In a blink, my childhood back yard disappears and is replaced by a bleary-eyed view of my own gray-haired arms. I note the dark purple and black bruises from recent IVs. Are these the same arms that just held the Tarzan rope, strong enough to support me effortlessly as I swung so high in the air? The same arms that allowed me to get away from the lion? Now, they are frail and listless. My eyes trace the tube from my forearm to the IV bag of *God-knows-what*.

Every breath I take is punctuated by a wheeze.

Again, I hear, “Dad? Are you okay?”

“Mikey?” As my eyes come into focus, I see my son looking down at me.

“Looks like you were struggling to breathe there for a while, Pop.”

“Yeah, I . . .” As I begin to speak, I am cut off by a series of uncontrollable coughs, and struggle to catch my breath.

“It’s okay, Dad, just relax. Don’t try to talk.”

After a while, I regain my composure. “Damn cough. It hurts my chest when I cough like that, but I can’t control it.” It’s scary, how hard it is to get a single sentence out without throwing myself into another coughing fit. “How are you, Mike? And the family?”

“Everybody’s good, Pop. They all said to say hi and that they are all praying for you.”

Still struggling to breathe without coughing, I say, “That’s nice. Could you raise the bed up a bit for me, Mike? You would not *believe* where I just was. Well, in my dream, I suppose.”

After raising the bed up, Mike smiles and asks, “Where did you go?”

Between breaths, I try and explain the best I can. “I believe I was in Magnolia—back in the house I grew up in. Well, not actually in the house; I was in the yard. The yard was just as it was when I was . . . oh, I don’t know, nine or ten. The oak tree was there, and my Tarz—” Again, coughing interrupts my speech. Mike waits patiently for me to regain my composure, but I can see the fear and sadness in his eyes. “My Tarzan rope,” I go on, wheezing. “The one that my dad put up for me was there, and I actually swung on it again.”

My laughter turns into coughing.

Mike raises his brows. “You swung on the Tarzan rope?”

“I did! And I climbed it! It was so *real*, Mike. I also ate raspberries and blueberries and a plum!” I went on, wheezing again. “This damn cough . . . Yes! It was all so real, Mike. I didn’t cough and I had no pain and I felt so full of energy!” Licking my lips, I continue, “I *really* tasted the fruit, and I smelled the roses!”

“Sounds like you had an amazing dream, Pop,” Mike said, grinning.

“It was so real,” I say again. “I’ve never had a dream like that before.”

“Maybe it was from all the drugs they’re giving you through that IV.”

“Well, if that’s the case, I hope they keep giving me more. I felt so full of energy. Not like now.”

Just talking about my dream is exhausting, and already I have to fight to keep my eyes open. I try to stay awake for my son, but it’s so difficult, and I know the coughs will start again if I try to talk too much. “I’m so sorry, Mike. I . . .” I feel myself drifting away as I give in to my exhaustion, eyelids too heavy to keep open.

“You sleep, Pop. I’m going to grab something to eat in the cafeteria and then I’ll come back up. Want me to lower the bed?”

Just before I respond to my son, a man walks into my room carrying a small book. He introduces himself to me and my son, “Hi, I am Chaplain Frank. I visit the patients here and see how they’re doing – check if they need anything, and also just to let them know that we care about them. I can say a prayer for you if you’d like.” As the chaplain smiles and opens his little prayer book, Mike says, “Yeah, that would be nice, but I have to get something to eat. I’ll be back in a half hour, Pop, nice meeting you chaplain.” Mike smiles at me as he leaves.

“You’ll have to excuse my coughing, chaplain, but it’s uncontrollable. I appreciate you stopping and, well, if you really want to say a prayer, why not.”

The chaplain looks at me and says, “Sure, but first, tell me something about yourself.” He looks at his roster of patients then addresses me, “Louis Bowella, is it?”

“That’s me. Not much to tell. I am ninety-two and on my third bout of pneumonia. That was my son, Mike who just left.”

“Nice looking man. He seemed very concerned about you.”

“Yeah, he’s a great guy and he has a great family, with two teenage girls…” Another coughing fit interrupts us. “Sorry about that.”

“No need to apologize, Lou. Is it okay if I call you Lou?”

“Sure, that’s what most people call me.” After a pause, I look at the chaplain in a serious way, before he picks out one of his prayers. “Perhaps you can say a prayer for my son, chaplain.”

“Call me Frank, Lou. I can certainly do that. Is there anything in particular?”

Something about Frank made me feel super relaxed and, for whatever reason, prompted me to tell him about our family. “The short story, Frank, is that my wife is gone almost thirty years now and it has been a very difficult time for us and especially for Mike.”

“You were very close to your wife, Lou?”

“Yes, but the difficulty started before she passed. Our other son, Timmy, drowned while camping with his friends. He was only thirteen.” Tears flow as they always do when I talk about Timmy. “You see, Frank, it was my fault. I should never have let him go. He was too young for that trip. Jill, my wife didn’t want him to go. We argued about it, but in the end, it was me that pushed for him to go.”

Frank closed his prayer book and placed his hand on my arm, amidst the dark purple marks from the needles. “It wasn’t your fault, Timmy drowned, Lou. This world is full of choices we make every day. I am sure Timmy is in a good place and I am also sure he doesn’t fault you for the accident.”

“I wish I could believe that, Frank. I wish my wife and I could have believed that so many years ago. The truth is that our marriage suffered after the accident. I don’t think Jill ever forgave me for letting him go on that trip and all of it – well, it effected Mike. That’s why he left as soon as he saw your prayer book. He wants nothing to do with God or prayer. He…”more coughing as I hold my chest, “He is convinced that no God could let that happen.”

“And you, Lou, how is your faith?”

“My faith? I am bitter! I am mad at God for not just the accident, but all the results!”

“The results?”

“We were the perfect family, Frank. Jill was always so joyful. We went to church, we prayed together.” Tears started flowing as I pictured our, once, perfect life. “So, slowly but surely, that joy we once had started to dissipate. We stopped going to church and praying. Jill, who was always the source of our joy, became, well, she became broken hearted. My son believes that it was her broken heart that took her life.”

Frank, still holding my arm, looked at me intensely, “That is truly a sad story, Lou. An unexpected death, especially to a child, can certainly demolish your faith. You and your son have lived with this bitterness far too long.”

“I wish I could wash it away, Frank, more for Mike’s benefit then for mine. I don’t want him to have this bitterness! Jill used to have such a lightness about her – such a joyfulness. It was contagious! Why would God take that away? I am old and close to the end, but I want that joy back for my son. Is that prayer in your little book?”

“Have you talked to God about this?”

“I used to, but whatever we did after Timmy, and now, after Jill, no matter what we try and do, we always fall short of happiness. I guess I gave up on it, and, well, as far as Mike goes, well, God is just not real to him.”

“There is still time, Lou.”

After another coughing spell and holding my chest, I look up at Frank. “Does that sound like there is time left?”