

EVERY 27 MINUTES

By Linda Welther

My husband and I went to a funeral a few weeks ago. The man we honored had not been ill. He was killed on a Sunday night while driving home. An oncoming car jumped the highway median and hit two other cars before smashing head-on into his.

According to the newspaper, the offending driver, who was returning from a wedding, told police she had drunk two bottles of beer and two glasses of champagne.

A wedding.

Followed by a funeral.

I wish she could have been there to see all the lives her act has changed forever: the widow, the four children, the extended family, the hundreds of friends who sat listening to words that barely touched the depths of their grief.

Strange to think that, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, this happens in America every 27 minutes.

Somebody drinks.

Somebody drives.

Somebody dies.

The day before the funeral, I had run into a longtime acquaintance while shopping. I was hobbling around with a broken leg, and he commented on my crutches. I asked if he had ever broken his leg.

“Oh, I have a long rod in one of them,” he said, “from an automobile accident I was in two weeks after I came back from Vietnam.”

“That’s ironic. To leave a war zone and get injured,” I teased him. “You’re lucky it wasn’t worse.”

“Well, my wife was killed and so was the wife of the other driver,” he said uncomfortably. Then he added, “We were hit by a drunk.”

I’ve known this man for years, yet here was a chapter of his life he’d never mentioned. He said he’d remained in the hospital seven weeks, aware all that time that his wife was dead. It was hard to know what to say, for there are questions you can’t ask in a casual conversation, like “How could you bear it?” or “What did you do about wanting revenge?”

I wish I knew the answers so that I could offer them to the woman who, overwhelmed by grief, could barely walk as she followed her husband’s coffin from the synagogue.

At the high school where she teaches, my friend Lynn saw a movie in which the young male narrator recounted how he’d killed someone while driving drunk. “He said he didn’t know how he’d stand it if he’d killed someone he loved,” Lynn told me. “That really bothered me. Isn’t everyone someone that somebody loves?”

Every 27 minutes, who dies?

A mother who will never comfort the child who needs her. A man whose contributions to his community would have made a difference. A wife whose husband cannot picture the future without her.

Every 27 minutes, who dies?

A son who involuntarily abandons his parents in their old age. A father who can never acknowledge his children’s accomplishments. A friend whose encouragement is gone forever.

Every 27 minutes.

A void opens.

Someone looks across the table at a vacant chair, climbs into an empty bed, feels the pain of no voice, no touch, no love.

Every 27 minutes.

A heart breaks.

Someone's pain defies the soothing power of tranquilizers. Sleep offers no escape from the nightmare of awakening to the irreversibility of loss.

Every 27 minutes.

A dream ends.

Someone's future goes blank. The phone will not ring, the car will not pull into the driveway.

Every 27 minutes.

Somebody wants to run. Somebody wants to hide.

Someone is left with hate. Somebody wants to die.

And we permit this to go on.

EVERY 27 MINUTES!!