



The Fall of Icarus

Pieter Breughel

## THE FALL OF DAEDALUS

**I first heard** this ancient Greek legend in my teens:

*A master craftsman Daedalus and his son Icarus are imprisoned in a labyrinth on the island of Crete. To escape from the labyrinth, Daedalus fashions two pairs of wings out of feathers and wax. Father and son strap on these wings and rise like birds above the island. "Keep a middle course over the water," warns Daedalus. "If you fly too high, the sun will melt your wings." Icarus soars exuberantly skyward. The wax on his wings turns into liquid; the feathers slip loose and flutter in mid-air; Icarus plunges into the sea.*

**In my early thirties**, I came across Pieter Breughel's 16<sup>th</sup>-century rendering of *The Fall of Icarus*: on a beautiful sunny day, a ploughman and horse are working in a field by the sea; in the lower right-hand side of the canvas, a bare white leg points skyward from the water. And an

*expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.* (W.S. Auden)

**Two years ago**, in my early fifties, I lived my own inversion of this story of tragedy and beauty, of generations and death.

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One Friday night in July 2000, my family and I drove from Houston to the Texas Hill Country for a long weekend. By noon on Saturday, the temperature had already reached 100 degrees. Our 19 year-old son Jake took out his new mountain bike, and set out on the labyrinthine roads and dirt paths of the old cattle ranch in Wimberley, where we had bought some land. Late that afternoon, my wife Letha and I slipped into the Blanco River. We floated in the cool, green water, savoring the maidenhair ferns and springfed waterfalls along the river banks. After a while, Jake came riding down to the river and dove in -- a bronze young Icarus dripping with sweat.

Around 7 PM, we towed ourselves dry and headed up toward our van.

"I've never been on your new bike," I said to Jake. "Why don't you let me ride it back to the lodge."

"Okay," he said. "But watch out for that long steep hill. You might get nervous if you go too fast." Not yet fully reconciled to my son's physical superiority, I heard those words as a challenge rather than as a warning.

I strapped on his helmet, turned left onto Red Hawk Road, and pedaled firmly up a gentle rise for a mile or so. On my left, the sun was slipping toward the horizon. On my right, a hand-painted sign warned: SLOW! STEEP, WINDING ROAD. Letha and Jake followed close behind as the black pavement sloped downward. I loved the breeze and the sensation of going faster. I flew down the steepness, leaving Jake and Letha behind, leaning first into a left turn, then quickly into a right turn. *I wonder how fast I'm going*, I thought to myself. *Maybe 40?*

The next sharp turn melted my wings. I slid off the pavement onto a dirt shoulder. The back wheel hit something very hard, tossing me toward a handful of limestone boulders. I'm not sure what happened next. My glasses went sailing. I think I somersaulted in mid-air, landing with a thud on a flat limestone boulder and sliding downhill into a gravelly patch that dug long deep scratches into my upper back and arms.

Later I asked Jake to reconstruct the incident from behind the wheel of the van. "I kept looking for you," he remembers. "But I couldn't catch up. I had to slow down the car – that's when I realized how fast you were going."

I tried to get up but couldn't. Sharp pains shot through my lower back. Too dazed to be afraid, I wiggled my toes and moved my legs and arms. *I'm alright*, I thought to myself. *Just banged up in my lower back*. I turned toward the road and weakly began waving.

"Watch for the bike on the side of the road," Jake said half-jokingly to Letha.

"There it is," she said, pointing ten yards downhill on the left. "But where the hell is daddy?"

Jake spotted my waving hand and pulled over. "Wow, are you torn up!" he said. I tried again to stand up and my head went black.

"Put your head between your knees," Letha said, hiding her terror. "Just put your head between your knees." She ran through the range of broken body parts in her mind.

Jake began to cry. He thought that I had broken my back or ruptured my kidneys. "Don't worry," I said. "I'm not dying."

I couldn't see his bike anywhere. "Jake, I'm really sorry about your bike. What happened to it?"

"Fuck the bike" he answered. It was off in the grass, the rear wheel completely bent into the hub, carving a large "V" in the rim. "Shit," I said. "I'm sorry man."

They helped me ten yards uphill and laid me on the floor of the van. By the time we got back to the lodge, a quart of sweat had poured off my skin. I thought I could wash up in the pool and relieve my aching back. Three times I tried to sit up; each time my head went black. The van became a family ambulance.

Lying on my back, I glanced up at the darkening sky as the electrical poles scrolled by on Farm Road 3237. An almost full moon was rising. A nurse opened the van door at the emergency entrance to the San Marcos hospital. They lifted me into a wheel chair, head between my knees. I remember the face-

down view of the cement walkway, the electric eye that open the glass doors, and the Emergency Room floor.

At the ER, I received a shot of Demerol in my left buttock. Internal bleeding had sent my body into shock. Around 2 AM, having been x-rayed and cat-scanned, the attending told me that no bones were broken. They released me the next day with mild prescriptions for pain relief and muscle relaxants. After two weeks, unrelenting pain and muscle spasms sent me to a Houston orthopedist, whose x-rays showed that my pelvis was broken in three places. At home, Letha bore the brunt of my recovery. One evening, Letha told her mother how exhausted she was--working, taking care of me, and picking up the slack around the house. "Don't be mad at him," she said. "He was flying."

I lay in bed for most of the next two months – plenty of time to think and dream in my vicodin haze. . . . I had passed through a narrow strait, which could easily have broken my back and paralyzed or killed me. On a beautiful summer night with the sun going down and the moon rising and the cicadas calling. Like Icarus falling out of the sky in the Breughel painting—except that I am Daedalus and should have known better.

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That summer night has taught me many things. How easy it is to slip out of the world. How little it might take to die. Instead of blacking out and coming to, I could have blacked out and stayed out. Just gone from the world. I have always thought that Gabriel's trumpets would have to sound in all seven heavens when I die. Now I think it will be more like slipping quietly off the stage, leaving life's theatre by the back door.

But there is a deeper learning for me when I see how I inverted the ancient father-son story of Daedalus and Icarus. ***What happens if Daedalus flies too close to the sun and Icarus survives?*** In that case, Icarus is bereft of a father who can guide him to safety and prepare him to fly on his own someday.

My son was spared that fate, thank God, and I have another chance to get it right.