

Cease and Desist

Night 1:

Enough pretending I'll actually fall asleep tonight.

I flick my left wrist upwards, "Wake up, Mr. Smartwatch, you lucky thing. At least one of us went into sleep mode," I whisper. The small dark square flashes on. 4:02am. Fucking hell. What a miserable night.

I am usually such a model sleeper. That's not to say I am asleep before my head even hits the pillow, but it's not too far from that, either. Two to four minutes is my guess, and I'm out. On a normal night, six hours later, I'm already up, fully charged. Get this day going, another day and the excitement it brings. I can't wait. Life is a game. And I'm winning at it.

But every once in a while, I'll have one of these nights when I just can't fall asleep. It's not that I'm plagued by anxious thoughts, or sorrowful regrets. I'm not troubled by life, the universe, and everything, or the meaning of it all (42, right?), I'm just unable to turn off. Doesn't happen often. Twice a year, if that. But tonight is one of these nights. Oh well.

I drag myself to the bathroom. I look in the mirror. I raise one cocky eyebrow to myself. Brush my teeth, while examining the delicate crow's feet around my eyes. I'm almost 42. Huh. Funny. That number again. Will I know the answer to everything soon? How soon? I engage in some sluggish mental math. 41 days to my birthday! Wait, no! I congratulate my foggy brain on remembering it's actually a leap year. So, 42 days.

Hmmm.

"Creeeepy," I let my mirror self know. And then I wink at her. Crow's feet or not, she's kinda cute. She looks young for her age. I like her.

I wrap myself up in my long winter coat, over my pajamas. I'll just go down, grab a coffee from the 24-hour diner across the street. May as well get started, call it a day.

Down the elevator of my fancy building, with my view of Central Park. Not the kind of place I'd ever imagined I'd live in. Turns out I made some clever choices, career woman that I am. A bit of a cliché at that. No husband, no dog, not even cats. Nothing in the fridge except that mandatory Pinot Grigio, for the potential one night stand, help muddle my brain and his with some more alcohol, so we don't overthink it. And some goat milk yogurt, probably gone foul. In the walk-in closet there's mostly overpriced designer yoga apparel, and extremely overpriced business suits. I don't mind being a cliché. I kind of love it. I kind of love being the only woman in the meeting rooms, the only senior partner at the firm. God knows I am worth it. I never lose a case. I win. I know the unpleasant names they have for me behind my

back, perfectly balancing out the saccharine smiles and pleasantries said to my face as I walk in every morning, head high.

The regular night doorman isn't there. There's a young woman. A doorwoman. How peculiar. I've never seen her before. There's something unusual about her, but I can't quite place it. She seems out of place. Maybe a recent addition to town, or to this country, I suppose. Who knows. Everyone comes here to live their dreams. Some end up in a room with the best view, some end up being doormen. Or doorwomen.

As I pass her, she nods her head slowly, deliberately. I flick my wrist up. 4:20am. What's with this already? She opens the door, I breeze by, pretending to ignore her, head high.

"Pardon me?" I automatically say. Behind me trails what must be what that woman had just said. I am not sure I heard it right. I could have sworn she said, in an accent I cannot place, "Have you committed sin?"

Night 2:

God damn it.

It's never happened two nights in a row. And yet, it's me and Mr Smartwatch again. And it's 4:02am. Again.

Teeth. Crow's feet. Wink. Elevator.

It's this woman from last night. I look at her more intently as I walk past her, head high. She bows her head down. I cannot see her face. But I realize she must be considerably older than what I thought last night. It's the same woman, that much is obvious, but I can't believe I thought she was young. This woman is at least 40. Or 42, I muse to myself. Instinctively I flick my wrist. 4:20am. At this point, this joke is only mildly funny.

I notice her name tag. Maat. Strange name.

Once again, as the door closes behind me, I hear her voice. "Speak to my face, woman," I mutter to myself, the irony not lost on me.

This time it's even stranger - "Have you committed robbery with violence?" is what I *think* she said, and what's this accent? And who says things like that? It's gotta be my somewhat tired criminal defence lawyer brain playing tricks. I have no time for this nonsense.

But a chill rises in me, still.

Night 3:

WTF. I'm going to get some sleeping pills, I make a mental note to myself. This is not acceptable. Maybe even go see Dr Small Hands, he's good for these things, but yeah, it's

gotten awkward since that Pinot Grigio. It's been three days of no sleep, it's messing up my work schedule. I'm not as sharp as I need to be. The face in the mirror says *fatigue*. I'm not winking at this one. She needs her beauty sleep. Pronto. I have a bunch of cases I need to review anyways. I shove the manila envelopes under my arm.

Elevator.

Maat is there, of course. I slow down so I can look at her. She's looking straight at me. I must have been wrong last night after all. She is young. And I also realize how stunning she is. Dark eyes. Dark Bangs. Long hair. Straight. Very straight. Way too much eyeliner. Before I know what I'm doing, I flick my wrist, look at the watch. I know what I'll see. 4:20am. I shift my gaze down to the floor as I walk by. I'm not sure I like any of this. I am sure I'm too tired to make sense of it anyways.

"Have you stolen?"

The door closes behind me.

"Fuck you, weirdo," I whisper to the night, cold breath rising up to frame my words.

Night 4:

This can't go on. The sleeping pills did nothing. Nothing. I've never had need for them before, so wasn't sure what to expect. But staying awake for another night was not part of the plan.

The face in the mirror is old for her age. Tired. Annoyed.

That witch of a woman downstairs - she's shifting on me again.

Tonight she seems my age. Alert. Joyful.

She beams at me.

"Have you slain?" she asks with a broad smile, perfect teeth, and that unplaced accent.

Didn't even wait for me to walk past her and out.

I stop walking. I look straight at her.

"Who are you?"

"I bring balance and order. And I judge," comes the strange answer.

Right.

I wonder if she's trying to pick up English from *100 totally useless phrases in English*.

"Or 42," something deep inside me seems to be saying. Wrist flicks before I can stop myself.

The familiar digits and the fear flare up, simultaneously.

Night 5:

I work through the night. I know I'm not going to fall asleep. The day was a haze. I think I'm dozing off at work but I cannot tell for sure. I cannot eat. The cases I'm currently defending melt into one another. My vile clients, that I get a kick out of defending. I always know when

they are lying, and most do. And eventually, they tell me their darkest secrets, and they are so so dark.

I help them get away with it anyways. Theft, violence, murder, sin. I like the game. And life is a game. People will be people. Who cares, as long as I get to be the most clever one in the room. And the money is phenomenal. None of that human-rights advocacy I thought I'd be doing once upon a time when I was young, and stupid, and wore thrift store clothes, mostly ironically.

I do not fully admit this to myself, but I'd rather not see her tonight, despite the fact I would kill for a coffee. The fancy espresso machine my then-lover, another rich tech executive with another divorce sob tale, bought me for my 41st birthday is still in its box. Another fucking braggart needy man. I have no coffee beans anyway. So much for that.

I microwave some hot water for tea, there's a knock on the door.

Startled, I look through the peephole. Nothing. On the floor, a note someone must have slipped under my door. It's a weird piece of paper. Yellow. Smells like damp bamboo. On it, in what seems like feather-pen calligraphy, is written "Have you stolen grain?"

What game is that woman downstairs playing?

Ping, goes the microwave, its clock letting me know that familiar, unsettling time.

Night 6:

"What do you want from me, you weirdo?" I nearly scream at the teen-ager downstairs.

"To save your soul, of course."

"I'm a criminal defence lawyer. Mine's long gone," I sneer.

"No it's not. But you haven't got much time. How heavy is your heart?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Purify it."

I turn around and stomp back to the elevator.

"Have you swindled offerings?" she demands to know. The red led digits of the wall-mounted elevator clock tell me a time I know too well. My heart is racing in a bad bad way.

Night 7:

I call in sick. Had to cancel a court appearance. I shut the curtains. Crawl under the duvet. I stay in bed. I am not asleep. In my head I go through cases. Why do I feel a sense of...what the hell is that? guilt? What is wrong with me? Is that what not sleeping for a week and one conversation with a nutcase does? I just grow a moral backbone overnight, after years of flippantly asserting I'm above it all? No fucking way am I allowing for this to happen.

A knock. A piece of damp yellow paper.

“Have you stolen from a goddess?” it says. I don't need to check the time. I feel it in my bones. They are aching.

Night 8:

Still “sick”. Still home. I order in some food, got tired of stale organic granola. I barely touch any of it. The hours somehow pass. They seem gooey, stretchy. I am certainly gooey. I cannot quite recall when was the last time I showered. Dark bags under bloodshot eyes. No one is winking at anyone in the bathroom anymore. This one is no fun.

Through my fog of a brain comes a trivial idea, with clarity I forgot I used to possess.

I open my laptop. I Google “maat 42”.

“Oh my fucking God,” I mouth quietly.

I read for a good hour or more.

I turn on the radio.

“Have you told lies?” a familiarly accented voice pipes from the speaker.

I think I'm going crazy.

“It's 4:20am,” the voice announces. Unnecessarily.

Night 9:

I wait for her, leaving my front door slightly open.

She comes in, walking slowly. Sits next to me.

With a sigh, she holds my hand. Kisses it lightly, gently.

“Tell me what I need to do. I can't go on like that.”

She holds out a large feather. Tickles my nose with it. I am so so tired. I am not sure if I'm laughing or crying.

“Make confessions on their behalf,” she says.

Oh. So she wants me to violate attorney-client privilege, expose my lying murdering thieving clients for what they are, lose my job, my license, my reputation, my power. And for nothing, since it won't be admissible. I am about to try and explain all that. She puts a frail rheumatic finger over my mouth. She looks at me with wise ancient eyes. She smiles.

“Have you carried away food?”

“No one cares about these things anymore, Maat. This is not ancient fucking Egypt. Go back home.”

“But you do care. You just forgot. It's time to wake up.”

Night 10:

A giggly 10-year old girl skips into my apartment, at 4:20am.

She brings a very thick wad of smelly yellow papers.

As she skips out the door she stops. Turns back.
“Have you uttered curses?”
I look down. I say nothing.
I know what needs writing. I know it will be written.

Nights, nights, nights:

Days stream into nights melt into days.
I send a resignation note.
I stop charging the phone.
I write and write and write. Confessions. Not mine. But I carried the secrets. I let injustice happen. I helped men go unpunished.

The passage of time is accentuated by the growing pile of densely filled papyrus paper, and by a nightly note. And sometimes, by a short visit from a woman of timeless beauty, age and wisdom, a woman I am no longer afraid of.

I know what each note will say, but I wait for them anyways.
I know what it's like to not sleep for 10 days, 15 days, 25 days, 40 days.
I know nothing.

The crow's feet are no longer fine. They are thickly engraved into my face. I cannot believe how much I've aged. I look like someone who is dying.

Night 41:

I am almost done. And I am tired. So tired. One more night.
Maat comes.
She looks at me with sad eyes.
For a moment it seems as if there is no white there, just dark inky black.
“Have you treated with contempt a god of your city?”
“Not anymore. Not anymore.”

Night 42:

No crow's feet. The face in the mirror is ageless.
I raise both eyebrows in awe. A joy fills me, I have not felt that way in a long time.
When I get back from the bathroom, the large ostrich feather awaits on my bed.
I have not slain the cattle belonging to the gods.
But I have left what is needed to slay the cattle who abandoned the gods.
I am 42.
It's 4:20am.
I'm ready for the 42 judges, for their questions.
It's time.

I take the elevator down.
I hold Maat's strong hand.
Together, we walk into the cold endless night.
My soul is light as a feather.
My heart is pure.
I am ready.
I am eternally awake.
In my bedroom, she lies, hands crossed over her chest, holding an ostrich feather.
By her feet a large tome of confessions.

She is eternally asleep.