

MATTERS OF CREDIT

2310 words

She was swirling on a tea tray in the sky when a noise jolted her. She opened her eyes to him standing beside the bed, all blue suit and attitude, looking down on her.

“What’s wrong with you these days?”

She shook the dreamy images from her mind and looked at the clock on the end table.

“I’m sorry, I slept in again. Be right with you.” She pulled the covers back and sat up in bed.

“You’re too late. Got my own breakfast. Again.”

He turned to the dresser mirror for a final appraisal and a quick run of fingers through his Brylcreemed hair. His reflection fixed on her.

“Really, what do you do all day?”

She didn’t answer.

“Why don’t you at least get out and pay that bill today?” His mirror image held its gaze.

“Okay.” She hung her head until he finally turned away.

“I’ll be home on time,” he called out and the front door clicked shut behind him.

She slid her painted toes into fluffy slippers and shuffled around the bungalow, pondering his question. *What do I do all day?* The appliances gleamed, the countertops were clear, the pantry was full and the air was Florient-fresh. Just like yesterday. Nothing had changed in the night, or the night before, or dozens of nights before that.

He and everyone said she should be happy, grateful. What more could a girl want? But... She couldn’t really put her finger on it. Something deep inside smoldered, and every now and again flickered. Like she wanted to get mad, or even. But for what?

She shook her head, grabbed the new Hoover vacuum that he'd given her for their anniversary, and started her routine. By early afternoon she had nothing left to think about, and nothing left to do. She looked in the mirror.

He's right. I need to get out.

Her voice was firm as she faced off against the little man behind the credit counter at Worsters department store. "Wrong? What could possibly be wrong?"

His pinstripe suit shone with age and wear that didn't warrant his haughty stance. And the puffy bowtie that cinched the frayed collar at his throat must have damaged his neck. Why else would his chin be tilted upward in an angle that let him, shorter than she, look down his nose at her?

"I beg your pardon." He cleared his throat, adjusted the knot in his tie and pointed a spindly finger to the signature line on the cheque in front of her. "Please sign here, Madame."

She moved the pen and it happened again. There were ample funds in the account to cover this bill. She had filled in the date, June 5, 1965, and the amount, seventy-six dollars and twenty-eight cents, payable to Worsters. But as soon as she finished writing, "Mrs.," it felt like the wrong end of a magnet repelled her hand from the paper. Now, in a kind of out-of-body experience, she watched her sizeable, wedding diamond glint in the light as her hand trembled and hovered above where she needed to sign her name.

"Are you certain there is nothing wrong?" He straightened his posture, folded his hands on the counter and looked directly at her. "Perhaps you would like to pay in installments, Madame?" Now his nose seemed to tilt even further skyward.

She looked down at his bowtie. *Maybe I could tighten it just a notch.*

"I told you everything is fine." This time her voice sounded shrill even to her and in the far recesses of her mind she heard her English professor pronounce, "The lady doth protest too

much.” She took a deep breath and returned the pen to its scabbard bolted between them on the counter. “I just remembered something. I’ll be back.”

She turned on her spiked heel away from the credit office, out to the retail area. Jaw clenched and muscles taut she marched off, only stopping when she reached familiar surroundings. Not much had changed in the half decade since she’d worked in the women’s underwear department to pay her tuition. She’d spent countless nights occupied in the mindless task of arranging colourless brassieres and hefty underpants as she pondered the day’s Shakespeare or Cervantes lecture. Now, gazing once again over the mounds of white cotton her body loosened, a wistful peace descended and her mind drifted back to a seventeenth century pastoral setting...

...“Sweet light of my life, I kneel before thee and pledge thee my troth.” The scent of garlic wafted up from the handsome shepherd bowed in reverence before her.

“Foolish fellow. I want for nothing. I have my own flock, a room of my own in yon woods. What temptation could possibly entice me to renounce such wealth and the pleasing companionship of shepherdesses for the certain bondage of matrimony?” She stood, hands on her slim hips, looking down on the wretched soul, his face awash in misery. His pleading eyes met hers and...

“Excuse me, Madame.”

She started at the sound of the familiar voice behind her. “Hmm?” She removed her hands from her hips and turned to face the annoying credit clerk.

He held something out to her. “You forgot your cheque book, Madame.” A frown crinkled his brow and he stared at her in a way that suggested he might think she was quite crazy.

"I said I was coming back. You needn't have bothered." She grabbed the item from his hand, spun around and stomped away.

When she figured she was out of his sight she stopped, heaved a what-the-hell-am-I doing sigh and looked about. In this corner of the department, big, pale, granny garments that dominated the collection when she worked here were now infiltrated by youthful, bikini bottoms and matching sets of bras and panties in colours like black and red. The red surprised her most. She remembered Mr. Worster's framed list of stern rules that hung large and looming above the punch clock. Rule number six said female staff were not to wear red. A senior girl explained one night that rules like numbers six and nine, that forbade men and women from eating together (they had separate lunch rooms), arose from old man Worster's sexual repression. According to her, he didn't want women wearing red or chewing in public because he thought those things were erotic.

She shook her head, turned back to the section with the sensible, cotton under-things and stopped beneath a limbless, lifeless torso on the display shelf above rows of practical briefs. She picked through the stock until she found a pair her size. She raised it to the light and thought of the starched apron she would wear tonight, like every night, when she greeted her husband at the door with a martini.

They married after she graduated and ever since she'd dusted and tidied and put dinner on the same plates on the same table at the same time every night. It was always meat or fish, potatoes and a vegetable or two, served at 6:00 sharp. Isn't that what she was supposed to do?...

... She hooked her new electric can opener onto the Alpo tin and it spun around until the lid sprung off, releasing the trapped aroma of mashed liver. She scooped the contents into the bowl, shook on some ketchup, and cracked an egg over it all. She sprinkled onion soup powder on top then squished everything together with a fork from

the stainless steel utensils he had given her for Christmas. When it was all well-blended she transferred the mixture into the Teflon loaf pan from the set he'd given her for her birthday, put it in the oven and set the temperature. A noise. She flung a tea towel over the empty can and swung around just in time to face him.

"You're home early."

"Meeting got cancelled. What's for dinner?"

"It's Thursday. So, meatloaf. Ok?"

"Sure, sounds good."

She turned away as her mouth twisted upward ...

"What's so funny, Mrs.?" A pimply stockboy looked at her quizzically as he passed by carrying a large box.

"Nothing, nothing at all." She lowered her head to conceal the burn that tinged her face. She tossed the bland garment back on the shelf and the young fellow disappeared into the distance. *What is the matter with me?*

She scanned all about and checked over both shoulders. No one was looking. She skulked back to the corner with the sexy lingerie and closed in on the blonde, shapely mannequin that modeled a crimson, push-up bra and matching, bikini panties. With furtive glances to each side, like a thief about to take something, she reached into the collection of red unmentionables. She caressed one delicate pair and raised it to her face. So soft, so silky. She stroked her cheek with the cool satin and purred at the thought of how especially luxurious it would feel against the concealed parts of her. What if she traded her pallid armor for these scarlet temptations? Dare she alter the routine menu of their weekly sex life? She closed her eyes...

... *The clock on the mantel chimed. Her heart skipped. She peeped over her Harlequin at him in his wing back chair in the corner. He tucked his pipe in his shirt pocket, just like every night at ten o'clock, then rose, crossed the living room and leaned down over her. The scent of amphora tobacco filled her nostrils. "I'm ready for bed," he said and gave her a peck on the cheek, a signal as reliable as a traffic light. A peck meant he would read for fifteen minutes, roll over and fall asleep. That happened every week night. On Saturday and sometimes Sunday too, he would kiss her on the lips, the signal they would make love. She knew in advance every move he would use, every sound he would utter, how long it would all take.*

He turned off the television and left the room. Ten long minutes ticked by. She took a deep breath and headed for the bathroom. In moments she emerged clad in nothing but a cherry red g-string and a feather boa. She fondled the feathers that snaked around her long neck and tumbled down, barely concealing her bountiful breasts.

"Oscarrrr," she growled from the doorway.

He raised his head from the pillow. His eyes bulged. She strutted in stilettos toward him.

"But it's not the weekend," he panted.

"Tell me something I don't know," she crooned in a Mae West voice as she twirled the tail of the boa.

"But we've never.."...

"Hey lady, watch out." A teenager ducked out of the way of her whirling purse.

"I'm sorry..." A wave of heat erupted from her chest and flushed across her face.

What am I doing? She looked at her watch. He would be home soon and expect dinner to be ready.

She lowered her head and charged back to the credit office, stopped in front of the snippy clerk and pulled out her cheque book. She slapped it on the counter between them, gritted her teeth and grabbed the pen. On a fresh cheque she wrote again, seventy-six dollars and twenty-eight cents, payable to Worsters. She tightened her grip and forged on. The ballpoint glided across the paper until she finished writing, "Mrs.." The tremor resumed. Once again her hand hung suspended in the air above the paper.

Her eyes twitched, her shoulders slumped. She looked from her hand to the pen to the cheque and back again. Then the words at the top left corner caught her eye. "Mrs. Oscar Dinwiddie, 123 Oak..." More twitches. Once more she started at the beginning and slowly re-read. This time the letters in the given name popped out like figures in a shadow box. Mrs. OSCAR Dinwiddie. The pen moved on its own, like the pointer of a Ouija board, straight up to the printed information. Her heart raced. Her breaths grew rapid. Until...a forceful swipe! The mighty weapon drove a horizontal stake through the heart of that name. ~~OSCAR~~! Now one last time her hand returned to the blank spot that waited for her signature. This time it wrote with a flourish.

She stared down at the final product. When her breathing relaxed and her pulse slowed to normal she raised her eyes to the credit officer and handed him the signed cheque.

"But, Madame, this is highly unusual."

It was her turn to be haughty. "How so?"

He rolled his eyes. "Well, I'm certain you understand, Madame, that it is customary for a wife to use her husband's name in matters of credit."

"Do I look like an Oscar to you?" She threw back her shoulders and thrust her ample bosom toward him.

His eyes widened and slid to her chest. "N-n-no, M-m-madame."

"My name is Mildred. Mrs. MILDRED Dinwiddie." She felt a flutter of excitement. "And this is *my* account. Do you want me to pay it or not?" She glared down at him as she stabbed the pen back in its sheath.

"Of course. Thank you," his voice crackled. His hands quivered as he rang up her payment and gave her a receipt.

Head held high, Mrs. MILDRED Dinwiddie tucked the paper neatly in her purse, turned away from the little man and sashayed back to the red, matching set in Mr. Worster's lingerie department. She wondered how it might look under her starched apron and thought she might order takeout tonight. She liked Chinese. She wasn't sure about Oscar. But it didn't matter. Tonight, around 6:30 or so, she would order Chinese. And in the far recesses of her mind she heard her English professor one last time, "Graze on my lips; and if those hills be dry, stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie."

END