

Dying to Live

By Darrell Ferguson

Chapter 1 The Cottage

I have to admit, I was a little bit scared.

“What are you waiting for? Hurry up!”

“*I’m coming!* Hold your horses.”

My big brother is so impatient. I just need a second. I’m usually not afraid of things like this but this slide is so... high ... and *steep!* I don’t even know if kids my age are supposed to be on this slide. I wonder if it’s going to hurt when I hit the pool?

I can do it. I just need to... let ... go!

At that, Adam released his death grip on the side and down he went. His stomach felt like it came into his chest. It felt more like falling then sliding.

For a split second he wished he hadn’t done this, but before that thought was even finished, he hit the water. As he plunged into the muffled darkness, he knew it was over and his flash of regret gave way in an instant to exhilaration and joy.

That was so scary and fun! he thought. *I’m going again.*

It felt good to be in the water on such a hot day, and Adam took a moment to enjoy the refreshment before he started swimming back to the top.

Wow, I guess I really went down deep. This is taking longer than I expected. It’s taking so long, too long! Why am I not getting to the top?

Adam started to panic. *What’s happening?*

He opened his eyes but couldn’t see any light. *Am I swimming the wrong way? Am I swimming toward the*

bottom? I'm running out of air! I can't... hold... and with that, Adam's world went gray and then black.

When he woke up, he was in an empty field.

"Where am I? What is this place? There is no swimming pool, and no people. Where's Jimmy? Mom? ... Dad?"

Adam had been lost before and it was the most terrifying thing that ever happened to him. But this time, for some reason, he wasn't afraid. Confused, but not afraid. Normally he would just want to find his parents and go home, but in this place, something about it just made him want to... explore.

On the other side of the field he saw a little cottage. It looked old – much older than everything else. At first it was just a dull brown, but when the sun hit it a certain way, it had all kinds of fun colors. He looked again, back to old, brown, splintered wood.

The cottage had a strange attraction, and Adam started stepping through the high weeds and making his way to the other side of the field. The closer he got to the cottage, the higher the weeds were and the harder it was to keep moving forward. Now the weeds were over his head and he couldn't see at all. They kept getting thicker and closer together and more and more tangled. Finally, Adam had to crawl along the ground under the tangles. It almost seemed like the weeds were trying to protect that little cottage.

It was such a strange place. It seemed like it was only half real. Adam felt like he was walking through the pages of a little kid's storybook. The things he saw looked like pictures on a paper. But when he got close, then they were real. The dirt under his fingernails and the scratches on his knees – those were definitely real. And Adam knew he was real. And that cottage – it was most real of all. His determination doubled.

But as he became more determined, so did the weeds – now more like trees. If he didn't know better he would

think they were purposely keeping him from the intriguing little structure. They had grown so thick, so entangled, vines and branches and roots blocked the way altogether, and Adam could make no more progress.

If I can't get there, I at least want to see it, he thought, and began to make his way up one of the taller trees. Back home he could get to the top of a tree faster than anyone at school, and before the trees even realized what he was doing, he was already near the top.

From that vantage point he could see the colors – many more than he had seen before. So many colors, and so beautiful. So inviting. He had never seen a building that made him want to be near it; to be inside. But this cottage – it seemed to insist that he come.

But the tree, now alert to Adam's location, began to shake. Adam knew he wouldn't survive the fall, and the shaking was getting more violent. One more jerk like that last one, and he would lose his grip.

"The vine. Take hold of the vine!"

"Who said that? Who's there?"

"Nevermind who I am. Take the vine or you will perish."

Adam looked around frantically for a vine, but he saw none – at least none within reach. The nearest vine was on the next tree over, and about 15 feet below him. Trying to make that leap would be surely be suicide.

But what of staying here? The convulsions were increasing, and the whole tree seemed to be about to give one, great heave that would surely send him falling.

"Jump now or perish!" said the voice.

Adam knew he had no choice but to trust this hidden voice, and, like he did at the top of the slide, he let go and jumped. At that instant, he finally saw who, or what, was speaking to him. Wrapped around the branch above him was the biggest snake he had ever seen – green with brown and red streaks running from head to tail.

“That’s it. Jump!” the snake hissed, and it was too late for Adam to change his mind. On the slide he was afraid, but here there was no time to be afraid. All his attention must be on catching that vine or plummet to the earth. He reached out his right hand and caught the vine, gripped as tight as he could, swung to the side, but then slipped off. The tug on the vine pulled him back, and flipped him backwards in the air. The next moment he felt something touch his left wrist, and he instinctively pulled his arm in close to his body, catching the lower vine under his arm. This swung him back toward the tree trunk, and he collided with the great wood with an impact that felt like it might have broken his shoulder. But he held on.

Just at the moment he realized he had made it, he turned his head and almost fell again when the face of the talking serpent was inches from his face. “You did it! That was impressive. I’m glad you made it. Now step on to that branch and rest your arm.”

Stepping on to the sturdy limb, Adam leaned away from the frightening creature.

“Aren’t you glad you listened to me?”

“If I knew you were a snake before I let go, I don’t think I would have.”

“I’m not usually a snake. Hardly ever. I just needed to be something that could get up the tree in time. You were climbing so fast, I couldn’t keep up, so I took a snake form.”

“You have other forms?” Adam asked.

“Oh yes,” the serpent said with a laugh, “I have to.”

“How many different forms have you had?”

“All.”

“All?”

“All forms to all needs, that by any means possible, I might save some.”

“Well I have to admit, you sure saved me.”

“I wish that were true,” replied the snake. “Perhaps it will be one day.”

Adam didn’t know what to make of that statement, but for now he had more pressing questions. He wanted to know about the cottage.

“What is it about that place that makes me feel like I need to go there?”

“Look at it,” the snake replied, “and tell me what you see.”

Adam looked and wondered what had attracted him before. Now the place looked old, outdated, broken down, and utterly boring. It held no appeal or attraction at all.

“I just see a worthless old cabin – nothing special about it. Before I thought I saw colors, but it must have been my imagination.”

With those words, Adam began to resent the cottage. It was the reason for all the scrapes on his knees, his bruised shoulder, and the trouble he had encountered since he arrived in this strange, half-real world. Adam deftly climbed down, turned his back to the cottage, and resolved to return to where he had begun. Perhaps he could find the way back to the pool and return to his own world. His world had fun. There was no fun in this world.

As he turned, he noticed a breeze in his face. More than a breeze. It doubled with each step, so that after a short distance, he could hardly stand against the mighty gale. He turned back in the direction of the cottage to take shelter behind a tree, but as soon as he turned, the wind stopped. Relieved that the chinook had passed, he turned again, but again, the wind halted his steps. He realized that the wind was blowing the whole time. He just couldn’t feel it when it was at his back. But the moment he turned into it, it was overpowering. His only option, it seemed, was to move in the direction of the cottage.

The pressure from the wind seemed to be pointing him toward the tree to his left – the one with the life-saving

vine. And as he approached it, he could see a tiny opening by the next tree. After squeezing through that, another opening. The great wind seemed to be pointing him to passages through the impossible jungle.

He continued the journey throughout the summer – or had it been many summers? He couldn't say how much time has passed. Time, too, is only half real here. Time passed and time future isn't real here, but time now is real. He was a child on the other side of the field. But what is he now? Not a child.

At last Adam emerged from the tangled wood, and stood before a sprawling valley that stood between him and the illusive cottage. He had not realized before how far away the cottage was, but he wasn't discouraged. It might be far, but at least it would be easier travelling in this grassy valley.

After the third day – or was it the third winter? Or the thirtieth? Half real time cannot be kept. But in this moment, Adam was nearing the bottom of the valley. He couldn't quite see the bottom yet, but he expected that he would find a small creek at the bottom that he would need to cross before beginning up the other side.

Perhaps if he got an early start in the morning, he would make it to the bottom and across the creek in one day. So he found a good place to lie down for the night, and began to gather some grass for a bed. As he grasped a handful and gave it a tug, he thought he saw the grass to his right move slightly. He stood up and looked, but saw nothing. Then a sound behind him. And again, to his right. Then some movement. *Something was out there.*