

Daedalus and Icarus

In the great city of Athens there lived an inventor. His name was Daedalus. He had made many wonderful things. He had changed the course of rivers, harnessed the power of the wind. It was said he could bend nature to his will. Rumours reached Athens of a tremendous fleet of ships crossing the sea. The old men, the old women gossiped about an invasion. Daedalus forgot the stories the moment he heard them. He was preoccupied with something far more important, his son's birthday present.

What to give him?

Icarus was a thoughtful child. He would sit on the flat roof of their little house and watch the birds scything through the air above. Of all of the birds, he loved the hovering hawks the most. The great day came. Daedalus led his son onto the roof and there, before the boy, was a strange feathered thing with a long snake of a tail. 'What is it?'

Daedalus was dimly aware of a commotion in the streets below.

'Let me show you.'

Within moments the thing was swooping and soaring; it was a kite, the very first kite. Daedalus heard a shout. He looked down. The streets were swarming with soldiers. They wore an armour the like of which he had never seen before. Emblazoned across their breastplates was a strange symbol, a two-headed axe. One of them was pointing at the kite; now he was pointing at Daedalus. 'That's him!' They were battering the door of his house. Now they were charging upstairs.

Icarus, frantic: 'We must escape!'

'How?' said Daedalus. 'Fly?'

Now, they were surrounded. The soldiers parted to reveal none other than the king of the island of Crete, Minos. Daedalus, trembling, bowed.

'Your fame has travelled far across the sea, Daedalus. Stories of the wonders you have made have reached my distant home.' He put his hand on Daedalus' shoulder. 'How would you like to help me make a palace, a tremendous palace, that will scrape the sky, that will be so astonishing men and women will tell tales of it for as long as there are people on this earth?'

The very next day, Daedalus and Icarus sailed off in one of Minos' ships. On Crete, they were given a mansion; they were feasted every night. When Minos explained his plan for the palace, Daedalus understood the king had been speaking truth when he'd said tales of this palace would echo down the ages. It was to bristle with spearlike towers, but it was what would be under the palace that was most remarkable – a vast labyrinth of such complexity that no one could escape from it. Daedalus asked the king, what was the purpose of this maze? But Minos would only smile and shrug.

Eventually the palace was complete. It was a frowning fortress that struck terror into the hearts of everyone who beheld it. Daedalus asked for an audience with the king. 'Now my work is over, I would like to return to Athens.'

Minos: 'Oh! You can't leave. I'll pay you more. There are so many wonderful things I would have you make.'

'Thank you for your offer. But I prefer to return to the city of my birth.'

'Offer?' said Minos. 'I made no offer. You cannot leave. You know too much. I can't have you selling secrets to my enemies. So you will stay here until your death.'

When he returned to his mansion, Daedalus looked at the beautiful murals painted on the walls, the fountains in the courtyard, and what he saw was a golden cage. He longed for the little house they had left in Athens. He found his son, on the roof as usual, flying his kite.

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In the months that followed, Daedalus became aware that, wherever he went, he was followed by soldiers. The soldiers, for their part, began to wonder if this great inventor had lost his mind: either he was staring at the sky or gathering fallen feathers. Early one morning, Daedalus shook Icarus awake. 'Come with me!' Upstairs they went, under the bright stars. Daedalus lit a candle. Icarus saw four supple saplings covered in feathers.

As Daedalus tied one on each of Icarus' arms, he said, 'Minos controls both land and sea but he cannot control the air. You and I will fly to freedom. Follow me! If you fly too high, the heat of the sun will melt the wax that binds feather to bark; if you fly too low, the waves will splash against your wings and their sodden weight will drag you down. Ride the gusts I ride!'

Father and son embraced. They ran to the roof edge and leapt into the darkness. They beat their feathered arms against the air, and they rose, they rose into the cool sky. Every surging gust of wind made Icarus cry out with joy. Very soon they had left Crete far behind. The sweep of the broad sky was above him; the black sea was beneath. He saw a band of red ahead – day was coming. Island after island passed by beneath, some no more than rocks jutting out of the sea, some peopled with farms and fields. One man looked up, saw Icarus, gasped and fell. A ploughman in a field stopped, mid- furrow, and stood stock-still. A fisherman gaped like a carp. Was that a god?

Icarus laughed at the little figures shouting, pointing, far below. A surge of wind lifted him higher. He lurched and a feather fell. He looked up to see the bird that had shed it; but above he saw only the fierce eye of the sun. A shower of feathers was fluttering now. Ahead, Daedalus looked back to check on the progress of Icarus and saw the boy tumbling, flailing, screaming, breaking against the ocean.

Daedalus, cursing his cleverness, buried the boy's body on a rocky island that was named after him. It is called Icaria.