

HONORABLE MENTION - TIE

BLINK... BLINK

by K. F. Stubert

"I opened my eyes and had no idea where I was."

Detective Justin Jones turned off the ancient cassette player, took a chair, and reread the note instructing him to first listen to the recording before opening up the envelope that lay on the center of the desk. The wary weary detective turned the envelope carefully in his hands, switched the recorder back on, and listened intently to the slow, halting, weak, voice of an older man.

"I could see the clear, cloudless blue sky, at least part of it. Something dark hung over one of my eyes blocking part of my vision. The sky was sideways. If I looked straight ahead, I could see only dark shadows with some light in the distance and then a sliver of blue sky. Everything was blurred. I knew I was outside. I could feel the air on my face; it was warm, not hot but quite warm. The side of my face was on the hard ground which smelled like damp concrete mixed with beer, popcorn, and stale air.

I tried to move my left arm but it was pinned beneath me. My left leg was growing numb and I could feel my foot and ankle aching, stuck under and twisted around an unknown object. I could bend my right knee and turn my hip a slight bit. I couldn't move my head. I could blink my eyes. I screamed for help; my mouth opened and closed but no sound came out. The noises echoing

around me were chaotic, muddled, and confused. My head started to throb and the pounding rapidly intensified. I closed my eyes hoping the pain would go away, but it didn't.

'Where was I and what happened?' I asked myself. A picture slowly developed in my tattered mind. I was eleven years old and playing baseball. I was batting; the pitcher was a kid in my school. I didn't know him but knew of him. He was big... way bigger than anyone else. Everyone said he was fourteen, but he was in my grade and played in our Little League so he had to be around our age. He had a funny name. What was it? Phil, Fred? No. Fletcher. That's it, Fletcher Raime. Everyone said he could throw the ball hard; faster than anyone. I guess they were right. I ducked but it was too late; I couldn't get out of the way.

I saw my mother kneeling above me. Tears were in her eyes. She stroked my head and said I'd be OK. 'Mommy, I can't see!' I began to cry; she stroked my head and told me my glasses were broken but I'd be alright. I cried out in despair, 'I can't see anything!'

My teammate, Charlie, saw I was conscious and shouted incredulously, 'You're lucky it's just your glasses he broke. I thought he knocked your head right off!' Then, Bill, our 1st baseman added, 'Yeah, he's right. He beaned you so hard the ball went back to 2nd base!'

The pain surged back into my brain and I squeezed my eyes tighter shut. My mother faded away. Wait. Somethings wrong. My mother's dead! She died years ago! What happened? What is happening? I bawled in silence.

Suddenly I saw a flash of startling bright, white lights accompanied by intense eruptions of orange and red burning objects followed by a thunderous explosion. My head felt it would burst, and I tried to writhe away from the inferno, but I couldn't move. Searing pain tore through my right bicep as I was thrown from the blazing truck onto the hot, blistering sand and into a small ditch.

Someone grabbed my shoulder. I could smell burning cloth accompanied by the pungent odor of burning flesh.

‘I’m giving you morphine,’ the corpsman calmly said after applying a tourniquet to my upper right arm. I looked down and saw my severed, right arm smoldering by my right leg. I passed out.

I forced my eyes open against the agony my soul was feeling. I could again smell the concrete. I tried to look at my right arm but couldn’t move my head far enough around. When I tried to lift it, nothing happened. My memory flooded back; my arm had been gone since our truck hit the IED outside of Kabul a decade ago. The pain was intense, I wanted that morphine again but now I didn’t know why. All I knew is my head hurt... a lot.

Then I saw you, my son, only inches from my face. I could see the tears pouring down your cheeks and the frightened look on your face. I didn’t know where we were or what happened, but I tried to tell you I was OK; I never heard the words come out, but I tried as best I could. Then everything went black.”

The tape shut off. The detective took out his pocket knife and carefully slit open the envelope. Using just his fingertips, he pulled out the neatly typed letter, spread it out on the desk, and read.

My father suffered greatly from PTSD following his injuries. Half of his company was killed by the roadside bomb and all but one was wounded. The corpsman from another truck saved Dad’s life, but Dad was never the same. His left leg was broken badly which caused a perpetual limp; he had various scars from the burns all over him, and he lost his

right arm, but his mind was sharp. He continued to work as a journalist, precisely and expertly dictating his reports.

Baseball was our mutual love and his escape. We'd watch games on TV and talk baseball all the time. He came to every one of my Little League games and practices, but the one thing we couldn't do was play ball. We couldn't play catch or do things together like the other kids, but we could go to see the Manchester Fisher Cats baseball games. We'd go to the ballpark every chance we could. After the games, we'd try and figure out what players would go up the ladder and make it to the major leagues. It was our time to bond together.

The last game was to be special. Wounded vets were given free tickets, and Dad got two seats in the front row, third base side, just beyond the dugout. I blame myself for what happened next. Dad wanted me to sit on his left so I would be on his arm side where he could shelter and protect me. I wanted to sit closer to the dugout. I held up my glove and boasted, "I got my glove, Dad. I'll catch anything that comes our way!"

Dad laughed, scuffed my hair, and said, "I bet you will!"

The game was in the third inning and I wanted a hot dog. It happened while Dad was fidgeting trying to open my ketchup packet; his eyes were off the game... on account of me.

Statisticians say the line drive foul ball was going at 110 MPH. Dad had turned his eyes toward me; he never saw the ball. It hit him right between his eyes. The force of the ball knocked him out of his seat onto his left side. His left leg got tangled in the chair and his head was twisted to the side. I screamed but couldn't do anything to help him.

I crawled down beside him; I was crying as I looked into his blank, vacant, empty eyes that said nothing. His mouth opened and closed but nothing came out. Suddenly his eyes blinked rapidly and then they closed.

He was in a coma for three days. His skull had been cracked and he lost sight in his left eye. After that came numerous surgeries followed by other drug-induced comas to stop the swelling of his brain. The motor movement in his left leg also worsened and he was confined to a wheelchair. His memory would come and go for a while and then steadily worsened. Early on, he would dictate his thoughts but he never spoke about that day... at least, that's what I thought. Then his speech deteriorated as well, and Dad lost all ability to communicate other than guttural grunts and groans. My father suffered a lot and died a horrible death just three years later.

His death shattered Mom too; she had no life either. He became entirely dependent on her and it took a horrible toll. She worked herself to death trying to care for me and Dad. She suffered the excruciatingly painful fate of watching her husband dwindle to nothing. She died on my 18th birthday, a sad, lonely shell of a woman.

And why? Because of me! All because of me...!

It was my fault, all my fault that my Dad suffered some much. Every time I looked at him the guilt of what I had caused swept over me. Why didn't I sit where he wanted me? Why did I have to have a hot dog right then? Why wasn't I watching the ball like he always told me to do? I should have caught it or at least tried.

Many nights I cried myself to sleep; when I didn't do that, I cursed my stupidity and selfishness. I never played baseball again. I hate the game, hate myself and I hate the hate I have within me.

A week ago, I mustered up the courage to go through a small box of Dad's mementos where I discovered the tape you just heard. It was dated three months after that fateful game. He never finished it. He kept telling us he would get better but instead, he just got worse. He never remembered what exactly happened at the field. He lived the hell of not knowing how or why he ended up as he did.

But I do. I can't bear the guilt anymore. The weight is too much. His words reminded me of how eloquent he had been, how he liked to speak and express himself... how he used to be, how he should have been... if it hadn't been for me! Maybe, God will spare my soul and I will see them in heaven. If not, my hell will continue, just not on this earth any longer.

Detective Justin Jones leaned back and breathed deeply. His now sad eyes fell to the couch on the other side of the room where the prone body of a young man lay. Blood was splattered on the wall behind him and, from a limp right arm, hung a just fired revolver.