**Second Place: In the Blink of an Eye**

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It was ten in the morning. I decided to call mom as it had been days since we had talked because I had stayed on the university campus and didn’t go back home for over three weekends in a row. My mother’s phone rang for a while, then she picked it up. The moment she said hi to me, I knew she wasn't home. Her voice sounded different than usual as if she had caught a cold. I felt worried. "Mom, where are you?" I asked. With her quietest voice that came almost as a whisper, she answered, "I am in the hospital." With a concern, I asked again, ‘What is wrong? Are you ok?’ "Your sister, Jawaher, and her family," she said and then cleared her throat, "They had an accident last night, and she is fine. I will call you later." She hung up.

I sensed a heat running over my body although the air-conditioning functioned perfectly in the room that day. My heart was about to skip a beat. How could mom break this kind of news to me in this way, then leave me clueless with just a single hint that "she is fine." I wasn’t sure it was actually the truth she was telling me. I called my older sister, my brother, my other brother, and my sister in law one after the other, but nobody answered my calls. I was worried sick. I wanted to know the core of the story. What happened to my sister? Her only one-month old baby, was he ok? Her husband, where was he? Were they all in the hospital? Tons of questions rose up in my head. My mind started to find its way to make up stories of what really happened and ran them through a maze of thinking.

My oldest sister answered her phone at last. I gave a big sigh before I bombarded her with my inquiries about my sister, Jawaher. She didn’t really provide me with answers, instead, she only informed me, "Jawaher is out of the hospital; she is in my house now with mum." I requested immediately, "Could you please come and pick me up from the university? I want to see her." She wasn’t able to come for me, but she sent her son to do so. The second my nephew stopped in front of the house, I rushed out leaving my handbag behind in the car.

I saw my older sister and I hugged her. Then I saw mom coming toward me, "She is good. It is just a few…" She stopped there, took my hand, and said, "Go and see her yourself." I tried to act brave and hold my tears. Yet, what I saw was more than any strong heart could bear. There was she sitting on the edge of the bed, while her sleeping baby was on the middle of it. I wouldn’t have recognized her at first glance. A shudder went through me when I realized that it was the new version of my sister's face after the accident. I stand still in a complete mute.

Her face was covered with scratches almost in every spot as if a savage cat attached her face with his sharp claws. The centre of her forehead was burned shaping a circle like a chocolate stained in there by mistake. Her eyes had thick red lines as if they were printed carefully. She got a long cut just above her right eye and a bit smaller one toward the end of her left cheek which made her dimple almost disappear. Both her nose and her lips were swollen and appeared to be bigger than they really were. A couple of stitches sewed over her chin; it looked quite similar to the stitches my mother made to my childhood's doll after it was torn by my naughty brother.

I could tell she was looking at me, but the scars on her face, made it hard for me to tell whether she was smiling or not. All I witnessed was her arms stretched toward me from a distance of a few steps. "Come here," she whispered. I threw my body into hers and I burst into tears that ran all the way down to my cheeks and on to her dress. Mom got in the room and warned me not to hug tight for that my sister's upper part of the nose was broken and both her arms and legs were bruised. She wrapped me up gently, "I will be alright in no time."

I knew that I was the one who should soothe her pain, but it turned out the roles had been reversed. I loved her beyond reason. My love to her absorbed all the strength I possessed and left me powerless seeing her in this condition. Her love to me, though, made her inhale every single air of strength that was left in her bruised body and exhale it out all at once, "There is nothing to be worried about. We should be thankful to God that my heart still pulsing." Her voice echoed softly in my ears, "Thank God. Thank God." Then she said jokingly, "Otherwise, you would never taste my delicious banana pie again." I smiled in the middle of my tears. She was the best pie maker I had ever known. "Yes, thanks to God." I managed a laugh while wiping away the remaining drops of tears.

Later at night, my sister told me the whole story of the accident after I asked her how it all happened. At first, she let out a giant sigh, lowered her head a bit, and then fixed her red eyes on mine. She started: "In the blink of an eye,--" she literally acted her words by blinking her eyes … then stopped and muttered: "It was the worst nightmare that I ever had." She continued, "It was one o'clock in the morning. We were in our way back home for the weekend. My husband, our baby, and I; the three of us were all in the car. The baby was sleeping peacefully in my lap; my husband was humming his favourite song, and I was opening a bar of chocolate for us both to eat. Suddenly, in the darkness, I glanced something grey in colour walking in front of our car. I screamed at the top of my lungs: "WATCH OUT! clutching my baby tight to my chest. I knew something terrible was about to happen. All I thought of at that moment was protecting my own little angle." She narrated the event so precisely as if she was reliving it in all detail. "My husband," she said "tried swerve the car to avoid hitting the donkey that seemed to have appeared from nowhere. Unfortunately, the car hit the donkey and we lost control of the car. Instead of stepping on the brake, my husband pressed on the accelerator that caused the car to drive off the road and crash into a lamppost." She paused and breathed heavily. I got the feeling that I shouldn’t have asked her about the accident so soon.

She plastered a sad smile on her face and went on, "I recall my tight clutch of my hands around my baby while my body was thrown from side to side until my face hit the windshield. I couldn’t open my eyes because slivers of glass had entered into them. Barely able to open my right eye, I checked whether my baby and my husband were fine. Nothing had happened to my husband, thankfully. My baby, however, was all covered with blood. I wailed thinking that he was dead until I felt his beating heart with my fingers. I gradually realized that it was me who was bleeding. My baby, though, was still asleep as if nothing had happened. All I remember later was me lying in the hospital bed with mom next to me carrying the baby." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. I felt so touched from inside. I leaned my head on her shoulder. She patted me on the arm and tilted her head slightly towards mine. We whispered together in one voice, "Thank you Lord."

I had been with my sister all my life, but never really could see who she really was. It is this incident that opened a new chapter in my sister’s life. I saw the courage and the patience that I didn’t know she had. She used to be a person who yelled at the tiniest pain and cried over the smallest problem. In the depth of her eyes, I saw the blaze of a mother’s sacrifice. The simplest thing she could have done was to protect her face with her hands; it is actually what we normally do as a reaction of defence, but a heart of a mother pulsated with care for her son more than for herself. I saw the anguish that had come into her scarred face. Someday, probably, these scars will narrate a story to a man who once was a baby on his mother's lap.

In the blink of an eye, three souls were about to be swallowed up by the dark. Yet, some sort of a miracle had taken place and had given them new lungs to taste again the air of life.