her away on a small trip to someplace romantic like Mauritius or the Seychelles. He wanted to reclaim what the illness had taken away from

them. But that was nothing more than a fantasy. Already they were in the last days of September, and he was still unable to make love.

“You know, there are many other ways to make love besides penetration,” his doctor reminded him when, during his appointment, he complained for the twenty millionth time about his dysfunction. “I’ve found with my patients that sometimes their attitude makes a huge difference. Positivity can lead to progress.” The doctor’s comment made him feel ashamed of himself. Right then and there, he decided to try harder, not to change his situation, but to make the best of it.

After he left the doctor’s office, he drove to the gym at the Air Force Officers’ Mess. It was on the other side of Cantonments, and it was where Adwoa and, it seemed, every other returnee and expat worked out. If she was done, he thought the two of them might go for lunch at the Buka in Osu. As he drove into the complex, he noticed Adwoa and Mr. Johnson sitting together at a table in the outdoor social area. They were talking and laughing, so deeply engrossed in whatever they were discussing that they did not notice him drive in, turn, and drive back out.

When Adwoa came home that afternoon, he asked about her morning, whether her time at the gym had been productive. He assumed that she would tell him about running into Mr. Johnson and fill him in on whatever they’d been discussing.

“Oh, it was good,” she said while stripping off her sweaty gear. “I ran into Ama Dadson. We spent some time catching up. She’s started an audiobook company.” Ama was an old friend of theirs. She’d attended Wesley Girls’ Senior High with Adwoa. “I’m going to have a shower; do you want to join me?” she asked.

“No thank you. I’ll probably have one later this afternoon,

before I change to meet Mr. Johnson at +233. Would you like to join us?"

"That would be nice," she said, walking toward the bathroom, "but I'm going to let you boys have your fun. Give Mr. Johnson my regards. I'll be out in a minute so we can have lunch."

That evening while having drinks, he asked Mr. Johnson about his day.

"I was in Tema all morning, some small meetings about a project," he told Kwame. And in that moment, Kwame realized that something was going on between his wife and his best friend.

Adwoa and Mr. Johnson met nearly every day. Kwame had started looking at the call logs on her phone and reading her text messages whenever she was in the shower. He knew the times and locations of their meetings.

I can't tell you how much this means to me, she'd texted him one day.

This is just what the doctor ordered, she texted another time.

Does he suspect anything? Mr. Johnson asked once.

Not a thing. He doesn't have a clue.

He was confused by the casual cruelty of this woman he thought he knew so well. How could she press her lips against his every morning, tell him how much she loved and wanted him, and yet sneak around with his best friend and then laugh behind his back about how he didn't even have a clue?

And Mr. Johnson! Of all the women he could have chosen to replace Naadu, why his wife? Why Adwoa? They'd been friends for nearly a half century. Kwame had shared his most intimate secrets with him. He'd even told him how inadequate he'd been feeling since the surgery, how he'd not been able to make love to Adwoa.

During the times when he knew they were meeting, he wondered what Mr. Johnson was doing to her, how he was touching her. He wondered if she'd ever worn her gold and blue waist beads while she was with Mr. Johnson, if she'd ever pleaded with him, in that near-growling voice, to do things to her.

Sometimes when Kwame pictured them together, he would come closer to achieving an erection than he ever had since the surgery. This only confused him more, made him angrier. It hurt to think of the pair.

The pain was unbearable. Kwame simmered in it all day, every day. He thought it might kill him. He even considered killing himself, but he decided, no, he would not give them the satisfaction of his death. He would kill *them* first.

Since Adwoa and Mr. Johnson believed that he was clueless, he saw no reason to let them think otherwise. He continued the charade that was their relationships, greeting Adwoa every morning as though they were still in love, being buddy-buddy and having drinks several nights a week with Mr. Johnson.

He planned to take care of Adwoa first. He remembered that article he'd read at the doctor's office, before his diagnosis. He now believed that it had been an omen, a sign of things to come.

One night, after some drinks at +233 with Mr. Johnson, he stopped at the Cantonments roundabout to speak with the whore who sometimes serviced him. He asked her to buy him several fentanyl tablets. He needed a powerful opioid. And with the influx of counterfeit pharmaceuticals from China and India, it was pretty much guaranteed that any drug purchased in Accra through unregulated sources was lethal.

The following evening, he stopped by the roundabout

again to pick up the fentanyl. He went home and deposited a single tablet in Adwoa's bottle of hypertension medication.

Every evening that week, as they got ready for bed and Kwame watched his wife take her medication, he believed that the tablet she was swallowing could be the one that would end his suffering. He believed that while they slept, that tablet would make its fatal journey from Adwoa's stomach to her small intestine to her liver, which would immediately empty the chemical compound into her bloodstream, sending it to all her other organs, including her heart—her deceptive, ungrateful little heart.

The anticipation was so stress inducing, Kwame could hardly sleep. That whole week, he was a disheveled, bumbling wreck. He was racked with guilt, fear, satisfaction, anger, sorrow, and, more than anything else, sadness. Each morning she survived, it made him regret his decision to kill her even more. He didn't want to do it. It made him sad to think that his marriage, his perfect union, had come to this. But Adwoa had left him no choice.

The morning of his birthday, she'd not woken up easily. He shook her shoulder several times, greeted her loudly, and nothing. He started to cry. He was crying so hard, he looked like he was convulsing.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" Adwoa asked. At first he thought he was hallucinating, but then she sat up, reached over, and started wiping the tears from his face.

This made him cry even harder. "I'm sorry," he wept. "I'm so, so sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," she said. "We'll get through this. I love you." She leaned over and kissed him on the lips. "Happy birthday," she sang.

"Kiss me again," he insisted. She did. "And again." His

love for her flushed out every other emotion he'd been feeling. What had gotten into him? She meant everything to him. What kind of life could he have without her? How could he ever face their children again? As soon as he was alone, he'd remove the fentanyl from her bottle of blood-pressure medication.

"I love you," he told her. "I love you more than anything." And as he was telling her this, he felt himself becoming aroused. His doctor was right—what guides the pleasure of lovemaking is the love. There are ways to work around whatever is lacking.

"You might hear some commotion downstairs," Adwoa told him as they were getting out of bed. "I asked Mawusi to come this morning to prepare breakfast for us. I was up late last night organizing your gifts and making sure she has everything she needs."

"You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to. It has been a difficult year for us. I know you've been having some challenges recovering from the surgery, and we're going to have to make some adjustments. But I am so grateful that you are alive and still with me. I thank God for your life, and I want us to celebrate it."

He felt like a terrible human being, the worst on earth. He was so ashamed of himself and his selfishness. He turned and started walking toward the bathroom so that she couldn't see his tears. "I'm going to have a shower. Will you join me? I'll say my thank-yous in there."

"I'm right behind you," she called out to him. "I couldn't fall asleep last night so I took a sedative. I don't like mixing medications, so I didn't take my blood-pressure tablet. Just taking it now." A pause. "Here I come."

He heard her footsteps. Then she stopped.

"I . . . I don't feel . . ." He heard her fall.

“Adwoa!” He ran into the bedroom and picked his wife up from the floor. He carried her in his arms and hurried down the stairs, screaming for Mawusi. When he got to the bottom, he saw Mr. Johnson, then he saw his parents, who lived all the way in Cape Coast. He saw his doctor and Ama Dadson and various other old friends.

“SURPRISE!!!” they yelled at him, blowing bazookas and throwing confetti in the air.

He stood there looking at them, all the people he loved most in the world, staring at him as he held his wife’s limp body and listened to her breathing turn shallower and shallower.