At the End of the Line

The line you are standing in is a snake that is folded so many times, but you are a patient man and wait at the back politely. You look at the door you just came through to see a white couple walk through the door. You think you remember them, but then you decide that they just resemble a couple you used to know. They walk up to you and become the back of the line.

“Hello,” says the woman. She looks like she is looking for the newest gossip, *a typical white wife,* you think.

“Hi,” you reply smiling politely.

The man reaches his hand out to you saying, “George Richardson, and this is my wife, Regina.” He seems respectful and kind, not forcing a smile.

You reply, “Luther, Luther Night.” You take note of the intense contrast between your dark hand and his white hand. George smiles back at you, and there is a pause while you search your mind for something to say.

“Do you have any family?” you end up asking.

“Yes, we have a son,” replies Regina cutting off George. For the first time, you take note of a faint aura coming from them making you remember dinner parties filled with loud laughter and good company. You could faintly smell wine when they talked and you could see the gleam in Regina’s eyes full of life and silliness. After you digest what Regina says, you realize how quiet the conversation has gotten, so does George. Regina doesn’t realize this until the pause is drawn out and she searches George’s face for the answer.

“*What?*” Regina demands.

“We *did* have a son,” George replies to you, ignoring Regina. “We just aren’t over the shock yet,” he says while putting an arm on Regina’s shoulder, “So how about you Luther, any family?”

“I did actually have a wife myself,” you say quietly.

“I’m sorry, how did it happen?” Regina asks.

“*Regina*!” gasps George. He looks at her sternly, but when Regina becomes a small and frightened child he sighs. You can’t tell what was said, but you do know that their exchange there meant something. “I am so sorry Luther,” George says, almost sighing. He looks back at you with tired eyes.

“No, it’s fine. It was … a car accident,” you reply only to be kind.

Regina nods her head. She begins to get teary, and you look down at your scuffed up shoes, pretending not to notice. She is wearing her innocent face. She is a lost kid who has just been accused of a crime she did not commit. However those small tears start turning into snuffles and eventually soft sobs. You are repulsed by the terrible acting she has provided you and George. You are the only one who feels this way because you see George comfort her by hushing her soothingly. You don’t understand why Regina performing her tragedy until George says, “Us too.”

“I’m sorry,” you say. A brief memory of your wife bursts through your head and is gone before you allow yourself to ponder over it. You won’t let yourself come to think of the woman you fell in love with. You won’t destroy yourself like that in this line. You look at your watch to avoid looking at the white man. To avoid looking at his spoiled wife, you look at your watch.

You look in front of you at the long line still there, in front of you. You are waiting in line to be asked questions by a man in a gray uniform at the front. He is sitting at a desk with a pen in his hand. The entire room is gray, down to the man at the desk’s pen. It resembles the sky on an overcast day, full of the different shades of gray. You are aware of the depression you begin to feel as you study the room. The feeling of being controlled is vivid, even through the gray.

You follow the system and figure out when somebody is done with the interview, they step onto a scale. After a bit there is a key, like one to get into a hotel room, handed to the person on the scale by the interviewer. You watch, as they would walk to either the white door on the right of the scale, or to the black door to the left of the scale. You notice about half of the people received white cards.

You turn back to George and Regina and see that Regina is done crying. George is still holding her like the small child she is. You see her expression turn from interested to a nervous intense stare. “I wish we could just be done with this. I wish we were at the front of the line,” Regina tells George. Regina is using George and it disgusts you. You think about what process you are going through, and you push the thought away from your head. Although your time is disappearing, you don’t have to face the question of what card you will get now.

“Why don’t you and George go ahead of me,” you offer.

“We’re fi-” George starts.

“Thank you,” Regina finishes. She tugs at George’s flannel shirt to pull him in front of you. You know Regina would take this offer from anybody in the line, including if the offer came from one person, allowing Regina to move forward in the line only a step or two.

You are getting closer to the front. You look behind you to see the line has not dwindled down, but grown from behind you. Every time somebody would receive their black or white key and walk to their door, somebody else would come through the gray door at the back of the room. Gradually, you are advancing to the front. You look at the scared faces of the lonely children in the line without their parents, friends, and siblings. The depression of this room is taking a toll on you.

The feeling of your stomach plummeting towards the ground makes you close your eyes and see with your feelings. Fear’s appearance is becoming more unmistakable as you approach the front of the line. You don’t show your fear like the rest of the room does, but the aura that is surrounding everybody is full of fear’s putrid appearance. You look at George’s hands because you notice they are trembling uncontrollably. He is closing his eyes and you know he is praying. You can tell he isn’t praying for himself, but for Regina.

You look in front of you and count two couples and four singles in front of Regina and George. You look down at your shoes when you hear a piercing scream from a woman at the front of the line. You see her holding a black card in her hand and she is screaming without words. She has suddenly become the snake that the line once was. She is trying to slither away by thrashing with a mad look in her eyes.

You notice that this woman caused a chain reaction for the rest of the room because Regina starts breaking down along with some men and most of the women in the room. You watch as her hands grasp at George’s arms like a small child. George starts to study the rest of the room along with you, and suddenly the tensions has overwhelmed everyone.

Two men in gray uniforms enter the room through an unknown door grab the woman and tow her to the black door. The woman can only fight so hard before she breaks down and she gives in. You hear the screams escaping the door as the men close the door behind her. With this, the room’s sobs are hushed.

Now, your thoughts begin to move to the same question flooding the room. What card will I get? It sits like a disease in your head slowly demolishing any other thoughts. You picture the possibilities of both cards, but you are a lost cause. You can’t comfort yourself, but you still try; you are a kid waiting to get a shot and you can’t take your mind off of that needle being stabbed into your arm. So, you wait in the line because you are a patient man.

Finally, you watch as George and Regina walk up to the desk and the man holding his pen and asking his questions. “Names,” the man questions.

“I’m George Richardson, and this is my wife Regina Richardson,” George replies. You are not sure, but you are almost positive that if Regina were alone she would be lost of words and incapable of completing this interview.

“Cause of death?” he asks.

“Well, it was late at night, and I was a bit . . . distracted. There was an oncoming car that we hit,” George stammers.

The man frowned down at George for a second and wrote something down. George’s eyes are suddenly becoming less kind. He starts glaring at the man. You don’t think that he is mad at his interviewer though.

“Was anybody killed in the car you hit?” the man said in an indifferent tone.

“I don’t remember.” George replies through clenched teeth. “There was, there was a man who was killed in the car we hit.” You look at his face, and your heart starts racing like you know George’s is. You want to comfort him because he has nobody to clutch to, but at the same time you are starting to remember how you know him. His face resembles a familiar red you *almost* remember.

“Please step onto the scale,” the man in the gray uniform commands in his monotone voice.

George stepped on, but Regina just stood there, leaning forward so she could still cling to George. George turned around and grabbed her arm to pull her up onto the scale. With this action, Regina started to sob uncontrollably. You also want to comfort her, but her voice, her scream is suddenly becoming familiar.

You see the man grab something from his desk, but you are too occupied to see what he hands George. All you remember is George tugging an unwilling Regina to the black door, and screams echoing in your dead ears.

You are looking at your scuffed up shoes again and a man in a gray uniform grabs your arm to pull you to the front of the line awakes you from your trance. You immediately step up to the front of the line. You don’t know why, but you feel as though all of your dignity will disappear if you can’t control yourself through this interviewer.

“Name?” asks the man in front of you whose tone suddenly sounds hostile.

“Luther Night,” you reply.

“Cause of death?” he asks.

You look down at your shoes for a second and you can hear the click in your head. Suddenly George’s face appears in the car coming right at you. His face is red and he is yelling at Regina in the passenger seat. You can tell he is drunk by the speed he is going and the fact that he is in your lane. You try to turn the car to get onto the other side of the road, but you are too late. “I was in a car accident,” you say looking at your interviewer straight in the eye.

“Please step onto the scale,” he says with a dead look in his eyes. You look at his face and the pressure in your stomach becomes more present.

You take a shaky step towards the scale, whishing you had something to cling to. You take the final step to the scale, and you wait. You wait for the longest second of your life. You have been waiting for this second since you were a kid. Your life starts to become just another whisper echoing in your dead ears. The faint smell of wine, the scuffed up shoes, the clinging, and the white man are forgotten. Finally, you are handed a white key.