

“Call Marlene”

When Mama and Daddy got back to their suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel, the room was stuffed with congratulatory flowers and a large stack of messages and telegrams. The one on the top read, “Call Marlene. Regardless of the hour, call Marlene.”

Underneath the famous first name, it referenced a phone number in Paris. When you get a call like that from Diva Dietrich, you don’t mess around. Mama was thinking, “Won’t this be thrilling? My very first phone call after winning the Oscar will be a congratulatory message from Marlene Dietrich!”

The excited actress reached the overseas operator, who put her through to that distinctive, one-of-a-kind sound.

“Hello?” the husky, German voice said.

“Hello, Marlene! It’s Eileen.”

“Darling! Your makeup was terrible!”

“It was?” Mama asked.

“It was in the movie, too,” Dietrich replied.

For the next ten minutes, Marlene Dietrich proceeded to berate Heckart for her deplorable fashions, her awful makeup, her nondescript hairdo, and her total lack of style. Two hours after winning the Oscar, my father listened to the other end of this conversation in utter disbelief as his wife sat there saying into the telephone, “Yes ma’am . . . all right . . . mmm hmmm . . . yes, Marlene . . . I won’t do that any more . . . Yes ma’am . . . Uh-huh.”

But, in her staunch, Germanic style, that was the only way Dietrich could congratulate her. That was Marlene’s way of expressing her love—by showing my mother that she cared enough to criticize her. While Dietrich had a great deal of respect for my mother, I don’t know that she really understood her. In the world of Marlene Dietrich, if you were going to be a star, that meant glamour, mystery, and Hollywood mystique. These were her stock in trade, but not Eileen Heckart’s. In her heart, perhaps Dietrich knew she needed this allure, because she never believed she was a great actress. Marlene Dietrich was a bigger star than my mother ever thought of being. But Dietrich knew a great actress when she saw one and she wanted my mother to behave like a star. While Dietrich could be just as happy in a pair of blue jeans making scrambled eggs for Maurice Chevalier or slinging hash at the Hollywood Canteen, she sure knew how to work an ermine stole or a gown by Adrian. While Mama could turn on the glamour when she wanted to, Dietrich personified it.

After several days of parties, fetes, and soirees, as they were on their way back to their beloved boys in Connecticut, Mama turned to my father on the plane.

“Jack,” she said, “What’s today’s date?”

“The second of April,” he replied. “Why?”

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“And tomorrow is Monday . . . oh, my God!” she said, “I’m due at the unemployment office tomorrow!”

He said, “Why not have a little class and wait until Tuesday?”

When she went in to pick up her check on Tuesday, everyone in the office burst into applause. Unemployed or not, they knew a star when they saw one.