

“Hello? Mom?”

Naomi heard, “Oh, hey, sweetie!” Naomi heard, “Hi, honey!” Naomi heard, “Hello, kiddo!”

“Mom? Mom, I’ve... I’ve moved to Alaska, and now I’m stranded in a motel. Could you please pick me up? Or send me some food, at least?”

Naomi heard, “Okay, sugarplum!” Naomi heard, “Ugh! Fine.” Naomi heard, “You’ll find it outside.”

“Okay, thanks.” Naomi couldn’t bring herself to smile. “Love you. Mom. Bye.”

Naomi heard, “Bye-bye!” Naomi heard, “Good night.” Naomi listened closer, and heard the grinding of brass wheels and the scraping of a string.

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Naomi opened the door to the snowstorm, and at her feet a cardboard box melted onto her collection of Simpsons DVDs.

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“Do the trains run through here?” Naomi asked.

The man in the front office nodded, lecherous smile still glued on his face.

“Great!” Naomi smiled, putting one foot through the office door.
“Where’ll they take me?”

The man nodded. It sounded like scratching cardboard.

“...hello?” Naomi waved a hand in front of his face.

The man nodded. Under his jacket, Naomi saw his neck end in the rim of a cardboard box, and rising from it, a thin, gleaming string.

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Naomi ignored the empty noises of her stomach and put a hand on her pulse.

Onetwothreefourfivesixseveneight... No, she realized. Those aren’t heartbeats. They weren’t distinct sounds after all. They were wheels. They were-

She thought to cut herself, just to see if she would bleed.

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She never did.

Her stomach's growls were shifting from anger to bargaining, and every step she took came with a twinge of lightheadedness that was growing scarily fast. She had to eat. And there was nothing in any of the motel's staff-only areas, the areas she could only enter because of an interesting lack of staff.

I won't do it.

But where else could she go?

Naomi sighed, and with the resolution of a hitman on her first job said:

"I wake up the next morning and head down to the front desk."

Something in her pulled taut and dragged thousands of invisible wheels into squeaking, whirring existence, and there were strings on the man at the motel's front desk, on the bear that'd chased her here, strings on Ned even now, even millions of miles away, and she felt every single one of them like the fingers of her hand. The wheels hooked the strings, shaping the force flowing from her clockwork heart (because she had one of those.

She refused to dwell on the implications), merging and splitting a thousand times a second to translate the will of her Words from talk into action. It was so much. It was all she could do to put one thought in front of another.

She looked at her hand. A string was looped around each finger, rising to connect with God-knows-what on this invisible mass of machinery. She flexed one back and forth, testing the pull of the string. Nothing moved, because she had not willed anything to. *How do I know that?* Something gently tugged at her chest, another string pointing the way. She followed it, followed it out of her room and down the hall and to the front desk where the man sat. She looked at her hand again: *Where are the finger-strings*, she thought, just had a second before they reappeared.

She pulled one down, and focused on the man. His head rose, and he made empty eye contact with her, and she felt powerful. The feeling flooded her brain like a chemical bath: Everything had, was, and would go her way. It scared her. It relieved her.

“What can a girl do to make some money around here?” I ask the man. His eyes widen. “That’s not what I meant!” I correct myself. “I mean, like a job.”

He shrugs, “There’s a diner a mile back or so. They could probably use some help.”

Of course. A mile back. How could she miss something so obvious?

She looked down at her outfit, more dressed for long walks along the beach than sipping cocoa by the fire. *Not like I could've tried it anyway.*

Well, she could now. She followed the string outside. The wind howled with indignation and knocked her right back where she came from. It felt personal. She didn't belong, so the wind had tried to kill her. The wind had tried to kill her!

Anger boiled into a growl, though it came out more like a half-polite "augh!" Naomi pushed herself to her feet and grabbed her chest-string like a rope. Like it was thinking the same, the string pulled taut, and Naomi began to pull. She had never worked out in her short life(?), but the string felt as comfortable as a sword made for her and her alone.

Teeth gritted tight as prison doors, she pulled herself out of the motel. The wind howled at her skin like a protection racketeer banging at her door for this month's dues, but the more heat it stole, the faster the invisible motors on her shoulders pumped it back into her heart through strings. Her bare fingernails were starting to turn blue, yet she still turned around the invisible wheel where her lifeline did and set out around the motel, toward the light she could now see in the distance.

And then the wind spoke to her.

She almost let go. But she didn't, she wouldn't. Still, it was only polite to hear the wind out. It said that she was straining this world beyond disbelief. It said that she was pressing holes into everything to thread them into her childish fantasy. It said that Ned would never really want to be with her – not the real Ned, not the canon Ned. That even her little version she had hurt so deeply that-

She almost let go.

"I didn't mean any of this!" she yelled. "I-I didn't know! And- and what do *you* know about Ned?!"

It asked her what she knew about someone she hurt just by being.

"I'm not hurting him now, am I?!" Was she?

The wind told her yes, he wasn't hurting right now. He wasn't anything – he was frozen in place just like she left him. Naomi's grip slipped. Her hair stood on end. (The lights of the diner were coming into view. Not much longer now.) As long as she was around, the wind howled, the machines would stay, and Ned would never be free. Her script was something that tore holes in the world, like the hole her DVDs came through, or the holes through which the wind could speak, could think,

could feel pain, or the holes she turned around to see behind her like a trail of pebbles, gaping and whining and demanding to be filled. It would be better, the wind said, if she left and *stopped making all these holes in-*

The diner broke the wind as Naomi got close, and as soon as she could she ran through the doors and slammed them shut. She breathed so hard she was afraid she might pop her own lungs.

She had to keep moving. She had to survive. So she put one foot in front of the other, and narrated, “” Breaths curdled into choked sobs, and Naomi fell crying.

Then she stopped. With a ring of the bell, the door had opened, and in had stepped a man. A man with short brown hair and an easygoing smile that fell into an ‘O’ as he realized who was at his feet. A man she realized that she recognized.

“Y-y-you’re-” Naomi stammered. She didn’t usually, but she couldn’t think of any other way to show her shock. With her voice, that is, she knew she could point. “You’re the guy who’s been stalking me!”