Matches

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Matches: A Light Book.

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I had a vision of a book that shed light. A torch book to light my way. A comet book, its luminous tail to leave a trace for me. Its brightness so intense that closing it submerged whoever broke it open in deeper darkness than before. I fancied a kind of sempiternal flame that shot up again as one resumed where one had left off.

It seemed to me there are two basic kinds of book, differing in radiance. One in which the words, erect, line up in columns and salute from every page, and another with words laid down in rows, looking up from their cots, sometimes wide, most only half, awake. The words are matches; those that strike ignite. From time to time, light sweeps across the page like wildfire. But most times, as with damp equipment, nothing so spectacular can be expected.

The match: little stick tipped with combustible stuff, sparked by friction; typically comes in a book or a box or a bundle (the point being: never alone). The highly portable match lighting more or less when required was a great nineteenth-century innovation. Before, we had only Danger and Poison matches, and countless match-induced accidents and suicides.

We still have not engineered mischief out of the match. One little lucifer, God’s little helper, lit in the company of its sisters and brothers will, if we let them, afford us a miniature inferno. Are we responsible for the recklessness of thought? There will always be match tricks to go very wrong. How many times have we amused ourselves in the schoolyard, lighting up the whole passel of ideas within our reach, getting us in trouble? And now that we are older, we can
strike anywhere. We count on sparks to leap long distances virtually, to pass most swiftly from point to point instead of smouldering. No sooner do we bring a flame to something flammable than it spreads—even as its conductors are already charring and curling up. Let us congratulate ourselves for remaking the transport of ideas. And for this new refrain: What matters is what’s on fire.

Lumenophiles! These are fragile thoughts. Be gentle with them. In a drafty space they might need your sheltering hand. Your sighs will extinguish them. Blow instead, blow hard, on the embers they leave behind. And never forget what they are: a little “gift” our ancestors received in curiosity and paid dearly for (being no match for a certain black “box”): evil and misery spilled out and flooded us. In that pagan tale, too, we reached for divine light and brought down darkness in its wake.

From this living tragicomedy we conclude that the mind was meant to be set ablaze, though not necessarily to survive the heat. Who will keep the ash-heaps of history raked and illuminated? Burn we must with desire to outmatch what consumes us, burning questions and objections. But what will come of our burnt offerings, our victory torches, our combustions and electrifications, we never know in advance. In hindsight much light was wasted, and much evil never did bring forth any good. So let’s also not fetishize the tools of light—these “matches” in a book or a box. The burnt-out match looks so uncannily human, and wise to this resemblance.

Incorrigible pyrotechnicians! It won’t be all fireworks! Which one of you doesn’t utter a cliché now and again, if only for reassurance at a particularly obscure spot concerning the existence of common sense? The platitude, that ever-reliable native intelligence that so often, apparently by chance, opens the darkroom door just when bold new thoughts are developing and ruins everything! I am sure I backed away from many such cheerless corners worried by what crud of shabby, light-shy eccentricity I might find there—proceeding rather by analogies, muddled circumlocutions, and yes, by common-places.
Now you know, and in your leniency will observe how little customary it is for platitudes, the smoke of opinion, to be keeping such otherwise lustrous company. This is their big moment to stand out and fall flat (as they must). And your opportunity to take note of them, perhaps even own up to some nodding weakness. So stay sharp, order a wake-up call if need be. Any banality you come across promise to strike against the sole of your shoe, and, with a cool head, stomp out its sooty flicker.

Above all, harbour no illusions about instant illumination. But perhaps you hope to warm yourself a little… Then you have not understood Andersen’s wise tale. Either that or you haven’t read it. Ideas, visions alone won’t keep you warm; it’s what you do with them. Have you ever in your life seen a bonfire of matches? Then you should know they were made neither to raise temperatures nor to dazzle. What’s this I hear about obsolescence? You don’t know what to do? A virtual flame is not hazard-free; how much truer is this of a real one! But safety talk would be out of place here. You’ll learn by playing how best to play.

*Allumette, gentille allumette,*
*Allumette, je te gratterai.*
*Je te gratterai la tête.*
*Je te gratterai la tête.*
*Et la tête! Et la tête!*

In any event, your expectations need scaling down. There isn’t all that much to be done with matches. On the bright side, you still have your choice of “effect”: lighting them as needed, one at a time, or seeing them go up in smoke, all in one go. Now ask me about the advantages to each approach… Why, that is just the moral of The Hothead and the Slow Burn (an ultramodern fable you are forgiven for not knowing). Which of the two is you?

I made this book of matches for the cold-stiff and the light-poor, with their survival at heart. Can they keep the fire going in their bellies, assuming they lit one? Without it, they won’t last the night. Should my matchbook, however, fall
into the hands of hot-blooded pyromaniacs who, having gone through it and finding it “light,” cast it empty into the furnace of their mind, then I will fan the flames myself. What better honour than to be eaten by a brighter blaze, turn fuel for that afflatus of genius, meanwhile discreetly eliminating its stench?

You may have already guessed that putting together such a book required no small ingenuity on the part of one who is no match-maker by trade. What do I know about mixing phosphorus or sulphur with whatever else goes into the head of a match? Never mind the effort, not entirely successful, to leave familiar thoughts and places, where one’s ideas fall short or turn out to be squibs. Habits took offence, reasons had to be improvised, so too credible excuses. But off one went. And here one is: whittling then dabbing the serviceable sticks with stuff pulled from elsewhere, doing this from sunup till sundown, into night as deep as before there was light.

A mountain retreat is only as good as the view, particularly at dusk. Can one really see better from here? Does better mean more, or less? Does it mean farther, or closer? Is it observing the mist hanging about me, or seeing through the mist? Is it watching the dance of a flame, or staring into it, at what feeds it? Is it looking in, or looking out?

Of one thing there is no doubt: it is no more looking up than looking down. Though I refuse to insert myself into it—and what would be the point?—I have gathered a thing or two about life in the valley. Its sounds after all reach me constantly: motors starting up, kids let out of school, weekend revels, amplified sermons, the crackle of fireworks, and, not to discriminate, the lowing of cattle, the chirping and squawking in the trees ... I see nothing of it beneath me. I only have eyes for what stretches on before me. Above all, I hate being the tourist. So I stay here, and regard best what I see worst—what I view absently and without consideration.

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