

For a week
they'd been
coming
every day

to wait for Number Four. This had produced a blend of moods in their faces, a disgruntled expectation. Arriving each morning he would ask the café proprietor if anyone had been in, then go sit at the table by that dirty window. The proprietor, who spent his time in the little galley smoking a hookah, would bring them glasses of tea to sip at. There was a thick red cloth on the table, like a magic carpet, its infinite fibres glowing serenely in the weak, dark light of autumn that fell through the window. They all leaned on this cloth to watch the outside. Beyond the window a rainy sky, creosoted barges, a car with a broken axle, three mossy boulders feet-wet in the sea. Suddenly and with no preparation they picked up the faint, quavering smoke of a remote vessel inches from the right-hand edge of the window and followed its progress across the opening, rapt. When the vessel had passed the faded green frame the three men, mustaches smiling as after unbroken sleep, looked first at one another and then at their watches; old and railroad watches which they drew from their fobs.

The proprietor burbled steadily at his hookah, and now and then after noisily coughing wiped his nose on the underside of his white apron. Two small, broken, disperseful puffs of steam constant above the samovar. And in front of the coloured glasses on the counter three fish kept magnifying incredibly.

Morning, afternoon and early evening were their edgy hours

for waiting. That's when someone who's left the house should feel it's too early to go home (especially in the rain) and will take refuge in some café; any old café. So at those hours they took turns sentry-wise watching the door and street. Now and then a dog crossed the three-foot doorway, or a cart with a load of firewood, or a big woman (coat over head and fat rear soaking), and sometimes about four men in a hurry but during the whole week not one person crossed the threshold.

It was the shank of the afternoon that seventh day when none of the three were hopeful and no one was watching the door, an impulse went through the floorboards and they all turned. Someone had come in.

As if they had just gotten there and were bored with ten minutes' waiting they called out.

"Hey, come on over. We were about to give up and leave."

Number Four shook himself like a lake-wet goose, then wordlessly took his coat off. Hanging it up he came to the table and slumped down on a chair.

"Sleep!" he said. "I'm here to get some sleep."

He really did have that ruined, angry, groggy look on his face of a man who has not slept in ten years. An old jacket, a big nose, a drooping lip, and two smoke-gray, jaded, tobacco eyes.

One of the others gave a strained laugh. "Some other time, huh? We've been expecting you."

"Got to sleep," said Number Four. "We'll play when I wake up."

And laying his head on the table he dozed off. His breathing synchronized with the sound of rain. The other three turned toward the window again, the sea, where two ships went by, and three gulls, and nine flies. The tenth landed on a pane. Autumn now, it's dying, thought one of the men. Who then began toying with the barges.

"Bring the deck," said Number Four quietly, waking up. The request was passed on to the proprietor. He left off water-smoking and brought a pack of cards from the counter to the table. Riffing quickly through and setting several cards aside the red-faced man called out, "We're short a king."

"Check again," said the proprietor. "That's a full pack."

They counted the cards again. The deck was a king short. "A

king short," they called. He looked on the shelves and floor and in the cupboards with no result.

"Not here," he said. "I gave you a full deck."

Red-face stood up and began gesticulating with one hand. "Well, no. We're missing a king, I say. Would a full deck come out short? Would it? This is just like you. You short-deck us, every day you short-deck us. Can't you admit it?"

The one with glasses – I think he was number two – sitting with his back to the wall listening, stared at the counter a long time, then quietly broke in.

"The king's propped against the marble slab behind the fish-bowl. Why don't you reach it out?"

The proprietor gaped at the counter. He extended his hand then and the greenishness which had been staining the water in the fish-bowl for days suddenly vanished. They sat down, rapping the table-top. The fly fell off the window and died.

"Get those cards out of sight," Said Number four.

Red-face slipped the unwanted cards into his pocket, then began to deal from the reduced deck with dazzling speed.

"I'm the bank," said number four. "Money stays in our pockets, all discreet. I can keep track."

The ships were always just leaving the first square of glass. Comes an ace, a king, a jack, a pair of nines. Usually the hands were too weak to play. The four of them would rap the table-top, twice each, in order.

Every time they rapped the proprietor looked toward the doorway to see who was there.

Number Three happened to be dealing – that pointless, anonymous, loser-faced Number Three, that wilted specimen of humanity who was just there to be any old number three on that side of the table – dealing when number four looked at him and said, "We've passed twice. More of this and I'm out." The others rapped on the table again, rap rap, and it was number three's turn. This was his chance to accomplish something. He could have come to life here, crystallised, risen off these pages to expatiate in the room. But he didn't. Twice on the red baize with the tip of his middle finger, rap rap.

At last the proprietor found the direction and looked over. He saw number four swiftly dealing and started toward them

holding the hookah mouthpiece as if the hose would let him cross all the way, then set the mouthpiece down to come over.

"What gives here?" he said.

"Nothing," said Four. "We're just playing a little casino."

"Honest?" Snatching the deck away the proprietor went back grumbling. "Casino! They spend seven days of the week in my café gambling and call it casino. Cops'll be on my neck, all I need."

He laid the cards on the counter.

Like a bashful girl coming to look out a fogged-up window in December, a king slipped behind the fish-bowl again. And again the water took on that greenish cast.

The coming of dusk. Far in the distance a ship's lights wink on. The muddy street shows outside the door. In that pale light reflecting from some vague source the mud looks swollen, soft, perhaps even warm. The window gives only last summer's fly specks for a view. Number Four stares into space, lost, cogitating. He must have reached some culmination for he looked up suddenly to speak.

"We've all lost money."

"Impossible," said one of them. "Somebody has to win."

"Nope. Three ways I figured it with the same answer. We've all lost."

"Could be," said number three, offering no explanation as to how. Loudly they all began calculating their own scores, hundreds of little figures suddenly swarming up like little bugs in the air. Just as the answer was emerging a quirky computation would send the totals to infinity. They were eluded. Silent for a while, number three then spoke.

"I told you," he said. "We've all lost."

"How about just you, though?" one of them asked.

"Me? Just me? I don't know, hadn't thought about it. I did lots of adding, though. We've definitely lost, so I must have too."

"Maybe yes, maybe no," replied the other. He did his own adding and then looked down at the table, flushed.

"Maybe yes." The words were mumbled.

No one spoke now. Their hands felt awkward, empty. Who would have thought that these men could wait every day for a week? Mentally they groped for games, but poker is a hard game

follow. There was annoyed glaring at the proprietor, who sat looking out the door, that tough, measured old proprietor's hookah mouthpiece in his hand. He sat regarding the broadly spaced black ruts in the frozen, glistening mud.

A soiled white chicken feather danced against the door jamb and blew inside, tumbling along the wooden floor toward the window. Four was following it with his gaze when abruptly he looked up.

"Here's an idea," he said. "We can play without a deck." He went on to explain before the half-heartedly smiling faces turned towards him could open in protest.

"Sure," he said, "it's great, and it's easy. Didn't you ever play when you were kids? I make like I'm dealing, and then you think you have a hand for yourselves as if the cards were real. Like you could tell yourself you have a pair of aces, a king, and two nines. Once you think up your hand, no adjustments. There's just the four of us here, all old friends. Anyone cheats and he'll be sorry. How about it?"

"No good," offered Glasses. "Suppose someone keeps thinking up a good hand and buries us?"

"No, that's out. We'd catch him the second deal."

Glasses, who would happily play marbles if it meant he didn't have to sit around, agreed for the sake of killing time. The others wore grins.

"Let's give it a whirl."

"All right," said Four, "I'm dealer."

He scooped together an imaginary deck and dealt. Everyone else kept a this-is-very-funny look. Red-face wouldn't even pick up his hand.

"Come off it," he said. "I was sleepy to begin with."

But the rest pushed him. Give it a try. Reluctantly he pretended to pick up his cards and glance at them. Then he spoke, totally stymied.

"This is great, but what have I got here?"

Four's shoulders sagged. He let a deep breath out and explained again. Red-face was starting to catch on now.

“Right, let’s play.”

The game began. For the first few deals they joked, keeping their self-respect about it. But they settled down. Suppose deploying, will-o’-the-wisp, darkness-streaking fate existed and you could put yourself in its place. How would the first few days go? Who could maintain that calculating, tight fist? No, the execution always brings excess.

Three or four hands went by and there were no good cards. Then, while one player reckoned his luck wouldn’t be right yet, and lost, another would be feeling that something might well come his way twice running, and he’d get a full house. Before long they were analysing, charting the periodicity of each other’s good and bad cards. Number Four, for example, noticed that whenever Red-face got two poor to middling hands the third would happily surprise him. All four made similar calculations, trying like expert chess players to ferret out the chain of logic in their opponent’s mind. But here there were four players, and soon the paths of probability branched out so intricately that they found themselves back at knowledge zero. For a moment number four saw that his luck depended on how the others assessed their own, but the insight flared in the dusk like straw-flame and went out.

They were so engrossed that no one sensed the presence of the proprietor who came over to watch. Finally Number Four glanced up. The proprietor. Four froze a moment. He felt for the table, and only then grasped the weirdness of their position, the ridicule it might earn. He worked up a grin, trying to pass the whole thing off as a joke.

“Pretty funny, eh?”

The proprietor simply shook his head, and went back clucking his tongue. He looked upset.

“Guess what,” said Four. “This time we all win.” His eyes held a sorrowing smile.

“Impossible,” they said. “Somebody has to lose.”

Still that firm but sorrowing smile in Four’s eyes.

Little bugs swarmed up again, till someone thought to count his pocket cash. He had exactly what he came in with. First Glasses, then Number Three (one last chance), they both counted their money. Exactly what they came in with.

"Sure. Could be," they said.

One of them got up and put his coat on. They all got up. They stopped for a moment at the counter to pay for their tea. Four went through his pockets, a thorough search, then turned to Number Three blushing red.

"Could you...? I don't seem to...."

A brown, stormy sky descended on the aquarium sea and the fish, suddenly smaller, darted to hide among the shy weeds.

Onat Kutlar (1936-1995), instead of completing his education in the Law School at Istanbul University, went to work as a journalist. Although he was known for his short stories and poems, his greatest success came with his essays on cinematography. He was killed in a hotel bombing carried out by a terrorist group in Istanbul at the peak of his career.



"Poet Nefti", 14 x 29 cm., water colour on paper, B. Aksoy Collection.