

# To Strike a Match

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by LaJoyce Martin

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# The Note

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## One

*I will if you will.*

The note was hidden under my chipped ironstone plate, its silent challenge clear. I found it when I sat down to lunch—and knew in an instant who wrote it. There could be no mistake. The i's were not dotted; the hand that wrote it didn't bother with detail.

Miss Molly, the aging proprietor of the boarding-house, had a maddening custom of turning all her dinnerware upside down on the long harvest table. It was a ritual handed down from her grandmother, she said.

"It keeps the cups and plates clean," she reasoned. "Nothing can fall in them, alight on them, or skitter across them while I am dishing up the meal. It also encourages patience. One must take the time to turn his place setting over while cultivating a grateful heart."

Considering the slithery things I had seen since we'd roomed here, I dared not dispute the good woman's wisdom. However, what was under my dish now made me more nervous than what might tiptoe over it.

The note's uneven edges tattled of its abrupt departure

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from a cheap five-cent tablet. My brother, Douglas, had slipped it there before he left for work. I gave a wry grin when I contemplated what would have happened had I changed places for this one repast. Someone else would have found the message, and the joke would have been on Doug.

I hoped that no eyes save mine saw the paper and, looking about quickly, decided that the other tenants were absorbed in their own interests, paying me little heed. Some of the older ones probably couldn't see across the table anyhow.

My mind somersaulted back a few hours. I was vainly trying to sleep while across the room Doug digested the *Ranchers West* magazine by the light of the kerosene lamp. Pages had stopped turning.

"Edwin," he stage-whispered, "are you awake?"

"I am now," I grumbled.

"Listen to this classified ad: *Need a wife? Brides by mail. Many satisfied customers. Overwhelming percentage of success. Write for details. Strike A Match Company, General Delivery, Dallas, Texas.*" He paused for emphasis. "What do you think about that?"

I groaned. "If you must disturb my sleep, Douglas, at least it could be for something sensible—"

"I think we should write for more information."

In the process of dismissing this as one of Doug's more hare-brained ideas, I laughed outright. Then I realized that Doug was serious.

"I'm lonely, Edwin." His voice souged. "Twenty-seven years is too long to wash one's own socks. I think both of us need wives—and a young woman is as scarce as a drumstick at a hobo party in this forgotten wilderness."

Thoroughly awake at this point, I worked diligently at keeping a straight face. “How do you suppose this send-off-for-a-wife scheme works, Douglas?”

“Why, I’d think we would just write in and tell them what we want like we would order a pair of boots from a catalogue. You have to pay, of course. Transportation and all.”

“Can they be sent back if they don’t fit?”

“It doesn’t say ‘money-back guarantee,’ but you probably could return the old gal if you had the money for postage. If you didn’t, you’d be obligated to keep her, I guess.”

My mind balked. For some reason, it chose this moment to dredge up a girl who chased me home from school when I was in the grammar years, a girl with a bloated face, a frizzed mop of hair, and the slovenliness of a rag doll. “We’d have no way of knowing what we were getting!” The sentence ended an octave higher than it began. “What if I got a knock-kneed, snaggle-toothed hag?” The pitch was still climbing.

“She’d have to be pretty bad to be worse than this awful loneliness. I think I’m willing to take the gamble. Anyway, I would request a picture.”

“Taken thirty years ago?”

“Come on, Edwin. Life is full of chances. Remember those lepers in the Bible who were starving to death? They could sit and die or chance going to the city for food. We can check into this opportunity, or we can sit here and take ptomaine poisoning from eating Molly’s slop. Do you want to be a bachelor for the rest of your life?”

“No, but there are things worse than being single.”