

Stranger Danger

After standing in direct sunlight in an oversized robe for three hours and giving a half-assed speech stolen from a sampling of YouTube videos, Phoebe shoves past the crowds, despite the fact that her mother is a part of them, to be the first one into her car and, in turn, out of the parking lot. She frisbees her graduation cap into the backseat and throws the robe over her head at her first opportunity: the single stoplight on the drive home. Sweaty strands of hair stick to her face and mascara is melting off of her eyelashes; her whole face is turning into a scoop of ice cream that some kid might've dropped on the boardwalk.

The light turns green. She presses the gas pedal; it rumbles beneath her feet when she hits the intersection's potholes. *What the hell am I supposed to do now?* she thinks. After not getting a proper night's sleep for six months, going to college and getting even less sleep isn't appealing. She pulls into the driveway, goes inside, climbs stairs, and flops onto her bed.

She sleeps for about fourteen hours. When she wakes up, college still isn't appealing, especially with the sunshine trying to blind her through the curtains she'd forgotten to shut. Papers crinkle under her shoulder as she rolls onto her other side. She makes eye contact with her goldfish, Giraffe, on her dresser.

He's a chubby little guy, but that doesn't quite make his huge eyes the right size for his body. He swims toward Phoebe, tapping his face on the bowl, bumping himself backward. *I need to feed him*, is her second thought, but her first is, *I want to be a mermaid*.

After dropping a few pellets into Giraffe's bowl, she sits at her desk; it looks like someone has dropped a bucket of oversized confetti onto it. Warm-colored sticky notes cover it

like a flattened flamenco dancer's sleeve. Each one has scribbles on it. She starts peeling them off; some are so old she has to use her fingernails to pry them from the wood.

There's a knock on her door.

"Phoebe? Are you up?" Her mother cracks the door open. "Oh, good! I thought I heard you up and about."

"Yeah. What time is it?"

"It's about ten o'clock." She pauses. "I wanted to see you after graduation, but you disappeared."

"Yeah, sorry." She forces a small smile. "I was trying to beat the crowd. The parking lot is already a nightmare when everyone in town *isn't* trying to leave simultaneously."

Her mother agrees, going on and on about last evening's traffic, and then whatever drama she has at work, how she's *so* glad that Phoebe is finally getting some rest but that she should really work on getting her college applications in.

"Mom," Phoebe interrupts, "will you make me some food?"

"Uh, sure. What do you want?"

"I don't care."

The door clicks shut. Phoebe rolls her eyes and continues to rip off sticky notes; she sticks the remaining carcasses onto her legs. Once the desk is clean, she opens up her laptop. She looks back at Giraffe and begins to browse the Internet for communities of people who do magic: magicians, witches, whatever they wanted to be called. When her mother delivers a ham and egg sandwich, she hides her screen. She messages some people. Takes a bite. The sandwich is sad; will her mother ever learn that mustard isn't spicy? A few replies, but they're all clearly

copy-pasted; they don't even bother with using the name she'd given them; they just send a generic, "Hello!" accompanied by a text wall of frequently asked questions. There's nothing promising until around noon: her first real message.

ClemenToTown: *hi. u wanna kno about magic??*

The person in the profile picture looks to be a guy around her age. He wears a hoodie, has dark, longish curly hair, and stubble. *Probably just a stoner*, she thinks, but replies anyway.

phoebe_my_bitch: *uh, yeah. who r u?*

He responds quickly.

ClemenToTown: *i'm clement. i do magic n shit. i'm assumeing ur name is phoebe?*

phoebe_my_bitch: *yeah. what kind of magic do u do?*

ClemenToTown: *idk basically anything ig*

phoebe_my_bitch: *i want to be a mermaid*

Clement is silent for a few minutes. Phoebe sighs and scrolls through her other tabs, but he eventually responds.

ClemenToTown: *i mean thats kinda wild but we could try it*

phoebe_my_bitch: r u serious??

ClemenToTown: yes???

ClemenToTown: r u?

Phoebe leans back in her chair. She follows a trail of bumps on the popcorn ceiling with her eyes. Her gaze moves down to the half-eaten sandwich and its crumbs. The trashcan under her overflows with colorful pieces of the mundane assignments and responsibilities that had consumed her life.

phoebe_my_bitch: show me proof you can do magic. can we skype?

ClemenToTown: i mean i'm in my pjs but sure

They exchange Skypes and, within a few minutes, a pixelated version of the scrawny stoner is fullscreen on Phoebe's laptop.

“Sup?” he asks, pointing a couple of finger guns at her. He's wearing an oversized green T-shirt with dinosaurs all over it.

“Show me what you can do.”

He takes a sip of whatever's in his mug. “You gotta sandwich, looks like?”

Phoebe squints. “How'd you know that?” She glances at her plate and her blood runs cold; the sandwich is gone.

“Magic,” Clement replies, holding the sandwich up to the camera. He takes a bite and scowls. “Dude, this sandwich sucks.”

Phoebe stares into the camera, mouth hanging open. Clement continues to eat and chew, eventually finishing the food. Phoebe takes a deep breath.

“Okay. You’ve impressed me. I’m convinced.”

“Your sandwich didn’t impress me. You got any pizza rolls?”

“That’s not important!” she hisses. “What’s it going to take to make me a mermaid?”

“You’re kinda demanding.” He stretches his arms over his head and she hears pops through the video call.

“I didn’t expect this to be real.” She exhales. “What do you want to make me a mermaid?”

“I dunno.” Clement scratches at his stubble, his eyes slowly moving around the room he’s in. “I could use some company. I’m lonely as fuck. Besides, making you a mermaid is probably complicated, so it’ll take me a while to figure out.”

“You… want me to come to stay with you?”

He shrugs. “It’d be nice. I’m alone most of the time. I live in North Dakota, man.”

Everything that Phoebe had ever learned about stranger danger is, of course, flooding her brain. But the only option her brain conjures up that isn’t soul-crushingly boring is just saying “fuck it, why not?”. If he’s magic and wanted to do something malicious, he could have already, right? Besides, he’s so skinny she could probably kill him blindfolded with an arm tied behind her back. If that wasn’t the case… being murdered would, at least, be an exciting way to go out: more fun than college, at least.

“Fuck it. I’m bored. Give me two weeks. I need to quit my job. Can I bring my goldfish?”

His eyebrows jolt upwards. “Wait, really?”

“Sure. Can I bring my goldfish?”

“Well, damn. Okay. Yeah. Bring the goldfish. I don’t care.”

She scribbles down the address, things she should bring, and the like on a new sticky note. She types up a cookie-cutter resignation letter.

phoebe_my_bitch: is it seriously ok for me to come?

phoebe_my_bitch: are there any good pet stores there?

phoebe_my_bitch: giraffe only likes his special food

ClemenToTown: it's north dakota, man. we dont have shit

ClemenToTown: can u order it online?

phoebe_my_bitch: probably

phoebe_my_bitch: are there jobs there?

ClemenToTown: yeah. its not THAT barren

phoebe_my_bitch: r u sure i wont be a nuisance? imposing?

The desk drawer squeaks open. Phoebe gasps, holding her breath as her face turns white. A notecard floats out of the desk like a kite and lands gracefully beside her laptop. It reads, “Are you having doubts?” with a small doodle of a mermaid under the text.

ClemenToTown: i dont know y ur trying so hard to come up here. ND's boring as fuck

As the following days go by, Phoebe packs little by little, hiding the suitcase under her bed. If her mother notices anything strange, she doesn't mention it; all she talks about is college applications, as if Phoebe'd submitted any. After Phoebe's last night making burgers and fries, she grabs her suitcase. Puts Giraffe in some Tupperware. Drives away under the cover of darkness. She throws her uniform shirt out the car window once she gets on the highway, leaving her in a tank top and work jeans.

The eventual drive is long and the North is cold. She doesn't get jumped at the rest stops. Giraffe's water sloshes. She drinks shitty coffee. Dissociates.

Her phone's GPS tells her that she's arrived after like fifteen hours. Clement's apartment building is inconspicuous: old brick, chipping paint, and frigid, empty air. She finds door 103 and knocks.

"Come on in," he calls. It's a studio. Not pristine, but not a dump. Homey. It smells like microwave food. Phoebe closes the door behind her. Clement is playing Mario Kart. He hands her a controller behind his head. She takes it and hops onto the couch beside him.

After a few hours of silence and getting their asses kicked by some random online players, Clement lets out a short whistle and turns off his game console. He grabs an oversized, wrinkly, white button-up shirt from the back of the couch, puts it on over his T-shirt, and grabs a lanyard on a hook by the door.

"Where are you going?" Phoebe asks.

"Work." He buttons up the shirt. "Make yourself at home."

"We're not going to, like, talk or anything?"

“We played Mario Kart.” He smiles a little. “I can learn a lot more about you through Mario Kart than conversation.” Phoebe blinks at him. “Am I right? Am I wrong?” He looks her in the eyes. “You seem kind of irritated.”

“I’m here to become a mermaid. Not to play video games.”

Clement frowns. “You seemed like you were having a good time.”

“I assumed that if we were doing it that it would lead to something.” She inhales. “You’re the magician here, not me.”

He tilts his head. “You thought Mario Kart would be related to magic?”

“Well, I sure as hell didn’t think that a twig would know shit about magic, but here you are,” she snaps.

“Ouch. Anyway, I’m gonna be late. I’ll be back later. Bye.” Clement leaves, throwing a peace sign behind him.

Phoebe blocks her mom’s number after the seventeenth missed call and fortieth text. She drags her suitcase inside. Feeds Giraffe and sets him on the counter. Takes a shower. She decides she doesn’t mind man soap.

She snoops, too; she’s almost disappointed that she isn’t finding a freezer full of dead bodies or a copy of “Human Sacrifices for Dummies.” Mid-filing cabinet, one of the folders opens; a paper flutters into the air that reads, “quit snooping >:(.”

Phoebe grumbles, “You told me to make myself at home.”

The paper turns over and says, “Do you snoop in your own house?”

She grabs it out of the air, crumples it into a ball, and throws it to the floor. It rolls itself over to the trash can before jumping into it like some kind of suicidal Kirby.

It's dark when Clement gets back.

Phoebe greets him with, "There's no food here. I'm starving."

"Those are some strong words for someone who was looking through my shit."

"What's the problem if you have nothing to hide?"

He shrugs. "Whatever. You want pizza?"

"Yeah. I do. And while it's on its way here, we'd better be talking about making me a mermaid. How long is it going to take?"

"About a month."

Clement quickly learns Phoebe's favorite pizza toppings. Phoebe finds a pet store thirty minutes out of town that sells Giraffe's special food, but it's pretty expensive. She looks for a job. Clement gets bored with Mario Kart and gets Super Smash Bros. Phoebe plays with him and kicks his ass. She gets a job at a bank. She upgrades Giraffe's bowl to an actual tank.

A month passes.

"How much longer?" Phoebe asks again over their meal of leftover Chinese.

"Like, two months."

"You said it would be a month... a month ago." She gestures with her chopsticks.

"These things are complicated." Clement shoves a huge clump of sesame chicken into his mouth.

"Whatever."

Clement's couch becomes comfortable. Phoebe gets more hours. Her coworkers want to be friends; she vents about this annoyance to Clement. He says that his coworkers stopped trying to talk to him a long time ago.

Two months pass.

“How much longer?” she asks again after beating Clement in Smash six times in a row. She’s sprawled across the couch, not leaving him enough space.

He doesn’t look away from the screen. “I’m not sure. I keep running into hiccups. I’ve never done something like this before.”

She wrinkles her nose. “How hard can it be to swap my legs for a tail?”

He stares at her. “That’s the easy part. I have to figure out how to make it work. If I cut off my hand and attached a foot, I wouldn’t be able to wiggle the toes, y’know?”

She scowls. “Did you have to pick a foot?”

“What else was I supposed to pick? My nose?” He giggles like he’s on laughing gas while Phoebe beats him with the dinosaur-shaped couch pillow.

“You’re so fucking lame!” she shouts, only showing mercy when Clement swears to never speak of a hypothetical foot to hand transplant ever again.

After a long day at work, Clement comes home to a dark apartment. He wonders if Phoebe went to get food, even though she usually waited for him to get home. He feels the wall for the light switch, but freezes at the sound of muffled crying. He squints into the darkness and his eyes adjust to see a form, presumably Phoebe, curled up on the floor by the kitchen. He tilts his head and calls, “Phoebe?” He gets no response.

He inches his way to the couch and switches on the lamp beside it. His restored vision confirms his suspicions; Phoebe is laying there, a crumpled pile of blonde hair and sweatpants. She breathes quietly, shallow, and fast.

He approaches slowly. “Phoebe? What-” His eyes dart upward and a little to the left. Giraffe is in his tank, floating upside down. Neon aquarium gravel is a horizon below the watery sky pulling Giraffe to fish heaven. The bubbles from the air pump make his corpse twitch. “Oh...”

She still doesn't move. Clement sighs. He grabs Giraffe's old bowl from under the sink, fills it with some of the tank water, and plops the fish into it with the nearby fish-scooping net. He sits across from Phoebe, criss-cross applesauce, and sets the bowl on the floor between them.

“Phoebe... hey, c'mon, don't cry. Well, saying that's not going to help, obviously, but, like...” He sighs again. “I probably shouldn't do this, but...” He pokes the surface of the water with his index finger. A faint light emits from it and Giraffe wiggles back to life and right-side up. His eyes roll around a few times before he swims towards Phoebe, hitting the bowl and bumping himself backward. “See?” Clement pushes the bowl a little closer to her. “He's okay. He's swimming again.”

Phoebe moves her arm and peeks out over it. Her eyes widen and she sucks in air so fast she coughs. She unrolls herself and crawls so close to the bowl that her nose touches the glass. She starts crying again, but this time with the biggest smile Clement's ever seen. She cups one side of the bowl with her palm and presses her cheek into the other. She laugh-cries until her hand goes limp and she falls asleep on the floor with her head right beside Giraffe. Clement drops a few pellets into the water, puts a thick blanket over Phoebe, then wanders off to bed.

The next morning, Phoebe paces around the kitchen aimlessly. The mug shakes in her hand, making it difficult to sip her third cup of coffee. Clement, at 11 AM, strides in with a

yawn, arms stretched over his head. He tilts his head at Phoebe. “Have I ever seen you drink coffee?”

She slides a mug on the counter towards him. “Where did you get your powers?”

He picks the drink up and takes a sip. He shrugs. “I was just born with ‘em.” Phoebe glares at him and he continues, “Seriously. I wish there was an explanation as much as you do. I’ve searched around, but I’ve never found any evidence strong enough to justify dropping everything and going on a whimsical adventure of self-discovery.” He takes another sip.

“You wouldn’t believe how many leads I could follow: religion, witchcraft, other spiritual bullcrap from people who probably just wanna sell me crystals...” He finishes the rest of his drink in one long gulp. “My powers probably should’ve been given to someone with more drive.”

“But then you wouldn’t have saved Giraffe.”

He can’t bring himself to tell her that there are probably more important things in the world than her goldfish. “Fair enough.” He puts his mug in the sink.

A few days later, while pouring milk into his cereal, he says, “Look, Phoebe... I can’t turn you into a mermaid.”

She’s in the midst of feeding Giraffe. She drops the entire container into his tank. Her head snaps in Clement’s direction.

“What?”

He pushes wet clumps of cereal around the bowl with his spoon; he won’t take his eyes off it. “Look, I don’t know what I was thinking. I don’t even think much these days. Jeez, man, I didn’t expect you to take me up on my offer.”

“Then why the hell did you offer?” she shouts.

He sets his spoon down and finally looks up. “Because I took one look at you and made the mistake of thinking that there’s no way you could be *that* much of a lunatic. I can do magic, yeah, but mermaids don’t even exist. Why would I be able to turn you into something that doesn’t exist? Hell, if there isn’t a mermaid society, why would you want to be one, anyway? Did you even think this through? Where would you go? What would you do? How would you *survive*? You’d be dead in a week!”

“I never said I wanted to be a *live* mermaid!”

He rubs his temples with too much force. “Y’know, I should be mad, but you not giving a shit about your life kind of adds up.” He tries to take a deep breath, but fails. “Okay. What about Giraffe? What would he do? He couldn’t come with you; goldfish are freshwater fish.”

“Who says there can’t be freshwater mermaids?”

“I-” he jumps out of his slouch. “Why am I even arguing with you? You’re literally nuts!”

“*I’m* nuts? You’re the one inviting random girls from the Internet to live with you by making false promises!”

Clement’s face is red. “Well, you showed up, so I guess we’re both nuts!”

They stand silently on opposite sides of the room. Phoebe turns and fishes the food out of Giraffe’s tank. Once the tension in their shoulders fades, they opt for opposite sides of the couch.

“You can leave, if you want. I’ll even pay for your gas,” Clement says.

“I don’t want to go back. Life is so fucking boring there.”

“Yeah.” He levitates a controller to himself and another to Phoebe.