

OFON'S POV

There were multiple banging tables, squeaky voices like a thousand mice, and the cries and wails of a two-year-old. The voice in my head constantly said to me, "*Ofon run!!*" and there I was hiding in the toilet for some peace and quiet and never having the courage to listen to the voice.

You would think this was the first time I heard the voice, but no it was not. Seventeen years of living and that was the most familiar voice in my head constantly reminding me that I needed to disappear from this place
"Where is that walking dead creature?!"

I could hear her voice from the corridor amidst the noise. Living with this woman who was supposed to be my mother made my life a nightmare that I wouldn't wish for even my worst enemy. I quickly began to wash my hands with water from the plastic bucket which I used to give her two year old a bath.

'Child of death,' she called me.

She burst the door open and dragged me by my ear from the toilet to the living room

"It is like you want to die. Very soon you will start to display one of those caricatures of yours, clean up this mess right now before I get angry" she said,

She gave birth to my four siblings after I was born and is now pregnant with the fifth. I wondered if she and her husband would ever take a break. As I cleaned the living room, I couldn't shake out the thought of why my Mother treated me like an alien, I found it difficult to call her my "Mummy" because she treated me with so much disdain, I thought of all the days I spent without proper food while everyone else in the house ate well, and I would have to wait for their leftovers just to avoid starvation. My mother treats me like a slave and I wish I was never born.

At seventeen, I sure looked like I was forty, I was so thin that I could blow away in the wind, and my clothes hanging off me like a scarecrow's. I was a walking skeleton, my brown flesh like parchment stretched over my bones, my collar bones sticking out even through my clothes, for this reason I couldn't care less if my mother called me "child of death". I had accepted what I was, after all I was falling sick every five market days.

Despite how weak I felt, I cleaned up the mess done by my siblings in the living room and put them to bed with the drug my only friend Mfon gave to me, she called it "diazepam", she advised that I add it to their food or drinking water so they could sleep for a long time if I wanted any sort of peace. Initially, I was a bit skeptical because I wasn't sure about the side effects of the drug, but I eventually gave in after Mfon convinced me that if I just gave them in little doses then they would be fine. I went ahead to use the drugs to put them to sleep whenever I wanted them to sleep for longer periods. Mfon was really the only one in my life that made me understand a little bit what genuine love for a human being felt like.

We met for the first time three weeks ago in front of my house, while I was trying to fetch water from the well.

"Come, come and eat udara"

The first words Mfon said to me, I think Mfon she wandered around and caught me struggling to fetch water that I could barely carry, she ran to me and invited me to eat some udara.

I was afraid, I was not used to meeting other people except the Mother's friends who treated me just as badly as she did. It felt nice seeing another human being smile at me. Though I was afraid, because my mother could have come out of the house at anytime and that would be a death sentence for me, I slowly started walking towards Mfon and she handed me some of her Udara,

MFON'S POV

Walking around the neighborhood was one of my favorite things to do, it was my escape from home. As the first child I had a lot of responsibilities, I became a wife, a mother and even a pharmacist.

Yes, I became a wife, my mum was barely home and I had to stay home with my father who had suffered a terrible stroke two years earlier. This situation caused my mother to become the breadwinner of the family with her career as a pharmacist. I was left to be the primary caregiver and companion to my dad, taking care of my two younger siblings while assisting at my mum's pharmacy when she was not around.

I usually strolled around our quiet neighborhood to clear my head and a couple of times I sighted her by the well trying to fetch water. She was really skinny and the ignorant part of me was jealous because I had too much flesh to become a model like the ones I saw on TV, but to me she was the perfect size.

This particular day I decided to talk to her, I mean it wouldn't hurt to make a new friend, I ran quickly towards her, with the fresh udara I had and I called out to her,

"Come, come and eat udara"

She turned around and I was hit with a deadly stare. I became instantly afraid but then I noticed her face gradually become sad and confused, like she was not sure if she wanted to talk to me or not. Then I said again,

"My name is Mfon, don't worry the udara is not sour"

She started to walk slowly toward me, looking left and right like she was afraid she was being followed, even I began to feel uneasy, she finally caught up to me and stretched out her hands quickly saying

"Thank you Mfon, my name is Ofon"

With a quick smile, she dashed back into her house even without the bucket of water. I didn't even get a chance to say anything , but it warmed my heart that she appreciated my udara.

The situation was still really weird, because I wondered what made her have such a sad face with the countenance that someone was either pursing her or watching her, as I began to leave something caught my attention by the window, it was her, she waved at me with the softest smile I had ever seen and I smiled back at her.

I visited her place the following day and a few days after but I didn't get a chance to see her, I concluded in my mind that she probably was a fragment of my imagination and did not exist, maybe I had successfully seen a ghost in my life .

OFON

Those udaras were the sweetest I had tasted in my whole seventeen gruesome years of life, before that day I could not remember the last time I had Udara, I barely ate good food anyways.

She smiled back at me, nobody else ever smiled back at me genuinely like she did, I was afraid my mother would catch me interacting with somebody else. I was hoping she would come around again even though I wasn't sure how we would talk for a longer time without me getting caught by my mum.

The day I received the udaras was the same day, the pains returned. At about 12 am, the pain rose from my lower back into my chest, sharp, intense and non-relenting. I had learned to put my wrapper in my mouth so that when I screamed I wouldn't wake anyone up . My mother didn't care for my pains, the last time , she threw a card of panadol for me to take and invited some Pastor to the house to pray for me that she thinks I am a possessed child. Whenever I had those pains, I wanted to die and disappear from the earth. I didn't see any point being alive with the pain and with a family where there was no love.

For three days , I lived in pain with no care from anybody, I cried to a point where my tear glands could no longer produce any tears, I became numb , I was tired , I wanted to die.

MFON'S POV

After three days I finally saw Ofon again, this time she was not fetching water , she was drying some clothes outside on the line and when she saw me, she ran towards me and hugged me like we had known each other for years meanwhile we had met only once and barely had a conversation, I was surprised that this time around she was not acting like someone that was running from somebody.

“Thank you so much for the udaras the other day, it was really delicious”

“You’re welcome, I hope you are okay though, the first time we met I honestly thought somebody was pursuing you and then I didn’t see you again for three days”

“Okay, that day I was really scared my mum would catch me speaking to you, she doesn’t like it when i speak to strangers, but today she had to go to the market in the village and she won’t be back until evening”

We spent the whole day talking and I realized our lives were almost similar, we were both the first children and had the responsibility of our other siblings which we agreed was very mentally draining for us at that age.

Something about her touched me, I couldn’t understand why her mom would treat her the way she explained to me, the part that broke my heart the most was the fact that, she didn’t receive any form of care at the times when she was sick and I couldn’t understand why she was falling sick with malaria frequently, I assured her that I would get her malaria preventive drugs and repellents from my mum’s pharmacy, as well as some vitamins which my mum always gave me to take, I also opted to bring her diazepam because she complained a ton about her younger siblings and the fact that she could never have any peace and quiet , my mum had told me diazepam made people go to sleep for long hours but I made her promise me that she would only give them in the dosage I recommended since they were little children.

Speaking to Ofon felt like speaking to a long lost sister, we instantly connected and the fact that we could relate on many levels was just amazing. At that moment, we had to find a way to see each other, since she was pretty much under house arrest by someone who was supposed to be her Mother and she did not own a phone either which made visiting her like a game of hide and seek.

OFON

The best three weeks of my life. Mfon and I had found a hiding spot just behind my house where my mother could never find me, and on every visit Ofon never failed to come with food and some snacks for us to share. On every visit before she left, she would give me a deep hug and would say to me ,

“Ofon, this situation is not permanent and one day you will be free and we will be able to be proper friends without the need to hide from the world”

I still remember vividly how happy I was because my mum had just come back from one of her trips. I was so excited to tell Ofon about this, running quickly to our usual hiding spot. Little did I know that I was about to get the news that would haunt me for the rest of my life.

I could hear the sirens of an ambulance which I followed leading me to the front of Ofon's house. A white ambulance parked in front of the house with people who were dressed like nurses and then I saw a man dressed in a white coat roll out a stretch from the front door, behind him was a woman who looked like she was in her mid 40s. On the stretcher lay someone I was not sure of, but the person was covered in a white sheet from head to toe, tears began to form from behind my eyes as I quickly ran towards the stretcher not minding the people around me or the woman in her mid 40s who I guessed was Ofon's mother, I yanked the white sheet off and I met the cold face of Ofon.

Confused, overwhelmed, perplexed I didn't understand, Ofon dead?

I ran to one of the nurses grabbing her by the shoulders ``Nurse nurse please!! What happened to my friend, why is she covered in that clothe”

I ran to the doctor, I needed answers and I needed them at that moment.

Five years later since this incident I have not been able to forgive myself for the death of Ofon. I felt responsible because maybe I could have saved her, I was too ignorant, I could have taken her from that place and taken her straight to my mum so that she would receive the care she needed.

Ofon had to spend seventeen years of her life with people who adopted her Illegally and when they found out she was getting sick too often they turned her into a slave in that house leaving her to suffer her sickle cell crises all alone.

The most agonizing part is that nobody knew about her illness, her adopted parents refused to take her to the hospital because she was adopted illegally and they didn't want to face the Law.

My mum and I had gone to the hospital the day she died, the doctors said Ofon died because her oxygen levels were so low and her brain was not receiving adequate oxygen to function properly which also led to the failure of her heart and lungs. Because Ofon was not receiving the proper treatment and care she desperately needed as someone with sickle cell, she endured all that pain which gradually damaged her organs until her death.

She was a fighter and the world failed her.

I have dedicated the last five years of my life advocating for medical care towards sickle cell patients and educating couples more about genetic testing before marriage and having children. In addition, I ensured that her parents faced legal consequences for illegally abducting a child from an orphanage in another state. I only wished that proper legal actions and investigations had been carried sooner, maybe Ofon would still be alive with me today.

Sleep well my dear soul sister Ofon, we shall meet again soon .