

Waiting

He had spent a lot of his life waiting. He waited for his first-grade classroom door to open, proud to enter and take his seat, instantly in love with Miss Milam and her blond hair, intoxicated by the fragrance of her talcum powder.

He waited four months for his report card in seventh grade, and even though it had a D on it, he took it home dutifully. At least he passed.

He had waited for the nickel bus to take him to school each day, and while waiting, memorized “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.”

In cap and gown, he had waited four times to hear his name called, to march across a stage, to receive four pieces of paper which he still had somewhere. He waited in lines in a gymnasium where the professors of the small college sat behind tables, enrolling students for the opening term of the year. He waited in line for the dormitory dining hall to open, but not because the food was gourmet. On spaghetti night, Bill, who became an astronaut, dished out spaghetti to those inching through the line. “Get your live fish bait right here!” Presentation was not characteristic of the men’s food service.

He had waited in the anteroom till the usher said, “It’s time.” He took his place, and the wedding march began. In she came, floating down the aisle like an angel. She had been his savior in ways he had never imagined, absolutely worth the wait.

He waited five hours, beginning at 2:30 A.M., staring at Pacific waves dashing on the rocks beneath a gigantic picture window, till the birth pangs were over, and he had another love in his life.

When his mother died, he had waited in the viewing room. Friends and acquaintances came to pay their respects. He wondered where everyone was. Then it occurred to him. She had outlived most of her friends and acquaintances. Her heart was large enough to embrace the world, but she was not a public person. No one was going to come by representing some club or church. The family only, plus a few strangers, all waited together.

Waiting with colleagues, marching in heavy rain, he struck for smaller classes; others struck for money. They got neither smaller classes nor more money. But they had stood up to power. They owned a dignity they had never felt before.

I’m waiting, he thought. We don’t check out according to our room number. I’m in Room 103. Leonard was in 104 and younger than me. One day he was there, the next he was gone, and Franklin is in his room. Now Franklin is waiting along with the rest of us.

Aggie, she left suddenly. She loved to play Bingo, and she could keep three cards going at the same time. She was lucky, and the prizes were not bad—a candy bar, a small stuffed toy, or a knitted hand warmer someone had donated. They rolled the gurney past my door last night, and even with the sheet pulled over her face, I knew who it was.

What’s next? he asked himself. The leap is next. The move to the head of the line--leap--into what? He wondered where the idea came from there’s something beyond death.

He thought of the funeral of one of his Hmong students who had gone home ill one day. The next day Lao Moua had jumped to the head of the line. Alone, he had an epileptic seizure, fell off his bed, struck his head on the metal frame, and bled to death.

The one indisputable fact is we go. We might wait 100 years, or far less, but ultimately we go, in war, or by accident, or in the quiet of our home, extracted from our room and hidden from view on a gurney.

He finally admitted to himself notions of an afterlife—resurrection, heaven, Purgatory—all were guesses that sprang from hope. The culture declares saints reach heaven; sinners enter hell, and we sinners pass through Purgatory, where their souls do a turnaround. Perhaps none of it is real. Over the years, he had gradually laid aside all ideas about life after death. *Why think about it*, he asked himself *when the answers never rise above the level of speculation? Even priests and ministers, specialists, disagree because they, too, are mere speculators.*

Whatever happens after death, he was content to leave in the hands of the Other, his designation for divinity. But he took comfort in the fact that people who die live on—in our memories. People he had loved, people he had feared, people he might have only known casually, all lived inside his mind. He still conjured up the memories of his mother and father, like the smell of his father's aftershave. His mother, queen of the kitchen, waited for the third table, the women's table--after the men and children had filled themselves with the holiday feast. He still heard the sweet voice of his blind Granny waiting in her dark world, "Who's there? I know it's someone," when all along, she knew it was he.

He closed his eyes, wondering if it might be for the last time. *If it is*, he thought, *then so be it.*