

# The Matchbox

I COMPARE women to match-boxes. Why? Because, like match-boxes with their calm and collected exterior, they may be seen in the living room, in the bedroom, in the kitchen and just like a matchbox, they have within themselves a supply of explosives that could start a hundred forest fires. Women, I consider to be like matchboxes. Do you want an example?

All right, then look at that huge, three-storeyed house down the road.

It is Sunday—isn't it? The time, morning. The washerman has arrived with his weekly wash. Nomita was emptying out the pockets of Ajit's shirts and trousers before handing them to the washerman when suddenly she discovered that letter. A crushed and crumpled envelope, but open. The envelope was addressed to her.

Nomita's whole system seemed to be on fire. She sat down on the bed and took the letter out of the envelope, her eyes riveted on the date. It indicated that the letter had arrived at least three days ago. She turned the envelope over and checked the postal seal. It confirmed the date. There was not the slightest shadow of a doubt that the letter did arrive three days ago. Ajit had opened it, read the letter, and then, crumpling it, shoved it into his pocket. He did not think it necessary to let her know about it.

The fire within her had reached a blazing point by then, and pervaded every nook and corner of her very being. This was certainly not due to forgetfulness; it was a deliberate act. This was Ajit's habit.

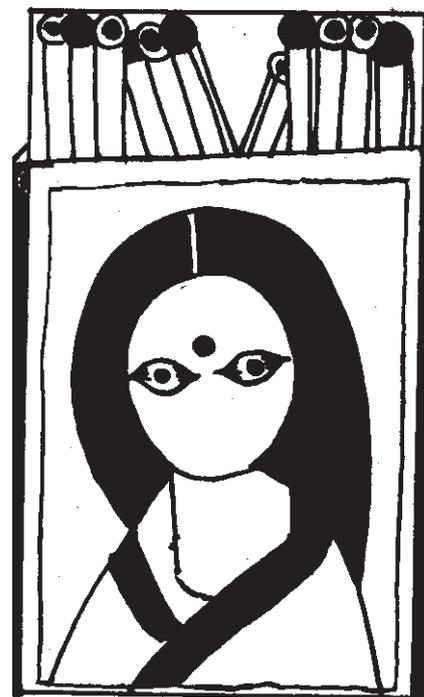
Ajit kept the key of the letter-box with him, although they were a joint family with fifty pairs of hands—pardon a little exaggeration. Usually, he read Nomita's letters first and then passed them on to her. Sometimes he did not care to do that even! At least, that was her firm conviction.

To tell the truth, however, till now, Ajit had not been able to claim that he had discovered any letter that was suspect. Still, he couldn't get rid of this despicable habit of his. Nomita had tried losing her temper with him, had said harsh things, had castigated him in unmistakable terms—but to no avail. Nothing had worked. She had even tried talking gently to him—but it had fallen on deaf ears.

In the beginning, he used to make light of the whole thing and when that failed, he pretended to lose his temper!

Nomita sat quietly for a few seconds in order to calm herself, then read the letter. It was from her mother, nothing serious. In her usual manner, her mother had listed all her troubles and difficulties, adding that the ceiling of her room was leaking and needed repairs urgently, or else it would give way and she would die under the debris. However, she felt assured that her queen of a daughter and her noble, generous son-in-law would not allow that to happen, therefore, etc. etc.

Nomita's mother was poor and a widow. She was able to get her daughter married into a rich family because of her daughter's beauty. But the mother never failed to take credit for arranging such a match and always took advantage of her now



-Jolly

prosperous daughter.

Whenever her mother's letter came, Ajit would comment: "Don't waste your time reading it. I had better fill out a money order form!"

Nomita wanted to die of shame.

Only the other day she had written to her mother telling her not to write on a postcard. She had decided to send money to her mother secretly, without Ajit's knowledge. Now, here was the result of a letter sent in an envelope!

Suddenly, Nomita grew terribly angry with her mother. Why, why, did she behave like a beggar? Why did she put her in this awful position all the time? No, this time she was going to let her mother know that she would not be able to help her any more. "Please do not expect anything from me from now on."

At that moment, Ajit entered the room. He had just had a bath, looked refreshed. Nomita's simmering rage found its victim now. She roared like a tigress: "When did this letter arrive?"

Looking askance at her, Ajit realised the seriousness of the situation. Actually, he had decided to tear that letter because

otherwise it would mean some money wasted. As a matter of fact, he did not want Nomita to know that a letter had arrived from her mother. What a mistake! He had completely forgotten about it!

But Ajit wasn't going to give in that easily. He pretended to remember, and, of course, failed to remember. "Letter? Which letter?" And then, suddenly as though seeing a light, he added: "Why of course, a letter did arrive from your mother. I didn't find time to give it to you. Sorry!"

"Why not? Why? Why? Tell me why you didn't, give me my letter?"

"For goodness sake—I forgot, that's why."

"Liar," hissed Nomita, like a snake.

"Why are you calling me names? Don't people forget?"

"No they don't! Why did you open my letter?"

Ajit tried to make light of the issue: "So what? My own wife's letter..."

"Shut up. I repeat, don't lie. How dare you open my letter. Haven't I asked you a thousand times not to do it?"

Ajit wasn't as afraid of Nomita's temper as much as he dreaded a scene. So he smiled weakly and said: "What if you forbade me to? Don't I have to check if anyone is writing love-letters to you?"

"Stop it. You are mean, you are despicable."

It would not be fair to expect Ajit to continue smiling, even after this! He held out his knife of poison now and said, "Why indeed? Only those who write whining letters to their sons-in-law are well-born. A poor girl has become a 'queen', I suppose..."

"Shut up," shrieked Nomita.

It was a blessing that their room was on the third storey — there were many in that house who would have enjoyed eavesdropping.

"Shut up?" growled Ajit, "Why should I shut up? I shall say is again. What I say goes. I was to do it — that is all. What can you do? Can you do anything?"

"Can't I do anything — nothing at all?" Nomita panted, breathlessly, "Do you want to see what I can do?" Forthwith, in almost a flicker of an eyelid, she did an

unbelievable thing. She picked up the matchbox that was lying on the table, the one Ajit used for his cigarettes and, lighting a stick, set fire to the end of her sari. The muslin caught fire in a second.

Ajit jumped towards her instantly and put out the flame with his hands — crumpling the burning end between his palms.

And, to tell the truth, he became quite nervous as he looked at Nomita stealthily. He saw her flushed face red-hot with a raging fire. He did not dare put out that fire with his hand, so he tried to pour some water over it. He forced himself to speak in a natural voice: "Really, you do lose your senses when you become angry., How can a woman lose her temper so? Oh!"

What Nomita would have said in reply I cannot say because right at that critical



juncture, her niece, Rani, came on the scene. Rani did not wait to take a breath and recited excitedly, "Aunty, how long will the washerman wait? If you aren't going to give any clothes this time, then tell him so."

Nomita paused for a second and tried to visualise the scene downstairs. Then, she picked up the dirty clothes and calmly replied: "Tell him that I am coming in a minute to give him the clothes."

Nomita is not placid by nature, so nobody meddles with her directly. They attack her as much as they can through indirect hints. The second sister-in-law was upto her neck in a hundred chores. Seeing Nomita, she forced a smile to hide her frown. "Thank the lord, at last you found time to come downstairs. Really! Any excuse to be with your husband. Aren't you two ever tired of your love-talk?"

Nomita took in the situation. She saw the family gathered together in the morning—crowded relations, friends. She mustn't allow her voice to waver! So she also smiled archly and said breezily: "Oh, indeed! watch us from a hidden corner and eavesdrop. When we talk it is always a battle of words, believe me!"

The second sister-in-law laughed a little: "Please, Nomita, don't play with words. What we see, we see right before us — twenty four hours."

Nomita blushed and then she smiled happily: "Didi, you are not being nice!"

The eldest sister-in-law entered the scene and asked anxiously: "Have you finished preparing the vegetables? Or are you chatting all the time?" And then she exclaimed, agitated: "What is that, Nomita? What happened? How did you burn the end of your sari like that?"

Nomita grew nervous, but only for a moment. She tucked in the end of her sari and laughed heartily: "See what happens if we don't obey you? I was trying to take the kettle off the stove with my sari. This is the result."

She pulled the basket of potatoes towards her and started to peel them. She began thinking about how she could send some money to her mother. She couldn't really write to her mother, saying that she would not be able to help her any more: "Please do not expect anything from me from now on!"

The whole village knows that Nomita is a "queen" and her husband is "noble and generous."

See, that is why I compare a woman to a matchbox. Though they have enough within them to start a hundred major fires, they don't flare up and burn the mask of nobility of their men. They don't explode their own colourful, calm exteriors.

That's why men let them be without any apprehension, in the kitchen, in the living room, in the bedroom. Here, there, everywhere.

And they also put them into their pockets without any fear at all.

*(Translated from Bengali by Anima Bose)*