A Happiness More Solid:

Travels in the Icarian Colonies

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Icarus is famous for having manufactured a pair of wings composed of beeswax; adapted these wings to his body and attempted the ascension to Heaven. As he ascended towards the sun, the heat became so intense that the wings melted and Icarus fell flat on the earth, realizing that he was too pretentious and better remain on this planet. (This is about what the Icarian communists have done as the experiment will show.) For what reason Cabot selected that name I do not know.

– Emile Vallet, Icarian colonist, 1917
From the window of a train Western Illinois looks like the prototype model of farmland: big red barns and dome-roofed silos under cotton-candy clouds. The trees are arranged in groups of three; the land as flat as cardboard; the buildings small and boxy, stencil symbols of themselves. The crops are smooth as carpeting, the young corn a nubbly doormat, green wheat bending with the silver of a polyester shag. This is calming: nature sorted and contained in patchwork borders: the lovely peaceful order of life trimmed and leveled off. I have never seen a place that looks so fertile and so barren, so much land and sky unchanging with so little in between. I have never seen a place that looks so much like a thing I’ve imagined, and its beauty is unsettling, too familiar for comfort. These crisp corners, pristine edges, are almost embarrassing in their perfection—they are someone flashing a vision, letting a private idyll slip.

I’m on my way to a place where people didn’t quite manage perfection. I am going to Icaria to see where utopia failed. The Icarians came from France in 1848, disembarked in New Orleans, and for fifty years cycled repeatedly through the achievement and loss of their hopes. Seven times they settled, schismed, faded, six times started over, moving from a swamp in Texas out to California wine country. But for most of their fifty years they lived in the Midwest, here in this farmland, where the land has space for anything and the sky looks made for winged leaps. In Nauvoo, Illinois, they founded their first stable settlement; near Corning, Iowa, they lasted four decades, and finally dissolved. Utopia performs an alchemy, turning a dream into something solid, turning a solid thing into empty space. I want to see what’s left.

I take Amtrak, riding in the strange stopped time of a space that moves through spaces, from Portland to Chicago. From Chicago to Macomb, Macomb through Galesburg to Fort Madison, we run late on borrowed tracks behind freight trains loaded with coal and oil. In North Dakota I see one of these trains sitting out of commission, coiled like a snake, its black tank vertebrae strung over acres of patchy grass. In Minnesota the Trails and Rails guides describe things
we already see through the window, and it feels like another reality, a strange doubling of the world. My first day on the train I meet Nancy and Charles, in their sixties, from Peoria, where the library is filling with more books than it can hold. The new books, bought four or five at a time, leave no room for the old and unpopular. When the discount sales are over they have to dump what’s left. It’s sad, Nancy says, but what can you do? You have to get rid of them sometime. Picture the dumpsters piled high with hardbacks, their spines going limp in the rain.

On the train Nancy reads on her Kindle, a little thing you can put in your pocket. No more suitcases of novels—she wonders, “Where do you have it all, now?”

“It’s in the Cloud,” says Charles, spreading his arms, pronouncing a capital C. “Who knows where it’s at? That’s why they call it the Cloud.”

They are worried by the speed at which all things rush toward obsolescence, how the 8-tracks are gone, and the videotapes, and now the books; the Kindles, soon. Picture the absence, the loss of things invisible to begin with. Why discard them, when there is still space? If discarded, were they ever here? *Well, what can you do*: Better worry about the boxes of cassettes left behind at the church rummage sale, the old college texts treasured in basements for years splaying outdated pages in the trash. In this cycle, in this concrete loss, at least there are concrete certainties: the fact that things just aren’t where there isn’t room for them to be. The fact that a solid object cannot be compressed or manipulated into anything less than itself: recall how the boy who later realized he could not love you packed your books in cardboard boxes, held you sobbing in his arms. Later you found that the boxes he packed were half empty, the books stacked up slipshod, and at that moment you remembered that he is younger than you. You apologized for crying. “I’m just happy to be here with you,” he said.

Icaria was founded on a sentimental romance. The author, Étienne Cabet—politician, editor, activist—used this method of avoiding laws against seditious books. France, by that time, had long
been caught in a cycle of anticlimactic upheaval, successive revolutions burning out in the heat of their own glory. Cabet wrote harshly against King Louis-Philippe, and chose temporary exile for his punishment; from London, writing his Histoire populaire de la Révolution Française, he regretted the loss of what Robespierre might have achieved. Terror, thought Cabet, then France’s only nonviolent communist, was temporary. A benevolent dictator would have done wonders, if only given the chance.

What that dictator would have done, if given the chance in another country, Cabet described in a novel, Voyage en Icarie—Travels in Icaria. With abundant exclamation points and apostrophic lamentations (“Happy women! Happy men! Happy Icaria! Unfortunate France!”), he describes “a second promised land, an Eden, an Elysium,” where “everyone lives in peace, pleasure, joy, and happiness.” This is utopia that neither claims transcendence of the world nor aspires to it, a paradise of clean streets and convenient machinery. Cabet imagined free public transit: a system of large horse-drawn carriages that speed through every street every two minutes with their wheels set in iron grooves. He anticipated suburbs, prefab houses nearly uniform, each with its own garden and just enough variation in the details to keep residents from being bored. There is universal health care. All kinds of work are valued equally. People take turns in seats at the theater. Bad art is not allowed.

We learn all this from the journals of Lord William Carisdall, an English tourist—a man who falls in love with a woman whose face is hidden when he first sees her. He calls her “the invisible one,” and says that she must be ugly. When she reveals her face, it is more beautiful than he could have imagined. I read this in May, and understand it six weeks later in Corning, Iowa, on the second floor of what was once the Icarian refectory. There, clear plastic peels from the windows where it’s taped to keep the weather out, betraying itself as a solid thing though it was made to disappear. It falls in fluted, shadowed folds, and the sunlight sits on the creases; as if this were a body for light to
inhabit, a crystallization of air. Consider the invisible as the standard of perfection: the most beautiful thing is always unknown, always hidden just out of reach. Consider the shape of transparency, sunlight in pieces on ridges of plastic, the beauty of something revealing itself that was not meant to be seen.

Cabet returned to France in 1839 with his two manuscripts, in which he carried his ideals of both the future and the past. He published *Voyage en Icarie* under a pseudonym at first, and when no legal action took shape against the author, revealed his name. His newspaper, *Le Populaire*, reported grim events of the nation, mock trials and anti-labor violence, with the slogan “None of this in Icaria!” In the preface to the 1842 edition of his novel, Cabet asserted that a communitarian system—the highest expression of equality and fraternity, the “goal of all efforts, struggles, and combats on this earth”—was not “merely a beautiful dream, a magnificent chimera”; that it could be established easily, whenever a nation chose. “The current and limitless productive power by means of steam and machines can assure equality of abundance,” he wrote. “No other system is more favorable to the perfection of the fine arts and all the reasonable pleasures of civilization. It is to render this truth in palpable form that we have written *Travels in Icaria***.”

In France the hundred thousand people of Icaria were mostly artisans, used to shaping and mending their worlds by means of a mallet, a needle, an awl. They were threatened by factories and by the laborers who demonstrated against them; they aspired to bourgeois comfort, but could not submit to bourgeois laws. They could afford nonviolence but had not the means for apathy; they could pay empathy to the oppressor, but owed their sympathy to the oppressed. Cabet gave them truth in palpable form and they took it in hand and worked it, weaving or kneading or nailing together the dream of a dream becoming real. They worshiped Cabet as a Christ figure. They sent him donations in Paris. But in 1846, when the wheat harvests failed, their patience began to crack. The next year, when Cabet announced a plan to establish Icaria in Texas—with himself as the
community’s sole financial, social, and moral authority—most rejected the idea, and the cost, of emigration. But some still believed in Cabet, enough to trust him as a dictator. Bit by bit they scraped together entrance fees for paradise.

Years later, in 1854, after the Icarians had made it to Nauvoo, Emile Baxter wrote to Cabet from New Jersey with an application to join them. He was a 28-year-old bookkeeper, born in France, educated in Scotland, who had spent much time reflecting “on the sad condition of human life.” His diaries, later in life, would consist of lists of pithy aphorisms, less a record of his own troubles than hypothetical woes of humanity. In 1854, he believed that evil was an accident, that society, if correctly shaped, could rescue men from themselves. He could no longer bear to sit and discuss Icaria with friends, at dinner parties, in rooms where pipe smoke rose and clung in a haze around every thought. Rather, “Finding it such as I would wish to do, if I possess the talent, I believe it is necessary to give one’s self; that is why I am leaving. One life most devoted to a new principle can accelerate its development and lead Humanity to a happiness less artificial and more solid than that which it possesses today.”

Think of happiness as a rock, a brick, a book, a thing to lean on. Not the peak of flight, transcendence, but a thing with shape and weight. And can happiness exceed a space, as books exceed the library? Can happiness be stretched to cover a gap? Can it be misplaced? The Icarian Advance Guard, arriving in June 1848 on Texas’ Trinity River, found their land laid out in a checkerboard, pocked with half-sections the company had reserved to sell later on. They found their paradise was a swamp that brewed pestilence underneath them, malaria and cholera killing nine of them in the end. They had been promised three thousand acres for free if they could build enough homesteads, fast enough. In three months, the devotion of thirty-nine men fell short of covering the space. By winter they were back in New Orleans with the Icarians who had arrived in the meantime, waiting for Cabet to come from Paris and decide what should be done. In 1849, of the 498 Icarians
who survived in America, 280 voted to stay with Cabet and try again somewhere else. The rest paid for passage back to France with the registration fees reimbursed them, feeling the loss of all they had never attained as a weight in the air at their backs.

There are obstacles, in Cabet’s novel, to Carisdall’s love for the invisible one. She—named Dinaïse—is betrothed in the eyes of her family and friends, if not officially, to Valmor, Carisdall's friend and host. Carisdall himself is practically engaged to a woman in England. When he realizes his feelings he resolves to leave Icaria—and falls ill before he can. Delirious, he confesses his love. Dinaïse confesses she returns it. A furious Valmor leaves town, but returns after two weeks of soul-searching with his blessings for the couple and a replacement bride for himself. He says he has always liked her a great deal. Carisdall is ecstatic and grateful. The couples plan a double wedding. The Icarians rejoice.

This is the end of Part I of the novel. By the time he returns to England, as the prefatory first chapter reveals, Carisdall will be “ill, consumed by grief, heartbroken, and near death.” His diaries will be compiled by a narrator who finds them “interesting” and “touching,” who will edit them “as he was suffering too much to work on it himself.” I don’t know how Carisdall loses Dinaïse: translations of *Travels in Icaria* are rare. My copy, from Syracuse University Press, contains only the first volume, and summaries of the second and third sketch only the philosophy, not the plot. So the fact of the loss hovers, incongruous, unknown but inevitable—like the declaration of love itself, a truth spoken from crazy sleep. *Travels in Icaria* tells the story of everything that one could hope for, and indeed implies that all these wonders are the only possible outcome. (Of course there is no crime! There can be no crime, with no property! Of course there is no adultery, for marriage counseling is mandatory!) But that story can only be told through the frames of the love story and Carisdall’s journals—and Carisdall’s journals can only be read since he has come back to England alone. There are ways it could have been written differently. But these are the rules of the
world laid out for us: To read of Lord Carisdall’s love is to read the history of utopia, something beautiful that, from the moment you learn of it, already has been lost.

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Nauvoo, Illinois, sits on the state’s southwestern border, surrounded by vineyards and sunset-tinged river and more of those perfect velvety fields. By June the air is thick with light and water, buzzing with gnats, and vibrates constantly with birdsong loud enough to wake light sleepers. It’s a town of nine churches and just a bit more than eleven hundred people, with a half-mile strip of quaint-cute businesses and some vacant buildings, sagging with ivy. To get to Nauvoo by train from Chicago, or indeed from anywhere else, you must cross the Mississippi into Iowa and return by car via the world’s longest swing-span bridge. Marilyn Candido, of the Nauvoo Historical Society, drives me across and tells me how once she got stuck at the pivot point in the middle, turning in place in her car while the arms of the bridge swung around her over the water. It’s a fitting metaphor for a town that often seems stuck in transition: Nauvoo is more than a little caught up in its past, hasn’t quite caught up with its future, and is meanwhile stranded, reaching out forward and back to two worlds that it doesn’t quite touch.

There is, what’s more, a serendipitous appropriateness to Marilyn herself being caught here, hovering above definite boundaries. She is half-Chinese and half-German, raised in Queens by German relatives. Being Asian and from the city makes her pretty unique in this area, where dark-haired strangers hail each other on the street to compare origins, and this, perhaps, is partly why she takes me under her wing, asking how I like school in New York these days, if there’s Chinese on my Filipina side. She wants me to meet her son, David, who was homeschooled through high school and, she worries, might be lonely in college this fall, pushed out to social peripheries. He might be
lonely now: As Nauvoo’s small economy has declined, families have sought jobs in the city. One by one, the friends whom David grew up with have moved away.

In February 1846, the Mormons fled from Nauvoo, leaving “the prints of dusty footsteps” on the stone-paved roads. Their prophet had been murdered. On the outskirts of the city they had been besieged by their neighbors, cannons fired at their walls. Their footprints were still visible months later, in September, when Colonel Thomas Kane came over a hill and saw their temple shining. He writes of feeling compelled to walk into the city, and finding it empty; entering houses and shops and finding tools laid out ready for use on half-finished work. “I could have supposed the people hidden in their houses, but the doors were unfastened, and when at last I timidly entered them I found dead ashes white upon the hearths, and had to tread tip-toe, as though walking down the aisle of a country church, to avoid resounding irreverent echoes from the naked floors.”

“Nauvoo” means “beautiful place.” Think of invisible perfection, of the pristine ordered streets where William Carisdall walks amazed. In the silence of sun squares on floorboards, in deserted shops and houses, all the beauty that people have built comes to rest in the spaces that they leave. And when a place is made perfect and waits for you, what is there left to do but fill it? When the trappings of life appear, sourceless and sudden as miracle, who can be blamed for belief? In March of 1849 the first boatload of Icarians came up the Mississippi River to dock on the Nauvoo flats. Their scouts had found the abandoned city, utopian land for the taking, and they’d voted to board a steamboat and try for paradise again. They’d brought cholera up the river, the New York Herald later reported, and they buried their dead in secret for fear their new neighbors would turn them away. Back in France their former comrades were filing suit against Cabet for swindling: he had taken their life savings for a failure in a swamp. But in Illinois the land was real, and though perhaps it would have been wiser to buy productive farmland instead of the ruined temple that
Cabet had his eye on, the transaction was honest. The Icarians built a refectory, an infirmary, a wash house. They built workshops and apartments, settled down in Temple Square.

Today, to an outsider, Nauvoo seems like a kind of religious theme park, dedicated almost exclusively to the production and maintenance of faith. The town’s economy—based in different eras on wine, blue cheese, and a Catholic boarding school—now relies on the influx of Mormon tourists to a series of pageants held in July. Both the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Reorganized branch of it operate historic sites down by the river, though the RLDS restored their historic buildings, and the LDS built theirs from scratch. Their row of Old Nauvoo shops, reimagined in red Federalist bricks and fake chimneys, sit on original foundations, looking neat and clean and all alike and nothing like the old days. At the Old Nauvoo Family Living Center, costumed LDS missionaries demonstrate nineteenth-century handicrafts steeped in religious metaphor; while pots spin on a wheel and rope fibers twist and rag rugs widen in circles, they are weaving their own story over and over, reiterating belief. The gift shops sell copies of the Book of Mormon, revised anew to a true revelation, every version of the text becoming the text as it always was. Meanwhile, at the anti-Mormon (no, pro-Christian!) Nauvoo Christian Visitors’ Center, Steve, a jovial, muscular evangelist, missions to the missionaries—the goal being less, it seems, to save them from sin than to save them from themselves. It’s not a healthy religion, he explains, citing a history of racism, phallic temple spires, Masonic symbols stitched on underwear. I ask Steve what makes a religion healthy and he tells me only faith will save us. Later, I hear he has asked his Facebook followers to pray for me.

Think of happiness as the rock on which you build a church; for Steve, good works have nothing to do with salvation. Faith cannot be hammered or hewn. Two blocks away, nearly two centuries ago, the Mormons built a temple out of limestone that they cut and hauled uphill from a riverbank quarry. The Icarians hoped to build their own meeting place in its burnt-out ruins, but a
sudden storm blew in the last standing walls, nearly killing the workers. After that they used the fallen stone to build themselves a two-story schoolhouse, and the schoolhouse stayed long after they did, into the 1970s, almost up to the time when the Mormons came to build their temple back. I have always heard of limestone as a stone that is soft and yielding, easily pitted and grooved and shaped by water to weeping stalactites. Is it dangerous, or wise to reify belief in something so prone to erosion? Do you choose it because it’s easy or because it’s all you have? Today, I’m told, the stone is polished and sealed against the weather, a thin veneer of permanence on this replica of the past. The temple stands at the end of the street, where its white walls catch the sunlight. The side roads are limestone gravel, pale and blinding as the clouds.

Bob Baxter, great-grandson of earnest Emile, gives me a tour of the Weld House Museum—a tour I’ll get three times in total, from four different generous guides. The house, managed by the Historical Society, contains artifacts from several different eras—a framed collection of arrowheads laid out in star shapes on bright boards arranged like a patchwork quilt, an interactive riverboat room with a cardboard-cutout captain. Bob, on the phone, calls it the Icarian Museum, referring mainly to the room at the top of the stairs where his family’s history is kept. In this room there are small chairs of dark wood that once sat in the Icarian refectory; Bob, lifting one and pointing to the number on the back, explains how the citizens ate in shifts. Copies of Emile Baxter’s letters and of a 1917 pamphlet by disillusioned Icarian Emile Vallet are kept in a tiny school desk. Annabelle, the youngest Baxter descendant, will climb on it when she comes with her parents and grandparents for the Baxter reunion. A glass case holds a pointed wooden shoe of a style the Icarians brought from France: called sabots, they could be thrown by striking workers into machines for sabotage. Beneath the shoe is an ornate porcelain cheese dish that once belonged to Cabet—evidence, Bob chuckles, that the dictator didn’t quite play by his own rules. He wanted communism, but he wanted luxury too.
In his private house across the street from the stacked one-room apartments, with his cheese dish on a lace tablecloth, he must have drawn resentment. And yet happiness, if not quite solid, collects somehow in solid objects, in those things laid out on lawns and carpets to be packed or sold: so little, so much. Debbie Callaghan, the Historical Society’s Icaria expert—who’s been busy moving lately, and tells me that moving is not her forte—keeps coming back to how hard it must have been to give up everything that you came with. Annette Powell Baxter, for instance, had to give up her piano. Now, she had been a piano teacher! That was her work—that was a part of her. But if everybody couldn’t have a piano, no one could—at least, not individually. Picture Annette sitting down for the first time at the colony’s public piano, stroking fingers gently, gingerly down unfamiliar keys.

In Nauvoo the Icarians woke at six to a bugle call and a shot of whiskey, working all day at a series of jobs assigned in rotation and frequently changed. Before meals they divided the sticks of butter in equal pieces, for fear the earliest comers would take more than their share. They took long community walks by the river and held plays with orchestral accompaniment. Their children studied on the first floor of the schoolhouse and slept on its second. Everyone called Cabet “Papa.” They published a biweekly newspaper featuring the letters of people who wished to join them. There were four thousand books in the library. On Sundays Cabet led a seminar on Icarianism and Christianity, until, in 1851, he was called back to France to defend himself against the accusations of theft. He didn’t have to do this, Bob Baxter points out—he was more or less safe where he was. What drove him back was courage or vanity, the chance to prove his skill as a lawyer. When I ask Bob if he thinks the Icarians could have lasted any longer—if Cabet had stayed in town, perhaps, or if the colony had had more money—he stops in his tracks, holding a heavy box of 150-year-old newspapers, and says sadly that communism just doesn’t work. We’ve seen in history. Much as it’s a nice idea.
Bob went to school in the limestone schoolhouse. He lives most of the year in Indiana, but has a place in Nauvoo down by the river, where he’ll sit and watch the sunset with what he calls “an unusual family of moths.” While the light spreads out on the water in a wavering sheet they hover and unspool their tongues into the honeysuckles. He can watch them all evening long. He’s been collecting Icarian artifacts for most of his life, since he was married; his father encouraged it then, as if to say caring for the history of a family was part of starting one. This summer, on behalf of the extended Baxter family, he is donating two artifacts to the Weld House: a crazy quilt made for one of Emile Baxter’s sons and a silk shawl brought from India for Annette. He is building a case for the shawl on the clean white table in his workshop, bending a sheet of plexiglass so the fabric can cascade behind it. He’s been telling people he’s donating the artifacts because his attic is getting too full. But that’s not the real reason, he adds: What good does it do for a thing to sit hidden and safe where no one can enjoy it or learn from it? I believe it is necessary to give one’s self; that is why I am leaving.

The dusty footsteps fall with the clink of the knife on porcelain, the chiming piano. The books of Peoria lie in the dumpsters, discarded, lost, given, released.

Debbie and Marilyn, both from coastal cities, regret what’s been happening in Nauvoo: the LDS buying up all the land, the jobs all turning to service, the young people moving away because no work can be found nearby. You can’t run a town like that, they say, with nothing for people to do. City Hall thought selling out to the LDS would bring in money, but it hasn’t worked; it’s turned out pilgrims can’t be counted on to spend. The site of the blue cheese factory is now a temple parking lot; the Catholic school and monastery, an enormous, pristine green lawn. When the LDS bought it, they razed it. Now, the temple can look to the river. Nauvoo waits on the highway to show itself to people passing through.

When Cabet came back from clearing his name in France he found that after a year or so alone in utopia, the Icarians had grown lax. There were arguments over food and seating.
arrangements in the refectory, new members keeping their possessions, the unequal division of work. Cabet was shocked to see his utopians drinking and using tobacco, the women wearing makeup and the men going hunting and fishing for pleasure. In October 1853 he introduced new rules, requiring silence in the workshops, the surrender of all private property, and a kind of entrance exam for prospective members on his works. Complaints were prohibited. Tension mounted. Once, at the general assembly, a shoemaker named Janyrey, a short man, dared to object to Cabet’s actions. Is it possible, Cabet shouted, that you, you Janyrey, you a little boy, allow yourself to make opposition to me? Cabet talked often of pilots in storms, of ships whose passengers, facing danger, must trust to the old pilot’s experience to get them out alive. The Icarians reelected him every year, until, late in 1855, he proposed against constitutional procedure that his term be extended to four years. Angered, the dissident majority brought a candidate to oppose him; as Vallet recounts, “He never expected so much audacity and became raving mad.” His followers stopped working in protest as the majority took power. Banned from the dining hall, they threw their food in the street to insult the new government, and paraded shouting through town with poles stuck through their rations of bread. When clashes between the two sides became violent, first at the refectory and then at the schoolhouse, American neighbors called the sheriff, and Cabet was expelled from town. “His will was strong, but he had a terrible nature,” Vallet writes. “He did all that was in his power to do good; but failed. He suffered much morally and caused others to suffer. … The spirit was willing but the flesh was too strong.”

Years later, around 1863 or 1864, Emile Baxter drafted a love letter in his diary. I need so much above all to tell you … have you not guessed? From a smudged letter M you can guess the confession is meant for his second wife, Mary. It could be just after or just before Annette, Emile’s first wife, died. The handwriting is larger than usual, and riddled with blots and cross-outs, extended ellipses interrupting every line. The phrase “above all” keeps moving around,
crossed out throughout a sentence, as if he doubted the structure or geography of his thoughts. What if happiness, placed just slightly askew, should topple the building beneath it? What if truth turns out fragile and unsound, and shatters with cracks up its sides? From the train, in Minnesota, I saw a love letter written in spray paint—“Frank I love you!” scrawled on an overpass, spending its intimate message on strangers. I was on my way to Chicago, dwelling on expectations of heartbreak, and I wondered if Frank would ever see this and know it as his; wondered whether it mattered.

*A great true and deep affection does not inspire contempt,* writes Emile, reassuring himself, even then, *when it does not meet with return.* And yet he sounds desperate—*Tell me only, tell me that you believe me*—begging if not for love then for recognition, the verification of his truth. Say that truth is what keeps love from being contemptible: what is a love that no one believes in? What does it mean to feel and to write that you love, and never to know for sure? A society founded on dogma, Emile once wrote to Cabet, “bears within … the germ that must destroy it.” Society could not be stable unless “founded on that which is known”—on love, for example, something Emile then held to be “an eternal truth.” “It is a law of Nature—whatever one may say—it is instinct, it is the soul’s cry … it is secret religion which speaks to all hearts and unites them.”

This is how love is a kind of utopia: both demand the faith of passion. Both involve a kind of joy that seems ridiculous in retrospect. What absurd propositions, both intimacy and communism—that you could give yourself, share all things with another person, and that the transfer would be clean and fair and would not hurt. “Alas!” cried the New York Herald, “human folly unfathomable!” “Communism,” concluded Vallet, “requires a degree of perfection, a condition that is not contained in the human body at present.” The Icarians fought over butter pats. They fought over makeup and alcohol. They took axes to the doors of their dining hall, attacked their schoolteacher in her bed. In October 1856 Cabet, the ousted dictator, left Nauvoo as winter gathered, with his gilt and flowered cheese dish, clacking in his wooden shoes. On November 1 he
and his last followers arrived in St. Louis, Missouri, where Cabet died a few days later—shouldn’t wonder, says Bob Baxter, if he died of a broken heart.

David, Marilyn’s son, says faith is dangerous by definition. To have it, he says, is to shut your eyes to anything that could change your mind. He speaks of a sickness in Nauvoo, claiming everyone carries a prejudice—some religious or familial bigotry that will always reveal itself, before too long. He knows it sounds dramatic, but he’s not joking. He sounds disappointed. He knows his mom would say he’s being intolerant, but it’s how he feels about it. David is nineteen, sharp-cornered and slight, with wild black curls and glasses. His favorite place in Nauvoo is the grove of pine trees in the state park just outside of town, where he and his three older brothers used to play. There, the needles fall and dry in cushiony orange circles, and the acid in them keeps the ground clear up to a crisp green edge: perfect, he says, like someone’s taking care of it, like it’s on purpose. His fascination with this place is something he can’t explain, but perhaps it’s that perfection again, the silent beauty of naked floors. Human art without human interference: Maybe this is the difference between truth and dogma, that truth can remain after people have left it, whether it is believed in or not. Maybe certainty sits at the vertex of the obvious and the incredible, where a thing seems drawn out of empty air, and you still can feel its weight.

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All this time I’ve been thinking of a story: In Greek mythology, Icarus leapt from the window of his prison, soaring high above the sea. He wore wings that his father, an inventor, had built from wax and feathers. He had been warned that the wax would melt in the heat of the sun, but ignored the warning—he was drunk on possibility, blind from the light that suffused his wings.
When he fell, when happiness failed to hold him, the gods marked the place with an island. They made land from an absent body, rock from wax. They called it Icaria.

There’s no evidence that Cabet named his island of perfection with Icarus in mind. But it’s impossible not to draw parallels between him in Nauvoo and the boy in flight, dreamy victims of hope and of hubris. I think of the story as I learned it in third grade, a fable of following safety instructions, until I read an article in an old newsletter by two enthusiastic Icarian scholars—scholars of Icarianism, the movement, one of whom is from Icaria, the Greek island—and the island begins to emerge as the real moral of the story. How this land, these people, could spring up from nowhere in the wake of spectacular failure. How this place could be known for a tragic myth and also for “world famous hot springs.” “In the genuine Icarians’ society, Liberty, Safety, and Happiness do not exist as demands, but presupposed rights!” write these authors, Dimitris D. Miliadis and Christopher H. Tripoulas, tracing Cabet’s vision to a line he may have read in a seventeenth-century travel book. By that account, the Icarian islanders were happy and safe, despite having little material wealth. Their history proves, say the scholars, that utopian ideals are possible in practice.

And yet, “In the world of Realism there is no mention of the intangible factor of Happiness.” Thus, “The island of Icarus continues its voyage into the future in solitude.” On the morning Cabet’s frozen body was found in his rented bed in St. Louis—he died alone, of a stroke, and the cold crept in before any of his followers did—the Cabetists wept as for a father who had built them the wings they would fall with. One killed himself. In Nauvoo, Icaria stilled and took a breath. Emile Baxter went home to New Jersey and returned with a wagonload of grape cuttings, starting a winery in Nauvoo that his descendants still operate today. Emile Vallet, newly married, stayed in town and eventually became active in local politics. Meanwhile, after grieving, the Cabetists moved to Cheltenham, Missouri, and carried on as best they could, reading Cabet’s books aloud and forswearing cosmetics on land bought with a mortgage they could barely afford. In the end they
would be bankrupt, plagued with chronic fever and dysentery, resorting to capitalist business
practice to pay for the land to be communist on. In Nauvoo, debts were pressing as well; profits
from their small industries dwindled. They resurrected an old plan of Cabet’s to expand the colony
elsewhere. In 1858, as Cheltenham faltered over debts, disputes, and disease, the Nauvoo Icarians
packed covered wagons and headed for Corning, Iowa.

Corning, today, is a vibrant little town of about sixteen hundred people, with a single motel
close by the railroad cut where trains run through town without stopping. Seemingly unpredictable
taxi service runs some weekdays from Corning to Creston, the local metropolis, through the
Southern Iowa Trolley, a fleet of white vans that trundle between towns depending on where the
day’s drivers commute from. Corning has a country club and golf course, a Little League field full
of huge green mosquitoes, a courthouse once known for the ugliest turquoise and coral paint job
around for miles. It is the seat of Adams County and the birthplace of Johnny Carson. It is the
birthplace of the Breadéaux Pizza chain and its Original French Crust. Thursday night there’s a
farmer’s market, a few folding tables with plastic-wrapped pies. A week before the Fourth of July,
speakers play “You’re a Grand Old Flag” and “Young Americans” in the street. The towns are so
small in this part of Iowa that the distances shrink in proportion: people think nothing of driving an
hour to dinner and a show, or two hours to the doctor. People can’t imagine a sky where you can
only see some of the stars. I’m told several times that I can’t leave without seeing the Milky Way, so
one night I step out to the gravel parking lot of the motel in my pajamas and crane my neck to see
under the awning. My night skies are solid and pale from pollution; this darkness overwhelms me, so
evidently, infinitely empty, glittering with distant light. Tiny stars drown the few constellations I
know; staring up makes me feel like I’m falling. It’s more beauty, more sight, than I know what to
do with. I duck back into my room.
There’s no shame, I often try to tell myself, in recognizing limits. Falls from heaven signal destinies in lower, simpler skies. Corning’s Icaria was more peaceful than Nauvoo’s, the division of power and labor less fraught; its communism was less true to principle, and more truly carried out. The constitution provided for only a weak president, with decisions made by a general assembly of all citizens. The community still ate together, but lived in separate family homes. Workshop industries, which had been a source of great contention in Nauvoo, were abandoned for a more straightforward agricultural commune. It was easier, perhaps, for all to learn a new occupation together; easier for these artisans to compromise on work less coupled with self. Though not farmers, the Icarians managed by chance to buy some of the best land in the area, and they prospered on it, women sewing and cooking while men shared the work of the fields and the mill. They sent their children to local public school and welcomed outside visitors. They held dances and plays in the refectory, sang on Sunday afternoons. Marie Marchand, the first child born in the settlement, remembered how young girls took turns doing laundry all night with wood ashes and boiling water, sorting each family’s things by the numbers marked in cross-stitch on their clothes. She remembered a Christmas tree built of wood and tissue paper, gray frescoes of landscapes and cameo heads linked by garlands across the dining hall walls. Years later she would stand again in that room and see the painted walls hanging in pieces; and maybe she could still see them whole in her mind’s eye, and maybe she almost could. Picture the absence of things that you can’t quite remember, scenes fractured to alien shapes.

In Corning, where Icaria faded away, I spend hours sifting through manila folders, watched by a Johnny Carson bobblehead, perched on a sighing yellow chair. I flip through memos, magazines, reports bound with brads and typed with carbons, one with snapshots of farmhouses fixed to the page by yellowed album corners. “These people loved beauty,” reads a 1942 report from the Adams County school superintendent. They were good, but “could not get ahead,” says a former
member in a 1946 newspaper account. Most of the time I skim the articles and read only the conclusions, trying to make sense of an ending whose sadness comes neither from its consequences nor its cause. “The dream was over,” is one last line; another, “They had become real Americans.” A third: “Each member received enough property to be considered fairly wealthy.” In this office Saundra Leininger, executive director of the French Icarian Colony Foundation, writes grants and calculates budgets beneath a photo of her toddler great-grandson. At the desk beside her, Doris, volunteer for the Johnny Carson Birthplace Society, keeps getting dead calls from some ghost. The phone rings and she answers and nobody’s there. What if the silence holds something important? The wondering could drive you crazy. Like painted walls crumbling out of your memory, like library books in the Cloud. The Invisible One floats through Carisdall’s dreams. Emile pleads: Have you not guessed? Doris shakes her head as she slams down the phone: “Nothing but damn dead air.”

In the evening, Saundra drives me north of town to Lake Icaria, where the first few Icarian settlers came from Nauvoo around 1852 to scope out the land. Back then this reservoir was just a river, and the first Icarians huddled on its banks through a snowy winter, digging dirt caves to keep themselves warm. Today, the lake pokes fingers in among the prairie rises, strokes the shore where teenagers tussle and dive in elegant arcs from the dock. Trailers sit row upon row in the campsites, staking a place for the Fourth of July weekend. People come from all over, explains Saundra proudly. Adams County has plenty to offer. She and Doris, and others, hope to revamp the economy by bringing more tourists here. And in this light, the sunset settling gold and liquid in the valleys, cottontail rabbits springing from the roadside grass, it’s not hard to imagine renewal. The green fields seem endless and dense as the crowded sky with young things quivering to grow. Even the air holds life: the humidity’s bad, but the farmers will tell you it’s what makes the corn grow.

“The Icarians … made a remarkable journey,” reads the website of Saundra’s foundation. “The French Icarian Colony Foundation Board of Trustees are now shaping another.” Their
eventual goal, as Saundra explains, is to build a living history museum, where visitors can stay and live like the Icarians, eating communally, working on crafts. So far, the refectory, the schoolhouse, and the cemetery have been restored, and a small garden planted; there’s no money to staff the site full-time, but the foundation has hopes for the next ten years. To capitalize on the local communists seems less like a cheapening of the dream than a new iteration of it: Where so many critics shake their heads knowingly over the Icarians’ lack of entrepreneurial spirit—or, alternatively, point out that spirit as the reason many thought the outside world would serve them better—it’s ironic, and somehow redemptive, to see Icaria as a way for Adams County to “get ahead.” Saundra has a weekly order for fresh herbs from the Icarian garden from the Three C’s Diner, where she’s a regular. She’s found some French recipes; soon, the foundation may be able to profit from jars of preserves.

In the 1870s, Icarians too old for fieldwork grew vegetables next to their houses. Young new members were annoyed by this individualism, among other things. They were fresh from another rebellion in France and eager to provide the world with a beacon. Called the Progressives, they wanted more room for new members, an organized forum for political discussion, a new commitment to communist ideals. They wanted suffrage for women. The Conservatives, jaded after Nauvoo, were doubtful of welcoming dilettantes, wary of changing a system that worked. They refused to enfranchise the women, there being too many women on the other side. In the fall of 1877, the Progressives announced their decision to withdraw; the Conservatives reluctantly agreed, but the two parties could not agree on how to manage the split. What could not be settled in the general assembly was fought out in a war of petty pranks: stolen milk Boston Tea Partied into a river, wilted lettuce and vandalized wagons, Progressive paint on Conservative signs, Conservative sand in Progressive foie gras. It took a judge and jury, in August 1878, to dissolve the colony’s charter, awarding the land to the younger Progressives—who reformed as Young Icaria—and a
share of the buildings to the older Conservatives, who agreed to make New Icaria elsewhere. The young had the grounds on which they stood. The old had what they had built together. When the ground froze hard they rolled the buildings on logs to a new site a mile away.

In 2001 a restoration team lifted the Young Icarian refectory from its foundation, loaded it onto a flatbed truck, and drove it to New Icaria. It stands there now with the one-room schoolhouse once shared between the colonies and Corning, finally anchored after sojourns at several different historic exhibits. Between the buildings are the herb and vegetable gardens, and the tiny cemetery—three modest limestone markers and a plaque for the unmarked dead—that had been the foundation’s first project. In the recent past, Iowa had no laws to protect historic cemeteries, so farmers plowed right over the graves and planted their corn on the dead. The headstones, then, were useful to prop up foundations and sagging front porches. Now, people renovating their old houses will unearth carved blocks of limestone and call Saundra’s office. “Hey, this looks like French,” they will say. “It was under the house. Do you want it?”

Today the buildings have come to rest: they rise from the grass and echo the tombstones, tall white blocks between green prairie and a blindingly blue sky. They gather dust on the furniture, light on the floorboards, file drawers of paper and fluff from a mouse’s nest, courthouse record books that the county had had digitized and was going to burn. They fill like the empty houses of old Nauvoo with a strange and holy stillness, that stopped time of a space that moves in spurts, like a train held up at junctions and running late. On a train, time stretches and dreamily slows, sunsets pooling on plastic tables, in the palms of a boy so tall he must hang his head at each door as if shamed. He draws pieces of negative space for you in the centers of sketchbook pages; claims that concrete never really cures, at least not deep inside. There, sand holds water. Crushed shells curl around the memory of an ocean. “When I hold you, do you feel special?” he asks out of nowhere. “It seems like you do.”
Icaria ended on a romance. By the 1880s, its population had dwindled to the oldest, most resolute members and their children too young to want to leave. Young Icaria had faded within a decade, its citizens restless and discordant, unable to unite behind a leader and unwilling to give up their trades to farm. The last of them sold the land and moved to Cloverdale, California; there, Icaria Speranza was to dissolve by 1886, its businesses failing as its high admissions requirements prevented any growth. Cheltenham had long since disbanded, foreclosed by the St. Louis Bank in 1864. In New Icaria, there were few young people left and not enough men to work in the fields. They hired local boys to help; in 1884, Will Ross came from Corning to work for the summer and to fall in love with Marie Marchand. He was eighteen when they met, over six feet tall and too big for his clothes, with hands so much larger than hers that the ring he measured on his pinky would slip off her thumb. She was eighteen months older, the president’s daughter, her fingers smudged with the ink of the printing press where she made the colony newsletter. At night they talked politics, sitting on a swing. Though she taught him communism, future writers would blame the colony’s dissolution on their marriage: it meant she left. It meant her elderly parents decided to live with her. In February 1895, Alexis Marchand, Marie’s father, proposed to dissolve the colony; the eight surviving assembly members, gathered at one of the round tables, voted as one. Think of a marriage kept whole for the children’s sake. Think of the sigh at the end of a day. The Icarians disbanded; in October 1898, their property was at last divided among the members, and the charter dissolved by a judge.

“We never thought that our failure was due to the impracticability of [Icaria’s] principles,” wrote Marie Marchand Ross in the epilogue to her memoir, *Child of Icaria*. “Our hopes still live for the advent of the Commonwealth of the World when all will have become enlightened and can see that no one can be happy unless all are brothers, living each for all and all for each.” She denies that she urged the end of the colony; she grieves for “the dream for which so many enthusiastic men and
women had given their all,” and vows that the dream will live on. Still, her book doesn’t end with her global resolve, but with her personal grief. She goes back to the site of the community and finds that most of the buildings are gone. Pigs are living in the basement of the dining hall; its top floor has turned into a hay mow. Her son climbs up, risking death on broken floors, a crash through with the sows devouring him. “I screamed at him to come down, and when I had him by the hand I looked at the wreck of what was once, to me, the finest building I had ever seen. … This sight hurt me so that I would not go near there again.”

Picture the loss, the absence that you turn away from seeing. Picture the beauty invisible in the spaces people leave. The train pulls out of Creston at midnight, in darkness; the land slides away in the black of the window; and I go home by a different route, waking where mountains rise harsh at the edge of the fields. I won’t go back to where pine needles cushion the ground, to the room where the sunlight grows solid, and I wonder if things can stay true as long as you leave them behind, as long as you don’t see them fall. Maybe roadworkers scour Frank’s note from the overpass. Maybe steps splinter the floor of the hayloft. Maybe a thing like love holds you here, just for a moment, your happiness lifting you up where you stand.