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## Word

It was a hospital room like all hospital rooms, square, white, almost naked, save a bed whose head and foot could be lifted mechanically by pushing multicolored buttons on a gadget, a white vinyl-covered chair, and a monitor box sitting on two brackets installed on the wall with wires, one end attached to the monitor, the other to the chest of the man lying motionless in the bed. The monitor, a small metallic box, was registering the heartbeat of the man. A tiny green dot was moving up and down and emitting a muted sound: *beep, beep, beep*. His heart was beating. The man must have been in the hospital for quite some time, for his unshaven beard was at least ten days old. The only sign that he was alive was the muted beep sound. His eyes were shut; he could not open them. He could hear, but could not speak; he could not move his hands or his legs. His heavily bandaged head was resting on a pillow, and his face was as white as the pillow case.

It was one of many hit-and-run accidents. The man in the bed had seen in a flash a car speeding toward him. He had felt his head hitting the sidewalk. Then it was all dark. Much later he was barely aware that he was in a hospital bed. Now wires were all around his body, and a needle in his vein was attached to a very thin plastic tube, the other end of which was attached to a plastic bag, feeding him with serum and antibiotics. He was helpless and motionless, between life and death.

The woman tiptoed and approached the bed. Her lips touched the man's cheek ever so lightly, and two teardrops fell from her

eyes. She dried them quickly with the sleeve of her dress and turned to the little girl who was standing at the foot of the bed. "Let's go, honey," she said, "we'll come again tomorrow." She extended her hand to hold the arm of the girl.

"Will Daddy be all right?" asked the little girl.

"Sure, honey," said the mother, trying to hide the crack in her voice, "of course Daddy will be all right. It's just a matter of time."

The door opened, the door closed, and the man in the bed was now all alone with wires around his body, intravenous feeding on his arm, and the monotonous *beep, beep, beep*, coming from the monitor on the wall. He had felt his wife's lips on his cheek, and he had heard his daughter's voice and the door opening and closing. He tried to respond, but no sound came out of his throat. He tried to move his finger, but the finger refused to obey his wish.

He entered his office; it was time to write his article for the next edition of the newspaper. He sat down in his chair and wanted to take out his yellow pad and black ink pen. Before putting his article into the computer—his limit was one thousand words—it was his habit to write down his ideas on paper, arrange them and then rearrange them, and then pass his article to the computer and press the Send button. The editor would receive it in no time.

He opened the drawer of his desk and took out the notepad. With disgust he saw that it was a white one. He pushed it aside and opened another drawer. It was empty. He opened another one; there was nothing in it. He pulled out all the drawers; they were all empty. A feeling of anxiety grabbed him. Then he looked around; his office was completely empty, not a single book, not a single file. He had several pictures on the wall: shaking hands with the president, awards he had received, his wife and daughter. They were all gone. The white walls, the shelves were all empty.

"This is not my office," he said to himself, knowing full well that it was. "I must write my article, I must, I must. OK, so the notepad is white. So what? I can write on white as well." He grabbed his pen. It was dry—it had no ink. He tried again and again, to no avail. How was he going to write his article without putting his ideas down on paper? He rushed out of his office in search of a yellow pad and a black ink pen.

He found himself in a long corridor, a miles-long corridor, more like a tunnel. He started to run, looking for a door, but there were no doors anywhere, not a single one. He began to shout: "Yellow pad, black ink. Yellow pad, black ink." There came no answer; he only heard his own voice echoing from the walls. Suddenly the lights were off, and the corridor was pitch-black.

A nurse entered the room. She replaced the empty serum bag with a full one, checked his temperature, adjusted the needle in his vein, and left.

He was in the printing room of the newspaper. The machines were running in reverse, making an infernal noise. Instead of the newsprint from gigantic rolls entering into the printing press from one end and the newspapers coming out already folded from the other, already printed newspapers were going into the machines and blank pages were piling up on the other end.

"Stop," he cried, "stop, it is all wrong." But no one was there to hear him, and the printing presses continued with their infernal noise.

He tried to cover his ears with his hands, but he could not lift his arms. Two-hundred-pound weights were hanging from his fingers. *These are the weights I lifted in the gym, he thought, why are they here?* He tried to shake them off. It was futile. They were tied with green electric wires—the same ones that he used to use to connect the lights of the Christmas tree.

"Help," he shouted. A blinking red light appeared on the machines and continued to blink, on and off...on and off. "Help," he shouted again, using all the air in his lungs.

A man appeared from nowhere, a technician. He knew all the men in the printing room, but he had never seen this one before. He fixed his eyes on him; the man had no face, no eyes, no nose, and no lips, just a blank face, as white as the white notepad in his office. The faceless man laughed. Suddenly the machines stopped, the lights went off, and the room became as dark as a starless night.

Standing at the foot of the bed, a doctor asked the nurse, "Any changes?"

“No, Doctor,” the nurse replied. “Low pulse, no fever.”

“Let’s stop the antibiotics,” the doctor said.

The door opened; the door closed. The man in bed was again all alone. The green dot of the box kept repeating *beep, beep, beep*.

He was on his way to Lincoln Center. The New York Philharmonic was going to play Berlioz’s *Symphonie Phantastique*. It was his favorite piece. But he was late. His taxi was moving at the pace of a tortoise—the usual New York traffic jam. He wanted to push the car from inside; he pushed the front seat repeatedly. The car was stuck, did not even move an inch. His anxiety was increasing. He got out of the taxi and began to run, but not for long. There was no space between the cars; it was bumper-to-bumper. He jumped onto the hood of a car, then on another one and another one. He was almost flying. He could see Lincoln Center now, but the faster he jumped and flew the faster it moved away.

All of a sudden he found himself in the concert hall, sitting in his chair in the first row of the balcony. The hall was totally empty; there was not a single soul in it, except him. Yet the empty hall did not seem weird to him. His heart began to beat faster. Was he late? Had he missed the concert? There were no musicians on the stage, and yet all the musical instruments were in their proper places, basses and cellos on the right, violins on the left, wind instruments and percussion behind them.

Suddenly he saw himself on the podium. He was naked, except for his underpants and the black tie on his neck. He looked at himself from the balcony. *I can’t conduct the orchestra*, he thought. *I am no musician*. Yet his naked self-lifted the baton, getting ready to conduct the orchestra without any player to play the fifth movement of the symphony.

First the opening bars, then the basses and cellos began to play the very same melody of the first movement. But that melody was now warped, and the beat kept hammering. The bows of the basses, then of the cellos, and then of the violins, all of their own accord, were gliding on the strings of the instruments. The beat changed to a waltz, the beautiful waltz of the third movement. But it was no waltz at all. It was eerie, slow, and weird. It had turned into a death march. A huge bell struck twelve, the hour when the witches appear. *Berlioz is a genius*, the man in the balcony thought.

The dance began. The witches were all around the podium, whizzing and flying. The music became faster and faster—much faster than Berlioz intended. The instruments were not following his baton. The witches now were whirling at an incredible speed. “That is not what Berlioz wrote,” he yelled. “Stop,” he cried, “stop.” The instruments were not obeying him; the witches were now flying even faster. He became dizzy, missed his step, tumbled down from the podium, and hit his head on the floor. The man in the first row of the balcony felt a sharp pain on his head. Suddenly the music stopped, and the witches disappeared. Once again it was all dark, like a starless night.

The door opened. His wife came in. The room was totally dark; only a faint light shone on his wife’s face. Her lips touched his cheek. The door closed, the light disappeared, and the room was totally dark.

He was alone in the classroom at Harvard with his favorite linguistics teacher, who was always impeccably dressed, contrary to many of his colleagues who came to their classes with corduroy trousers and ill-fitted jackets. His teacher was now wearing the habit of a Franciscan monk, had a pair of sandals on his naked feet, and was carrying a sword in his hand. Flames were coming out right from the center of the classroom, red crimson flames. His teacher was cutting the flames with his sword.

“What is this sword?” he asked.

His teacher replied, “It is ‘word,’ the sharpest sword ever.”

Letters kept falling from the ceiling, letters of many colors, red, yellow, green, pink. The letters of the same color were forming chains. If C hooked with A and with T, and if all three were of the same color, it spelled *cat*, and they blew up into the air and disappeared. B hooked up with A and with T and disappeared. Words that he had learned in the first months of grade school were now blowing up in the air.

Then there were the words that he could not decipher, words that he had never seen before in any language that he knew. All these letters were red and instantly blew up in the air. Even when the letters were of different colors, chain or no chain, they were fall-

ing into the flames, and the teacher, with his magic sword, kept cutting the flames. But the letters kept raining down from the ceiling.

Suddenly he saw an H, an E, an L, and then another L. The man extended his hand and touched the flames. They were ice cold.

“Jump,” his teacher shouted. “Jump, and there you will find your yellow pad and black ink pen and listen to the symphony as Berlioz wrote it.”

The man walked toward the flames with hesitating steps. His whole body was cold, a cold he had never experienced before. He jumped into the flames. It was a free fall. Faster and faster he fell with the speed of light. Suddenly he hit the bottom.

The green dots stopped. The muted sound was just a long beep.