

Tarzan Lives

By Penny Randell

He came from Tshikapa town, the capital of Kasai Province in Western Democratic Republic of Congo. His name was Papalas, but he was known throughout the area as “Tarzan, King of the Jungle.” He traveled the forests and general locale barefoot with the ease of an overlord, scouting out a way to secure a bit of “small, small” change for his family, as well as selected edibles from the forest. Because his mother invested her entire physical being in the musical beat, Papalas was encouraged to dance and sing early on, entertaining folks on street corners. After completing his daily school work, he would pass up the chance to play with the other kids and head to town center. There he would perform until nightfall and later show up at his home with a pocket full of coins.

Once home, Papalas would always charge through the front door, grab his mom around her rotund middle, and roar, “I’m home Mama.” At the time the house was shared with the boy’s two brothers. Papalas was the middle son; Anyan was the youngest; Thiben was on top. There was no father, for he had left years earlier. And Mom? She was both mother and father, accepting her role with grace, determination, and love. Her faith in God alone spun the family into a surviving and independent entity. Their tiny wooden house was just that: tiny and wooden. The three boys shared one common, mat-covered floor, while Mama had her own room. The family pursued peace and they held it true.

Tragically, Papalas was only 10 when his mother passed. He was all but crippled by the loss and took refuge in the jungle where he fought for strength. That was his playground and he knew it well. As far back as memory served he had listened to his mother’s stories about the character of Tarzan. He had even seen him in pictures and from there he pretended to be Tarzan. Knowledge of the animals, poisonous plants and snakes kept him out of harm’s way and he never failed to amble out in better shape than when he entered.

Now distraught and unable to grapple with such pain, Papalas practically moved into the jungle. However, after four days without eating, he wandered back to his mother’s home, only to find he no longer had a home. His father’s brother had forcefully taken over and told Papalas to get out. In fact, he literally threw the lad out onto the dirt street scolding and yelling, “You are finished. Go away! Go to your jungle, Tarzan.”

Unable to fully grasp the incident, unable to conjure up a rebuttal, Papalas once again bolted for the jungle. The following days were brutal and tears flooded away all hope. Without options, especially for food, he somehow limped back to town and reclaimed his music on the street corner. Every moment was dedicated to the procurement of money for food. Papalas had nowhere to go and he slept on the street or in the jungle every night.

Unable to find his brothers, plus fearing his uncle, the boy elected to make his way to Congo’s capital city, Kinshasa. There he would hopefully root out more people to entertain, more money, and perhaps even a life. Weakened by homelessness, the boy could barely walk, but somehow, he could sing. His troubles were common knowledge, and folks were graciously amenable to

throwing him some change. After many days of saving up provisions, he bought a backpack and headed out. He had his talent and his mother's beliefs. Nothing stood in his way.

Travel to the capital city was only two days by car, but Papalas was hitching a ride and therefore solely dependent on the passersby. He began the trek early on a Wednesday morning after flagging down a truck that was only going a short distance. The driver was concerned about the boy and even tried to talk him into staying in his home village. Papalas whispered, "No, I go to Kinshasa. I have nothing here."

Troubled for the boy's safety, the driver continued to argue and asked, "Do you have family there? How can someone your age make it alone? There it is dangerous."

Papalas lowered his head and replied, "I have no family. **I am alone.**" At that, the man gave in and drove onto the open road with his new passenger. There was no conversing after that and the two rode silently for about two hours. Upon reaching his destination, the man pulled off the road and parked at the entrance of a garage. Papalas said, "Why are we stopping?"

"This is the end of the line. I live in this village and I go no further." At that the man hopped out of the truck, and lazily made his way to the other side. Reaching for the door handle, he opened it and helped the lad down to the ground. He turned to Papalas and said, "I don't know where you go, but I wish good luck."

Throwing his backpack over his shoulder, Papalas didn't say a word and turned towards the road. He took a deep breath and began to walk. Cars and trucks passed with no one stopping. This continued for some time. Weary and unable to take another step, the child finally gave in and stopped for the night. Slipping into the jungle, he found a good-sized hole at the bottom of a tree, scooped out the forest litter with his hands, crawled inside, and pulled leaves over his shivering body. There he slept until the morning sun met his eyes. Upon waking he realized his hunger, reached inside his backpack, and pulled out a bag of bread. That's all he had. He bit into the somewhat battered loaf and then began to cry. What had he done and where was he going to end up?

The sobbing didn't last long before the child began to beg God for help. Moments passed before he was able to motivate. All he could think of was his cherished mother. Why did she die and why had she left him all alone? He had no one and he was terrified. Methodically, he proceeded from the tree and began his trek back to the road. It wasn't long before a car came along and noticed the boy with his hand raised. They pulled over. "Where you go young boy?" Papalas told them he was going to Kinshasa and they motioned for him to hop in the back seat. This time the ride proved to be considerably valuable, as they drove over 200 miles, stopping in a wee village along the roadside.

Upon exiting the vehicle, the lad bowed and addressed the driver, saying, "I thank you sir." He then skipped across the street, all the while considering nothing but his empty stomach. Recognizing that he only had a few coins, he made effort to round up some folks for an audience. There were few people about, and his plan just wasn't working. Thwarted by fear and despair, he drifted up to the only kiosk around and asked what they offered that he could afford. Moments later he walked away with more bread.

The forest did not host Papalas on this particular night, for it was too far from the road and the boy was exhausted. Instead, he curled up behind some bushes on a main street in the village. He pulled his extra clothes from their pouch in effort to lessen the heavy winds that threatened to blow him away. Sleep did not come easily and he tossed about all the while.

The following day brought a sense of hope. Perhaps he would be picked by someone going all the way to Kinshasa. Maybe he would make a friend. At first, he sat silently and prayed to God for these things, then he reached in his pack for some bread. The plan stayed same and he tried to imagine ending up somewhere for the night and creating a crowd that he could entertain. Without such he stood no chance to eat.

Surprisingly, he was picked from the roadside early on, waiting less than 20 minutes. Papalas believed with all his heart that his prayers had been heard. This time though, the ride was more eventful and he thrived on the conversation with the couple in the front seat. They asked all kinds of questions and got to know what was going on with the boy and why he had to get to Kinshasa. At one point the couple asked to hear a tune or two. Papalas was delighted and sang out loudly.

The day was long and the car was hot. By the time they stopped for the night, Papalas was totally depleted. Nonetheless, the couple did contribute a few dollars he could use for food. But that wasn't all the good news. Once within the wee town he was able to conjure up a few people who were particularly pleased with his performance. He danced and sang until after dark and then gathered his money to buy a meal.

He rapidly consumed the maize flour and greens he could barely afford and then rested his head on the table. What would he find outside; where would he sleep? But again, Papalas felt an answer to his prayers and this time he found refuge within the town where he fell asleep on a pile of burlap shipping bags. He won a good night's rest after all and he was undisturbed for more than seven hours. That sleep was sorely needed, too, for this morning delivered a truck that was going all the way to Kinshasa. With only three hundred miles left, he was sure to arrive before nightfall.

And that he did. Reaching the capital city was like entering the ozone and emerging from the other side. This kid was titillated and up for gathering a multitude. The chosen street corner was in the thick of it. Struggling to take it all in, he opened his mouth and made sure he was noticed. "Wow! Look at me!" he shouted into the masses. Then he began to dance. In due course the notes began to flow from his little round mouth. Success was instantaneous as folks congregated and clapped. The crowd was dancing, too. Women were hollering through their lips and everyone was twirling about. It was Saturday night and Papalas was the star.

This time his performance lasted until well after dark. He gathered the coins and paper notes from the ground and headed for a café. There he took two portions of greens and three bowls of beans. Well satisfied, he sauntered out to the street and began to look for a place to sleep. This was quite the challenge, for there was no forest floor to comfort him and the streets were crowded with hoards of people. Finding an old and rotted mattress in the alleyway between shops turned out to be a blessing. He threw his pack down, plumped up the extra clothing for a pillow, curled up in a tight ball, and fell to sleep almost immediately.

Waking, the boy was forced to struggle with the pangs of abandonment and dread. He missed the jungle and he missed his family. What would this day bring? Would he find a friend to talk to? Would he make a lot of money when he performed? Indeed, Kinshasa brought new hurdles and he was truly frightened. The big city meant crime and he wondered if he would be robbed. Just as he was reviewing his options, Papalas noticed a clown suit hanging in the window of a shop. That's it, he thought, I'll be a clown! Reaching into his pocket he pulled out enough money to buy the suit. Of course, it was excessive in size, but to Papalas that made it even more funny. Besides, this boy was tall for his age and could move about in the pants without tripping.

The clown suit idea paid off and the day was profitable enough that Papalas could afford a room with a shower. Bathing was nothing less than a delight and he stayed under the faucet until the drippings turned cold. Oh, to be clean again meant the world. This time when he gave into sleep it was pure comfort, for he feared nothing. A sound sleep ensued until the daylight hours were once again in his eyes and he was forced to wake. He ran down the stairs as though something was chasing him, and settled for a table in the dining room positioned by the window. Breakfast came with the room and it was there for the taking.

The rest of the day was spent searching for a suitable street corner in city center where he could draw a hefty crowd. The choice was dead easy and he claimed Main Street as his very own. He sang as he walked up and down the thoroughfare, blasting melodic penetration with every breath he could afford. Moments passed before anyone stopped, and then it suddenly seemed as though there was a spotlight around the boy. As Papalas began to dance the passersby halted and took notice, amazed at what they were watching. By nightfall he had gathered the equivalent of 20 American dollars and he was ecstatic. Somewhat spoiled from the night before, he focused on finding a room and held up there for the night. There was no shower, but an African sink-bath got the job done.

Weeks passed and Papalas never failed to make an appearance on his chosen corner where he began his daily march, singing and dancing for hours on end. Triumph filled his soul every evening as he would peel back his costume, dig through his pockets, and count the money he received from the day. Within two months this talented kid raised enough money to stay in a rented room every night. His diet was proper and he had no unanswered needs...or so he thought.

The temperature in the heart of the city had turned hostile. Daily records soared past 110 degrees Fahrenheit and humidity was around 80%. The boy was taxed and could barely stand, never mind dance, and his voice was giving way. On a Tuesday afternoon about 4:00 Papalas spoke his last words for more than a week. Seriously infected with malaria, his body gave out and he fell into the street. People and cars were intermixed to the point of a major jam. It took over an hour for the ambulance to arrive. By then Papalas was somewhat conscious, but he could utter no words.

Again, good fortune found its way to the boy. A spectator was on hand to take charge of the situation effectively, and even aided in directing traffic. Eventually this kind soul from nowhere knelt to the lad, cradled his head in his arms, stroked his hair, and repeated words of comfort over and over again. "There, there young boy. Be still, the doctor comes."

When the needed emergency vehicle arrived, the stranger boarded alongside Papalas. He told the driver, "I am a relative and must stay with this boy."

The days spent in the hospital revealed that the lad was in a somber state. The malaria varmint had erected quite the township of their own within his body, and they had instigated a sizeable foray into his kidney. He needed a healthy drip of antibiotics and a week's rest.

The stranger, known as Mabira Frank, had stuck around after the boy was hospitalized and returned to visit practically every day. Papalas grasped the sentiment immediately, not knowing why or how the man got there. For a child his age, affections were slight and limited. He wanted to love this man, but he could not let go of his fears. After all, only a few short months after losing his mother forever, he was thrown out of her house onto the street.

After two weeks Papalas was pretty much recovered. Those days were precious and the boy flourished off the serenity and benevolence given from those that cared for him. Somehow when word got out the entire hospital staff surrounded the boy, providing him with almost anything he wanted. Inexplicably, Frank had accepted the boy as practically his own and paid all his hospital bills. During his 14-day treatment, an agreement was presented and Papalas slowly acquiesced to Frank's proposal. The boy was to live with Frank and attend school. Before the illness ravaged his body he never once thought of staying with anyone. He was free and hoped to remain so. Still, Frank had a grip to offer and Papalas was too weak to be in dispute.

Resolved, the boy left the care center with his new friend on a Friday afternoon. They went directly to Frank's house where Papalas was introduced to his very own bedroom. In those beginning days the boy settled in and found dependable comfort. Frank kept his word and enrolled him in a local primary school. When the school day ended the boy would return to his street corner, entertaining all who passed by.

Papalas remained with Frank for years. At 14 he auditioned with a successful Lingala band and was hired on the spot. He performed six days a week and earned enough money to give up his street corner and eventually move near the jungle. By the time he was 16 he won a singing contest and received \$1000. This young man never abandoned his mother's beliefs, and because of that he remains close to Frank until this day. Peaceful and happy within, this talented, worthy young soul was truly transformed. But, this is not the end of the story. Never giving up meant prevailing as Tarzan, for he found his Jane in the forest gathering flowers when he was 23. The journey was worth it and today the two live happily in a tiny wooden house on the edge of Tarzan's jungle.

