

Mystery Month #4 - 2024

The Worst Kind of Phone Call

By Ken Weber in Utterly Ingenious Five-Minute Mysteries

"Mom, there's been an accident.' That's what she said." Laura Pascal was speaking to Karen Tarata but kept her eyes fixed on the road as they sped along Milldown Parkway. It was 1:00 A.M.

"So when she said she was all right, it didn't register at all." Laura continued. "Not until she told me the third time. You'd think she'd have the sense to start a midnight phone call with 'I'm OK' and then tell me. Look at me! I'm still shaking!"

"You sure you don't want me to drive?" Karen asked.

Laura shook her head.

Karen stared out the passenger window for a moment before saying, "At least she called you. If you hadn't come over to tell me, that call from the police would have been my first inkling. Come to think of it, that's just how the policeman started too . . . 'Mrs. Tarata, there's been an accident involving your daughter.' And, you know, even though you'd already told me no one was hurt, I could feel the ice pour into my stomach when he spoke."

The drive continued in silence, both women reflecting on the accident and on their relationships with their teenage daughters. Laura Pascal was tense, anxious. She held the steering wheel firmly with both hands and continued to focus completely on the space of light the headlights of her car opened before them. Karen Tarata was equally upset, but her nature was more secretive and her body language more contained.

Laura was the first to break the silence. "The car, apparently, is a write-off." It was the first time either of the two women had mentioned the vehicle. "It ...it..." Her reluctance to deal with the details was more a factor of her own fears than worry that she might upset Karen. "It rolled twice after going through the guard rail so they must have been going pretty fast. Thank God for seat belts."

"It was the Maleski girl? Cara? Her parents' car, right?" Karen spoke without looking away from the passenger window. "I don't know whether it's the accident that's making me say this, but I've never been entirely sure about her."

Laura nodded at the road. "Going to the dance at Milldown High was her idea, but to be honest, Karen, I don't think our girls needed much persuading. You know..." For only a second, she broke her driving concentration and looked sideways at her passenger. Laura wasn't sure whether to continue with her thought. The two women were neighbors, not really friends, but had been drawn together more than once in the past because their daughters "hung out."

"No matter how I try," she carried on, "I can't understand their social pattern, these girls. My Allie, she's seventeen, and, you know, the grad dance last month was the first time she went on an actual date. You know, where the boy actually knocks on the door. Comes to pick her up. And then brings her home again!"

There was another silence, then, still looking out the side window, Karen said, "Liberation." There was another pause. "It's the first stage in liberation. The first thing you do when you're set free is act like your oppressors."

Laura turned away from the road again, this time with new interest. Here was a facet of her neighbor that she'd never encountered.

"And because males cluster in groups and take on a group personality, that's what girls do now, too. From what you told me, that's probably what caused this whole thing tonight. Your Allie and that Cara, and Jenine—who was the fourth one? The Lotten girl from one street over?—the spat with that group of boys in the parking lot would never have turned into an incident if they weren't acting as a group. Individuals back down, walk away. Groups fight. Imagine! Girls being asked to leave a dance. There's liberation for you."

Just ahead, the lights of Milldown were visible on the horizon. Laura slowed to obey the new speed limit.

"But Allie told me they left without a fuss," she pointed out. "It was when they were on their way back home to Porterville—they were about halfway she said—that they saw headlights coming up behind them and recognized the boys' car. So—maybe it was Cara's first instinct; who's got judgment at that age?—she speeded up to get away and . . . well you know the rest."

Karen not only turned away from the passenger window, she shifted completely, so that her body was facing Laura. "And you bought that story?" she said.

What in Allie's story does Karen Tarata not believe?

Name: _____ Phone Number: _____