

## Duty Calls

It's almost time! My eyes are getting moist as I beg the phone to ring. I wonder if you're walking toward your phone. Maybe it's in your hot sweaty hands right now. I know you're slow when dialing my number. You told me that's part of the thrill. Well, if you call now, it'll be over at twelve minutes past four.

I wear shorts, no matter the weather, and now I'm moving so quickly in my rocking chair, the wood seat is biting my thighs. I enjoy the feel of bare wood scraping my skin. It takes my mind away from the waiting. If you call now, it'll be over at four thirty-three.

Scraped thighs no longer satisfy me so I begin to pace. Four steps toward the couch and three steps back. When I finally get to my sofa, I sprawl on it, while staring at the bronzed digits of my grandfather clock.

It's now seven minutes to five. Call now. It'll be over soon because it doesn't take you long to come. That's what you said. As soon as your seed spills, you don't need me for a week. Did you find another? Someone more willing to listen to your filth? That can't be. No one is better at this than me! Besides, you couldn't have found one so quickly. It's only been six days since the last call and that's not long enough. Or is it?

I stare at my painting of her near the wall clock. Reaching over I begin stroking it. This painting is a small one of her, a tall black feather with gold flecks. She's an Egyptian goddess called Ma'at. Sometimes she's portrayed as a brown woman in full queen regalia, gold armbands, braided black wigs, heavy necklaces of jewels. Other

times she's a feather, generally a long thin ebony one, narrow on top and full at the bottom, like me. Dad always talked about ancient Egypt and the Gods that ruled their world. Ma'at is truth, order, balance. She's harmony, yin and yang. The way things should be. If Ma'at didn't exist, the universe would be thrown into chaos. She helps all who worship her. That's her duty.

I bolt toward the ringing phone.

"Hello?" I'm sad because I thought it was him but it's always nice to hear the assured warm voice of a friend. "Hi Steve," I shyly say. "It's great that-you want to do what?"

"It's a double bedroom with a fireplace, baby," he said.

"Wow! The place sounds fierce. Sure, I can go to Cape May with you this weekend," I said. "This is wonderful! I'll meet you at the club. Bye, sweetie."

September is turning out to be a great month. Though it began by looking through my neighbors' garbage for food I forgot about being patient last Tuesday and made a desperate phone call to Hutchins Advertising. I got that graphic art assignment! A partial payment from them and the return of a loan I made to an old friend gives me that giddy feeling excess money brings out. If I'm careful, and this time I will be careful, the income from the Hutchins assignment can last three months. To top it off, yesterday after settling my bill at Pearl's, the owner offered me a stack of odd size canvases at a steep discount. I

know I have to pay for all this good luck. It's my duty. That's why I'm tolerating you, you obscene phone-calling nut.

I give the ringing phone an evil glance. It's about time.

I know you like formality, so after picking up this time I remember to say, "Good evening sir. I'm so cold because I'm only wearing pink panties while standing by an open window. Do I have your permission to move?" The silence frightens me. Instantly I knew I made a mistake. Who's calling? Finally I heard a long "Oh," filled with shock, hesitancy, excitement.

"Well, it's you, Larry," I replied. He's my sometime agent and friend.

"Why would you answer a phone like that?" Larry sounds like he can barely stay in control. "Are you doing this for Steve? Isn't he too square to enjoy it? Unlike me."

Forcing myself to be sharp I said, "Never mind!" Immediately Larry began talking about the reception for South African artists Skoto gallery was giving. He managed to persuade them to put me on the Board of Trustees but it came at a cost.

I'm surprised by what he's saying and can't understand how things went wrong.

"They couldn't have gone through that money in a month," I said. "All right, maybe it's been two months, but you know I don't have much cash. I got expenses, too. All right. I said all right! I'll get the money ready."

Damn, why does Larry have to cause problems? Why do I always have to pay for refreshments? I should have yelled more, but that's not me. Besides it looks so good on my resume to say I'm a financial backer for Skoto gallery. So what if I'm just one of some who are buying the eats. When I go to the receptions, I can talk about my art and maybe something good will happen. It's been working so far. Larry introduced

me to Steve, so I have a duty to help him.

Why don't you call, fucker?

I pat my pictures of Ma'at and then check the time on one of my clocks. I collect them too, and the Aztec one reads twenty minutes to six. I cover my face in despair. Why haven't you called? You usually do between four and seven. This waiting is driving me crazy. You've been good to me so far. I found a great job, my loan got repaid, I think Steve is falling in love with me and my painting is almost done. All because of you. You make me suffer and that makes me produce. You can't leave but if you're gone, great. I hate you, greaser! But if you do leave, the bad news is I'll have to find another problem to suffer from. That's the way Ma'at wants it.

I move the sleeve of my sweater further up and turn my arm to its side. They're fading, but I can still see scars from the knife I scraped my arm with. That's how I got this apartment. When the rental agent saw my arm, she thought I was abused and I got put on the short list for this place. When something bad happens to me, I'm rewarded with good. That's how it works.

I'm remembering how I learned about Ma'at and how she could help me but I don't want to. If only there's something I could distract my mind with, but there's no phone call, nothing needs cleaning and I'm too stressed to paint. If I can't find something soon...my memories are going to get so strong, I...it's too late. I'm not in my home anymore. My mind has taken me to my mother's kitchen and I'm nine.

"You have to eat more, especially candy, Marie," Father would tell me, "You need to be round." Gleefully, I told myself to eat whatever he gave me. I'd anything

for him because no one had a dad who could answer any question put to him, except me.

“Why is there so much sand over there,” I asked.

“Does ‘over there’ have a proper name?”

“Yes. Egypt.” That’s my favorite place right now. As soon as I saw those triangles on that sand, especially the one with the worn out face, pyramids and the Sphinx, I wanted to know all about that country.

“The sun gets so hot it bleaches the land white and breaks the soil into tiny pieces until its sand,” Dad answered. “C’mon, Marie. It’s time.”

I kick my shoes off and pull my pants down. There are some things about ancient Egypt I didn’t understand, like why they have so many Gods, but Dad will tell me. He always answers my questions. Except why, after Mom leaves for night school, I have to walk around only in my panties.

Dad finishes putting away his paints. He comes closer, arms open. He loves to hug me when I’m just in my panties, his fingers touching the elastic bands of my underwear or stroking my inner thighs. It tickles, but when I look up at him to share my smile, his face is stern and sweaty.

“You’re scaring me,” I said.

“Don’t be. This happens to all good girls.”

“What does?”

Instead of answering he walks down the hall, stopping briefly to put away his canvases and easel. He then picks me up, opens my door and tosses me in. As I land on the bed, I happily shrieked, “Bedtime! I know everything. It’s too early, isn’t it?”

“No. It’s best to do it early.”

“What?”

He whispers again not to be scare and lays down beside me. He never did that before. He was so close, nearly on top of me.

“I’ll give you things, tomorrow for doing this now, chocolate or kewpie dolls.”

“Chocolate. Mmmm. M&Ms?”

“Sure. A lot of good things start with M. Like this.” Grabbing a feather that’s sticking out of my pillow, he tickles my nose, places the feather next to me and then slowly moves his hand down my tummy.

“Feathers don’t start with M, Dad.”

“Ma’at does.”

“Who?”

“Ma’at, an Egyptian goddess. She makes good things happen to people who obey. Will you obey me?”

“I always do, Dad. Why you asking?”

“Then come here. And don’t scream.”

I had no reason to, though Dad is getting strange. He’s moving his hand up and down my legs and now he’s stroking his...his...crotch. That’s what he said it is.

Because I don’t know what he’s doing I bury my face in my pillows and wait for something to happen, that I could understand.

I love how my pillow smells. Nana, Mom’s mom, made us pillows and sent them from Trinidad, before she went to heaven. Mom said we have to redo the seams

because they got loose and the lavender and feathers that Nana put in them keeps coming out. As I buried my face deeper in the pillow a big black feather keeps tickling my nose. Pulling it out I loudly say, “Achoo!”

“How did you get a cold, darling?” That question came from Mom. I wonder why she came home early. I could hear the heels of her shoes clicking as she walked toward my door.

That noise made Dad bolt from my room. I didn’t know then but I know now what Ma’at saved me from.

I can still see the morning after that night when washing dishes with Mom my who cares comments on what Father did last night made most of the dishes fall. He stopped putting me to bed. Mom stopped going out. She got strange too, opening my bedroom door at night, slamming it against the wall, peering in angrily. A brief distant smile was the only comfort she would give.

Home is different now. Father hating me for telling, I hating Mom for not understanding and Mom calmly saying with tears rolling down her face that she hated me and father and wished herself dead.

Father left after a few days. I wished he took me with him. I hate how Mom looks at me now, staring at me like I’m taking her food and drink. The way she looks at my hands while I’m drawing, makes my fingers burn and I start crying for relief. That’s when she would say, “You owe me. Don’t remind me of him, promise!” I did. But whenever I grab pencil or ink, crayon or paint, paper or cardboard, Mom’s back gets stiff and her eyes narrow.

She doesn't want me to draw anymore but I can't help it. It makes me a better girl. I do well at school and I can make a joke out of anything. Though I'm too afraid to touch her, I would dance around Mom laughing, just like Dad. I became Dad, the good part of him. That's when Mom would start remembering everything about the man she loves but could not have, so her hands became unforgiving fists.

Now I'm back in my home and I'm so grateful those childhood images vanished. Seeing only my apartment, I glance wearily at the grandfather clock.

Twenty minutes past seven. Goddamn!

I throw off my clothes and change into something tight. After a splash of perfume and a heavy smear of dark red lipstick, I coax myself out of the door and onto a train.

He always calls by seven. He left me, that's what he did and I got to find someone else. Someone who'll hurt me, threaten me, make me feel sad. If bad things happen, I'm rewarded with good. I know that's true. When I was fourteen, I let my neighbor touch me while we stood in the dim hallway. I timed it just right. His wife was pulling the cart filled with laundry up the stairs as he did it and the money he slipped into my pocket to quiet me was enough to pay for the art lessons Brooklyn Museum gave. Those lessons got me into college.

The rush hour is on. I'm going to Manhattan. Since most are going the other way I'm able to find a seat in the first car near the front window next to the operator's door. I unbutton my coat and cross my legs so he can see my figure. He was a heavy set man and we glance at each other warily but he made no move toward me.



After waiting for him to act, I ignore him and look out the window watching the blue, red and green lights move past and gradually merge into a blurry white glow.

I'm not going through another dry spell. I remember the last one. Nothing went right because nothing was wrong. Too quickly, I ran out of jobs, money and hope. I felt I was getting buried, so I picked on my friend, quick-tempered Charles. I hounded him for not being able to sell his work and having his second wife leave him. It costs me a black eye, but when I went to the interview for the Hutchins assignment, my heavy makeup got the recruiter asking me questions that had nothing to do with graphics. She cried when I told her my version of the truth and that's probably why I got the assignment.

I have a rent controlled apartment in Park Slope because I moved a knife down my arm. I getting Steve because I give a lot of money to Larry and Hutchins ...I got them all because I let something bad happen to me. I don't know why it has to be this way but it works and it's not my fault! Ma'at makes the world like this and I need her. I need yin and yang. If there's no way to bring on the good and survive the bad, I can't go on. I'll go crazy. I may get so unhinged I'll go up a tall building with a gun ready to shoot while screaming I need order.

"It's you going off," the man hisses as he slides a cheap drink toward me. It's not my favorite bar. It's the one I use when I need to find someone to drive me crazy. I stop staring at my watery drink and look closely at him. His bald head, face and arms are covered with so many tattoos, they seem to come alive as his fat wiggles and jiggles. He smells. He's repulsive and he'll do... what to me? I don't know but I got to keep

the good luck coming.

I put my cell number on my answering machine so anyone who wants can get in touch. As I feel his greasy fingers paw my neck, I answer my phone while wondering what duty calls.