The Icarian
Brennen Johnson

The birthday party seemed a success and, being a warm July afternoon, the evening was particularly clear and beautiful. From the terrace, Lawrence’s guests could look out over the River Rother and see the green of the West Sussex hills rolling out towards Kent. He was speaking to trade partners about something or another to do with production in Spain, it always seemed to be Spain that had problems, when Eva, his wife, came and whispered that there was a call for him. He excused himself graciously from his guests and made his way to the study.

“This is Mr. Halborrow.”

“Hello Mr. Halborrow, this is Mr. Arkwright, your father’s attorney from F. Arkwright and Associates. Your father passed this morning and I’m calling on his behalf in the matter of settling his estate.”

The conversation was brief. Questions were asked—when, how, where—the attorney did his best to answer, and at the end of the conversation it was decided. Mr. Arkwright, the attorney, would come to Lawrence’s office the following morning to discuss the matter of settling the estate of Lawrence’s dead father. After exiting the study, en route to revisit his business guests, Eva stopped him to ask about the call.

“It was nothing.” Lawrence would respond. “My father passed away. We’ll discuss it tomorrow morning. For now, focus on making the party enjoyable.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I thought it was your father’s attorney.”

“It was.”

She paused for a moment, trying to understand before responding. “But why would he be calling? When did it happen?”

“It would seem he was informed before me, no?” He saw as Eva noticeably winced under the sudden sharpness of his tone and he felt his mistake immediately. “Forgive me darling. Please. It’s really not that great of a deal. Let’s just focus on the party.”

“Of course.” Eva would do as asked.

She would do a splendid job of entertaining the women of the
party per usual, as well as the men who weren’t of real significance, while Lawrence would take advantage of the opportunity to discuss hypothetical solutions to the never ending problem of Spain with his potential associates from different groups. Their sole purpose in attending Mr. Halborrow’s party was to offer their proposals and bids for different contracts and whatnots, the proceedings of which were all conducted in a language only understood by those who appreciate smoke rooms, prefer the Cohiba mark, and know the difference between a Churchill and a Lonsdale cigar. It was a language to which Lawrence was native; it was bred into him from his start at Eton and at the behest of his father. He would try to ignore the cold rage he felt within, stirred by the brief call, and seize the opportunity of the evening to negotiate and dance, threaten and joke, and to cut and trade and soar higher and higher in ambition and wealth. It was a flight funded and propelled by the construct of his father’s business reputation, a reputation of ingenuity and brilliance, and for Lawrence himself it had started at the boys’ college of Eton.

When he was sent to boys’ school at the age of thirteen, it was with a firm handshake from his father and the promise that whatever was needed to succeed would be provided. He spent the next five years surrounded by the brick and stone halls of Eton, and in that time he would be visited by his father twice with the exception of breaks. The first visit came at the end of the same year, when his father and mother came to congratulate him on his good marks. The second visit came only two months later after his mother was drowned in a diving accident off the Andalusia coast. His father had been consulting with partners who oversaw his company’s production in Malaga. His mother had taken the day for herself while his father was occupied with work and had rented a boat, equipment, and a crew. Lawrence was never told exactly how it happened, but he later learned it had something to do with being hit by the boat, and his father did a good job keeping the details out of the papers. The only announcement was in the obituaries, short as can be. Patricia A. Powell-Halborrow: of Sussex. Beloved wife and mother. Survived by husband Peter F. Halborrow and son Lawrence Phillip. With Regret. The last word was capitalized. Regret.

During the school breaks, the most memorable things to Lawrence about his visits home were the things he felt should have been there, but weren’t. Namely, his mother. What made things even more uncomfortable was the palpable feeling of nothingness carved
away by her absence from discussions with his father. If not working, his father spent nearly all his time in the library reading. When Lawrence asked to know what had happened to his mother, his father didn’t acknowledge the question. He just sat in his armchair, smoking, eyes buried in a Homeric epic. Lawrence understood that the subject was not to be discussed.

His father was a big fan of the Greek classics. In the family estate, the library had a spectacular collection of the ancient Greek works and anthologies. While at Eton, all Lawrence could visually imagine of his father was a reflection of the times he had spent spying from the doorway of the library as his father read alone. Of those ancient classics, Lawrence’s favorite was the story of Daedalus and his son Icarus. While he was sure it lay somewhere in the compendium of the family’s collection, he only read it for the first time during the beginning of his second year at Eton, where he spent the evenings devouring the leather-bound collections of the school’s library. It carried a powerful image for Lawrence, even at the age of fourteen. He imagined a father watching powerlessly from above while his son, fallen from the greatest of heights, struggles against the current of the sea below. He felt his own lungs seem to gasp for air as he watched Icarus, overwhelmed by the cold, thrashing against the waves in search of the surface. Lawrence could picture it perfectly as Icarus slipped deeper and deeper into the dark below. He was moved by how Daedalus, after reaching Athens himself, fell upon the earth and wept over the manner in which his own ingenuity and brilliance had robbed him of his son.

Lawrence learned how the flight of Icarus was so well remembered and revered that the sea where he supposedly fell and drowned, between the Isles of Patmos and Agios Kirykos, still bears his name to this day. The beautiful Icarian. When he wrote to express his appreciation of this story to his father, he wrote of the ambitions of Daedalus’ ingenuity and how it destroyed his son. He wrote of how he missed the way things had been before he had been sent to boys’ school. He wrote of how he wanted to escape the stone labyrinth of the Eton halls and return to the beautiful manor which was once his home. He wrote of how he missed Sussex and his mother and father and the way things had been before. When his father wrote in reply, he answered with nothing more than a short note; Daedalus loved his son for his character, strength, and fearlessness and Icarus is remembered because of the height of his flight, not for his fall. Fly high son and be strong. Soar above where
your classmates dare and you’ll be remembered like Icarus. From that point on, Lawrence’s father only ever wrote on holidays.

Oxford followed Eton and seemed to go as quickly as it came. Lawrence’s life was linearly fixed. Shortly after graduation, he would marry Eva Jennings, the daughter of another Sussex family. Although it was an ideal match for the families, it was still out of love. He would work at his father’s business for the first five years of his career, although they would see each other only at Christmas, Easter, and the occasional gala or event in between. He himself would have a son. He named him Edmund. After five years at his father’s company he would leave to begin his own, because a Halborrow was to make himself. At thirteen, his son would be sent to attend Eton, like him and his father before. Lawrence would build his company upon a foundation of great ambitions and strive to soar far above his competitors. It was the foundation laid by his father before him. Over the years, the holiday visits with his father grew even briefer and less frequent and the two men just about stopped talking altogether. Of these brief interactions, the most memorable for Lawrence came a year after his son was sent to Eton.

It was an event hosted at his father’s estate. Nearly an hour after the event had started, his father had yet to make an appearance. Guests began to question Lawrence on the matter, as if he should know the whereabouts of his father, and growing frustrated, he excused himself from the present company to go in search of the old man. He made his way up the curved marble staircase in the manor’s entry and down the hall towards the library. He felt something which might best be described as a worn sepia or a withering black and white as he made his way down the same halls he had wandered as a child until finally, he stood at the same threshold to the library from where he had watched his father decades before. Nothing had changed and his father sat in his armchair with the back facing towards the doorway. There was half a glass of scotch on the side table next to him.

“Father, what are you doing here. It’s your party and people are expecting you.”

“I know what’s expected of me, Lawrence.” He didn’t move and his voice was heavy, almost slurred. Lawrence started across the room.

“Father, are you drunk? Do you have any idea how many people are downstairs?”

At this, Peter rose and turned to face Lawrence.
“I said that I know what is expected of me.” The two men stood face to face. Ovid’s Metamorphoses dangled from his father’s hand as the two men looked at each other. There was a moment, and then two; finally his father broke the silence.

“I was reading about Daedalus and how he gave the thread to Theseus and Ariadne. For the life of me, I just can’t understand why he gave them the thread.”

“You need to go downstairs.” His father seemed to ignore him.

“Think about it. His greatest creation, an unsolvable labyrinth, and he just gave away how to escape.”

“I don’t want to sound like a broken record, but you need to get downstairs. Now. You’re expected.”

“I said that I know what’s expected of me! Damn it, Lawrence! I told you already.” Lawrence had never heard him speak that way.

“Father, are you alright?”

“Of course I am. Damn it. I’m headed down now. I’m just... I was just reading, and I think I forgot my glasses, somewhere.”

They were in his hand and Lawrence watched as he pawed his way around the bottle of scotch and the two other scotch tumblers which inhabited the chair’s side table in search of them. Lawrence reached out to take his father’s hand, but his father recoiled instantly.

“What are you doing?”

“Your glasses, they’re in your hand.”

“Of course they are... You think I didn’t know that?”

His father was just over sixty at that time, and the Alzheimer’s had seemed to set in rapidly. Of course, no one was quite sure as to exactly how rapidly the disease had set in, as by that time he was spending few actual hours at his offices and he spent most of his private time pent up in his library. He was seen very little. The family physician recommended that someone be brought on to keep watch for him and make sure things were under control at the manor, so Lawrence made arrangements for a live-in nurse. Lawrence attempted to visit his father shortly after the nurse was brought on, but his father wouldn’t see him. He attempted several more times throughout the next year, but all his visits were turned away in the same manner. At each visit, Walter, the groundskeeper, would meet him in the grand entryway and excuse his father.

“I’m sorry Master Lawrence, but he’s still refusing to be seen.” It became a repeated phrase.
In this time their communications fell silent and remained so as the attempted Christmas and Easter visits became attempted Christmas calls, and then just cards, and so on, until finally the cards and calls and visits just became nothing at all. Life continued on into Lawrence's own gray years, until after his father had begun to grow old and white. His own son began working and married a girl named Claire. She was from a respectable enough family. Soon after the disease had set in, his father was forced into retirement and a very successful merger brought the companies together under Lawrence's control. He became the Mr. Halborrow, of Sussex. When the name Halborrow was referenced, it was in reference to him. And so had things come to be when he received that call from his father's lawyer on the eve of his fifty second birthday.

The afternoon after the call, Mr. Arkwright arrived as scheduled, precisely at three o'clock, and the receptionist showed him immediately to Mr. Halborrow's office.

"Can I have Clarice get you anything Mr. Arkwright?" Lawrence asked.

"No, thank you Mr. Halborrow."

"That'll be all Clarice." The receptionist left them to their business.

"The matter is actually quite simple, Mr. Halborrow. I have here the will of Mr. Peter Franklin Halborrow, recently deceased. I'll read you the part that matters for the moment. I, Peter Franklin Halborrow, do hereby make and declare the following to be my last will and testament. First, my executor shall first pay all claims against my estate. Second, I grant unto my executor unlimited authority in the management and disbursement of my estate according to the following stipulations; The Greek portion of my personal library shall be preserved in whole and become the property of said executor, all remaining possessions and properties shall be sold at auction, the proceeds of said auction shall become the property of said executor, minus expenses, without exception. Third, I name as sole executor of my estate, my son Lawrence Phillip Halborrow, of Sussex County.

"According to our advisement, your father then continues the will with several articles, stipulating conditions should you be deceased by the time of his death, an article dealing with the tax elections, and then a final article relating your fiduciary powers and provisions. But I feel the message is clear in the opening article that he names you as the sole beneficiary of his estate, which is to be liquidated—"
“Liquidated? You mean to say...”
Lawrence let the phrase hang over the desk, expecting assistance in completing it.
“I mean to say as I did earlier, that all assets of your father’s estate are to be sold, and the proceeds are to be placed at your disposal. That is, all properties and possessions, with the exception of the Greek collection.”
“All properties and possessions? Am I to understand that he expected that all of his estate should be sold with no reference at all to my discretion of what should be preserved?”
“That is correct, Mr. Halborrow. He clearly stipulates further under the fiduciary privileges and provisions, that whatsoever shall not be sold in the auction shall be retained by the firm until sold at a later auction. Everything is to be sold, except the library.”
Lawrence stared across his desk in disbelief, mouth open, but no sound escaped. There was a moment of silence which to both of them must have seemed longer than it truly was.
“I understand then.” Lawrence finally replied. The response was short and biting, but it wasn’t aimed at Mr. Arkwright.
“I think the most important aspect of this will,” Mr. Arkwright began, “is that he names you the sole recipient of his remaining estate. You are the heir to a rather small fortune Mr. Halborrow.”
“I said that I understand, Mr. Arkwright. I appreciate your coming to my office and the services you have reliably offered my father. I believe we’ve discussed all that is needed, have we not?”
“Yes, I suppose that is all. This is a copy of your father’s will and testament in completion. If you would please sign this document appointing you as executor of his estate.”
Mr. Arkwright pushed a paper across Mr. Halborrow’s desk, indicating towards the bottom left section where Lawrence would scribble his thin blue signature across the perforated line. It was done and Mr. Arkwright abruptly thanked Mr. Halborrow for his father’s business and expressed his expectation that he would hear from Mr. Halborrow in future legal matters of the family’s estate. As he made his way across the oriental rug towards the doorway leading out of Lawrence’s office, he turned quickly.
“One final thing. Do please forgive me for nearly forgetting. The groundskeeper has been retained at your father’s home for maintenance of the site, at least until the property should be sold at auction. Should
you intend to visit the manor before the auction, which will take place Thursday, he will be there to show you in. You have two days.”

Then he left.

That night, as Lawrence lay with his wife in bed, they discussed his father and the estate. It was Eva who brought his father up as, Lawrence had said earlier that evening that the legal matters were settled and he felt there was no more to discuss on the subject.

“I know how you feel about him,” she began.

“About who, Eva.” It was more a challenge than a question.

“You know fully well what I’m trying to say, Lawrence.”

“Why don’t you just tell me then instead of insinuating that I know what you’re trying to get at? Let’s cut the ambiguity, what do you want to say?”

“I’m sorry; I’m not trying to hurt your feelings. I just know that things were difficult with him and I don’t want you to go through this alone.”

They lay silently, staring up into the gathering dark as it filled the space between the bed’s canopy and the Corinthian crown molding of the room’s vaulted ceilings.

“Things weren’t difficult. They simply weren’t.”

“Forgive me for bringing it up.”

They sat in silence for several moments as Lawrence ran his mind through a list of all the things which were to be sold at the estate auction in two days’ time. He needed to change the subject on his mind.

“Have you spoken with Edmund recently?” He asked.

“Yes. I called to tell him this morning.”

“Oh, you did.” Of course his father would still play a role in their discussion. “How is he?”

“He seems to be doing well. You haven’t seen him in a while. He and Claire both asked me to say hello to you, but you were at the office and I forgot to mention it.”

“When was the last time they came to visit? And why weren’t they at the party last night?”

“Well, they were on the Cote d’Azur enjoying the same vacation you promised me last spring when I called, so it’s understandable that they didn’t come. And the last time they visited was Easter. When else would they have been over darling?”

“I just wasn’t sure when it was.”

“When I told him what happened he said he would fly out
tomorrow."
  "He did?"
  "He said that he wanted to be here for the service."
  "He's flying in?"
  "Didn't I just say that darling?"

In the brief pause that followed Lawrence pictured thousands of moments from the past fifty-two years. He saw them in what he considered to be the same pattern and style, thousands of moments like bricks and stones evenly cut, coming together in the formation of walls and arches, just like the walls of Eton and the so fashioned manor of his father's estate. They rose in the shape of his father’s manor like an unsolvable labyrinth of space and time between his father and himself. They were all the same shape and size, similar moments and choices, like the stones which he had picked for the construction of his own estate—the estate whose walls he watched begin their rise between him and his own son.

  "I should call him."
  "What?"
  "I should call Edmund."
  "Darling, it’s nearly eleven thirty. What possible reason could you have for calling him at this hour?" She was nearly laughing, but the lines of her face in the dark seemed to somehow indicate concern at the same moment.

Lawrence saw that she was right. It was already late. He was being foolish.

  "Of course, it’s late. I should just wait for the morning. I don’t know what’s gotten into me. I must just be tired. Goodnight Eva."

  "Goodnight Lawrence." She answered. "I love you."

  She hovered over him and kissed him on the cheek.

The next day was Wednesday and the choice was simple, yet frustrating for him. He did not want to see his father’s home. But it was his last opportunity and so he would go. As Lawrence stepped out of his car and onto the circular cobblestone landing which stretched out from the manor’s front stairs, the groundskeeper, Walter, was already descending the stairs to greet him. He must have been in his late seventies by this point. And so Walter, who still greeted Mr. Halborrow as Master Lawrence, led him up the stairs and into the manor through the grand entryway. Inside, the chandelier wasn’t yet draped and the two freestanding marble stairs carved their symmetrical paths up to
the balcony above. When the groundskeeper offered to bring a drink and smoke, Lawrence suggested that he would use what was already in the library.

“Of course, sir. Nothing’s been moved. There’s both a scotch and a bourbon, as well as a box of Gurkhas in the side table by his chair.”

“Thank you, Walter. I’ll find my own way and show myself out when I’m done.”

It was immediately evident that Walter was disappointed by Lawrence’s request for solitude, but he obliged him nonetheless.

“I’ll let you be as you please then. It was good to see you again, Master Lawrence.”

Lawrence was left to make his way up the marble stairs to the balcony, and then down the hall towards the east wing, where finally he found himself peering into the library from the doorway. It was the same spot from where he had watched his father sitting and reading alone when he still considered the manor to be his home. He made his way over to the side table by his father’s leather armchair and poured a bourbon for himself in his father’s glass. It looked dirty, like it had been gathering dust, but he didn’t care. Opening the drawer of the same side table revealed the box of cigars to which Walter had referenced and a small box of matches. There was also his father’s pipe and a half empty tin of tobacco. He took the matches and lit himself a cigar. He crossed the room to the section by the ladder where his father had kept the Greek classics and scanned the shelves until he found the two volumes titled Metamorphoses. He pulled them down and carried them back to the armchair and bourbon that were waiting on him. He examined the full paneled calf bindings, and the intricate work with the frontispiece plates. The joints were slightly cracked from use and wear, but the boards were still all firmly attached. Opening the second volume, he thumbed the corner of the yellowing pages as he flipped through, looking for the stories of Daedalus. He found where King Minos first instructed that the labyrinth be built. He read the story of how Daedalus gave Ariadne the flaxen thread so that her love, Theseus, could navigate his way out of the labyrinth after slaying the Minotaur beast within. It was at the ingenuity of Daedalus that the Minotaur was slain. And then he read how King Minos, enraged at the death of his beast and the loss of his daughter to Theseus, shut Daedalus and Icarus into the labyrinth. He read of the gathering of the wax and the feathers. Of the flight and the fall. He read in frustration as Daedalus wept over his lost son. He felt the bitter current which ran through his bones biting deeper into
his nerves. He hated Daedalus for building the labyrinth. He hated Daedalus for making the wings. He hated Daedalus for sending Icarus out over the sea. He felt the conviction rooting itself deeper and deeper that Daedalus was a fraud. The father wasn’t weeping for Icarus, he wept for himself. Lawrence fanned out the pages and put the red ember tip of his cigar to the bottom corner of the volume in his hand. He coaxed the flame under the steady flow his angry but controlled breath. Propped against the bottom of the shelves, the flames leaped upward from Ovid’s pages as the shattered glass of bourbon wrenched them up the bookcases and towards the ceiling boards. The whole collection would burn. Thick black smoke that looked like billowing tar was filling the room as if it were an inverted sea. It rippled its way in waves across the ceiling as it descended earthwards. Lawrence had to escape or he was sure he would drown.

If you loved him and knew his ambition, how could you give him such fragile wings—and if he had never risen to the heights which caused his fall—or if he had been too afraid and it was the foams of the sea which had brought him down to the depths—if he were hollow of ambition and cleaved to the earth—and if he despised the thought of wings which would raise him up to the onslaught of the scorching sun—or most of all—if he resented your creations and saw the labyrinth and the thread and the wings and all that you made as a sickening trap founded in the arrogant ambition of his father—then, after all, would you weep and cry you love him still?