

When she was thirteen, Jenny and her friend Linda Serrano were walking up Chopsey Hill one spring afternoon, talking a blue streak, planning a party that was to follow their eighth-grade graduation, just weeks away. They were not far from Linda's house, where Jenny had been invited for spaghetti and meatballs: her favorite, and Mr. Serrano's specialty. All the way from school, Linda had been walking on the inside and Jenny on the outside; then, for some reason — Jenny cannot remember why — they changed places, and not thirty seconds later a car came speeding up behind them, hit Linda, and killed her.

The car never stopped, but another was following not far behind, and that one did stop. A man and a woman jumped out. The woman put her arms around Jenny and turned her away. The man flagged someone down and told him to go call an ambulance and the police. Jenny heard him shouting that it was a hit-and-run. He described the car and the man driving it and said that the bastard had “killed a woman.” Of all the sickening details of that mild spring afternoon, the one that sickened Jenny most was hearing her friend called a woman.

And that horrific *thunk*. Of course the driver had felt it; of course he had heard it. Who could not have heard it? It filled the world. There had been no sound of a car coming up behind them — at least, none that Jenny could remember — no screech of brakes or squeal of tires, just that unthinkable *thunk* as Linda was knocked out of the universe. There was not a sound from Linda, either, no cry or scream. The last thing had been her saying, “That Catherine George, she's so —” (Afterward, Jenny could not see Catherine George without wondering how that sentence would have ended. She was glad when Catherine George went to a different high school and she could stop thinking about it.)

And then there was what the impact of the car had done to Linda. It had quite literally ripped her open. Jenny had seen a torn breast and a leg bent at an impossible angle, like one of those rubber dolls whose limbs can be twisted every which way. Then the woman came and turned her away, pressing her face into a yellow spring coat that smelled so strongly of camphor that Jenny had a clear image of the woman lifting it just that morning from a trunk in her attic.

How had Linda been ripped open in front, when she was hit from behind? Had she whirled around at the last second? That would have put her even more squarely in the path of the car. But Jenny has no memory of those last seconds. As far as she is concerned, the puzzle remains unsolved, although by now she has watched enough crime shows to know that a coroner or forensic expert could have figured out the exact angle at which Linda was hit.

The undertaker, Phyllis Fisher's father, did a heroic job. He must have worked all night to put Linda back together. Jenny stood for some time at the open casket in which her friend lay serenely, looking as lovely as ever, with her dark hair and her tawny skin set off by the white dress she had bought for their graduation, a sleeveless summer dress with a closely fitted bodice. Jenny was trying to memorize the way Linda looked now, and not the way she had last seen her, when Anthony Benvenuto



and some other boys came up behind her. She heard Anthony give a low whistle through his teeth and whisper, “Body by Fisher.” Because Linda Serrano had the best, the only figure in the eighth grade.

“Body by Fisher” was a joke people frequently made about Mr. Fisher's work, because it was the slogan of an auto-body commercial that was on television then: “Body by Fisher.” Everybody said it — but never at a funeral. At the funeral of someone you knew, someone who was supposed to be a friend of yours, someone who could so easily have been you? Jenny



had had a crush on Anthony Benvenuto until she heard him say that, and heard the other boys snigger. After that, Jenny hated Anthony Benvenuto. She hated them all.

When Jenny cried about it later, her mother said that people were sometimes so overwhelmed by the magnitude of death that they tried to make it smaller and more manageable by mocking it, even mocking the person who had died. She told Jenny about primitive tribes who put funny masks on the corpse and performed lewd dances around it as a way of rejecting death, of refusing to let it touch them.

TWO FOR ONE

a short story by JANE MULLEN

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“Those boys didn’t mean anything,” she said. “I’m sure that, in their own way, they were just as upset as you were tonight.”

Oh no they weren’t.

Jenny did not tell her mother, did not tell anyone, even the police when they asked exactly what had happened, about how she had just changed places with Linda. She felt guilty. Had she not changed places with her, Linda would still be alive. If anyone knew that, they would wish it had been the other way around. No one, except for her own mother and father, would choose Jenny’s life over the beautiful, popular, shapely Linda Serrano’s.

And Jenny was afraid of what Mr. and Mrs. Serrano’s reaction would be. Already they could hardly bear to look at her. When it was her turn to offer her hand and tell them she was sorry, she knew they were wondering why she couldn’t have been the one hit by the car, instead of Linda. They were probably thinking that if she hadn’t been coming home from school with Linda, it never would have happened. Linda would have been walking alone, along the edge of the road, not so far into it. If they knew about the changing places thirty seconds before, who could tell how they would feel, or how much they would hate her?

So at first it was guilt and fear that kept her from talking about it. Then later, it was impossible to tell the story because she would be suspected of making it up after the fact, perhaps from some self-centered desire to attract attention or sympathy. Her parents did not like their children to call attention to themselves, and her mother, who was English, was very much of the “put it all behind you” school of thought. No, it was something that had to be told immediately or never.

But not having told the whole truth disturbed Jenny more than she would have thought. And, too, there was her witnessing the accident, seeing her best friend, a lively, high-spirited, beautiful girl, reduced in an instant, in the middle of Chopsey Hill, in the middle of a sentence, to an ugly, inert mass of blood and flesh and bone. Naturally, this started her brooding about the fragility of life, and also about the complete randomness of it, the huge element of chance in matters of life and death. Even though she had survived, she no longer believed herself to be in the care of a benevolent being who watched over and protected her; rather, she saw herself as having barely escaped the blind swipes of a huge and blundering — if not downright menacing — hand.

The priest at Linda’s church tried to put a good face on it by acting as if Linda had been selected to receive some great honor. Jenny would never forget the words of his sermon, delivered so sadly. The priest held on to the podium with both hands and looked out at the congregation, at Linda’s family and all those stunned children — the whole school was there — as if he couldn’t think what in the world to say. Then he took a deep breath and, just like the undertaker, made a heroic effort to conceal the truth from them.

“We will never know why God has chosen Linda.”

Or not chosen me.

Jenny would never again hear the expression “chosen

people” without flashing back to that day on Chopsey Hill.

All this changed her in some subtle but essential way. Just as she and Linda had been on their way to a spaghetti-and-meatball dinner, Jenny had been on her way to becoming someone else. Exactly what kind of person she would have been if it weren’t for the accident, she couldn’t say. Maybe someone like that Catherine George, who was so . . .

Years later, Jenny tells the story at a gathering of her husband’s family. The occasion is a milestone birthday, but even when they’re together for a funeral, as they often have been, Jack and his brothers like to stay up late talking, reminiscing, telling stories, laughing. In the past, they have been known to drink too much and laugh themselves silly, despite their mother’s parting admonition on her way to bed: “Now, I don’t want anyone getting *drunk*.”

This time Jenny is the only wife present; the other wives all had other commitments. But the five brothers are here, and that’s what matters. Living in different parts of the country, they don’t see each other very often. And they are all inveterate talkers, so the wives don’t usually say much at these gatherings anyway.

The theme tonight seems to be “close calls”: The brother who, while trying to rescue his twelve-year-old dog, fell through the ice on a mountain lake in Wyoming and nearly drowned or froze to death before the dog got them both out. The brother who, while driving back to college after spring break his sophomore year, lost control of his convertible, which sailed through the air, flipped over, and, fortunately, landed across a ditch, where he hung upside down by his seat belt all night, unconscious. There are more close-call stories, including two told by the brother who nearly always begins with “I’ll give you two for one.”

So Jenny is moved to tell her own close-call story. But as soon as she’s told the bare bones of it — about walking along the road and changing places just before her friend was hit by a car — she’s sorry she began, because she can’t give the group anything to laugh at. The other stories, though not exactly “funny,” were told in such a way that they provoked a lot of good-natured ribbing and joking among the siblings, an understood prerequisite for taking part in these genial family seminars. Maybe someone else could tell Jenny’s close-call story in a way that would get laughs, but Jenny can’t. And so, after a few sympathetic comments, an awkward silence falls. She can tell by the questioning look in her husband Jack’s eyes that he will ask her about this later, and she will tell him everything, lying side by side with him in the dark. But he is a generous, loving man. If she were in his place, she would be thinking, *Do you see what you have done? Do you hear the silence in this room?*

(end of excerpt)

It’s Billy, Jack’s son from his first marriage, who picks up the snapped thread of entertaining narratives and begins to tell about a recent harrowing experience of his own. He, too,