

Paradox

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INT. BURNEY'S - AIRPORT BAR

Angle on KARL ROSSMAN [freckly 19 y.o. preppy, over-sized checkered suit & a larger than life backpack] sipping beer through a straw that disappears behind his face mask. Several TV's tuned to the same channel talk about the vaccine. A 'no smoking' sign hangs on the wall.

Apart from a heavy man drinking whiskey same way as Karl and a bored barmen wearing an aggressive face shield with a small insect smashed against it, the bar is empty, dead.

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.)

(Through Karl's air-pods. British, Attenborough-esque accent)
We are not even aware that it exists, but it is like a dripping tap inside our bodies. Our rational minds do not understand it. They do not need to. All we know is that we want a cigarette, and when we light it-

Karl takes his air-pods off. He pulls up his phone opening an email pertaining to a job interview at Nieman Marcus, congratulating him on making it to the final round. He smiles proudly.

He clears his throat and glances at the heavy man.

KARL

Good afternoon sir or-
(briefly looks at his watch)
I should say evening as it is past 5.
My name is Karl.
(nods politely)
If you don't mind me asking, and I can assure you that this is solely out of personal interest, um where-w-where are you traveling to?

Emotionless, the man looks up at the departure screen above their heads, as does Karl - just one flight scheduled for the day...

KARL (cont'd)

Hmh, of course. My apologies - I should have known better. Tough to get to places these days huh?

No response. Still looking at Karl, the heavy man takes a long sip/slurp of his drink...

KARL (cont'd)

I-I myself have an interview with a big corporation tomorrow.

(enthusiastically)

I am sure you've heard of them but as it is impolite, I won't mention their name, unless of course you insist, in which case I must, but in any case, I'm sure that you've heard of them--

(gesticulates)

Fingers crossed, ha-ha.

Karl chuckles then stops abruptly, biting his lower lip in embarrassment. Long beat as the man keeps staring at Karl.

KARL (cont'd)

So, um-- anyyy- exciting plans once you get there? If I may of course--

Beat. Suddenly the man bursts into a loud guffaw... Slurps up his drink, throws a \$20 on the counter and leaves, continuing to laugh...

The barmen, glued to a protest video on YouTube, pays zero attention to anything else. Karl stoops his head, sighs, and nods to himself.

KARL (cont'd)

(to the barmen)

That was mighty selfish of me wasn't it?

The barmen looks back with an annoyed grimace.

KARL (cont'd)

Talking about a job interview during such strenuous times, you know?

(shakes his head)

A-and what if that gentleman was in a similar predicament?

Beat. Emotionless, the barmen goes back to his video...

Karl finishes his drink & gets ready to leave... He pulls a \$10 bill from his large dad-wallet, & looks at the barmen.

KARL (cont'd)

Excuse me-

(no response)

Sir?

Sighing, the barmen looks up again. Karl shows him the \$10.

KARL (cont'd)
 No need for change. Thank you for
 your hospitality.

The barmen goes back to his video again...

KARL (cont'd)
 (genuine)
 Have a great evening.

And with that, Karl plugs his air-pods back in, & leaves.

EXT. AIRPORT - MAIN TERMINAL

The vast terminal is mostly empty & alienating, most shops are closed, multitudes of face-mask & hand sanitizer signs as small groups of silent people, all in masks and solemn-looking, shuffle by like zombies.

Angle on Karl staring at a wide set of arrival & departure screens that show one arriving and one departing flight...

Karl checks his watch and heads to a moving walkway that stretches through the terminal. A man in the distance sneezes as multiple security guards instantly surround him. This makes Karl uneasy.

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.)
 My advice is - try to avoid stressful situations. There is no sense in putting undue pressure on yourself. In the case of social events my advise is the reverse - go to a party, and rejoice in the fact that you do not have to smoke.

Cue 'The Golden Fang' by Jonny Greenwood (or something else that's mysterious & alienating)

Karl stands idle, anxiously looking around, as the walkway carries him...

Past mostly abandoned/deserted cafe's and seating areas... An empty kiosk who's owner follows Karl with her wide, pleading eyes as Karl looks the other way...

Empty runways where birds sit in pairs of 3, Past a set of escalators where all the steps that aren't 6FT apart are removed as people clumsily balance on single steps while clutching their bags...

All the while small groups of people shuffle by, all turning their heads to glance at Karl, who avoids their looks.

Hosts of TV's tuned to different channels but all invariably discussing the virus... A destroyed information desk...

A security area where a TSA agent gently frisks a spooked man using a '6FT' stick that ends in a replica of human hands.

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.) (cont'd)
 (flows through the walkway)
 Once the illusion that life will
 never be quite as enjoyable is
 removed, once you realize that not
 only is life just as enjoyable
 without it but infinitely more so,
 once the feeling of being deprived or
 of missing out are eradicated, then
 we can go back to reconsider the
 health and money -and the dozens of
 other reasons for stopping smoking.
 Have no fear - the worst thing that
 can possibly happen is that you fail.

A first-class lounge that now accepts 'all classes'... An empty seafood joint with a logo of an octopus wearing a mask & holding 8 hand-sanitizer bottles...A smoking room...

Suddenly, the walkway slows down, as if coming to a halt... Karl hesitates, looking at the smoking room...

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.) (cont'd)
 Remember, you did not enjoy being a
 smoker. You do enjoy being a non-
 smoker. Keep going. Keep going, Karl.

Karl frowns - did it actually say that? - & looks at his phone, then back at the smoking room... It's inviting...

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.) (cont'd)
 Just one cigarette' is a myth you
 must get out of your mind.

He exhales sharply, pauses, then turns away and continues further, determined as the walkway resumes it's speed...

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.) (cont'd)
 Doesn't it feel marvelous to finally
 be able to say: I'M FREE?!

Sounds of running footsteps. Karl turns around - a young man is running straight at him.

Confused, Karl moves to the other side to give way but the man moves to the same side, heading right at Karl...

Now frightened, Karl moves again - so does the man...And again... The man is now close, looking straight at Karl, who takes a few steps back...

Then turns around & starts running away, off the walkway as the running man gets closer & closer...

RUNNING MAN

Move! Goddammit-

Karl darts out of his way as he runs past...Then another man comes running after the first one, laughing, his shirt soaked with water as if someone sprayed it on him...

Panting, Karl shakes his head in their direction, and just when a small group of passersby walk right past him, obliviously clears his throat...

Instantly, they dart & tumble out of his way, screaming...

Karl stands frozen to his spot, he is shell-shocked...

PASSERS-BY

(overlapping, aggressive)

What the! / HEY! / What's wrong with you?! / You can't do that! / Have you been tested? / etc.

Wide-eyed, Karl puts his hand to his mouth and instinctively retreats backwards, but slowly, like a penguin...

KARL

(fearful)
I-I uh I'm so sorry I- Im-
Im sorry I- etc.

PASSERS-BY

Where do you think you're
going?! HEY! HEY YOU! Get
over here!

He turns around & pauses... Then bursts into a run... Oblivious to all the confused strangers who frown as he passes, clutching his backpack as it bounces to & fro...

PASSERS-BY (cont'd)

HEY!! Get back here!! Security!!

He turns a corner and stops, panting, his mask puffing in & out... He peaks around the corner - in the distance, the passersby are talking to a security agent...

Suddenly they all look in Karl's direction as the passers-by point in Karl's vicinity... Karl's eyes widen in fear...

Horrorified, he clutches the wall behind him and retreats further & further down the corner...

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.)

(as he runs...)

Smokers also suffer the illusion that the ill-effects of smoking are overstated. The reverse is the case. There is no doubt that cigarettes are the No. 1 cause of death in society.

Until suddenly a door behind him opens & he falls into...
The smoking room...

INT. AIRPORT - SMOKING ROOM

A small room filled with lingering clouds of smoke. Air vent hums. Contrary to the outside of the airport the atmosphere here is nice - everyone seems at ease, chatting & laughing as if they are all close friends.

Karl is more at ease, half-way through a smoke, listening, along with a few amused others, to a man telling a joke...

MAN

(gesticulates)

And then he says - so why don't you see a psychiatrist? Well I can't, says the poodle. I'm not allowed on the couch.

The group, including Karl, bursts into laughter... Karl looks at the floor, then at the woman next to him.

KARL

Um, excuse me, Marsha-- I think- I-Is that yours?

He points to a handkerchief on the floor. MARSHA raises her eyebrows in surprise.

MARSHA

Uf jeez-

KARL

I got it!

He picks it up & hands it to Marsha. She smiles.

MARSHA

Thank you Karl!

KARL
Of course. Thank you for the
cigarette!

Her smile turns melancholy as Karl butts his smoke and starts heading out.

KARL (cont'd)
(to the room)
See you guys! Have a wonderful
evening!

SMOKERS
(various foreign accents)
See you Karl! / Take care of
yourself. / Best of luck on your
interview! / Yeah, break a leg amigo!

INT. AIRPORT - MAIN TERMINAL

Resume spooky/alienating music.

Karl carefully steps outside & looks around, he's weary again. He goes back to the same corner & takes a peak at the main corridor - no red flags.

He reaches into his backpack and pulls out a hoodie along with a face-mask that is a different color from his.

INT. AIRPORT - ZONE X

A long line of passengers stretches from the ticket counter, boarding is in progress.

Wearing his new disguise, Karl hides behind a column, carefully peering over the passengers:

Pan over the passengers faces/masks: Transparent, attached to glasses, shirt collars & hats, ones that say '5G protected', masks with little fans attached to their sides, dog masks that resemble neck cones turned upside down etc.

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.)
Why do we allow this scandal to go
on? Why doesn't our government come
out with a proper campaign? Why do we
allow society to subject healthy
young teenagers to paying through the
nose for the rest of their lives?

No passersby in sight. Cautiously, Karl joins the line...It trudges along... Karl takes out a pack of chips from his bag & sneaks a stack under his mask.

INT. PASSENGER BOARDING BRIDGE

A tunnel-like bridge surrounded by posters promoting COVID friendly loans provided by HSBC. Alert, Karl trudges along a socially distant line that leads to the airplane's entrance.

He looks around, suspiciously...Then turns back & continues.

STEWARDESS

(greet's passengers, gesticulates)
 Good evening, welcome. This way
 please. Good evening, welcome. This
 way please. Good evening, welcome.
 This way please...

INT. AIRPLANE

Mostly all the passengers are seated... Karl, hood up so that it covers most of his face, rushes to his seat.

Karl approaches his row. An old lady spinning a pair of sanitizers like revolvers sits by the window. A massive, ripped gentlemen in a tight protective suit has the isle. Karl nods politely. No nods back, just stern looks.

Karl squeezes past the muscly man and takes his seat... He throws another stack of chips in his mouth and pushes a button to straighten the back of his seat...

When suddenly the backrest propels into Karl's back, thrusting him forward... Beat--

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.)

Will I ever be happy again? Will I
 ever enjoy a meal again? How Will I
 ever enjoy a social function again?
 The smoker is waiting for things to
 improve, but of course while he is
 still moping, the cigarette is
 becoming more precious.

HRRK. HRRK. Karl re-bounces & puts his arm against his throat in shock as his cheeks puff up and crumbles of chips fall out from under his mask.

With horror in his eyes he lets out a series of concealed coughs and quickly freezes, holding it in, his chest & cheeks moving in sudden burst as if he's about to explode in a coughing fit.

His shocked eyes dart between the the old lady & the muscly man who didn't seem to notice... Karl pleadingly looks at the 'Unoccupied' bathroom & is about to head there when-

CABIN CREW

(through the intercom)

Ladies & Gentlemen, the captain has turned on the Fasten Seat Belt sign. If you haven't already done so- (etc. Continues)

Karl hesitates - maybe he can still make it but-

STEWARDESS

(from the kitchen section)

Sir! Sir! Sit down please!

Unwillingly & struggling, Karl sits back down... When suddenly PSCHTT, PSCHTT - The old lady starts vigorously blasting him with sanitizers...

OLD LADY

Better safe then sorry.

Tears stream down his eyes as he squints & whirls; he looks away, coincidentally at the muscly man, who looks aggressively back at him...

In panic & fear, Karl turns back to the sanitizer stream... He is about to burst when suddenly, an idea...

In an aggressive motion he opens his backpack &, assuming a position of a scared ostrich, inserts his head inside, where...

Gasping for air, he frantically presses his hoodie over his mouth & bursts out coughing, silently, carefully & joyously...

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.)

The book describes an incident in the distant future in which a man falls into a river. His companions merely sit around the bank like cattle, oblivious to his cries of desperation. -- For as long as you remain a smoker, you must think of yourself as that drowning man.

Sounds of the plane gaining speed... Someone taps Karl's backpack. He hushes, alert... He isn't done coughing...

MUSCLY MAN (O.C.)

Hey!

Another tap. Karl inhales deeply and holding his breath, retreats from the backpack. His face is sweaty & beet-red...

MUSCLY MAN

(barks)

Sit up. It's not safe.

Struggling, his face & body bursting in sudden motions, Karl sits up, as the muscly man hands him a large face-shield.

MUSCLY MAN (cont'd)

Here - I don't want to get sick on your account.

Karl's helpless eyes dart between the mask & the muscly man... Then, out of fear, he nods in gratitude & puts it on, while the muscly man opens an issue of Men's Health: 'COVID-friendly diets'...

On the verge of another burst, Karl attempts to go back into his backpack but his new mask won't fit through...

He notices the old lady next to him praying, lightly rocking back & forth, her arms in a pleading position...

Slowly pan over the passengers in the whole isle - chatting, reading, sleeping etc.

Until we get to Karl - Arms in pleading position, head tilted up, shimmying back & forth in a sustained coughing fit but subdued as we can only hear the plane taking off...

A few passengers, including the muscly man, notice the commotion & seem alert but once they see Karl's praying hands they nod in approval, & go back to their business, as the camera keeps moving over the isle, leaving Karl OC...

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.)

Having lost your health, energy, wealth, peace of mind, confidence, self-respect, happiness and freedom, what have you gained? Absolutely nothing, except the illusion of trying to get back to the state of piece, tranquility and confidence that the non-smoker enjoys all the time.

Take off noises quickly recede as the plane is airborne...

Karl is a tad relieved but still very much struggling and holding his breath. The 'fasten seat-belt sign' turns off. His eyes widen, he is about to head to the bathroom when-

CAPTAIN

Ladies & gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. Before we proceed with our service I'd like to ask you to join me in observing a moment of silence as we remember and honor the victims of the Corona Virus.

The airplane becomes dead silent. Air whooshes outside. In disbelief, Karl slides down on his seat, letting out a tiny, involuntary hack. PSHHT, PSHHT - More sanitizer-sprays follow from the old lady...

ALL PASSENGERS CLOSE TO KARL

TSHHH! SHUSH! THTCH! Show some respect! etc.

Karl looks pleadingly at the bathroom. Then he sees a lady across the aisle drinking water... He closes his teary eyes, making drinking motions with his puffing, wheezing mouth...

When suddenly his eyes widen in excitement... He pulls a pack of gum from his backpack, rips it open & slams a mouthful under his face-shielded mouth, satisfied...

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.)

The further it drags you down, the greater the relief. When I finally stopped I went straight from a 100 a day to ZERO, & didn't have one bad pang. In fact-

Wheezing lightly, he swallows what sounds like saliva & a smile overtakes his face...

The moment of silence is over & a girl passes down the aisle in the direction of the bathroom. Suddenly she stops, and looks back at Karl...

Her eyes widen - She is one of the passersby from the airport. Karl notices that as his eyes widen too & out of shock he swallows his chewing gums. GULP.

PASSERSBY WOMAN

(to someone OC)

(MORE)

PASSERSBY WOMAN (cont'd)

Hey! That's the guy from the airport!
Who was coughing! Yeeees, that's
him!!!

HRRK. HRRK. Having swallowed his chewing gums, Karl is back to square one - his face grows blood-red, eyes widen & cheeks puff up, as the air-pods fall out of his ears.

And then...He finally bursts, like a rabid dog, hacking & wheezing in every direction...Passengers disburse in panic...

Noticing all this makes Karl horrified, and then somehow amused as he tries to laugh but ends up coughing more...

His vision becomes increasingly blurry, sounds - muffled... Until suddenly there's nothing but darkness, & cough...

His eyes slowly adjust. We recognize his hoodie and the interiors of his backpack. SFX: Backpack zipping.

CREW MEMBER (O.C.)

Stay there and don't move!

Angle on the terrified, scattered passengers. As Karl shimmies & coughs, an alert crew member (badge reads 'Robinson') in a protective suit zips up the backpack over Karl's head, then looks OC & takes a step back.

Holding an astronaut's helmet, another crew member (badge reads 'Delamarche') in a protective suit rushes towards Karl...

Then, Robinson swiftly pulls the backpack off Karl's dancing head, and Delamarche immediately replaces it with the astronaut's helmet... Beat...

Karl's head bounces like a ball in a pinball machine... Robinson & Delamarche exchange satisfied nods...

Then, Robinson opens a small hatch on Karl's helmet as Delamarche shoves a long qtip through it and into Karl's nose, pushing it in hard...

Shocked & surprised, Karl freezes, tears roll down his eyes. Then his eyes widen and he sneezes, which pushes the qtip further down his nose...

Alert, Delamarche pulls on it lightly, but it won't come out. Karl sneezes again, wheezing.

DELAMARCHE

Its stuck. It's STUCK! -- TWEEZERS!

Robinson hands him a pair of tweezers. Delamarche takes the qtip by it's end and in one rough motion pulls-- getting it out as the kickback sends him tumbling OC...

Similar to a large, unclogged drain, Karl momentarily pauses, motionless... And then erupts, in a series of unprecedented hacks, wheezes and machine gun sneezes...

Robinson runs over & closes the hatch on Karl's helmet. It subdues all the noise but the helmet is now flooding with snot & fogging, Karl's face less and less visible...

Delamarche inserts Karl's qtip into a special device & hits 'SCAN'...

As Karl keeps struggling, everyone's eyes are set on the device... Long beat...Karl's barely visible eyes widen.

KARL'S IMAGINATION - VARIOUS LOCATIONS

A red light shines and 'Positive' runs through the devices' monitor...

CUT TO THE PLANE LANDING.

INSIDE, passengers are scattered as Karl, still in his space helmet, is being escorted out by Delamarche & Robinson.

Once they step out of the plane, Karl is handed over to a large group of agents wearing nuclear protective suits-

SECURITY

Mr Rossman?

KARL

Um, y-yessir.

SECURITY

You will have to come with us.

QUARANTINE HOTEL. Large, monolithic, disheveled building. Pan inside.

KARL'S ROOM. A claustrophobic one bedroom. Karl sits at the desk, in the middle of a Skype conversation with a large man in a suit, with a 'CEO' badge.

CEO

What else can I say Mr Rossman but that you blew it. These kinds of chances do not come by very often and, as you can surely imagine.

(MORE)

CEO (cont'd)

And as much as I would like to help you, I'm afraid there is absolutely nothing I can do - you were late and therefore it is only fair that you pay the price. Good day Mr Rossman and thank you for all your efforts.

The CEO ends the call, tears roll down Karl's eyes. He starts crying. Someone pushes a small, plastic-wrapped food tray under his door - the food looks disgusting.

SOMEONE (O.C.)

(American accent)

Bon appetit!

BACK TO SCENE

A green light shines and 'Negative' runs through the devices' monitor...

A crew member raises the monitor in the air victoriously as all the passengers cheer & exhale, starting to come back to their seats...

Delamarche & Robinson look at Karl, his face almost invisible due to all the liquids & the fog. They exchange annoyed glances. Grunting, they lift Karl by the shoulders & carry him off down the isle...

Towards the bathroom, where a smiling stewardess holds the bathroom door open for Karl, as Delamarche & Robinson shove him in...

CUT TO: Concerned & murmuring passengers and crew members looking in the direction of the 'Occupied' bathroom.

SFX: Racking coughs, running water, wheezing & sneezing, throat clearing, bathroom door trembling, cries of joy, heavy breathing, whistling, laughter, gulping, water being spat out, wheezing, gulping, water being spat out, coughing, cries of joy, body dropping on the floor. Long Beat.

Cue upbeat music.

The bathroom door opens & half of it falls off it's hinges, but Karl doesn't notice or care. A new man (air-pods back on) he victoriously struts back to his seat, politely nodding to everyone he passes, though nobody nods back...

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.)

Keep this book safely in a place where you can easily refer to it.

(MORE)

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.) (cont'd)
Do not lose it, lend it out or give
it away.

The muscly man and the old lady are gone. Grinning, Karl takes the isle seat and reclines his seat, resting.

Someone taps Karl on the back. This frightens him as he cautiously turns around...

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.) (cont'd)
If you ever start to envy another
smoker, realize that they will be
envious of you.

A kind looking lady offers him a Halls... Smiling, he gratefully accepts...

He looks at the empty seats on his row and raises the armrests between them. Using his backpack as a pillow, he lays down and puts his face against the light shining through the window - satisfied and happy as he breathes a sigh of relief...

DUNCAN WELLES (V.O.) (cont'd)
You know it's the correct decision.
Expelling that much filth from your
lungs will probably save your life.
Never doubt that decision. If you
have any difficulties, contact your
nearest Allen Carr clinic. You will
find a list of these on the following
pages...

And then, the airplane's engine explodes and panic ensues, as the craft goes whirling & wheezing into nothingness.

THE END