

The Matchbox Girls

by Kaitlin Roney

Along the edge of a very busy city, lives a little girl, all alone in a safe green space. She is a small, whisper of a girl that nobody seems to notice. When she walks through the market, no one says hello. It is as if they cannot see her at all.

The girl swiftly gathers discarded food to eat, but is no more significant than a shadow to the frantically hurried city people.

Sometimes the people are so rushed that they bump into the almost invincible girl, and they are too preoccupied with their lives to notice her hunger or lonely expression. "Watch where you are going!" they bark in annoyance.

So, the poor child takes what no one else wants, and slips away each day to the home she built for herself in the woods, just beyond the city.

The girl has no family, although she can remember a time when she did. Her memories of being curled up on Mother's lap, as they traveled across a hot and dangerous land, still ran wild in her mind. "We will be safe when we get there", promised her mother in a whisper.

But that was long ago, and Mother had been taken away when they arrived in the city. "I will come back for you, my love!" the tiny girl could still remember her mother yelling. It was then that the frightened child slipped away from the angry scene unnoticed, as she does best.

Now, in the safe green space, the whisper of a girl has made a sweet home near a stream. Nestled in the side of a very large hollow tree, the child has all she needs. You see, the busy people of the city throw away fine, useful items, because they like to buy new things. The girl finds everything by the road, with the exception of one thing. She steals boxes of matches from the news stand each morning, and uses them to keep her fire going for warmth throughout the cold night.

One day, the resourceful child notices that her stack of empty matchboxes is growing quite tall. Not being the type to throw anything away, the imaginative girl begins to dream up ways to use the boxes. As she picks up one from the pile, and slides out the inside compartment, she remembers her bed from long ago. Her dark eyes sting from the joyful memory. Sometimes an extra bed would be pulled out from under the bed where she slept....for a friend! The memory of friends and sleepovers almost makes the

child's heart burst. As she weeps, holding the empty box of matches, it comes to her. "I will create my own friends!" declares the child.

Working with determination, as only one who has been wishing fiercely for some time can, the girl begins creating matchbox girls. Each little drawing of a face resembles a girl she had played with, or one of the dear women who had taken care of her before they had to leave. Scraps of fabric are pieced together for the clothes, and burnt matches form the delicate legs. As the child glances around her home, she is pleased and smiles at the girls who circle her. Finally, the shadow of a girl is not alone!

That night, her dreams are filled with memories of vivid sleepovers, holding hands, and giggles.

The next day, the child wakes up to the somewhat familiar faces of her loved ones, and feels warm in spite of the chill in the air. Noticing the cool temperature, she stretches her small frame, and lights the fire with a match that had once been stored inside one of the matchbox girls. Sitting down to eat a stale piece of discarded bread, the girl thinks she hears a voice! "Do you want to play?" the sweet voice had spoken. The girl realizes she must be hungrier than she thought, and resumes eating her breakfast.

Then, what she sees causes her to gasp, and she almost chokes on her bread. She HAD heard a voice, and it was coming from one of her matchbox girls! She is ALIVE....and SPEAKING!

Each of the matchbox girls sprang to life as the fire blazed. The little girl was overjoyed! The matchbox girls spent the day telling stories, playing games, and dancing with the child. The child shared all of her wonders with her tiny new friends, and grew so engaged with her company, that she forgot to keep the fire burning. As the final embers burned, the matchbox girls seemed to fade. The once animated and glowing girls, grew stiff and dull. Finally, as the last spark went out, the matchbox girls ceased to talk or move. They were nothing more than handcrafted matchbox dolls!

The whisper of a girl was struck with grief, holding each of the matchbox girls tenderly, willing them to return to her. But after checking on the last doll, the girl felt defeated and could only sob into her pillow. She felt more alone than ever before, and began to think she had imagined the lively matchbox girls all together. The heaviness that she felt from such a loss prevented her from even rekindling the fire. The girl slept, wrapped in her own sadness and the cold darkness.

Just as the sun began to spread rays through the trees, the girl woke suddenly with a shiver. She glanced around, seeing the matchbox girls, and the tragic awareness that they had never been alive loomed around her. The girl pulled her cold bones from her sleeping place, and automatically lit a match for the fire in an attempt to warm the space. Just then, the girl heard the familiar sounds from the day before.

The matchbox girls were alive once again! Overcome by happiness, the girl scooped up each sweet little friend for a delicate embrace.

“It must be the fire!”, the girl shouted in realization. “If I keep the fire burning, you will all remain alive!” With that, the girls filled the day with stories and games, as they had the day before. The lively shadows bounced off the hollow inside of the tree, and the air hung with magic. As the day went on the small girl grew desperately hungry, but was too afraid to leave to search for food. She would rather starve than be alone again. “You must eat!” declared a worried matchbox friend. And although the girl was growing weak, she refused to stop tending the fire. Eventually her vision started to blur, from lack of nourishment, and the girl could make out shapes and shadows above the tiny matchbox girls. It is Mother! She had found a way to get away, and search for her child. Mother was calling out “I came back for you, my love!” and it was the most beautiful sound she had ever heard!

The matchbox girls gathered around the fading child, chanting, and passing thimbles of water to her mouth. Eventually the girl came around, and sat up tall and determined to find her mother.

With a renewed energy, and full of regret at leaving the matchbox girls, the whisper of a girl hurried to the city. As the child rushed past the people on the streets, she almost tripped over a frail woman, who happened to be crying against a lamp post, with a picture of a girl in her arms. She knew that it was Mother before the woman raised her tear stained face, for she had come to her so often in her dreams. Both mother and daughter overflowed with love as they melted into one another's arms.

Holding on to her mother's hand the wisp of a girl whispered the promise; “We will be safe when we get there,” and led her to the green space outside of the city, where the quiet embers of her fire still burned, the matchbox girls waited, and magic still hung in the air.