

A LITTLE SHOULDER

It is said that no man is an island and the quality of friends one has determines the quality of his life. I'll share with you a phenomenal story about three friends - Uwakmfon, Uduakobong and Ofonime.

Uduak, being the first of eight siblings was by culture, responsible for all her siblings after the demise of their parents. Howbeit, all hands were on deck. Every one of them had something they were doing to bring in money. It ranged from POS attendants to sales person. They made contributions daily, afterwards, the money was gathered by Uyai - the second girl in the family and she would buy what they would cook for dinner. Although Uduak also known as "Udee" for short, worked two jobs, her monthly salary could barely suffice for her schooling and personal expenses. "Who is around o" Atim called. Atim was a very friendly neighbour to Uduak. "Aunty come in! Good afternoon ma" Idiong replied. He was the immediate younger one to Uduak. He was seated on the woven mat, spread across the cold cement floor and shared a plate of garri and roasted groundnuts with the last born. "Where is Udee? I have some clothes for your sisters" Atim said. "Heeeii" Uduak squealed. "I'm here o" she answered from inside and scurried out. "Aunty, when will you ever have clothes for the boys?" Idiong asked her. she laughed. This was a typical evening at their home. Uduak had goodly neighbours who often gifted them items like garri, clothes, palmkernels and even perewinkles.

Uwakmfon was the direct opposite of her friend. While Udee was outspoken, outgoing and enthusiastic, Uwakmfon, also known as "Uwa" for short was quiet and reserved. She lived with her uncle and his "iron wife" since her father wouldn't take her to live with him and his wife. Uwakmfon wasn't reserved from childhood, it was life that shaped her into being an introvert. "Uwakmfon!" Her uncle's wife called. Uwa had a bit of a hearing problem. "Uwakmfon!!" She called again. Uwa stopped washing, it sounded like she heard her name. Sometimes, it was her imagination tricking her as her name was often shouted in that house, but imagination or not, she knew she had to respond or risked getting slapped if truly aunty had called her name up to three times. "Yes Aunty!" She dried her hands on some dirty clothes and ran off to the front yard. "Are you going to use the whole morning to wash those clothes? Will my children starve for lunch because of you?" the woman shouted from the verandah. "I'm almost through, ma" Uwakmfon replied bending her knee in respect. "Wash at night! Have I not said it before? If I touch you now, they will say I am wicked. Wash at night, dry in the morning!" "Yes ma" she answered. "You told your father that you were not in school yesterday and today?" Uwa's heart sank. "Answer me before I slap you!" Uwa cowered, she had expected Aunty's hand to land on her. "A-aunty, h-he asked me h-how was school" Yes was shaking. Her uncle was on the phone with her father and from the faint voices, she could tell that her dad was upset. Uwa's father sent money constantly to ensure she was taken care of. "Kneel down there" Aunty pointed with her chin and went into the sitting room. The call had ended. Uwa could hear them whispering. "Allow the girl to go to school, do I need to remind you of how useful she is to this house?" her husband warned. "She always goes to school, it is just a punishment!" Aunty replied.. "Look, if her father takes her away, we will all suffer. My work cannot fend for all of us. Allow that child to go to school!" "My love why are..." "Are you hearing me?" He snapped. "I don't want problems with my brother, dismiss her to go now" he ordered, took his shirt and went outside. "Why are you here?" He sighted Uwa. "Finish up and go to the school!" Uwa looked at Aunty for approval, she signaled with her fingers for her to get up. "Change the baby's diapers and dry those clothes before you leave" Aunty instructed.

It was their first year at school that these three friends met as course mates. For Ofonime, nothing much can be said about him. He was social, just like Uduak and very generous but academically, he was slightly below average compared to Uwa and Udee who were well above average. The girls studied hard and did their best to support their kind- hearted friend, Ofonime. Uwa kept Udee abreast with informations regarding tests, assignments and updates on when she needed to be in school by all means, while she still shuttled between being a part-time teacher and a student. Ofonime was not the only generous person amongst them. The girls too were, only that, Udee would rather give when she had what to spare but Uwa would go ahead to give her last, without even thinking. On one particular hot afternoon, the girls were walking home to get to that

point where they would enter different buses when they sighted an elderly woman seated by the pedestrian walk, she was neatly dressed. "Hold on Udee, good afternoon ma" Uwa squatted next to the woman. The sun was scorching. "Are you alright ma?" The woman's words were inaudible. The girls looked at each other. Udee squatted next to her. "We can't hear you, what's the matter?" Udee asked. The woman gestured at her head, in a faint voice, she complained about not seeing properly and a very bad headache. A young guy got closer to them. "May I help?" He asked. "Mama, come with us to the pharmacy, please. I'm sure they can help you" Uwa said and tried to lift her. The young man helped. They explained her condition to the pharmacist and her vitals were checked.. "Who's her family?" The pharmacist asked. "We saw her by the roadside" Uduak said. He nodded, "Her blood pressure was very high. She could have had a stroke right there or even die. You ladies took a huge risk but it's commendable." They got to the cashier's. "Uwa!" Uduak called in a stern low tone. "You're going to spend money that you don't have abi? You want to be trekking home this week." "For how much? Her drug is not expensive, it's just to manage her until she checks into a hospital" Uwa said, as she took her change and walked away. "Mama have you eaten anything?" Uwa asked. She shook her head. "Let's buy her some food first" Uwa suggested. "Hmm, Uwa, okay!" Udee warned. The young man offered to show Uwa where she could find fresh fish pepper soup with rice while Udee stayed back with mama. "Sister, please I beg you. Will you help me? I am stranded. I've asked people for help but nobody would help. I saw you and my spirit said I should ask you, please." He turned around revealing his badly torn trouser. "Please, even if it's money to mend the trouser since I don't have money to return home. I was going to meet with some clients, from there, I know I'll have transport fare, please." The young guy who helped them pleaded, as they were about entering the pharmacy with the food. "I only have two hundred naira to spare else I'll trek home this evening. Will you take it?" He was beyond thankful, handing over the food, he kissed the money and jogged off. This was just one of the many instances where Uwa sacrificed what she had. They wrote their final exams and defended their project. They knew they might not get to see each other but promised to keep in touch. Uduak took up a full time teaching job while doing cleaning for a family on weekends, no one heard from Ofonime anymore as his mobile lines were no longer connecting. As for Uwakmfon, she became a full time nanny and house maid. Both ladies, like every other young lady, had young guys and even men who showed interest in them. Udee flexed them and helped them spend their money but Uwa, was never to be seen outside talk more of talking to a guy. Back in school she had tried a couple relationships but was unwilling to give herself as an offering of love. After the forceful attempts by her two different exes, she disliked anything dating relationship.

Over the course of time, Uduak took to learning vocational skills from her neighbour at close of work. She learnt to bake and fix nails, she was industrious and smart. "Sister, your phone is ringing" Uyai shouted. It was Ofonime calling! She couldn't believe her eyes "Who is this o, Ofonime?" He laughed. "It's not done o. This is not how friends are treated o" she said. "I am really really sorry. I've been very busy, work, work, work. How are things with you?" They spoke at length. Uduak told him how much effort she puts in daily but received very little pay and almost no customers. He asked her to consider relocating to Lagos, assuring her that the cost of living may be high but there were various opportunities and better pay compared to Ikot Ekpene where she had lived all her life. He had same conversation with Uwakmfon earlier, encouraging her to take a step of faith and relocate but Uwa's trust issues were bigger than her heart. She had no heart for it. She just couldn't leave to stay with a male coursemate who once liked her. Not after the experiences she's had with her exes. She cried almost everyday from the downgrading words, coupled with the emotional and physical assault she was served by her uncle's family all the time but she had no where to go as her father wouldn't welcome her because of his wife. Uwa's mum disappeared into thin air, seventeen years ago.

On a fateful day, Uwa got the shock of her life which made her make the biggest decision of her life. She phoned Udee and could hear a familiar voice in the background. "Isn't that Ofonime?" He took the phone. "It's me, ma." "Hey! so you are in town and you didn't even bother to tell me?" She was disappointed. "In

town? I'm not in town o. I'm in my house" He replied. It was quite confusing to Uwa. "You're now based in Lagos... wait... No way!" it was beginning to fall into place. She was stunned. "Is Udee in Lagos?!" "Yes, she is" he laughed. "Yes baby, i'm in Lagos, in Ofonime's house" Udee shouted from the background. Uwa laughed and cried at the same time. "How did you do it?" She was filled with an outburst of hope, "are you really in Lagos?" she asked between sniffs. "Yes and once I'm able to get my place, you're coming over. I want you out of there, start making plans to come" Udee told her. The many nights that followed after, Uwa couldn't sleep. She tossed and turned, she thought for hours. It was a mixed feeling of hope and fear. If Uduak, an ophan could risk it to Lagos for a better life, then she could do same. She began planning, lying, stealing and saving up for it. On the D-day, as they all planned, she left, leaving a note behind.

We've heard the saying that it's not always greener at the other side of the fence. This was Uduak and Uwa's experience in Lagos. The first two months were difficult, they attended series of interviews. Uwa couldn't appear in any of her clothes for the interviews as they were all old. Udee would dress them up for interviews. They needed a job with a good pay but the locations were too far from where they lived, distance ate a larger share of the money. It was like working to give to transport drivers. It was either that or they weren't just qualified for the job. They desperately needed a good job closer to them which wasn't forth coming. "How about that guy? Tony really likes you, Uwa" Ofonime said, one evening. "That Tony guy?" Udee asked. "If Uwa agrees to go out with him, it will do her some good" he added. "What exactly do you mean, Ofonime?" Uwa sounded disappointed. "At least, you'll have money to take care of yourself. You need it." He said. "Abeg, end this. You know Uwa is not that type of girl. If the guy needs someone to spend his money, I am here." Udee defended. "I can settle for the jobs close by. Atleast it's better than nothing" Uwa said in a whisper. "What can fifteen thousand naira do for you in Lagos?" Ofonime asked.

In subsequent days, their conversations tailed this line. Udee didn't mind befriending guys to flex the money but for Uwa, it was not an option, she wasn't willing to do it. "I can't sleep around for money!" she said one day in an argument. "Nobody said you should. Wait, you think I sleep around? Babe, take the money and still say no, it's like a game of football, just dribble" Uwa shook her head. "Yes, yes!" Udee shouted. Uwa looked at her in disbelief. "Babe, the food you eat is Ofonime's and my money, you're wearing my clothes, how do you expect us to keep doing this? I'm taking care of you and my siblings. You have to cooperate because I can't keep up. Cooperate please! I won't care again o. I've told you" Uduak warned and slammed the door shut. Uwa lost her appetite, she looked at the noodles she was eating, she dropped the bowl of food. They were right. She knew they had a solid point. She was being selfish and living off them. Just maybe she wasn't meant to live a decent life. What good has good morals brought her so far? She was giving herself one more week. One last week before she would give up on modesty. She couldn't afford to return to her uncle. Her dad was crossed with her, she had better stood up for herself. She searched for a better job earnestly and luckily received a few email invitations but the locations were farther as usual. If only she had a friend she could squat with in the area. She wasn't sure of going for any of the interviews, there was no point. The pressure from her friends were coming in strong. She knew she had to attend atleast two of those interviews but what if it would be a waste of time and transport fare again? She got a reminder the night before and just maybe she should go. She had chosen a bank job and one with a big fashion house needing a human resource manager. On her interview day at the fashion house, she got dressed and left, praying to her God in her heart. She was going to ask for accommodation, if at all she would get this job. Uwa was nervous on arrival, she spoke with the receptionist who asked her to sit and wait for her turn. Those were some of the longest minutes of her life. She wasn't going to live off her friends, she was beautiful and could learn how to play the game from Udee. When it was her turn, she walked in and politely greeted the three-man interview panel and took the seat before them. The man's eyes squinted. "Do you remember me?" She took a steady look at him. "The torn trouser, you helped me in Ikot-Ekpene. Two years ago, I think" Of course! she remembered him. Her face lit up. He laughed, she inhaled and smiled.