

PILOT TO SURGEON

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Kanzi was a young, brilliant, and talented girl who studied in Primary Five at Kizito Primary School. She had pale-dark skin, copper-coloured scanty hair, hazel eyes, and a hooked nose just like her father's. She had dimples that pressed down her hollow cheeks wherever she smiled which made her charming. She was also tall and slender in her early teenage years. She was a jolly girl who never carried her soul on her face. She lived in the small village of Katwe in a grass-thatched mud house that was neighbouring the seer's enclosure.

Her parents had been invited to her school by the headteacher following the exceptional performance of the School Music Dance and Drama Club in the inter-regional competitions. Kanzi was the school entertainment prefect and this triumph had been as a result of a creative drama she had trained the club members. It was the best in the contest. Therefore, this invitation was for the recognition of her contribution to the glory of the school in the region. Besides, Kanzi had been the best performing pupil in her class from primary one.

Despite the invitation being for both parents, only Kanzi's mother appeared in the headteacher's office. She was clad in a faded and torn *gomesi* that exposed her shoulders. Her hair was covered with what seemed to be a once-white but now brownish cloth. She

had a blue-blackish swollen left eyeball and a potato-sized bump on her left forehead. The headteacher gave little attention to her appearance since it was common for mamas to appear like this in parents' meetings.

"Good morning mama," the headteacher muttered as he pointed to the bench adjacent to his messy office table.

Meanwhile, the conversation went on as Kanzi stood outside the office waiting for her mother to let her know of the proceedings of her visit. Kanzi had become so impatient and so she made up her mind to move closer to peep through the window and eavesdrop on the conversation.

"Thank you, thank you. God bless you abundantly," her mother said kneeling.

The headteacher moved closer to pat her on the back (in a way of congratulating her) and went back to his seat leaving her in open-mouthed surprise.

In the meantime, Kanzi would not guess what the dialogue was all about. She was later called back to class. All her thoughts were on what may have transpired between the headteacher and her mother. She could not wait to get back home in the evening.

As usual, her mother welcomed her with some cassava but today her mother had a twinkle in her eye! Kanzi was curious.

"Mama, what did you talk about with the headteacher?" she asked. "You can't believe it my daughter. The school board members have decided to offer you a full bursary for your entire primary and secondary education," her mother said.

Kanzi bubbled with excitement. She hugged her mother as tears of joy streamed down her cheeks. That evening, she could hardly

eat because of her excitement. At least her education was now assured and it would relieve her mother who always toiled in Mwangu's shamba.

Her father had denounced her education referring to it as 'wasting' money on 'someone's wife.' He always claimed that he would rather buy meat for his dogs that would secure his fowl from wandering foxes than educate a girl child whose only duty was being a housewife. In their community, the recognised roles of women were producing children, tilling fields and preparing food for the home. Moreover, educating a girl was regarded as a form of deviance since it would make them 'unruly' wives.

That evening was jolly until its fate was sealed by the drunkard Kiwalabye in his zigzag movement. All the children were asleep and mama was finalising the chores before he kicked the door. With an old-brewery-like smell, he slurred, "W... where is m... my f...f...ood?"

His voice would prompt you to think that he was being choked by his tongue. He was wearing his knee-folded greasy trousers with his heaving barrel chest almost nude in an unbuttoned shirt. He was a tall man and thus couldn't stand upright in their hut. The waving of his hands as he made inconsequential gestures gave way to a he-goat pong from his bushy armpits.

His arrival induced a shiver that crawled up mother's spine. As he made his jumbled movements, he kicked the pot that had the food. The sweet potatoes rolled on the floor of the hut. He was livid with anger and a hefty slap landed on poor mother's face. He picked up a rod behind the half-filled sack of beans and ruthlessly flogged mother. He did all this in the pretext of blaming her for

being careless and mishandling food which would annoy the gods and cause famine in the area. The fracas woke up Kanzi who tried to protect her mother but was also beaten together with her. That night, Kanzi and her mother slept in the nearby bush.

Her travails at home often made Kanzi sorrowful. She often pretended to be happy but this particular day, it was hard to pretend. She could not even concentrate in class. Her friends realised that something was not right.

It was a grimy, doleful afternoon. The sun exhibited a bizarre fascia that appeared to be stooping grudgingly in a grisly genuflection beneath the bosom of the sprawling sky. From her sitting position in class, Kanzi could see the small path adjacent to the school courtyard.

In disbelief and total shock, she saw her father cycling from the small bend in the bushy path that connected to the school courtyard. Her pulse rate almost tripled and sweat was being excreted all over her body. Her father had never come to school! He parked the bicycle and within no time was in front of the class.

“Kanzi, follow me!” he roared as silence roved all over the boisterous afternoon class. Swiftly she moved out of the class and sat on the bicycle carrier. The shuttered buildings of her school receded into the distance as they rode off and finally disappeared into the curved bushy path. Little did she know that it was her last day at the school. Her father’s ignorance, fiendish and treacherous attitude had made him forcefully withdraw her from school!

On arriving home, she was surprised to find an old man seated on a stool under the shade of the jackfruit tree in their compound. The unkempt forest of a grey beard gave him a look that was almost close

to that of a mountain gorilla. He seemed to have had a dry tenacious cough that made him recurrently clutch his torso.

Kanzi's mother moved out of the hut and stood on the verandah with a pitiful gaze at her daughter who was kneeling to greet the strange man. Before she had even finished her greetings, her father cleared his throat.

"I now no longer owe you anything Munywanyi and you will have to clear my remaining beer in a fortnight. Take your wife and leave," he said in a rough tone as he pointed to the path that linked their home to the village road.

This almost killed poor Kanzi! She could not believe her ears. She knew that such things had happened to her friends before but she had never thought she would be a victim. She had dreamt of becoming a pilot because she wanted to rescue her mother from the hardships of life and regular abuse and fly her to London. She had seen the beautiful city in the cinema while she had gone to represent her school in the debating competitions. She knew being studious was her only hope. But now it seemed books had to be forgotten, all dreams seemed shattered. Her heart was being torn apart in despair.

Her luggage had already been packed and handed to old Munywanyi who immediately rode off with his bride. The oppressive glare of the scorching sun accompanied them in their five-hour journey. However, all her thoughts were on her mother. How would she help her poor mother? "Oh Lord, take my life! I beg you. I want to die," she pleaded silently as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Days turned into weeks and weeks into months and soon Kanzi was expectant. Despite all this, she still had to till the fields and fend for her elder five 'children' who were left behind by her

co-wife. Her back ached from hard work and her arms were heavy from hoeing.

One day while in the field, she felt sharp pain in the lower part of her tummy. She immediately fell heavily on the ground and the little girl she had gone with to the fields immediately ran to call the grandma.

The renowned traditional birth attendant didn't know that her 'luck' was only in grown-up mothers, not children. She ignorantly administered her concoctions on Kanzi. However, Kanzi's condition required a professional. She had protracted and obstructed labour which resulted to life-long incontinence. In addition, she had a stillbirth.

The tales of how Munywanyi's wife had had a stillbirth – a 'bad omen' spread like wildfire around the village. Kanzi had also developed an obstetric fistula complication which resulted in a disgusting odour from her dripping urine and fecal matter. People looked at her as cursed; a manifestation of the anger of the gods. She was secretly taken to the seer in Katwe who would consult the gods on her behalf. This did not bear much fruit and her condition worsened.

Munywanyi threw her out of his home and she decided to go back home. Her father on seeing her also chased her away. Kanzi had nowhere to go. To survive, she resorted to begging on the streets and sleeping in the bushes at night as no one dared to take her in because of the stench and they also believed that she was cursed.

As waning days waxed into swollen months, her appearance completely changed – the long hair, torn clothes, and untidy outlook made people perceive her as a lunatic!

One day, as Kanzi had given up and was on the brink of taking away her life, a kind woman passed by. She later learnt that her name was Pauline. Pauline asked her for her story and she decided to tell her since she had nothing to lose. Pauline asked her to get into her car and drove her to the hospital. Kanzi wondered why she seemed not to be bothered by her stench. Kanzi spent that night in the hospital. She also learnt from the nurses that Pauline was a prominent philanthropist who helped those in need.

After hours of excruciating surgery, Kanzi was successfully operated upon and her condition was corrected. A week later, Kanzi had fully recovered and she was dismissed from the hospital.

Time had healed Kanzi's proverbial wounds. Aunt Pauline had wiped away all her tears. Life had given her a second chance.

One day, Aunt Pauline brought her mother to visit her. Kanzi's excitement knew no bounds. She profusely thanked her 'aunt'. She learnt that her mother had since separated from her father because of the constant abuse. Pauline decided to start up a food stall for Kanzi's mother.

Pauline connected Kanzi to a scholarship through which she got enrolled in one of the best schools in the country. Despite her experience, she resumed her studious nature and as usual, she excelled. This time she had altered her dreams from being a pilot to becoming a specialised fistula surgeon. From experience, she knew that fistula plagued many women.

Years later, she graduated as a specialised fistula surgeon and decided to volunteer part time at the hospital where her life had been reinstated. She also started an organisation that offered free

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treatment for fistula victims. She strongly advocated for girl-child education as a way of empowering women.

Little did she know that her experience would give hope to an African girl-child! There is always light at the end of the tunnel!