

# The Players

Jack Burks

## *Players...*

PAST- Grey hair, dark bags under his eyes, forming an expression of pain, fatigue, and skepticism. He slouches and speaks in a grumble. He wears a dusty old suit, white shirt and black sports coat, black dress shoes. He owns a pair of black pants (that he is not wearing). His red tie has been loosened down and hangs like a noose. The look of a retired businessman who still wears his expensive clothing as a symbol of masculinity. Remember something?

PRESENT- A face full of youth, the changing mask of momentary reaction, expressive mouth and mobile eyebrows. He sits upright and speaks calmly, brightly, with confidence. He wears a white dress shirt with the highest button open and no undershirt or tie, grey pants held up by suspenders. He owns a pair of dusty shoes (that he is not wearing). The look of a street-corner newspaper boy. Do something?

FUTURE- Nervous eyes that often flick between the backs of the other two poker hands. He sits anxiously, never finding a comfortable position, and speaks impatiently, occasionally tripping over words. He wears jeans and a pair of tennis shoes. He owns a blue button-up shirt (that he is not wearing). The look of a man who earns a living with his hands. Become something?

FOURTH- Immobile. Eyes closed. Mouth open. Head rolled back so that the eyes would be facing up if open. No distinguishing features.

## *Scene...*

Past, Present, Future, and Fourth sit in wooden chairs dispersed at equal intervals around a circular wooden table, all situated on a floor of white sand. They are playing a game of poker. Each of three has a pile of chips, roughly even, and a hand of cards. Fourth is slumped in his chair, eyes closed and held tilted back. Before the fourth lies a permanent hand face down on the table that is never revealed, next to a mountain of chips, more than the other three piles put together. Among his chips are Present's shoes, Future's shirt, and Past's pants. Fourth never moves. The players never stand totally straight, and never completely leave their chairs.

## THE PLAYERS

*(The curtain rises, and the three gaze at their cards for half a minute. During this time: Past is still, gazing into his cards with the aforementioned expression. Present nestles into his chair, getting comfortable, a broad smile growing on his face and then declining again. Future taps his foot and reorders his hand several times.)*

FUTURE: Where are we going with this?

*(The other two look up from their hands.)*

PAST: The same place we've been going.

PRESENT: How now, fellows. We ought to take this one game at a time. *(He smiles, too broadly)* No need to get worked up!

FUTURE: I-I hope it turns out alright.

PAST: Maybe if you'd cut your hoping we wouldn't have gotten stuck here.

PRESENT: It's not all bad, friends. Nothing wrong with a card game. Enjoy it while it lasts.

FUTURE: It won't last much longer.

PAST: That's what you said last time. And that was a long time ago. Nothing came of it.

PRESENT: True. *(His smile fades)* Things are the way they are.

FUTURE: We'll start a new game soon?

PAST: You said we had stopped playing!

FUTURE: We can. Surely we will.

PAST: You've always been so annoying, Future. I've never liked you. *(He aims a quaking finger at FUTURE)*

FUTURE: You will in due time. I'll grow on you. Perhaps. You'll grow on me. *(Confusion)* Yes. You will.

PRESENT: *(In a mocking tone)* Come now, Past! We're all friends here. We may as well be. Nothing else to do but to play some cards. We may as well *(Pauses, shrugs)* be!

PAST: (*Scoffs*) This has been a waste of time. Have you looked around the table? We've all lost money to a dead man. (*He gestures at FOURTH*)

PRESENT: Who is he anyway? Are we sure he's dead?

PAST: We checked his pulse.

FUTURE: I wonder if he'll return.

PAST: We checked his pulse.

PRESENT: Does he have a pulse, then?

FUTURE: (*Indifferent to the other conversation, dreamily*) He has to come back.

PAST: I haven't been able to recall...

PRESENT: He doesn't smell.

FUTURE: (*Still dreaming*) Poker will be more engaging with four players.

PRESENT: It's a tragedy.

PAST: Who was the old bastard? I haven't been able to recall... how he got all our money.

PRESENT: He has our clothes too.

FUTURE: (*Still dreaming*) Four players will be simply divine!

PAST: (*Finally responding*) You never learned to shut your mouth, did you?

(*FUTURE wakes from his dream, shaking his head*)

PRESENT: (*looking at FOURTH*) He isn't participating.

PAST: (*looking at FUTURE*) You've said it. He's always been off in his own little world.

(*FUTURE leans away from PAST's accusatory gaze. PAST and PRESENT continue to address different subjects.*)

PRESENT: He's well off.

PAST: What did you expect? He's been in a daze for years.

PRESENT: He's a handsome fellow.

PAST: Handsome! He was birthed by a starving bitch.

PRESENT: He seems like he could still be alive. *(He squints at the motionless FOURTH)*

PAST: *(Turning to PRESENT)* You've talked nonsense all your life! *(Narrowing his eyes at FUTURE, he speaks meticulously, like the issuing of a terrible insult)* This man was a still-born.

FUTURE: *(Exasperated)* I'll stay out of this clusterfuck.

PAST: *(Turning to FOURTH, eyeing the mountain of chips)* Anyway, whoever he was, he quit at the right time.

FUTURE: We'll win it back when he returns.

PAST: If I had won that much, I wouldn't return.

PRESENT: He seems to be elsewhere. Without his winnings.

FUTURE: Then he'll have to come back. To get them.

PAST: I haven't been able to recall... a dead man ever rising.

PRESENT: He seems alive.

PAST: *(Sarcastic)* Ha! Then I suppose he's been sleeping all this time, he just preferred not breathe while doing so.

FUTURE: *(Impatient)* Shall we stop this blathering and finish the hand?

*(PAST mumbles irritably, as PAST and PRESENT take up their cards. Two rounds of raising the stakes. The order around the table goes: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE, skipping FOURTH. A small pot grows in the center. On the third round PAST folds. PRESENT slaps his cards on the table, followed by Future. They stare at the empty white cards.)*

PRESENT: This would be much easier... if our cards weren't blank.

FUTURE: We'll get new ones eventually.

PAST: Tell me, have we been using them so long the ink rubbed off, or have they always been like that?

PRESENT: Either way we can't tell who wins and who loses.

FUTURE: We'll pretend then.

PAST: Like we always have.

FUTURE: I'll win this round.

*(PAST eyes him critically, but raises no objections)*

PRESENT: That's fair.

PAST: *(Sarcastic)* Well played.

*(FUTURE rakes in the pot, nervously counting each piece. His pile grows ever so slightly. Present shuffles the deck and prepares to deal. He reaches for the face-down hand of FOURTH, but reconsiders, leaving it on the table.)*

PAST: *(Scratching his chin, reminiscing as PRESENT shuffles)* We were able to tell who won and who lost. Weren't we? It was long ago. Maybe we were pretending then too.

PRESENT: If only we could find cards with markings...

FUTURE: And we decided we would learn the rules...

PRESENT: Things would run smoothly.

*(A pause in the dialogue. PRESENT finishes shuffling, slapping the deck down on the table. He gains no one's attention. PRESENT eyes the deck, ventures a dry laugh, fails.)*

FUTURE: *(Still reminiscing)* There were marks on the cards, curving symbols of red and black. Weapons and organs. A king with a sword in his chest. A queen with a rose. And numbers in the corners, ascribing value, meaning, purpose. *(Sighs)* We knew the rules then.

FUTURE: *(Suddenly bright)* We'll make up our own rules!

PAST: We were never able to do that.

PRESENT: *(At PAST)* Don't be a coward!

FUTURE: Our rules will be better anyway.

PAST: The rules have been in place forever, you lunatics. We were never able to change them. Never able to change anything.

PRESENT: Maybe you're right. (*Despairingly*) There's nothing to write with.

FUTURE: One day, we'll play by our own rules. (*Confusion*) Yes. We will.

PRESENT: Maybe he (*Gesturing at FOURTH*) knows how to play.

PAST: That old zombie? Why haven't we woken him up?

PRESENT: You said he had no pulse.

PAST: I've been trying to recall... ever saying that.

PRESENT: Let's wake him up now.

*(The three players stare at FOURTH for a few seconds, unsure of what to do.)*

PAST: We tried this. Didn't we? It didn't work. Or did it?

FUTURE: We'll do it later. When are you going to deal, Present?

PRESENT: Screw this. I'm going for it.

*(PRESENT leans over the table toward FOURTH and looses a primal howl while shaking FOURTH's body violently. FUTURE pays no heed to the display, taking the deck from PRESENT's table space and shuffling it nervously. PAST gazes off into the distance, toward the audience. After PRESENT has exhausted himself in vain, he collapses back into his chair, and FOURTH slips back into his regular position. FUTURE places the deck back on the table, and all three are gazing into the distance, toward the audience.)*

PRESENT: (*Once his breathing has slowed again*) Anyone see anything?

FUTURE: We will soon.

PAST: (*Shouting suddenly, sitting bolt upright from his regular slouch, pointing*) I just saw something!

PRESENT: (*Squinting, hand shielding his eyes*) I don't see anything.

PAST: (*Embarrassed*) It was a mirage.

PRESENT: They come more and more often these days, don't they?

FUTURE: When will we find some new cards?

PAST: There's never been anywhere to find new cards.

PRESENT: (*Comic disbelief*) Are these the only cards in the world?

PAST: They were the first.

FUTURE: I'm beginning to believe they'll be the last.

PRESENT: Look around. See if there's anything to paint them with.

*(The look around them, under the table, out in the distance, under their chairs, on the seats of the chairs under themselves. While doing so PAST notices he has no pants.)*

PAST: Where have my pants gone?

PRESENT: The dead man has them, you daft old bastard.

PAST: I could have kicked the shit out of you! ...Back in the day.

FUTURE: (*Clutching his head in annoyance*) This nonsense won't end!

PRESENT: One of us should get up from his chair, and crest the nearest dune. There may be something out of sight from this table that we can use.

*(No one moves.)*

PAST: If you two have always wanted new cards so badly, why haven't either of you gotten up?

PRESENT: You get up.

PAST: I'm old, dammit! You (*Pointing at FUTURE*) haven't gotten up.

FUTURE: I will get up when I choose! And you? (*Pointing at PRESENT*)

PRESENT: I have things (*He snatches the deck back from FUTURE's table space*) to do. (*He begins shuffling*)

*(PRESENT shuffles, and the players lean over the table toward each other, faces close together, each placing blame on the other two with expression alone. After ten seconds or so of this, their*

*eyes all slowly gravitate toward FOURTH, and they lean close to him, staring him down with still-narrowed eyes and vicious scowls. PRESENT shuffles through the whole ordeal, and without watching the cards they begin to tumble out of his hands onto the table until he holds nothing, but continues the shuffling motion. Then they slowly lean back into their respective seats. Their gazes return to the horizon. PRESENT's shuffling motions slow, then cease.)*

PRESENT: Anything?

PAST: Nothing.

FUTURE: Something...?

*(Another pause. FUTURE suddenly ducks under the table, emerging with a handful of sand. He takes one of the scattered cards and violently rubs the sand into it. He holds up the card as high as he can, still sitting down.)*

FUTURE: We'll do this with every card. Then we'll be able to tell them apart, by the patterns of sand we arrange.

PRESENT: It looks the same. The same! The sand is as white as the cards.

PAST: Yeah, the cards might have been made from the stuff, for fuck's sake!

PRESENT: The exact same color. We can't see the patterns, sand doesn't stick to playing cards, and even if our spit could hold the pictures together, you can't shuffle a deck covered in saliva and sand!

*(FUTURE still holds the card aloft. He droops a little and lets his arm fall, feeling defeated. Then he thrusts the card back into the air.)*

FUTURE: We'll pretend. We'll pretend we can see the arrangements, and since we can't, there will be no point in shuffling anyway.

*(The players are still for about five seconds, PAST and PRESENT looking at the card held in the trembling hand of FUTURE. Then all at once, the players duck under the table, frantically scooping great quantities of sand, dumping it in heaps on the table. They grab cards from the scattered pile and begin rubbing the sand in as hard as they can, one card after the next. They continue this as the curtain falls.)*