

## The Case of the Evening

In most cases of mystery, the town is a serene spot where the comfortably retired walk their dogs, and everyone knows everyone. The town sits idly by a white-sanded beach, and during summer months, there are plenty of tourists that roam the main avenue.

The town is cute and comfortable. It has a local restaurant that boasts the 'hard won' title of *Best Breakfast Steaks This Side of Texas!* The citizens are friendly; they will collect your mail while on vacation or invite you to ever-present social nights at the civic center. There is Bingo Night, Movie Night, and Teen Night. There are Valentine's Day parties and potlucks, and you feel welcome among the happy faces and foldable metal chairs.

It is impossible to visit the hardware store for a gallon of paint without coming face-to-face with your youngest daughter's third-grade teacher. She, in good nature, married your oldest son's dentist four years ago and everyone got their hands on the pictures. Every person in the town goes to the same church. Every person watches the same weeknight television programs and has the same 'It could never happen here' mindset when something drastic happens.

(Author's Note: it can happen anywhere.)

So, yes. In most cases of mystery, the town is soft enough for the townspeople to overlook any signs of danger. Their way of life is irrevocable, spotless.

Good things happen to good people.

If a seventeen-year-old girl goes missing, the men and boys gather together to find her. After forty-five minutes of wandering around in the late evening, they do. She is with her boyfriend in his truck, parked behind a convenience store on the edge of town. The mild panic on her mother's part becomes a slight embarrassment for the girl. Everyone is glad she was found, and they do not think to hire more than three deputies if she really was a missing person; after all, it doesn't happen here.

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And so far, nothing bad has happened there, in a comfortable town where nothing has happened ever. Instead, something bad has happened in a neighboring town just up the highway, where everything bad seems to happen.

When seventeen-year-old Vivian Spencer disappeared behind a partially rundown convenience store, the men and boys banded together to find her. No one had opted for the community movie night, so there were plenty of people to help. And even though it was common knowledge that teens attempted to run away or just went missing for an hour, searching for the girl would be more entertaining than the nightly rerun of *Wheel of Fortune*.

Forty-five minutes would pass and there would be no sign of Vivian Spencer, a lifelong resident of the town where bad things often happen. When the dentist and the preacher found no trace of her beyond the skate park, the group met up once again. A minor witness claimed that the pickup truck Vivian Spencer was seen in had been her boyfriend's, but her boyfriend was among those in the makeshift search party.

Before long, another forty-five minutes had sped by. Someone piped up, "Hey, what if she's at Movie Night?" and though it was unlikely, her boyfriend ran to check regardless. Throwing open the metal doors, he did not see Vivian among those who had decided to watch the movie. It was some overplayed Lifetime original about a missing girl and a list of unsuspected suspects. No one would like that detail later.

The search party grew as mothers and sisters joined in, cupping their weathered hands to shout her name. *Vivian! Vivian!* She did not answer. There were desperate tones and whispers from the older generations, who knew something horrible could have occurred but didn't want to break it to the Spencer family. No one wanted to voice their thoughts even though everyone was thinking it: bad things happen here.

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The entire community in the crumbled, washed up town wanted to find her and believe she had lost track of time. As unfortunate as it sounded for the boyfriend, many hoped she had been seeing someone else and simply forgot her curfew. The boyfriend wanted to believe it, because the alternatives weren't pleasant to consider. Vivian had no reason to run away, either. No one had found anything, and that was the baffling part. There had to be some sign, whether it was lost jewelry or disturbed shrubs. Someone was sure to find a new oil stain or the scuff from a boot. But everything was still and quiet.

Suddenly, it was one in the morning and many volunteers had hurried home. It was a Sunday and there was work in the morning. They all shook their heads as they stood on front steps, facing the street. Even as a miniscule group pressed on to look through parks and alleys one more time, no one had the nerve to tell the family.

You couldn't say, "Go home and get some rest", because they wouldn't rest. They wouldn't stop, not even as one a.m. became two. Not even as the sun began peeking over the sky. Not even when the rest of the residents had slept and risen, or when twelve hours became twenty-four. And especially not when their police department called over to the town just down the highway.

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In most cases of misfortune, the person doesn't deserve it. They either volunteered on a weekly basis or they knew so-and-so's child in school and never had anything wrong. They may have had a part-time job at the local restaurant that has the best breakfast steaks that side of Texas, or they may have been the flower girl at a local wedding. They may have hosted a potluck or two with lemonade and the best appetizers everyone wanted recipe cards for, or they may have won the movie night raffle for what to watch the next weekend.

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In most cases of misfortune, the person doesn't deserve it. They may only be seventeen and have a mother who adores them. They may have a boyfriend who just put new tires on his pickup truck. They may have thought saving \$5 in gas was the right thing to do that evening, on their way to the town's movie night. Walking can be nice. They may have plugged in their earbuds in hopes of listening to that newest hit the internet wouldn't stop talking about. They may have even considered stopping at the local convenience store for a drink, just because.

In most cases of misfortune, it is bigger than misfortune.

It is a *bow-your-head* and *cover-your-eyes* evening; it is a *swallow several times and still feel the choke* sensation. In most cases of misfortune, there is not an end in sight, even as the sun sets and the civic center vigil draws in a large crowd.

Just ask Mr. and Mrs. Spencer.