

Tin Can Telephone

Alyssa Proujansky

Fiction

My wife, Sophie, disappeared for a month, and then they said they found her body. I was given a bag I was told contained her ashes. I threw them from a small boat into the sea.

When I'd finished shaking the last of the ashes into the water, a single dolphin appeared.

"Well," said the man operating the boat. "That's something else. Never see dolphins out here."

I thought Yes! and then punished myself by thinking No.

That was many years ago.

Sophie's voicemail still works. I pay the bill every month. After the beep, she waits one beat longer than you'd expect, then she says her name.

When I hear her, I see dust motes, spots of sand, hazy, molecular light.

When I'd finished shaking the last of the ashes into the water, a single dolphin appeared.

"Well," said the man operating the boat. "That's something else. Never see dolphins out here."

I thought Yes! and then punished myself by thinking No.

Is this because she had these colors around her to begin with or because she jumped from a bridge into the sea?

We lived next door to each other as girls.

We collected rusted tin cans and old, knotted string. We played in the ruins of a house by the beach. We communicated between rooms via tin can telephone.

I call her every night before I go to sleep.

I call because I imagine, impossibly, that she is still alive. But even as I dial, I picture her phone, battered on the bottom of the sea.



I can find evidence of Sophie anywhere—even after all these years. When the clock displays multiple numbers. In dreams that pin me to bed in the morning. When I turn the radio dial, I hear breathy whistles and clicks.

I want to believe in unchained energy, but I'm embarrassed by my new, unscientific thoughts, afraid of being revealed.

Revealed to whom? My dead wife? Isn't there something faulty about that argument?

Early this morning, the dogs barked, and I woke with a start and flailed my arms and knocked my phone to the floor. As I bent to retrieve it, I must have hit redial, because the mechanized beep blared into the room.

But after the pause, there was a small cough. A throat clearing.

And as if in a dream, I was in the car, driving down the familiar roads to the beach.

Sophie was standing on a small patch of beaten-down grass. I stumbled out of my car, into the stale, still day.

Tiny tips of green tried to push up through grimy patches of snow.

Sophie was barefoot, her jeans rolled to her knees.

I'd always imagined that if she came back I'd claw and leap and nip and stare, like our dogs did after we'd been away.

But I just stood there, looking down at her mud-flecked feet in the scrubby grass.

"This is the front yard," she said, somewhat proudly.

Everything looked thawed-out and dirty.

"Come in, why don't you?" Her voice was polite.

She wasn't unhappy to see me, I realized, but she wasn't glad, either. She didn't seem surprised or not-surprised. She wasn't anything.

I hung back. I should have been overjoyed. She was alive! But there was a buzzing in the tips of my fingers as I followed her across the grass and into the house.

Inside, Sophie's hair curtained over her face.

"The dogs," I said, reaching for her. "Our life together. All these years."

Inside my head, I screamed WHAT ABOUT before each of these.

But Sophie moved quickly away. She hummed an unfamiliar tune. She tucked her long hair behind her ears.

"These are my things," she said. "This is where I live."

She took empty tin cans from a table in the middle of the room and stacked them on a dusty shelf.