

Word Count: 1000

The girl holds the phone in her hand, staring at the number on the screen, unable to hit the dial button. Will they want to hear from her? Have they forgotten about her? Do they even care about her anymore? Her finger hovers over the button, shaking.

“Something the matter?” she’s asked, and she shakes her head. The voice is floating around her, never staying in one place for too long. Circling her. “Then why aren’t you calling?”

She doesn't answer, and after a moment the phone is ripped from her hands. She yells out in surprise, and reaches out for it. Her life line to the outside. “Give it back!”

The phone is held just slightly out of her grasp, dangling in front of her. She reaches out to grab it, fingers only able to graze it as it’s again pulled out of reach.

“If you won’t call them, then what’s the point? I gave you this out of my own kindness.” She nods. She knows this. “Last chance.”

The phone is thrown at her. She flinches. It misses hitting her, but only just barely. It skates across the floor. She hesitates, but then scrambles to get the phone before it’s taken away again. She redials the number slowly, preparing herself.

The phone rings.

A middle-aged woman, doing the dishes, looks up. She calls to her husband in the living room, asking if he can get the phone.

And rings.

He says he’s reading the paper. It’s probably just spam. No one calls the landline anymore.

And rings.

If it's important they'll leave a message.

It stops. She holds her breath and waits for the person on the other end to say something. It's quiet, but then an automated voice says, "Hello, no one was around to answer your call. Please leave your name and number after the beep."

The wife dries her hands, just in case she has to answer it.

The girl nods. It makes sense. No one answers unexpected landline calls. *Once they hear my voice, she tells herself, I know they'll pick up.*

The answering machine beeps. The wife joins her husband in the living room, and waits by the receiver. She looks at the pictures decorating the wall while she waits, and smiles looking at the photo of their trip abroad last year.

"Hello? Hello, is someone there? Hello?" The girl says into the receiver. Her voice is small. She hopes there's someone home. *Please pick up.* "Hello? Mom? Dad? It's me."

The wife's smile drops as a young girl's voice echoes through the house. She looks at her husband. He puts down the paper he was reading.

The girl waits on the other end. No one is answering. *Maybe they can't hear me?* She repeats herself, louder this time. She starts counting the seconds of silence.

One...

The wife's hand hovers over the receiver. ~~She doesn't want to answer.~~

Three... Four...

If they don't answer on the count of thirty, I'll hang up.

Seven... Eight...

The husband tells her ~~not~~ to pick it up.

Ten...

They've forgotten about me.

Fifteen...

The wife responds that she has to. Of course she has to. What kind of mother would she be if she didn't?

Twenty... Twenty-one...

They don't want to hear from me.

Twenty-five...

The husband has no response. ~~It can't be her.~~

Twenty-eight... Twenty-nine...

They don't miss me.

Thirty.

The wife picks up the phone and looks at her husband.

"Hello?" The voice is soft, familiar. Her mother's voice asks again, "Are you there?"

"Mom? It's me. It's Anna." She can hear uneven breathing on the other end.

"Mom?"

"Anna? Is it- Is it really you?" The girl nods. Her mother can't see her.

The wife nods to her husband, and mouths *It's really her*. The husband shakes his head in disbelief. He gets up, and joins his wife's side.

On the other side of the receiver, the girl can hear her father's voice asking what's going on. Her mother tells him that she's on the line. That she's *alive*. They say something she can't make out.

The husband tries to take the receiver from his wife but she won't give it up. She moves the mouthpiece away from her face as her husband tells her this is impossible. That there's no way. The wife clicks the button to switch from handheld to speaker. *Listen for yourself*, she says.

"Are you still there?" The girl asks.

The husband *knows* it can't be her. The wife *knows* it can't be her. *This is impossible.*

"Is this a prank? Who is this?" Her father's voice is angry and loud, like she did something wrong. The same tone he would use when she refused to do what he wanted her to. "My daughter went missing years ago, so who. Is. This?"

"It- It's me." She tries her best to hold back tears, but her voice cracks as she says, "Why don't you believe me?"

More silence. Hushed whispers. Then her mother's voice, "We believe it's just so hard to believe. You've been gone for so long."

The wife is crying now. Tears, not of relief for hearing from her missing daughter, but tears for herself. She knows what she did- What *they* did to her. ~~She is scared.~~

Her father's voice again. Less angry. "Where are you, *sweetheart*?"

This confuses the girl. *How does he not know?* She wipes her tears. "What do you mean? I'm right here, right where you left me."

"And where is that **Anna**?" Her father's voice was shaking now, anger replaced by something else. An emotion she had never heard from her father.

The husband is scared. Scared of the impossible. Scared of what will happen next.

She reaches up, and starts knocking on the ceiling above her head, the floor below their feet.

The couple looks down, seeing a faint glow of a cell phone between the floorboards. The faint claw marks that could never be fully removed.

“I’m right here.”