

The Phone Call

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Short Story

The phone rings. Argh, not now! It's a local number – I should answer it, it might be mum.

'Hello,' I say, slightly put-out.

'Hello. Is that Aaron Dunstan's wife?' A female voice, vaguely accented – European perhaps - with a silky and even tone, each word gently and breathily enunciated.

Can I ask who's calling?' suspicion rising.

'Are you Aaron Dunstan's wife?' that question again, reiterated patiently.

'Can I ask who is calling please?' my words are firmer now, authoritarian like the school teacher voice I use with rude kids.

'Priscilla Wiśniewski. I have a letter for Aaron Dunston. I'm at 12 Smith Road.'

I suddenly see the connection. We're at 21 Smith Road and she has a misaddressed letter for Aaron Dunstan who is, indeed, my husband.

'Ah, I see,' I respond, friendlier now.

'Can you come and get it?' asks Priscilla.

'Could you maybe leave it in your letter box and I can pick it up soon?' I suggest.

'I can't get to the letterbox.'

'Oh, ok. We're about to go out – I could pick it up if you like?' In my mind, I see a wheelchair bound woman unable to even get to her letterbox. But then there's the paranoid part of myself alert to a scam, or some sort of danger. Would I be accosted, or was this silken-voiced female somehow associated with my husband? Will she inform me of their long-standing affair? The convenience and coincidence of a lover just up the road feeds my paranoia nicely. Fatigue and anxiety have been playing havoc with my nerves and warping my perspective. Get a grip, woman!

The driveway is steep, and as I negotiate the slippery mauve blanket of fallen flowers it occurs to me that I have never really noticed the modest brown brick house at the bottom. It is visible from the street but its lowered position beyond tall gum and Jacaranda trees renders it almost invisible like a small child lost behind her taller siblings in a family photo.

I knock and the voice from the phone now beckons me from inside the house, front door already ajar. I enter a room lit only by yellow morning light pouring in through rectangular windows. I note Priscilla's thinness, her long, bony limbs, the scrunched-up leg warmers bunched at her ankles, incongruous on the spindly legs of an octogenarian in the height of summer.

'Hello. I'm Carol.'

'Carol Dunstan?' she asks, the intonation on the surname.

'Yes,' I say with a small laugh.

Priscilla holds out the letter for me to take. 'Thank you,' I say, noting my husband's name on the white envelope.

'Thanks for calling about this Priscilla.' There's nothing more to be said in this strange exchange, I think to myself as I turn to go. But there is. 'Can I get you anything before I go?'

'No, thank you. My daughter will be here shortly.'

'What was she like?' asks my daughter who has been waiting in the car. 'Very nice and very old – just like grandma up north, but skinnier and less talkative!' I think about the fascination with which my daughter looks at her paternal grandmother. Her wrinkled face and her hunched body causes her to stare, not unkindly, and I can see her trying to reconcile the decrepitude of another's old age with her own visceral experience of living in a young and vital body. Grandma Edna is ensconced in 'assisted living' accommodation in the hot wok of the northern NSW town of Lismore, where the cloying humidity supplants all other experience.

As we make our way to the shops for the weekly grocery shop, I am preoccupied with my own shortcomings as a daughter and daughter-in-law, with how I have often failed the older people in my life through my own self-involvement. By the time we leave the shops, I have resolved to leave a note for Priscilla with my number on it and an offer of help, or company, whenever she might need it and whenever I can manage it.

Priscilla is, indeed, receptive to my offer and what tentatively begins as a neighbourly exchange of small talk blossoms into a mutually enjoyed meeting of minds. I can tell that she appreciates the time we spend together, particularly since her daughter, Jayne, visits less frequently. Priscilla is reluctant to discuss this turn of events, so I imagine there has perhaps been a falling out of sorts. Aaron has been less than supportive in my desire to spend time with Priscilla and tells me that I should be minding my own business when I return from one of my little visits and canvas any number of reasons behind Jayne's increasing absence. I despair to think that a mother-daughter relationship may be souring. My relationship with my own mother has gained strength, and Aaron has an uncomplicated connection with Edna. His upcoming trip to Lismore to visit her sees him in good spirits which is unusual because he tends to dread any return to his hometown. He laments that it's nothing like it used to be during the golden days of his childhood.

Three days after Aaron has left, as the last of the day's heat finally drains from the house like a receding tideline, the phone rings. Argh, not now! It's not a local number – I should answer it, it might be Aaron.

'Hello,' I say, slightly put-out.

'Is that Carol, Aaron's wife?' A female voice, vaguely accented – European perhaps - with a silky and even tone, each word gently and breathily enunciated.

'Can I ask who's calling?' suspicion rising.

'Is this Carol?' asked pleadingly.

'Can I ask who is calling please?' my words are firmer now, authoritarian like the school teacher voice I use with rude kids.

'Jayne Wiśniewski, Priscilla's daughter. I'm here with Aaron and he needs to talk to you.'

I hear muffled voices before Aaron's breath is suddenly in my ear.

'Aaron? What's this about?'

'Carol, I'm so sorry, but we need to talk.'