

Don't Talk To Strangers

Noelle navigated the driveway, swallowing repeatedly to hold back the tears. *Pregnant?! Her?* She had always been so careful! Perfect timing that her boyfriend of seven years had just left her, and not for another woman but just because he said he wanted to see other people. In other words, he was bored. As if that was not bad enough, she was hearing rumors that her workplace would be shutting down within a few months. Apparently the slow economy and the new government stipulations had taken its toll there as well. There was no official announcement yet, but the layoffs were becoming pretty pronounced. Noelle would have to hustle if she was going to find another job, and it was not as if she was earning much to start with – she had depended on her live-in boyfriend to provide half the rent and utilities.

Her stomach did a flip-flop as she saw the red paper attached to her front door. *Oh please no*, she thought to herself as she sat in the idling car. Noelle rented the house she lived in, and her lease was due to expire at the end of the month. She had already spoken to the landlord about renewing the lease, but that red notice did not look promising. She supposed she should be thankful since she was now single and her employment status was uncertain, but right now all Noelle could think was that it was just another thing going wrong in her life. Leaning her head against the wheel, she closed her eyes and tried to figure out when things started going downhill. Naturally, there was no set time and place, it just happened.

“Such is adult life,” her father would tell her. Of course he meant it in an encouraging way, but it never made her feel better. It always made her feel like a whining child, one who had bemoaned being under the authority of her parents and was impatient to get older to move out of her parents’ house, and now

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complained because she had gotten her way and the world was not as golden as she thought. Noelle knew that life was rough all around, that no one was immune – but for heaven’s sake could she not just vent to someone? Her friends were few and far between, and they had their own problems so she hated to tell them her woes. It always felt like she was imposing on them. Besides, most had moved away to seek job offers in other cities. Right now she was settling for talking with her plants – at least they listened without prejudice.

Realizing she could not delay the inevitable, Noelle sighed and turned off the ignition. Exiting the vehicle and still swallowing, she made her way to the front door. Her entry key was already in her hands, the motion automatic at this point. She simultaneously set the key in the lock as she bleakly read the red notice.

“Lease will not be renewed. Resident must vacate within 30 days of lease expiration.”

Noelle hated the feel of the tears finally escaping. She hissed as she swiped the notice off the door and entered her home for the last two years. What was with her luck lately? Had she unknowingly walked under an aisle of ladders or had black cats sleeping on her car at night? Tossing the red notice onto the kitchen counter-top, followed by her keys, Noelle wondered what she was going to do. No hope of the lease being renewed, no roommate to help with rent at a new place, soon no job to make the bills, she had miniscule savings due to trying to keep up with bills and expenses, she had even less belongings due to the garage sales in an attempt to build more of a financial cushion, and now she was pregnant. She sat down at the kitchen table and stared blankly at the walls, the sheer enormity of her situation beginning to overwhelm her. Whether it was her increased hormones or simply just an intense feeling of discouragement or worse a combination of the two, Noelle had never felt so hopeless and adrift.

She dropped her head in her hands as she began to cry, and hated herself even as she gave into the weakness. Noelle always despised the weepy stereotype of women, but she was so stressed

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and overwhelmed at the moment that her body could find no other way to release at the moment. She did not exercise avidly, and was allergic to tobacco and alcohol, so the only outlet left was to be the emotional wreck most commercials and magazines touted women to be. Oddly enough, when she was done Noelle did feel better. Drained, but somehow lighter. Her outburst did not help her situation at all, but at least she had vented her frustration. Still cradling her head in her hands, she considered her options.

She could always beg one of her local co-workers or acquaintances to let her room with them for a while, but Noelle hated doing that. She had lived with a co-worker once before, and it had not been a pleasant experience. She had no desire to repeat it. The option of moving in with family was always there, maybe. The problem was with her pregnancy they would drive her so crazy with their suspicions of why *he* left and what she was going to do, not to mention how she was going to manage, and undoubtedly being so accursedly patronizing the entire time, Noelle knew she would be miserable.

So then, what to do?

Plans came and went as she wandered into the kitchen and absently made herself something to eat. If asked, Noelle would have said she was not hungry, but her body was responding to another need. She would not even taste the food as she chewed. As she finished the first half of the sandwich, there was a knock at the door. Taking her time, Noelle went dazedly to see who was at the door.

Standing there was a woman, rather unremarkable really. Dirty blonde hair, fair complexion, average height, fair looks, bland clothes; the only thing that seemed lively about her were her eyes, a vibrant green that watched her with an intensity which almost unnerved Noelle. Her eyes seemed to glow dimly with an ethereal light, but Noelle was certain she was just being fanciful-it had to be the angle of the failing sunlight. Still, the steady gaze made Noelle uneasy.

Then she steeled herself. This woman had come to her home, what did she want?

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“Pardon the intrusion,” the woman said with a slight edge. “My car has broken down and the reception on my cell phone has given out.” She held up the small device, indicating its antennae bars were non-existent. “Could I please borrow your phone?”

Noelle debated. She had heard the rumor mills about people shamming to get into a house to scout it out for robbery, and that would be just her luck right now. Then she glanced past the lady and saw the car at the end of the driveway, blocking it. A tire had blown out, and she could see smoke coming from under the hood. Not surprising about the reception either, Noelle lived in an area somewhat away from the main city. Sometimes cell phones worked, sometimes they did not – which was why she and most of her neighbors had a landline. At least two parts of her story checked out. Then Noelle mentally shrugged and gestured the woman indoors. What did it matter if she got robbed now? She had sold a lot of things already, there was precious little left. If anything was taken, it was less for her to move.

The woman smiled her thanks and entered. She waited in the hallway as Noelle closed the door and led her to the phone. Noelle did not even stay to see what number was dialed or to hear the conversation. It might have been rude, but she really did not care if the woman was calling a friend or a mechanic or a tow agency.

While the stranger talked on the phone, she set about cleaning up from when she made the sandwich. As she did so, her mind began turning over her situation again. It was not healthy, she knew, to dwell on things beyond her control, but she had to find some sort of solution. The first thing she would have to do is redo her resume and start filling out applications, then she would have to start looking for a place to live. No, she had to find a place first, and then work. After all, what if she found work in a different city. Then what about her appointments, she had to keep up with them now. Noelle could feel the pressure building as her frustration grew. Each solution she thought she had brought to mind new responsibilities she had to take into consideration. Of course, there was always the other option – but her mind shrank away from that. Not from a political or religious standpoint, just a

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personal belief – it was not a decision she thought she could live with. It took a moment for her to realize the phone conversation was over and the woman was looking, unabashedly, at the red notice left out on the table beside her half eaten turkey club.

Anger simmering, Noelle quickly retrieved the notice and stuffed it into a pocket.

Nonplussed, the woman looked around with more interest, stoking her temper further. *Probably looking for a new place of her own now*, came the surly thought. Well, she was not ousted yet.

“Who is coming to get you?” Noelle asked sharply, perhaps more so than was strictly necessary.

The woman did not seem to notice; she merely looked at Noelle with a strangely amused expression. Her green eyes glittered slightly as she answered. “A friend.”

“What about your car?” Noelle pressed. “Can she get around it?”

“I am sure she will get it up and running,” came the calm response. “You mind if I wait here?”

Noelle looked at the other woman suspiciously.

“Well it *is* rather hot outside, and my air-conditioning unit is not going to function with the engine not working.”

Noelle ground her teeth for a moment, still furiously embarrassed at the stranger having seen the red notice of eviction. She then offered a strained smile. “Of course, I am sorry for being so rude. Just... stress.”

The stranger nodded, a sympathetic look crossing her face. Though still angry, Noelle felt a strange compulsion to keep talking. Just like she despised the stereotype of weepy women, she especially disliked pity. Why she should justify herself to this stranger was beyond her, but she could not stand that look on the woman's face. The pressure was at a boiling point, and Noelle refused to break down and cry in front of her.

“I am sure it is difficult right now,” the woman cooed at her, unknowingly stoking the fires of her host's fury.

“It is difficult everywhere,” Noelle managed in an even tone, but she could hear the strain to keep herself from growling. “My

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situation is no different. I rent, and my landlord decided not to renew.”

“Ah, sorry to hear that.”

Like hell, she thought, but aloud she said, “Well, probably came at a good time,” she lied to herself and the woman. “I needed a new space. I think I can stay at one of those weekly hotels while I shop for a new place.”

“Sounds like a plan,” the stranger agreed.

Noelle bristled as she suspected the woman was trying to placate her. Darn it, she did not need pity! “Yeah and it probably will not be as expensive as renting, or maybe not. Depending on what I can find. If only...” she hesitated from saying anything further. She had already shared more than she intended.

“If only?” the woman echoed, twirling a strand of hair. Noelle had thought it was dirty blonde, but now she could see it was actually tan blonde. The prompt pulled at Noelle, almost demanding that she finish the thought.

“If only my boyfriend had not left me!” Noelle blurted out, horrified at her weakness. She quickly backpedaled. “He was bored, you see. I had done nothing wrong. We were together seven years, and one day I come home to an empty house and a note. A note! All his stuff was gone, so he had to have been planning it for a while.” She knew she was rambling, but she could not seem to stop. “How could he do that? How could I have missed it? Of all the times for him to leave!”

“Something happen?” the woman asked the other commented, leaning against a wall and revealing an ample bosom underneath her plain top. Her eyes narrowed a bit as if she were considering something. Yet even through the slits, Noelle could swear there was a sliver of green light.

Still, Noelle dared not answer. Unfortunately her body betrayed her as her hands drifted towards her abdomen. The woman caught the movement. She pursed her lips thoughtfully, and the amusement seemed to be returning. What did the woman find so damn funny?

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“He did not know, did he?” the question seemed mocking, but Noelle was too distracted by the suspicions the question prompted.

Finally she shook her head. “No, there was no reason for him to know. Hell, I did not know until today. He left a few weeks ago.”

“Seems rather convenient,” the woman interrupted, her healthy complexion becoming flushed as she went on. “Him leaving and you being alone to handle... all the responsibility.”

Noelle's wrath flared anew. What if he had known? There was no reason why he would, but what if he had? It would definitely explain why he was in such a rush to leave, probably thinking that Noelle would demand matrimony, or at the very least financial support. After all, it took two, and she should not be alone in this. Noelle could feel her own cheeks flush with an amalgam of emotions she could not clearly define. When she looked up, the woman was smiling. The image of a shark came to mind.

A dread crept over Noelle, though she tried to shake it off. “He does not know,” she said emphatically, determined to think better of the father of her child. “It does not matter, I will take care of it.”

“Will you?” the stranger leaned forward curiously. Her green eyes gleamed with a morbid fascination. “How?”

“I will find a way.” She said stubbornly. “There are programs out there I can apply for, perhaps even move to a place closer to friends or family. Trade housekeeping for room and board for a while. Since I am single, there are even State and Federal assistant programs I can apply for...” her voice trailed off.

The woman watched as the massive weight of what she was saying finally made an impression. Noelle was certain she was going to be homeless by the end of the month, possibly jobless not too long thereafter. Her insurance was job-related, so it would expire soon as well. Thankfully her car was paid off, but she still needed money to get from place to place. Even pregnant, how could she show up at a loved ones' doorstep and hope they would

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take her in? Everyone had problems, and taking care of her would just add to them. Wouldn't it?

Noelle slumped against the opposite wall, her arguments dying on her lips.

"Sounds like you have it all planned out."

She definitely heard the sarcasm in the other's voice then. Yet now, there was no answering rage. She just felt... empty. She did not want to impose on anyone, but she did not want to do anything to her growing child because she was afraid of the unknown. Surely things would work out. Yet even as she thought that, the hope was hollow.

The woman's green eyes glowed, Noelle was sure of it now. There was something manic in them now, as if she was taking a strange pleasure out of their painful exchange. "Alright, so what would you do?"

She was taken aback by the question. "Pardon?"

"It is pretty plain your options are few, excluding the ones you do not want to even consider. So, if you could make a choice, something that would guarantee everything worked out," the stranger explained with a negligent wave of her hand. "What would you do?"

Noelle shook her head, dazed by the quick turn the conversation had taken. "I do not understand. Are you asking me what I would wish for? Wishes are for children. We live in reality."

"Humor me." The stranger said with a Cheshire-cat grin.

Noelle considered this carefully, though she could not say why. The dread was pronounced now, causing her to proceed with caution. Somehow, she thought the woman was going to take whatever she said seriously. A wish? Any wish? Would she wish to start over, but retain the knowledge so she could use it to her advantage? No, there were so many things wrong with that thought. What was it science said? A change in direction had a ripple effect in time, causing differences. Even her knowledge would become useless after a while. Wish for a steady job? Too open to interpretation as to what type of job, doing what, and for how long. She had the child to consider. Ah yes, the child – what

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was going to happen there? Should she include it in the wish? No genetic diseases, no mental problems, healthy and happy. Was it too much to ask for? Then there was the uncertainty about the future. Gangs, education, wars; with a child came everything that she would normally not have to truly worry about. What should she wish for then? Noelle did not know, all she knew was that she was over-thinking this. It was a hypothetical question after all.

If she was going to wish, why not wish big?

Finally, she looked squarely at the woman with shining green eyes. "Alright, if it were up to me – I would wipe the slate clean. Everyone gone, everywhere, and start over. No claims of genetic memory or of genetic defects. No residual teachings of inferiority or superiority. No psychological damage caused by neglect or abuse, or even complexes caused by excess attention and pampering. Blank page. Start over."

There was a low giggle, which developed into a manic laugh. "What a delightful idea!" the woman said.

The last thing Noelle saw was the blinding emerald radiance of her eyes.

The woman smiled at the welcome quiet which descended upon the house. The structure itself would soon begin to fade, so why not take advantage of the turkey club left behind? Returning to the kitchen, she took the uneaten portion and bit into it – relishing the taste. As she did so, another figure entered the house, a serpent coiled about her slender shoulders. She looked around smiling, and then approached the woman with glowing green eyes. Occasionally small sparks of black lightning shot from the eyes, and whatever they hit would disappear.

"Ge," she began, "it looks as if you have been having fun."

"Naturally," the chaos goddess replied, laughing with delight. "I wonder if Zell-Ravenheart would still have started the Church of All Worlds, with the goal of awakening me, if he knew this would be the end result."

"You already know the answer to that."

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Ge looked at the newcomer with good humor. “Are you implying it was inevitable, Ananke?” she asked jokingly and then stood, wiping the crumbs from her hands. “Well, time to start this dance over again.”

“Indeed,” Ananke inclined her head and joined Ge at the transparent door. “You think you can manage it this time without producing monsters?”

“Where would be the fun in that?” she answered devilishly.

Her companion simply sighed, and then chuckled as they both disappeared in a Chaotic flare of green energy laced with black lightning.

*Delighted to see you! This first story is the result of reading Johnathan Maberry's **The Cryptopedia** and learning about the religious sect who worshipped Gaea, not to mention recalling Grecian myth about the goddess. Thus this tale was spun.*

How is that for an apocalyptic spin? The collective thought is a massive plague or world war will end civilization as we know it. Why not the old gods just get involved again, was my thought. It was just as terrifying. Anyone who read any of the old tales know not to mess with them. What would you do, given a powerful wish like that?