

James Kwapisz

The Paradox Café

The state of a time can be read by the moods of its bars. In a foggy, tucked-away town in the Pacific Northwest one such bar was the focal point of communal banter. The Paradox Café, where *fine foods & spirits* were spread about the townsfolk, giving growth to the tangled weeds, or flowerbed, that was the bar.

The Paradox Café was also the home of George Matley, an old Vietnam Vet who spent most his time in his whicker chair in his small room on the second floor. Rent was cheap and walls were thin. You could hear the click of a cue ball through the bar's ceiling. George, a recovering alcoholic, had moved into the apartment as an attempt to face his weakness head on. As he had expected, the less he drank the more bitter he became. But he could no longer stand it—the nightly rituals, the monotony of conversation, the staleness of it all.

George had never been in the bar itself, which may seem surprising given his condition—but what happened was that he had migrated in order to cut his ties in New England, who and which kept him suppressed in his continual stupor. He thought that if he so as set foot in the Paradox Café the purpose of his endeavor would be compromised. All George Matley knew of the bar he lived above was gathered from his eavesdropping on the voices that came uninvited and muffled through his floorboards, and from his cigarette breaks when he would linger in the front of the blue building.

One night, while out smoking a cigarette, George was approached by two young men in search of a lighter. Both were in their early twenties, dressed in jeans and polo shirts. Without a word George handed over to them his lighter, which had stars and stripes on it and read, "Let Freedom Ring." George never really thought about the design—he had bought it at random with the simple intention of lighting his Camels. But now that it was displayed for these young men who he did not know he was amused by the thought that they might size him up based solely on this corny lighter—although for the most part, he felt quite indifferent to the situation altogether.

“Uh-mur-ih-kuh,” said one of the young men mockingly upon taking the lighter from George’s hand. He nudged his friend searchingly, a gesture which was answered with an uncomfortable smirk. The young man handed back George his lighter. “Thanks, boss,” he said. George nodded in reply, then retreated to his room to finish the rest of his cigarette.

The two young men had come to the bar to catch up on lost time. They had not seen one another since high school. Nick Callahan, the wisecracker, went to a state college for four years and had not yet worked a day in his life. As for his friend, Daryl Smith, he had enlisted in the military right after their graduation. However horrific his experiences overseas had been, Daryl was still in the service. This meeting of old friends was only made possible by the coming of the holidays.

Nick and Daryl seized a couple open stools at the bar, and right away Nick ordered shots of Jameson. They tilted their heads back in unison, each squinting his eyes at the burn in his chest.

“So, get anything good this year?” Nick began. “Hopefully you got something better than socks. I swear, my mom has no imagination. Every year, socks.”

Daryl, still holding his chest and grimacing, forced a smile, so as not to seem rude despite his struggle. “Ah, can’t complain, man,” he finally managed to utter. “Got some nice boots—Timbs—uh, what else? These clothes I’m wearing now, a couple pairs of boxers, and yeah—socks.”

They shared a short laugh. Nick beckoned the bar tender over and ordered two more shots. When she came back with the drinks and change, Nick left the coins on the counter for her and stuffed the bills into his shirt pocket.

“Times are rough,” Nick said, half joking. He took a deep breath, and scratched his beard to occupy the stillness of the moment. “Man, I hate living off my mom’s money. I feel so goddamn tied down. If I had a job I would buy you some Jack Daniels or something. You shouldn’t have to come home from busting your ass and risking your life to this cheap shit.” Nick downed his shot and looked out the bar window. “Ugh, awful.”

Daryl paused, then followed suit by suffering his shot, as it seemed the only thing he could do in that instance.

“You know,” Nick said, turning back to Daryl, “that old dude’s got me thinking.”

“What old dude”

“That guy, you know, that was just standing outside.”

“Oh, what about him?” Daryl asked.

“Well, it’s not really *him* that’s got me thinking. It’s his lighter.”

Daryl, still uncomprehending, contorted his mouth, then asked, “What about it?”

“You ever read Milton?”

Daryl shook his head, No.

“You never read *Paradise Lost*?” Nick asked emphatically. Daryl again shook his head, this time widening his eyes in annoyance. “Well,” Nick continued, “one of Milton’s big ideas in that book is that it was a good thing that Eve ate the apple—you *do* know the story of Original Sin, right?”

“Oh shut up, man, of course I do. Everyone knows that story, I’m not retarded.”

Nick rudely called to the bar tender, demanding that she bring them more shots “pronto.” When the glasses were placed on the counter, Nick raised his and said to Daryl, “By the end of the night, you will be.” They clinked glasses and took their shots. After a guttural coughing fit, Nick carried on, “So, it was actually good of Eve to cause the fall of man from Eden—”

“Yeah, you said that,” Daryl interjected with playful impatience. “Are you going to elaborate, or—?”

“Whoa, calm it down there, bud. I’m getting to that. So yeah, everyone blames Eve for all human suffering and for just being this great big ole bitch, right? But truth is if we hadn’t of fell, there would be no such thing as free will.”

“How do you figure?”

“Think about it: In Eden, you had to do whatever would please God, like a puppet—but now we are free to do whatever the hell we want, be it good or bad.”

“Wait, wait, wait. How does this have anything to do with that old man’s lighter?” Daryl asked.

“Did you see what it said on it? ‘Let freedom ring.’ At first I thought it was lame—and I still do—but it’s got me thinking. That lighter is an advocate for freedom: If I want to

use it to smoke cigarettes and ruin my lungs, I can. If I want to open a beer with it and destroy my liver. I can.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Don’t you see, Daryl? That’s what freedom is—having the option to make good *or bad* decisions. I just figured since you fight for freedom—I mean, supposedly—that you would at least know what it means.”

Upstairs, amid the thin stream of smoke issuing from his half-put-out cigarette, George sat, partially listening to the conversation below. *Supposedly?* he thought. Behind his glazed eyes George saw a parade. People teeming sidewalks as he and his compatriots walk, or limp, or roll, down the street. Expecting praise, a soldier waves his nub at the crowd, but receives no cheers for his courage, no applause for his bravery, only a bombardment of broken bottles and booing. Protesters hissing cusses at the wounded men who fought for them—*supposedly*.

Straightening his back, Daryl asked, “What are you trying to say to me?”

“I think you know—” Nick replied, “I mean, it’s no offense to you, do what you will, you know. But I personally don’t think there’s a point to it—I mean, no point other than protecting the interests of rich bureaucrats who don’t give a shit about you.”

Daryl turned to his drink and hunched over the bar. “I think you need to shut your mouth,” he said under his breath.

“Oh, don’t get sore—”

“Do you know what I have to do every goddamn day in that hot, filthy desert?”

“I’ve got a pretty good idea, and I can’t say I envy you.”

“Yeah, well if you actually *knew* the extent of it you wouldn’t talk so damn haughty, and maybe then you’d shed some fucking sympathy for the people who keep this country safe so you can go to school on mommy and daddy’s money just to read books and tell people how fucking smart you are.”

Feeling that he had overstepped a boundary Nick summoned the bar tender, “Hey, uh, two more please.”

He buried his nose in his beer as if it could provide shade from the sun that was Daryl's glare, hot on his cheek.

"Don't walk away from this," Daryl demanded, grabbing Nick by the shoulders. "Face me when I'm talking to you."

"Okay, thought-police. I'm not entitled to my own opinion?" Nick retorted, prying Daryl's grasp from his shoulders. "That's the problem, they fucking brainwash you. They make it seem so cut and dry. People are either right or wrong in their eyes—if someone's wrong, kill them—or rather, 'correct' them. That's it."

Daryl slouched, shaking his head. "You're not getting it, you don't get it. I don't care *what* you think, but it's the way you say it that's bullshit. So goddamn disrespectful."

"Oh! I apologize for my manner of speech, that it is not up to code, sir. I will right my error by the morrow, drill sergeant sir," Nick said, saluting mockingly.

"Yeah, go to hell."

Nick slid a few bills to the bar tender then sipped at his beer. "I think you're getting too upset about this. Chill out. Drink your beer."

"You never could take anything seriously. You don't care about anyone but yourself—your ideas are all that matter to you. And since you never listen to others you don't respect them— Your father's still a minister, right?"

Nick nodded.

"Okay, so what if I told you that his whole life was a lie—that his purpose was to perpetuate tales of false hope? And what's worse is that he makes his livelihood off this grand illusion that people foolishly give in to."

"Don't talk about my father like that, I'll flatten this can out on your face."

"Ay!" Daryl exclaimed, wearing a derisive smile. "I knew I could get a rise out of you."

"I don't care that much." Nick finished the butt of his beer. "He's not the best example, but I see what you're saying. He's, uh, too much of a literalist for me. Essentially, I think the conception of an anthropomorphic God is absolutely absurd, but that does not necessarily mean that I don't believe in a higher power."

“You’re your own higher power—listen to the way you talk. It seems more like you’re trying to flaunt your big sophisticated college-bought vocabulary than to actually say something to me.”

Perching his elbows on the bar, Nick peered out the window.

“I’m sorry for using your father as an example. That was low, I admit. But I knew it would get you to actually listen. I’m sorry, let me be more direct: I think *you*, Nick, are the one who needs to rethink his life’s purpose, if anyone has to. You went to college for what, four years? English, right?”

Without turning, Nick nodded.

“What do you want to do? Teach, write, what?”

“Haven’t decided.”

“Well you’re not going to do a very good job in either unless you learn how to actually communicate with people. Talking at and talking with someone are two completely different things.”

Nick, for fear his response would only further confirm Daryl’s claim, resigned himself in silence. He felt vulnerable, and resented Daryl for making him feel as such. Too much time has passed between us, he resolved, it’s wedged us apart—this person is no longer my friend. No friend of Nick’s had ever before been so forward with, nor so impervious to his lofty, analogous manner of speaking. He felt that all his words, all he had ever uttered until that point, were sadly unheard, bound up in ribbons of pretentious diction, and fated never to escape his intellectual cocoon. Dejected, Nick stared out the window, unable to bear Daryl’s gaze, nor able to even drink his next beer.

“Three shots of Jack,” a hoarse voice muttered over their shoulders.

Nick and Daryl looked at one another then peered at the old man behind them. They nodded to him familiarly based on their brief encounter outside the bar earlier. The bar tender came back with three tumblers and placed them on the counter between the young men’s elbows. They looked at the drinks then back at the old man. George did not need to speak a word; his face said clearly enough, Go on—drink up. So they raised their glasses but seemed confused as to what they should cheers about.

“To freedom!” George roared heartily.

The young men had no desire to drink any further, but they could not refuse the old man's warm gesture. They all touched glasses and tossed back their heads in unison. When the burn in their chests subsided, George patted the young men on their backs. "Well move over, c'mon now, don't make an old man stand." Embarrassed, Daryl scrambled to the empty seat to his right so that George could sit. They exchanged names.

"And who's this miserable bastard?" George asked.

"Oh, ha—that's Nick."

"What's the matter with him? Can't speak?"

"Maybe," Nick butted in, "it'd be better off that way."

"Aw, Little Boy Blue," George mocked. "What happened? You seemed so proud comin in."

"There's no point talking about it," Nick replied, then turned back to his solace outside the window, to the desolate intersection glistening in the streetlights. George became disinterested with his attitude, and so continued conversation with Daryl. The former and current service men discussed at length their experiences in battle.

"Was it all worth it though?" Daryl asked.

"Hell no, not at the time," George answered, which made Nick's ears perk up. "But in retrospect, what the hell can you do?" George directed the rest of his response toward Nick. "It happened, there's nothing I can do about it now. So might as well be satisfied that I was of service to *something*. Yeah, I had no control over *what* happened, because of the draft and all, but at least I can be content with *how* I did with what I was given. And I tell ya what, I did damn good."

But Nick did not catch his drift. He felt terribly removed from their discussion. "I'm going to go out for a smoke," he declared, rising from his seat.

Daryl and George paused to look at him. They shrugged. As Nick turned to walk out the bar, George grabbed his arm and said, "You'll be needing this."

Liberated, Nick lit his cigarette and walked off through the dark streets, under the dim, intermittent lights.