

Sorry, Wrong Number Study Guide

Sorry, Wrong Number by Lucille Fletcher

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Contents

Sorry, Wrong Number Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Act 1, Part 1.....	4
Act 1, Part 2.....	6
Act 1, Part 3.....	8
Act 1, Part 4.....	10
Act 1, Part 5.....	12
Characters.....	14
Symbols and Symbolism.....	16
Settings.....	17
Themes and Motifs.....	18
Styles.....	20
Quotes.....	21

Plot Summary

Sorry, Wrong Number is a play written by Lucille Fletcher in 1952. The main character is Mrs. Stevenson, an invalid, who has been attempting to get in touch with her husband, who is working late. However, the line is busy, and she ends up overhearing a phone conversation between a killer named George and his boss. They are discussing the specifics of a pending murder of a woman at 11:15 p.m. that same night.

Mrs. Stevenson attempts to get the call traced. The operator urges her to contact the police, which she does. The police can only say they will check into things. Mrs. Stevenson then learns that her husband will not be home that evening. She realizes that she is the intended murder victim. She desperately tries to get back in touch with the police, but she is too late. The murderer is already in the house and listening in on the call. Just before she is connected to the police, Mrs. Stevenson is murdered.



Act 1, Part 1

Summary

When the curtain rises, the stage is divided into three sections. Only the center section has lights. It is Mrs. Stevenson's bedroom. It contains a bed, a phone, a nightstand, pill bottles, a mantel and a clock, as well as closed doors and windows. Mrs. Stevenson is a nervous and self-centered woman, who is attempting to make a telephone call. A train is heard in the distance as Mrs. Stevenson puts down the phone, takes a pill and a sip of water, and attempts another call. This time she calls the operator. Mrs. Stevenson explains she is trying to get through to Murray Hill 4-0098. She has been trying unsuccessfully for nearly an hour. Mrs. Stevenson explains that it is her husband's office and he is working late. The operator dials the number for her.

The phone rings and a man named George—a hired killer—picks up in a phone booth. Mrs. Stevenson says hello, but ends up overhearing a conversation between George and a 1st Man. The 1st Man says that they have heard from their client and the coast is clear for that night. At eleven o'clock each evening, the private patrolman always goes to the bar on Second Avenue for a beer. At eleven-fifteen, a train crosses the bridge. The train will muffle any possible screams if the window is open. George is reminded to leave as little blood as possible. The 1st man reminds George to make it look like a robbery by stealing jewelry. The call is disconnected.

Mrs. Stevenson calls the operator once more, where she explains to the First Operator what has happened. Somehow, the wires must have been crossed, and she has overheard a murder plot. She wants the call traced. She tells the operator that, obviously, the wrong number had been dialed. Mrs. Stevenson explains that she could hear the people on the phone, but that they couldn't hear her. The First Operator doesn't know what number has been dialed, and Mrs. Stevenson urges the First Operator to dial again in exactly the same way as last time.

Analysis

When Lucille Fletcher's play *Sorry, Wrong Number* begins, the reader is quickly introduced to Mrs. Stevenson, whose character becomes better known throughout the course of the play. Lucille Fletcher describes Mrs. Stevenson as a neurotic invalid. Her only real form of communication with the outside world seems to be the phone. Another key piece of information is that Mrs. Stevenson's husband is working late on this particular night. A nightstand filled with pill bottles further cements Mrs. Stevenson's characterization. Her presence alone in the central part of the stage is telling. She will be alone when she faces whatever is going to occur.

Mrs. Stevenson is attempting to phone her husband. Instead of reaching him, she overhears a conversation about a murder plot. She is terrified and does her best to get



reconnected to learn more. She urges the operator to reconnect the call. Interestingly enough, Mrs. Stevenson does not urge the operator to connect her to the police right away, as would be expected in such a situation. Yet, this is in keeping with her character as a self-centered neurotic. Her cause becomes not that of the potential victim, but of her own part in what she has stumbled upon.

Discussion Question 1

What aspects of Mrs. Stevenson's characterization point to her as being a self-centered neurotic? In particular, how does this affect her handling of the murder plot she overhears?

Discussion Question 2

What does Mrs. Stevenson hear on the phone while attempting to reach her husband? What is her reaction?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Mrs. Stevenson not immediately call the police? Is this a sound decision? Explain your reasoning.

Vocabulary

querulous, neurotic, peripheral, illumining, imperious, unobtrusively



Act 1, Part 2

Summary

The First Operator tells Mrs. Stevenson that an attempt will be made to get Murray Hill 4-0098 once more. After a few seconds, the First Operator reports that Murray Hill 4-0098 is busy. Mrs. Stevenson glances at the window in her room nervously and becomes angry with the First Operator, telling her that she must be dialing the number incorrectly. Mrs. Stevenson tells the operator that it is their civil duty to redial the wrong number to apprehend the murder being planned. The First Operator says she will connect Mrs. Stevenson to the Chief Operator, Miss Curtis.

Miss Curtis picks up. Mrs. Stevenson explains the situation to her, about the wrong number being called and needing to trace a call she doesn't have the number for. She explains it is about a murder. Miss Curtis explains that tracing the call depends on whether or not the call is still going on. Miss Curtis takes down Mrs. Stevenson's information. Her name is Mrs. Elbert Stevenson, Plaza 4-2295. Miss Curtis asks if Mrs. Stevenson has gone to the police. Mrs. Stevenson has not. This leads Miss Curtis to explain that she doesn't think they can trace a call based on Mrs. Stevenson's say-so as a private individual. Mrs. Stevenson is enraged. She hangs up and decides to call the police.

Mrs. Stevenson calls the operator once more. She gets the Second Operator. She asks that operator to connect her to the police department. Sergeant Duffy is having a meal delivered when the phone rings. Duffy answers, identifying himself and his location at Precinct 43. Mrs. Stevenson identifies herself and her address at 53 North Sutton Place. She says that she wants to report a pending murder. This catches Duffy's attention.

Analysis

Mrs. Stevenson's determination to be at the center of what she has stumbled into – again, in keeping perfectly with her character – blinds her to the fact that she should be calling the police. Instead, she repeatedly urges the operator to get the call back on the line or to trace the call. The operator redials the number, but the line is busy. Mrs. Stevenson urgently presses the operator to pick the call up again, but it cannot be done. Mrs. Stevenson finally runs into a legal roadblock when she discovers she can't have a call traced as a private individual. She has no choice, except to call the police.

Mrs. Stevenson, her options exhausted to return to the call, finally gets in touch with the police. Sergeant Duffy answers at Precinct 43. He seems primarily occupied with eating his meal. Duffy is relatively unmoved by Mrs. Stevenson, until Mrs. Stevenson explains that she has overheard a murder plot. Those words catch Duffy's attention. Mrs. Stevenson's declarations that there is a murder that will be committed are not selfless.



She sees herself, not the potential murder victim, as the central focus of the event. Her behavior will become a matter of irony as the play progresses.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Mrs. Stevenson so urgently want the operator to get the call back on the line?

Discussion Question 2

Why can the operator not trace the call as demanded by Mrs. Stevenson?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Mrs. Stevenson finally call the police? Is this a selfless or a selfish act to call the police for Mrs. Stevenson, or is it a mixture of both? Explain.

Vocabulary

sarcastically, frantically, explicitly, idiotic



Act 1, Part 3

Summary

Mrs. Stevenson tells Sergeant Duffy that she heard the plans of the two conspirators and that the victim lives in a house near a bridge. She heard the conversation about eight minutes ago. Duffy grows a little bored and asks for Mrs. Stevenson's information once more. Mrs. Stevenson explains her place is near the Queensboro Bridge. She goes on to say that they also have a private patrolman and Second Avenue is around the corner from where she lives. Duffy says he will look into it, but Mrs. Stevenson says that is not doing enough. The murder will have taken place by then. She urges a city-wide search. Duffy says a lot of murders are committed every day, and the police do all that they can to stop them.

Duffy explains that Mrs. Stevenson's clues are vague. The police are only able to take action if Mrs. Stevenson believes someone is planning to murder her. Mrs. Stevenson says that is impossible because her husband loves her. Besides, nobody would want to kill an invalid who has been sick for twelve years. Duffy says the police will handle things, but an angry Mrs. Stevenson is unimpressed. She hangs up. She looks around nervously and wonders why Elbert, her husband, hasn't come home yet.

Analysis

Having finally called the police, Mrs. Stevenson runs up against Sergeant Duffy, who doesn't seem particularly adept at his job. He is, however, alerted by Mrs. Stevenson's use of the word "murder." Yet, as he listens to Mrs. Stevenson's story, two sobering things are realized. First, tracing the call and looking into the murder would be difficult at best, due to the nature of the situation. Second, as Duffy listens to Mrs. Stevenson's histrionics, he seems less and less inclined to believe her. He doesn't want to take any action based on the information she has given him.

Things change dramatically for Mrs. Stevenson when Duffy explains that the only way action could be taken would be if Mrs. Stevenson herself were threatened. Mrs. Stevenson flatly rejects this notion, saying her husband loves her. However, Duffy's casual comment is not so casual for Mrs. Stevenson who is, after all, a paranoid shut-in. Duffy's suggestion will come back to haunt her, eat away at her, and finally take hold inside her.

Discussion Question 1

According to Duffy, what issues does he face in light of Mrs. Stevenson's situation?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Mrs. Stevenson at first deny that she could possibly be the intended target for the murder?

Discussion Question 3

Given Mrs. Stevenson's mental health, what is the danger of Duffy suggesting that she might be the intended victim?

Vocabulary

exasperation, stolidly, vague, triumphantly



Act 1, Part 4

Summary

Mrs. Stevenson calls the operator again, attempting to get the Second Operator to get through to Murray Hill 4-0098. The line is still busy. Mrs. Stevenson hangs up by slamming down the receiver. She glances nervously at the clock and tries to get comfortable in bed. The phone rings. When she answers, no one is there. She hangs up. The phone rings once more, but no one is there. This continues on and on. She then calls the operator once more, and finally gets through to the Third Operator. She chastises the Third Operator for the horrible operating service. She also wants to know what is going on with her phone. She wants to know who has been calling her. When the Third Operator says she can only check into it, Mrs. Stevenson slams the receiver down.

The phone rings again, and Mrs. Stevenson answers it. It is Western Union reporting a telegram from Elbert. Elbert will be leaving for Boston at 11 p.m. for urgent business. He explains that he has been trying to get through to her for the past hour, but the phone has been busy. He says he will be back the following afternoon and signs the telegraph with love. Mrs. Stevenson is terrified now that her husband is not coming home.

Mrs. Stevenson is now beside herself with worry and anger at Elbert, wondering how he could do something like that to her. She calls the Fourth Operator and tells her to try Murray Hill 4-0098 once more. The call goes through, but nobody answers. Mrs. Stevenson doesn't want to be alone for the night, so she calls Information to get the number for Henchley Hospital.

Analysis

Sergeant Duffy's casual comment that the police cannot do anything unless Mrs. Stevenson is the intended victim begins to eat away at Mrs. Stevenson. Strange occurrences begin to occur, such as the phone ringing and no one on the line when she answers. This begins to drive Mrs. Stevenson to distraction. In keeping with her neurosis, the reader begins to wonder if perhaps Mrs. Stevenson is simply paranoid, or if there is some lurking danger that is beginning to manifest itself. It is difficult to say due to Mrs. Stevenson's fragile mental condition.

There is a striking similarity between the location of the Stevenson home and the location for the murder. Their home is near railroad tracks and around the corner from the bar on Second Avenue. The neighborhood also has a patrolman. Compounding these similarities is the fact that Mr. Stevenson has traveled to Boston on urgent business. He will not be home at all. His departure time is 11 p.m. Mrs. Stevenson really is alone, and her husband will be of no help to her.



Discussion Question 1

How does Mrs. Stevenson react when she learns her husband will not be home that evening? Explain her reaction.

Discussion Question 2

What evidence supports the notion that Mrs. Stevenson could be the intended murder victim? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Is Mrs. Stevenson's thought that she could be the intended victim a matter of paranoia, or is there real substance to the idea? Explain.

Vocabulary

whimpering, fretfully, restlessly, vacated, inefficient, aghast, mechanically, fiendish



Act 1, Part 5

Summary

Mrs. Stevenson explains to the operator that Henschley Hospital is a very exclusive private hospital where she had her appendix out two years before. Information gives her the number for Henschley, which is Butterfield 7-0105. When Mrs. Stevenson calls, a hospital receptionist answers. Mrs. Stevenson explains she wants to hire a nurse for the night. She explains her nerves have her on edge, but the receptionist explains they are under orders not to send out nurses except in situations where they are absolutely needed.

Mrs. Stevenson explains, hysterically, her entire evening to the receptionist. Mrs. Stevenson realizes that her clock has stopped. She asks the receptionist for the time. It is 11:14 p.m. As the receptionist explains this, a click on the line can be heard. Mrs. Stevenson believes someone has lifted the receiver off the extension downstairs. Mrs. Stevenson is now terrified. She hangs up the phone and calls the operator. The Fifth Operator answers. Mrs. Stevenson whispers that she is in desperate trouble and that she can't speak any louder. The phone clicks, and Mrs. Stevenson begins thrashing about in bed. She screams and knocks the lamp over, plunging the room into darkness. She begs to be connected to the police. A shadow is seen rushing to the bed and choking Mrs. Stevenson. She screams, but the sound of a train drowns her out. Duffy picks up the phone at Precinct 43, but George says that he has dialed the wrong number. George hangs up and exits; Duffy shrugs. The curtain falls.

Analysis

Any lingering doubts that Mrs. Stevenson is simply paranoid or acting based on her neurosis are put to the test at the end of the play. Mrs. Stevenson is indeed the intended victim. She gets in touch with the police, seconds too late. If Mrs. Stevenson hadn't been so determined to get back on the line with the murderers, she might have survived. Therein, lies the irony of her situation.

The one question that remains unanswered is "Why?" All signs point to Mrs. Stevenson's husband as the culprit who orchestrated the murder. He disappears from town conveniently, is unable to be reached at the appropriate time, and has the motive. He has lived at Mrs. Stevenson's side for all twelve years of her mental neurosis. This had to be wearing on him. Rather than seeking a divorce or some other means of escape, he simply chose to have her killed. While it is not certain that this is what happened and that Mr. Stevenson is the mastermind, the evidence points to him.



Discussion Question 1

How does Mrs. Stevenson figure out she is the intended murder victim? How does she respond?

Discussion Question 2

Who is believed to be the mastermind behind the crime? What evidence supports this?

Discussion Question 3

If Mr. Stevenson is indeed the mastermind, what motivation can be gleaned from the play for the crime?

Vocabulary

superintendent, hysterical, bland, lethargic, hoarsely



Characters

Sergeant Duffy

The disinterested and apathetic Sergeant Duffy heads up the night shift at Precinct 43. He speaks by phone to Mrs. Stevenson. He is not overly concerned with her report. Ultimately, he plants the idea in Mrs. Stevenson's head that she might be the murder victim.

George

A contract killer who harbors no remorse for his victims, George is called upon by an unknown superior, on behalf of presumably Mr. Stevenson, to kill Mrs. Stevenson. George successfully carries out his contract.

Hospital Receptionist

Seeking medical assistance and company for the night, Mrs. Stevenson gets in touch with the hospital receptionist at Henschley Hospital. The receptionist cannot send any nurses over to Mrs. Stevenson as the only available nurse is out for her lunch break.

Elbridge Stevenson

Mentioned but never seen, Elbridge Stevenson is the husband of Mrs. Stevenson and the suspected mastermind behind the murder. He conveniently skips town the night of the murder. Mrs. Stevenson has been an invalid for twelve years, during which time, Mr. Stevenson has never left her side. This fact provides Mr. Stevenson with a motive.

Mrs. Stevenson

Mrs. Elbridge Stevenson is the main character in the play *Sorry, Wrong Number* by Lucille Fletcher. Mrs. Stevenson is probably middle age. She has been an invalid for twelve years. She also suffers from neurosis. She is self-centered and vain. It is obvious that she is wealthy since her street can afford to hire a private patrolman. While trying to phone her husband at work, Mrs. Stevenson unwittingly stumbles upon a conversation that uncovers a murder plot being discussed by two men.

Mrs. Stevenson tries to get reconnected to the number through the operator service. Then, she attempts to get in touch with the police. She is the recipient of several phone calls where no one answers. Finally, she realizes that she is the intended victim. She attempts to contact the police, but it is too late. Mrs. Stevenson is murdered.



Second Operator

Mrs. Stevenson uses the Second Operator to get in touch with the police station.

Miss Curtis

As the Chief Operator, Miss Curtis speaks to Mrs. Stevenson about contacting the police. She is finally able to convince Mrs. Stevenson to report what she heard to the authorities.

First Operator

The First Operator speaks to Mrs. Stevenson a number of times, trying to connect her to Murray Hill. The First Operator is patient and kind, but she is unable to reconnect Mrs. Stevenson.

Fourth Operator

Through the Fourth Operator, Mrs. Stevenson is finally able to connect to Murray Hill. However, the Fourth Operator reports that no one is picking up at Murray Hill.

Third Operator

Through the Third Operator, Mrs. Stevenson has her phone checked out because she is receiving calls and no one is on the line after she answers.



Symbols and Symbolism

Pills

To handle her neurosis, Mrs. Stevenson takes pills. Her nightstand is covered in pill bottles. Taking pills reinforces the fact that Mrs. Stevenson has a mental condition.

Telephone

Used as Mrs. Stevenson's primary form of communication, the telephone is a link to the outside world and a link to murder. Mrs. Stevenson overhears her own murder plot on the telephone. However, she cannot save herself because her call to the police is a few seconds too late.

Knife

Wielded by George the killer, a knife is used to murder Mrs. Stevenson.

Clock

Used by Mrs. Stevenson to check the time repeatedly, it is discovered that Mrs. Stevenson's clock has stopped working some eight minutes after hearing the murder plot.

Lamp

A lamp is the source of light in Mrs. Stevenson's bedroom. It is knocked to the floor when Mrs. Stevenson thrashes about in terror as she tries to reach the police.

Telegram

Mr. Stevenson sends a telegram to a phone company. The telegram's message is delivered verbally by phone. The telegram indicates Mr. Stevenson will be gone overnight on business.



Settings

New York

New York is the city in which the play is set. It is the location of the Queensboro Bridge, Mrs. Stevenson's bedroom, Murray Hill, and Second Avenue. New York is a massive city full of murders, which Duffy says the police do their best to stop.

Queensboro Bridge

Located in New York, the Queensboro Bridge is a viaduct for a railroad. Mrs. Stevenson lives near the Queensboro Bridge, and it is over the Queensboro Bridge that a train passes, drowning out her screams as she is murdered.

Murray Hill

Murray Hill is an area in New York. It is where Mr. Stevenson works. Murray Hill work number is the one that Mrs. Stevenson consistently tries, without success, to reach throughout the play.

Second Avenue

Second Avenue is located just around the corner from Mrs. Stevenson's home. There is a bar located on Second Avenue where the private patrolman for Mrs. Stevenson's street goes to get a beer every night at 11 p.m.

Mrs. Stevenson's Bedroom

Mrs. Stevenson's bedroom is the main setting for the play. It is where Mrs. Stevenson lives as an invalid, calls operators, the police station, and Henschley Hospital. It is also where she is murdered.



Themes and Motifs

Mystery

Mystery is a dominant theme in the play *Sorry, Wrong Number* by Lucille Fletcher. Mystery involves elements of the unknown. There are two mysteries in Fletcher's play, both of which concern Mrs. Stevenson. While one of these mysteries is solved, the other is left open-ended. Mrs. Stevenson is the victim of the murder plot. However, the second mystery about the murderer's boss is speculation based on Mr. Stevenson's urgent trip out of town and a logical motive for having his wife killed.

Terror

Terror is an underlying theme in the play *Sorry, Wrong Number* by Lucille Fletcher. Terror is a classic element in horror, mystery, and crime-themed literature and pop-culture. Terror is essentially fear brought on by some internal or external individual, situation, or circumstance. Terror in *Sorry, Wrong Number* revolves around the character of Mrs. Stevenson.

The first appearance of terror in Mrs. Stevenson -and for the audience –comes with her discovery of a murder plot while she is trying to reach her husband by phone. Mrs. Stevenson, self-centered though she is, is still terrified that somebody is going to die. Her terror only compounds when she is unable to get back online with the murderer and his boss. She becomes even more anxious when she is unable to convince the police to do anything at all about the plot.

The second appearance of terror is one that slowly grows, but ultimately becomes overwhelming by the end of the novel. The audience –as well as Mrs. Stevenson –are terrified to learn that Mrs. Stevenson is, herself, the intended victim of the planned murder. As evidence that points to Mrs. Stevenson as the intended victim increases, terror grows. It ultimately becomes overwhelming when Mrs. Stevenson discovers the killer is in her house and is racing upstairs to murder her.

Crime

Crime is a major theme in the play *Sorry, Wrong Number* by Lucille Fletcher. Crime involves the commission of acts that are immoral and/or illegal. In the play, the crimes are conspiracy to commit a murder and murder.

Mrs. Stevenson, attempting to contact her husband in Murray Hill, overhears a murder plot instead. A man named George and his boss are planning the murder. George later carries out the crime by killing Mrs. Stevenson. Ironically, it is murder that Mrs. Stevenson has been trying so desperately to avoid.

The play also touches on a hint of irony between crime and law, noted by Mrs. Stevenson. She bemoans the fact that there is so much legal red tape when she attempts to stop a murder. To stop crime, the laws become suffocating. However, when a crime is being committed, the laws are simply ignored. Mrs. Stevenson is very frustrated by this.

Styles

Point of View

Lucille Fletcher tells her play *Sorry, Wrong Number* in the first and third-person limited omniscient perspective, from the point of view of stage directions for action in third, and in the first-person with respect to the characters involved in the play. This is done because the stage directions must be told in third-person so the actors and stage crew know what to do. The characters all speak in the first-person because they become the characters they are meant to play. The play is further told in the limited omniscient, so that readers and viewers only know as much as the characters do, as they learn and discover things. This adds mystery and suspense to the play's plot.

Language and Meaning

Lucille Fletcher tells her play *Sorry, Wrong Number* in simple, straightforward language. Fletcher's goal is to tell a mystery, and she accomplishes this through ordinary, everyday language. This allows the reader to focus on the plot and the terror of the plot, rather than on the writing or the style of the writing.

Structure

Lucille Fletcher tells her play *Sorry, Wrong Number* in one long, continuous act. This is done for at least two reasons. The first is to tell an uninterrupted story, in which a chain of events is set in motion and cannot be stopped (the murder of Mrs. Stevenson). The second reason is that although the play's continuous nature may be long, it also reinforces the concept that not much time has passed. Indeed, between overhearing the plot and calling the police, a mere eight minutes have passed. This further adds to the terror and the mystery of the play.



Quotes

It's my husband's office. He's working late tonight, and I'm all alone here in the house. My health is very poor –and I've been feeling so nervous all day....

-- Mrs. Stevenson (chapter 1 paragraph 6)

Importance: Here, Mrs. Stevenson reveals two important facts. First, she is an invalid and in poor health. Second, her husband is working late. Both are key pieces of information that will inform the future plot of the play.

A knife will be okay. And remember –remove the rings and bracelets, and the jewelry in the bureau drawer. Our client wishes it to look like a simple robbery.

-- 1st Man (chapter 1 paragraph 26)

Importance: Here, Mrs. Stevenson overhears a murder plot being hatched, and the plan to make it look like a robbery. Because of this, it will be difficult to find a motive behind the murder.

This was a wrong number. And you dialed it. And we've got to find out what it was – immediately!

-- Mrs. Stevenson (chapter 1 paragraph 35)

Importance: Having been disconnected from the murder call, Mrs. Stevenson is desperate to get back on the line. She urges the operator to connect her once more so she can discover more about the plot.

I want you to trace a call. A telephone call. Immediately. I don't know where it came from, or who was making it, but it's absolutely necessary that it be tracked down. Because it was about a murder.

-- Mrs. Stevenson (chapter 1 paragraph 52)

Importance: Desperately trying to get more information about the murder plot and those involved, Mrs. Stevenson urges Miss Curtis to trace the call. She repeats over and over again that it involves a murder and the call must be traced. It demonstrates the futile attempts by Mrs. Stevenson to find out more information.

Oh- for Heaven's sake! You mean to tell me I can't report a murder without getting tied up in all this red tape? Why –it's perfectly idiotic.

-- Mrs. Stevenson (chapter 1 paragraph 72)

Importance: Commenting on the irony of law and crime, Mrs. Stevenson is horrified to discover the legal restrictions to reporting a crime, while criminals need only break the law to commit a crime. Preventing a crime seems far more difficult.

A lot of murders are committed in this city every day, ma'am. If we could do something to stop 'em, we would. But a clue of this kind that's so vague isn't much more use to us



than no clue at all.

-- Sergeant Duffy (chapter 1 paragraph 107)

Importance: The apathetic and disinterested Sergeant Duffy remarks on the sad state of New York: Murders abound and the police do their best to stop them. The problem with Mrs. Stevenson's report is that her report is very vague, and the police have little to nothing to act on.

Unless, of course, you have some reason for thinking this call is phony –and that someone may be planning to murder you?

-- Sergeant Duffy (chapter 1 paragraph 109)

Importance: Sergeant Duffy first plants the idea in Mrs. Stevenson's head that the murder plot may actually be against her. That would be the only information that would allow the police to do something. Otherwise, the information is too vague.

And meanwhile, I've got to sit here in my bed, suffering every time that phone rings – imagining everything....

-- Mrs. Stevenson (chapter 1 paragraph 139)

Importance: Here, Mrs. Stevenson laments to the operator that her nerves are getting to her. Indeed, Mrs. Stevenson's neurosis is making the situation worse, and the reader alternates between wondering whether everything is all in her mind, or if something is actually going on.

Nerves. I'm very nervous. I need soothing –and companionship. My husband is away...

-- Mrs. Stevenson (chapter 1 paragraph 139)

Importance: Mrs. Stevenson's nerves are shattered, and she does not want to be alone. She tries in vain to get a nurse to come over to her house for company and for medical assistance. Her decision not to call the police until it is too late will be costly for her.

Sorry. Wrong number.

-- George (chapter 1 paragraph 201)

Importance: Just as Mrs. Stevenson is murdered, her call to the police precinct goes through. But, it is George who talks to Duffy, telling him he has accidentally dialed the wrong number.