

Lucky Number

My last ten dollars . . . which number . . . which number, I agonized. The croupier¹⁾ spun the wheel. There was a large crowd. A lot of money riding on number seven. Should I go with it? It had always been our lucky number, and maybe it would be lucky again, just one more time. We'd met on the seventh, married on the seventh, and both our birthdays were on the seventh. Then again, I'd been losing on seven all night. I put my money on eight.

It hadn't been a good evening. I had entered the casino²⁾ with a sense of foreboding³⁾ which deepened during the night, as I gambled away my meager savings. It was the first time I'd been back after the disaster of 1993, when I'd lost Estelle's money as well as my own. Worse than that, I lost her respect. That was a big lesson for me to learn. Money could be lost and won easily. The respect of your beloved could be lost easily, but was not easily won back.

I thought she would leave me. I begged her to stay. I pleaded with her. I threw myself on her mercy. I made promises — big promises. She stayed. I kept my promises. I stayed away from the racecourse⁴⁾. I handed her my salary, which she handled very well. I was pleasantly surprised at how well you could live on a modest wage when you didn't waste it gambling.

I thought I was cured. Estelle never referred to that night, but she had never forgotten it either and I could feel its presence, like a small dark cloud on the horizon of our otherwise sunny existence. So why was I here? I wouldn't have been, unless it was absolutely necessary. believe me. The simple fact was that I had crashed Estelle's car that morning. It was extensively damaged. A not so simple fact was that Estelle's car was not just any old car — it was a beautiful yellow MGB that had belonged to her father. She never allowed me to drive it. I wanted to impress a client and had foolishly seized the opportunity to “borrow” it while she was out of town for the day. Everything would have been fine but for the lamp post that I ran into on my way home. Another not so simple fact was that at the moment of impact I suddenly remembered that I hadn't posted off the insurance premium due last week. It was still in my briefcase⁵⁾. The small dark cloud was rapidly becoming a black thunderhead, flickering with lightning. My only resource was a couple of hundred dollars I'd saved by skipping lunches and cutting down on smokes. A man should always have a little something in reserve, for a rainy day, like today. I really had no alternative. I took the money, gritted my teeth⁶⁾, said a prayer, and headed for the casino. I soon found that my luck had not deserted me — my bad luck, that is. You'd think that after an absence of almost three years I would be due some beginner's luck. But no sirree⁷⁾. Everywhere I turned, everything I tried, I lost.

And here we were, playing with my last ten dollars. The last throw of the dice. I looked up from the spinning roulette wheel and caught the croupier's stony gaze. I watched him as he scanned the eager crowd. His eyes met mine and there was a hint of contempt in the smile. How many fortunes had he seen won and lost at his table? How many lives ruined? “Yes, mate, ” I felt like saying, “here's another sucker whose entire life depends on the throw of a dice⁸⁾. ” I understood his contempt. In the last three years I had watched others go down the road I had shunned. I saw their glee turn to despair. I saw the

desperation in their demeanour⁹⁾ as they slunk into the den of iniquity. I shuddered to think that I had been one of them. Estelle had saved me and I stood proudly invincible, untouched by triumph or tragedy.

Until today. No wonder the croupier had contempt for me. I had contempt for myself. I dropped my gaze. The roulette was still spinning crazily, as if it was never going to stop. A hundred eyes focused on it. It started to slow. The crowd pressed forward. The man beside me squared his shoulders and seemed to hold his breath. Further along the table I could see a woman's hand clenched into a white—knuckled fist. Something, perhaps the woman's wristwatch, reminded me of Estelle, and I turned away in shame. I promised myself that win or lose, I would never return. Never a gain would I compromise the purity of our relationship.

When the croupier's voice announced the winning number my stomach sank. It was seven. All was lost. A woman squealed in delight, so like my own dear Estelle that it stabbed me to the heart. I saw the previously white—knuckled fist jab the air in joyous victory. The movement was so sudden, almost violent, that the wristwatch clasp broke and the watch sailed into the air, landing on the plush carpet, not far from my feet. All eyes, however, were on the woman. She had flung herself into the arms of her ostentatiously¹⁰⁾ wealthy male companion, squawking in an unnatural high pitched voice, "Ken. Ken. We've done it. We've won." She began to laugh uncontrollably. She hooted. She cackled, screeched and whooped. She slapped her thigh. She danced a jig. The crowd watched in envious amusement. But I was not amused. I didn't need to pick up the watch to know that it was inscribed "To Estelle from her grateful husband."

□by Pieter Koster

幸运数字

还剩最后 10 美元……压哪个数字……哪个呢？我感到极度的痛苦。赌场总管转动着赌盘。一大群人围在前面。数字 7 上摆了许多钱。我应该试试它吗？7 一直是我们的幸运数字，或许这次能再次应验，就这一次了。我们在 7 日相遇，在 7 日结婚，并且我们两人的生日都在 7 日。然而，整个晚上我都因投 7 而失了手。所以这一次我把钱压在了数字 8 上。

这一晚上我可真不顺。一来到赌场我就有一种预感，随着手头上本不充裕的钱越赌越少，这个预感则变得愈来愈强烈。此次旧地重游是我灾难的 1993 年后的第一次。那一年，我输掉了埃斯特尔的钱和我所有的钱。更糟的是，我失去了她对我的尊敬。这是我有生以来最大的一次教训。钱财易失也易得，但你所爱的人对你的尊敬却易失难得。

我想她会离我而去。我于是恳求她留下。我真是求她了。我乞求她能够怜悯我并在她面前对天起了誓。她留下了。我则信守诺言。对赛马场我敬而远之。我将工资交给她，她管理得有条不紊。当看到不再把钱浪费在赌博上，而靠微薄的工资也能很好地生活时，我感到了一丝快乐的惊喜。

我认为我的恶习已经得到根治。埃斯特尔从未再提及那天夜里发生的事情，但是她却始终没有忘却。我能感受到这一点，就像在我们灿烂的阳光中总有一小片黑云似的。那么我又为什么来到这里呢？请相信我，若不是不得不来的话，我本是不该在这里出现的。简单的事实是，那天早晨我把埃斯特尔的汽车撞坏了，而且撞得很厉害。但另一个并不那么简单的事实是，埃斯特尔的车不是辆普普通通的旧车，而是本来属于她父亲的一辆漂亮的黄色 MGB。

她从不允许我开这辆车。而我却为了在一位客户前摆阔，竟趁她今天不在“借来一用”。要不是在回家的路上我撞在了那盏路灯柱上，一切本来都很顺利。另一个并不那么简单的事实是，在那撞击的一瞬间，我突然记起，上星期保险到期，我却还没有将续保险费寄出，还放在我手提箱里。小片的乌云迅即成了浓云滚滚，电闪雷鸣。我惟一拥有的只是几百美元，还是我缩食节烟省下的。一个男人总得有点私房钱。就是为了某一天的急用，像今天。我真的别无选择了。我拿着钱，咬了咬牙，嘴中祈祷着走向了赌场。我很快发现我的手气背弃了我，也就是说我的运气糟得很。你会想几乎3年没练手，我应当有点新手的福气。可事实上根本没有。我到处去翻转赌具，到处去尝试，却到处都输钱。

好了，把话再说回来。我留下了仅有的10元钱，还有最后一次压赌的机会。我抬头从飞速旋转的赌盘望去，目光正好与赌场总管的碰到了一起。他逐一扫视着这些急不可耐的赌客。他也看到了我，于是对我笑了一下，但是笑中带着一丝蔑视。在这张桌子前，也不知他看到了多少次大把大把的钱财赢来又输光。目睹了多少人家破人亡。“是的，伙计。”我很想对他讲，“这儿又来了一个将整个命运压在这最后一掷的笨蛋。”我懂得他那一瞥蔑视。在过去的3年中，我也曾见过不少人沿着我一直避免不去走的路滑落下去，他们由欢喜变成失望、误入歧途又难以自拔的情景历历在目。想起我也曾是他们中的一员，不禁感到心有余悸。埃斯特尔挽救了我。我得以又以一个自豪的不可战胜的新面孔挺立起来，赢利或是悲戚对我来讲已如同陌路。

但是今天这一切都已成过去。难怪赌场总管用那种蔑视的眼光瞧着我。其实我自己都蔑视自己。我垂下了眼睑。赌盘仍在疯狂地旋转着，好像永远不会停下来。数百只眼睛紧紧盯着它。转盘开始放慢了速度。人们的身体也随之向前倾去。我身旁的那个男人端着肩膀，似乎呼吸已经凝止了。桌子的另一边一个女人紧握着指节已变白的拳头。有样东西，或许是这个女人的手表，使我想起了埃斯特尔。我感到了一阵羞愧，便转身走开了。我向自己许诺不管是赢是输，我决不再回到这里了。我再也不能破坏我们纯洁的关系。

听着赌场主管宣布获胜的数字，我的心猛地沉了下去。幸运数是7。一切全完了。这时传来一个女人快乐的尖叫声，很像我亲爱的埃斯特尔。我心里不禁感到一阵刺痛。我看到刚才那个白指节的拳头正在欢快地胜利地在空中挥舞着。动作是那么地突然，几乎可以说是猛烈，以至于手表带一下子崩断了。手表在空中迅速飞过，最后落在了离我脚不远的豪华地毯上。然而，人们的目光仍盯着那个女人。她飞扑进了她的穿着阔绰的男伴怀中，用尖尖的声调叫道：“肯。肯。我们成功了。我们赢了。”她开始狂笑起来。她一会儿大叫，一会儿咯咯地笑，一会儿尖声尖气，一会儿又气喘吁吁。她拍打自己的大腿，随即又扭起了舞步。周围的人们用羡慕的眼光饶有兴味地注视着她的表演。然而我没有任何喜悦之情。不必拾起那块手表，即使知道表上刻着“埃斯特尔存念，心怀感激的丈夫赠。”

NOTE 注释：

1. croupier ['kru:piə] n. 赌场上的总管理人
2. casino [kə'si:nəu] n. 赌场
3. foreboding [fə:'bəudɪŋ] n. 预感，先兆，预兆
4. racecourse ['reɪskɔ:s] n. 跑马场，赛马场
5. briefcase ['brɪfkɛs] n. 手提箱，公文包
6. grit one's teeth 咬紧牙关；下定决心
7. sirree [sə:'ri:] n. 先生
8. dice [dais] n. 骰子

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9. demeanour [di'mi:nə] n. 行为，举止
10. ostentatiously [ɒsten'teɪʃəli] adv. 装饰表面地，卖弄地