

UPENDO'S TREASURE

Kaladi Peace (Uganda)



Pendo's heart dropped after reading the email. A long sigh followed as if she had breathed her last. *All funding shall be stopped if this letter is not signed.*

The words echoed in her mind as she glared at nothing. *'Where will I find 20 million to clear all the hospital bills and debts?'* she wondered.

Her heart had mastered to play amazing beats of suspense and tension. If you listened to her heartbeat, you'd feel like you were in the wrong turn movie, about to be eaten by cannibals. It had been ten months since the lockdown. The children were staying with their guardians all over Kumi. She had not yet visited them because of the troubles with *Forever True*, her donor.

Forever True was a small group of compassionate people who supported organisations in community development.

'What happened?' she wondered. It killed Pendo to imagine that many children were suffering in the village.

'I cooked a soup of hope and spiced it with love. Served it to hungry widows and orphans for 10 years. Before their bellies were full, I snatched the bowl from them,' she thought, condemning herself.

The community put its trust in *Upendo Ministries* knowing that their lives would change for the better.

COVID-19 had laid a path of sharp blades on the road to cut all economies. And the lockdown was not helping. The virus filled the atmosphere like drones in a sci-fi movie.

'Now, I have to engrave a signature on a document declaring all power and ownership of Upendo Ministries to my only donor? I'm sure there is a way to overcome this,' she thought.

For 10 years, *Forever True* had provided all financial support to Upendo Ministries. Pendo believed that their relationship would last forever. They shared a vision to improve the lives of vulnerable people. What would change that?

She searched her memory hoping to find the source of the tsunami she was spinning in. But nothing! All her life, she had dreamt of helping widows and orphans. That is why she founded *Upendo Ministries*. All she ever wanted was to share love with those that the universe had pushed to the pit of helplessness.

Pendo grew up with her seven siblings and single mother Toto in a small village called Ogooma. Their home had four huts – two were bedrooms one for Toto and the girls, and the other for the boys, one was a store and the other a kitchen. The homestead was very peaceful and quiet.

All the girls learnt how to be good wives as the boys went to school. They spent hours in the garden and walked for long distances to fetch water. The girls wished they could go to school but they were told that it was not a place for them.

When Pendo was thirteen years old, she was considered ready for marriage and many suitors sought her hand. But Toto never wanted her eldest daughter to get married. This caused friction in the clan as dowry always added to a clan's wealth. To get away from it all, Toto sent Pendo to live in Tilling village with Ija. Ija was Toto's younger sister.

Pendo enjoyed her life in Tilling. She did not have to walk long distances for water and there was plenty of food. They had to walk though for about 10 kilometres to a nearby town to grind maize and cassava. Although initially this annoyed her, she came up with a plan.

Any time Pendo went to town, she sneaked into the school compound and eavesdropped from the window for one hour. Her excuse was that the millers were busy and that she had to wait in line for her turn. Pendo loved the new things she learnt from school and wanted to learn more. So she always watched the boys at home studying and joined them. She learnt how to read and write from them.

Pendo lived in Tilling for two years.

Her phone rang.

Then a memory.

One day, she was tasked with taking cassava to the millers in town. Pendo was excited. As usual she would sneak into school for one hour and continue to town. As she walked to the millers, she felt a punching pain in her lower abdomen.

Since she was late she decided to ignore it and headed for the shop. As the cassava was processed, she went to the bush to ease herself and realised that it was her menses. This was distressing and exhilarating. Pendo knew what this meant. Time passed and she could feel the flow. She knew what to do next.

A shortcut back to Tilling. She often heard the girls tell stories of a monster in the shortcuts, but she took it. Pendo paced through the bushes with a basin of cassava flour on her head. The blood was still flowing and it made her uneasy. She walked faster and like a miracle saw a stream of clean water.

'I will clean myself,' she thought.

Pendo placed the basin down and walked towards the stream. She stretched out her hand and scooped a handful of water to rinse her leg. When she stretched out her hand the second time, she saw a wide mouth coming from below the water. The creature had a human head but a body of a snake. She did not know where her strength came from but she ran – the basin of flour forgotten. She did not look back and collapsed as soon as she reached their compound.

Ija and the other women tried to resuscitate her and were almost giving up. She never stirred for three days and nights. On the third night, she woke up and took a bath refusing to talk about the incident. No one ever found the flour and nobody ever talked about that incident.

Pendo missed her mother and Ogooma. She wanted to back home. Ija was worried about her niece, she was never the same again. She rarely talked to anyone and so Ija granted her request and asked one of the boys to escort her back home.

Pendo had nightmares and cried at night after her return from Tilling. She barely showed her emotions and was cold to everyone. Her mother talked to Philip, who lived in Soroti, to take care of Pendo for some time. She felt that maybe she would become her former self after going to a new place. Toto trusted Philip as he was her friend's son.

Her phone rang.

It was Darrius – the president of *Forever True*. It was probably related to the Memorandum of Understanding MoU that was sent earlier.

“Hello,” she said.

“When will you sign the MoU? If you do not send it in two days, we shall cut all ties with Upendo Ministries,” he warned without any pleasantries.

Pendo felt the words slice through her heart as she spoke to Darrius. For ten years, they had encouraged her not to be involved with other donors and to ignore grants from them since they would support her forever. She felt betrayed and deceived as she read through the document. Signing it meant that all the land and property of her organisation would be transferred too.

While in Soroti, Philip supported Pendo's education... but she also bore him two children. Philip already had a wife and four children and so he could not marry her. This left Pendo as a single mother.

Putting her children to school was Pendo's priority. Education was the key to all the treasure chests they would seek in the future.

"I know the struggle and pains of being an orphan and a single mother," she told Darrius. "I will not sign that document out of fear and pressure to receive funds. I will work hard to make sure that I find more partners and supporters who will help me. The widows and orphans that Upendo Ministries are helping will suffer for a short time. They'll get support and love for as long as they are empowered and independent."

She was confident in her resolve.

"For ten years, we have provided free education to the orphans and helpless widows. This is the time that our 10-year impact will manifest when the community members finally become independent. I will be as an eagle pushing her eaglets off the cliff so that they can fly. I trust that the people will survive as we find more partners and means to save and empower them," she said, with a tone of heroism.

"You do know that the education and wellbeing of all those widows and orphans will be affected if you don't sign it. Right?" he replied with a spiteful voice.

"Yes, I also know the consequences of rushed and pressured decisions such as this one. So, I have to think twice," she replied with power and authority.

Pendo recalled all the good times she had had with *Forever True*. The first time Paul and his team visited Ogooma, they listened to Pendo's vision and hoped to transform the lives of the orphans and widows. At the time, she had started a group called *Upendo Wetu*. The group taught women how to save and earn so that they could educate their

children. It also encouraged parents to take their daughters to school. They also learnt human rights, numeracy and entrepreneurship.

Paul and his team were moved and touched by the humility of the group and decided to support Pendo's vision by starting up an orphanage. Since then, *Upendo Ministries* became a home for the helpless orphans and also a refuge for the widows who struggled and suffered in the community.

Paul visited Ogooma annually and gave the orphans clothing and toys. With time, so many people volunteered to help raise funds for *Upendo Ministries* through *Forever True*.

But Paul was replaced by Darrius in 2017. Most of the people who worked for the organisation resigned. Darrius started to change the vision and foundation story of *Upendo Ministries* and *Forever True*. Pendo took a deep breath and prayed to her God for strength and courage to continue and support her project.

Darrius cut communication with Pendo and tried all means to convince her to sign the document but she was adamant. He started rumours to tarnish her reputation but the community believed in Pendo.

Pendo spent her days thinking of new ways to help her children, finding partners and donors. But it all just seemed out of reach. Her nights were filled with insomnia as she had nightmares of white and black snakes snatching her home and organisation from her. Until one day... one day there was hope.

The community members volunteered to help with the fundraising activities. The teachers volunteered to teach the orphans at no cost. Her YouTube channel went viral and her readers encouraged her to keep fighting and working hard.

A year later, the country was experiencing a lockdown. Upendo Ministries offices were bushy and deserted. But she walked through to feel the love she always felt. At least the children were getting sponsors who supported their education.

At 50, Pendo had experienced so many unfortunate events. But she was confident that Upendo Ministries could still be revived. As she walked through the bushes, she smiled and believed that she had created an impact. She sat under a tree and reflected on how education impacted her life. And she wished that more girls had studied during her years.

Pendo's eyes landed on something shiny and bright. The sunlight made it glow. She moved closer to inspect what it was.

'A broken glass?' she wondered.

But curiosity drew her towards the object. It was not just a stone.

"Maybe I'm so desperate and I'm starting to think that this is a diamond," she said looking at the stone suspiciously.

So many questions clouded her mind. She smiled beginning to feel confident that it was a diamond.

"I am confident that this land has more to give than I can see. I will do everything possible to revive Upendo Ministries and make my village a better place. My wrinkles trace love."

She would take the stone to be inspected.