

Falling or Flying

A treatment by John Doona

A 'road movie' story of the growing understanding and tenderness between a son and an ailing father.

Synopsis

Widower Michael is told he may have months to live. Telling his son only a part of the truth he initiates a trip across Europe to Meteora.

Light Icarus and Daedalus references through out.

On the journey East a series of brushes with petit criminals – a bag-snatch in Paris, an incident in a back-street brothel in Zagreb reveal more deeply Daniel's inadequacies. He has also lied about his achievements. Patrick laments his son's lack of strength and resilience.

At the Meteoran monastery Patrick reveals the depth of his illness.

On the rock edge, Michael leads his son on an imagined, lyrical flight into the rising sun. At the end of which Michael passes away. Daniel returns home alone but determined to live more fully.

Background

The writer spent a year in Thessaly in 1988 6 miles from the unique and spectacular area called Meteora. The giant stacks of rock are home to precariously perched monasteries. It was made famous through its appearance in the James Bond film, *For Your Eyes Only*. The writer became very familiar with the area; visiting it most weekends of his stay. Meaning "hovering in the air", Meteora is a perfect setting for a play about reaching higher.

The play is informed by the writer's own relationship with his father, who passed away after a long chronic illness two years ago. The concern of the father, as to whether the child has been sufficiently prepared for the struggles of a sometimes combative world, is a question the writer asks of his own children.

Detailed Synopsis

- Michael is reeling from being told his 'survival statistics' – he may only have months to live. He tells his son only part of the truth who initiates a final trip across Europe to Meteora.
- The departure. Michael and Daniel (Father and son) are leaving from a train station. Daniel's partner, in early pregnancy, is dropping them off. Parked illegally Daniel is fussing over Michael's medication and luggage. Michael is absently looking at the sun disappear behind clouds, anticipating the fierce sun of their destination. The train is arriving.
- On the train Michael has organised this as a 'mystery trip' and Daniel asks where they are going. Michael shows Daniel a photograph of himself as a young man standing on top of a stone edifice. Behind, through mist, strings of other stone stacks with buildings on top. They joke about the long-haired youth in the picture. 'Mum' took the picture. Michael reminds Daniel of Roger Moore scaling in rocks 'that Bond film'. (*For Your Eyes Only*) Michael offers Daniel a guide book and he reads about Meteora. The train continues.
- Daniel asks why they are taking a train so far. Michael suggests they wouldn't let him fly even if he asked because of his poor state of health. Besides, his son should know how he feels about flying. Daniel insists he should conquer his fear, "The world's a small place to a man who flies. The world's a small place to the man that stays at home too".
- Paris Daniel tries to wake Michael on the train as they pull in. He panics a little. Michael does wake. They argue about Michael's health. Michael's anger flares. He doesn't want to hear another thing about it.

- Paris street café Michael talks about Daniel's life, about his pride, his 'going out into the world'. He's 'ridden air ambulances in war zones!' Daniel tries to reject the heroicism. He can't even hold down a job. He couldn't even pay his way on this trip.
- As they talk someone pushes into their table and makes off with a small bag of Michaels and Daniel's mobile phone. Daniel gives chase – but stops breathless and fearful. He returns to the table where Michael is reassuring a waiter. Daniel begins to remonstrate but Michael calms him. In the bag was Michael's medication. Daniel panics. Michael assures him that he has enough in his other luggage. Daniel says enough till we reach a chemist.
- Briefly in Milan Michael gets Daniel to stand with him and face the sun. Can you feel it strengthening? Drawing us forward and upwards. Can you feel your skin coming alive?
- Train journey Reflection and elaboration of Michael's time in Meteora. He recounts the story of the photo. He says he 'married' Daniel's mother there.... Not 'formally', but that was where they 'melded'. And he, says, he doesn't mean in any mucky way. They stayed in adjoining cells, sparse, clean, empty, a sleeping mat on the floor. Insert: A priest's welcoming voice, sung prayer behind. Michael asks for Daniel's reminiscences of air ambulances. Daniel is reluctant. Strongly so. Michael imagines it himself. We hear chopper blades briefly as he does. Daniel objects strongly. A quiet. Michael says, "When we get to Zagreb, let's get rat-arsed.'
- Zagreb The two men have drunken too much. They are a little rowdy. They have got themselves lost looking for their hotel and find themselves in a worrying area of town. Michael goes into a bar to use the toilet and ask directions. A man, who introduces himself as David, approaches Daniel. He engages Daniel in over-friendly conversation. He claims to have a twin brother working in a Turkish restaurant in Daniel's home town. Daniel's been in the restaurant! David insists that he must buy David a drink. He overwhelms Daniel, who follows him to the 'Karnival' Bar. *Meanwhile, Michael comes out of the bar and can't find Daniel.* David sits Daniel at a table in the dingy, empty bar. A large man and an over-dressed woman sit either side of him, Neither of them speak English. David disappears. *Meanwhile, Michael is looking for Daniel. He becomes very agitated, his head spins and chest aches.* The woman is speaking to Daniel, uses the words 'drink' and 'smoke'. Drinks and cigarettes are brought to the table. Daniel says he doesn't want one. He tries to leave and is forced back into his seat. *Meanwhile, Michael collapses on the street. A small crowd gather. He send them away, Refusing their offers of an ambulance. He calls for a taxi to take him back to the hotel.* The 'sting' on Daniel is complete. David returns with a bill for 400Euros for 'the lady's' drinks and cigarettes. He says he has no money. He is led to a back room to meet, as David, laughing calls him, 'my god-father'. They search him. He appears to have nothing. They ask him where his hotel is. He won't tell. He is crying, pleading, sobbing. They drag him to the roof of the building and threaten to throw him off. He is distraught. He wets himself. They laugh at him and let him go.
- Later. Michael is recovering in his hotel bed. Daniel returns. He is terror-struck. Crying. He has fractured completely. He sobs about his own inadequacy. He can't cope. He's not a 'grown-up'. Michael exhausts himself in anger and reproach. Then in sympathy he comforts his son, calms him, cradles him. Daniel wants his mum! He makes Michael promise there'll be no more detours – straight to Meteora.
- Train They cross the border into Northern Greece. Michael starts a serious conversation that Daniel doesn't want to have. He apologises for his fathering. He wasn't around enough, was too tired when he was around. He wasn't the father he could have been. Daniel wasn't a 'supported' child (beyond his wonderful mother). That's why Michael is so proud of him being so strong.. because he did it by himself. Daniel reveals that he was never strong. He didn't fly an air ambulance in Palestine. He was there to help for a month, but others did the flying, he never volunteered. He stayed in the camp and played with the children... pretending he used to play for Manchester United! Yes, he's a fake, he says, an inadequate. Michael is calm.
- A hotel in Trikala, Central Greece Morning. They are six miles from Meteora. They begin the final stages of their journey on a local bus. Greece music playing. Daniel questions Michael's colour.
- Kalambaka An ice-cream parlour. Michael has insisted that they stop. They can see the rocks of Meteora in the distance. After their great journey, Michael wants to stop! He says they can walk from here. Daniel doubts Michael's ability to walk in the heat. He hasn't seen him take his medication for days. Michael is scared of returning to Meteora. What if it as changed. He couldn't cope. But then he draws his attention to the sun. He describes it's strength. It's continuing draw. They begin their walk into Meteora.

Michael asks Daniel his relationship with Rachel and the pregnancy. Daniel is as coy as a teenager. Tries to tell give him fatherly wisdom... but gives up quickly. "You need someone to bring to the places that made you."

- Daniel sees Meteora for the first time. He describes it in wonder. Michael comments on the height of the rocks, the mist in the air, the draw of the sun. If there was a place a man might 'leave the earth', this would be it.
- They arrive at the monastery. They are welcomed at the door by a priest... they have been expecting Michael and Daniel. After a long cup of refreshing water the two men are shown to adjoining cells. Michael is suddenly weak and lies down on the bed-mat. Daniel questions, "Is this the same cell you were in before?" "No, this was your mother's cell, mine was next door... where you'll be sleeping."
- Michael sends Daniel to bed and tells him to come to him early in the morning. Michael is coughing, fading. Daniel asks about his medication? Michael says that the medication ran out days ago. He needs to rest. He told him he'd show him Meteora and he has done. As he leaves he also tells Daniel to look out of his window to the narrow, unoccupied stack of rock adjacent.
- Back in his room Daniel looks. An eagle's lair. The eagle is returning. He watches and then weeps.
- The following morning. Daniel wakes in a panic. He rushes into Michael's room expecting the worst. The room is empty. He looks out of the window. Michael is standing on the edge of the rock. Calmly looking out. Daniel runs out. Michael silences him before he can speak. They look at the mist rising together and listen to the sung, morning prayer. The eagle crosses close by and we hear its wings.
- Michael says this is it. If there was a place on earth a man might fly, this is it. You said I should conquer my fear. I'm going to fly. Can you feel it; the sun, drawing us up? Daniel begins to object, Michael silences him. Michael tempts Daniel to fly with him. Talks bluntly about the struggle that characterises Daniel' life. He forces Daniel into defending himself and asserting his need to live more fully, and to give himself to his child.
- Michael leads his son on an imagined, lyrical flight into the rising sun. In it he leaps from the rock; "I'm falling, I'm, flying." Looking back he gestures for his son to join him in the air. Daniel steps off and flies. They climb to the sun. Michael driving Daniel on.
- Returning to reality Michael is silent and still. He has passed away.
- Daniel makes the long journey home; alone but determined to live a fuller life.