

A Little Matched World

A Modern-day adaptation of
Hans Christian Andersen's
The Little Match Girl



By
Shyam Mael

Foreword

With this adaptation I have taken a double liberty. The first, the adaptation itself, I feel is excused by the second, a presumption that Andersen's intentions when he wrote *The Little Match Girl* in 1845 mirrored mine when I adapted it in 2008.

My intentions were, as they still are, to insert a pause into the robotic excesses of the season, and inspire a thought for those whose circumstances give them little reason to celebrate.

More often than not it is the combination of circumstance that results in people being homeless and living on the streets. Seeing someone sleeping rough on a wet and wintry night quickly exposes that lie dished up by one hypocritical politician after another, that such a life is a lifestyle choice made through laziness.

The story is free. Should it move you, let that movement flow into some concrete action. Every one of us can do something to make a positive difference.

Please pass it on, it is after all a seasonal tale.

Cover art note (in case you're interested)

The top picture is woodcut print by the Danish artist Johan Thomas Lundbye printed in a calendar for 1843, one of several sent to Andersen by the editor of an almanac with a request that he write a story around one.

The bottom picture is from a 2008 Guardian newspaper article by Pam Cahill, which reported that at that time the number of homeless women had risen 80% in the previous five years.

It was dark and cold, freezing cold. Falling snow, driven near horizontal by the wind, transformed the hurrying shoppers into strange bulky shapes; two-legged oxen, heavily laden, heads pulled into shoulders, venting steamy breath.

Atop a piece of cardboard in a tiled corner of the station entrance a girl sat cocooned in a grimy sleeping bag. Scrawled on a square of damp cardboard at her feet, 'Spear some change please'.

Squinting against the wind and glare of the lights on the greasy pavement, the girl watched the flow of anonymous legs. The never-ending motion numbed her brain, combining with the cold to produce a sleepiness that was beginning to be comfortable. She breathed in suddenly and deeply. She'd better move soon before she froze there. Twenty brown shoes and she'd move.

There was a pause in the jostling and coins clinked in the hat.

'Cheers,' said the girl looking up at the receding back. As she did she caught sight of the purposeful movement of two uniformed figures toward her. She looked down, gritting her teeth.

'I bet I know what you're going to say,' she said, putting on a smile and looking up, 'Here's a fiver from the lads being as it's Christmas.'

'Guess again,' said one of the uniforms, not smiling.

The girl sighed and retrieved the change from the hat. It wasn't worth sitting there anyway. She pulled the sleeping bag from around her. The frigid wind knifed through her clothes, snatching away the blanketed warmth. She reached behind and steadied herself as she stood, stars dancing in her vision.

'You alright?'

'What do you care?'

She swallowed hard against the urge to cry and bent over quickly. No way was she going to let them see her cry. She stuffed the damp sleeping bag into her bag and straightened up again.

'Merry Christmas.'

She hadn't gone very far before the dizziness came back and she had to crouch in a doorway. She stared unseeing at the swirling flakes. A weight settled over her, in her, dissuading any movement, physical or mental. There was no point anyway.

A taxi hissed to a stop and a vicar got out. She pushed herself out of the doorway, almost staggering with stiffness, and approached him as he reached through the cab window.

'Scuse me...'

The vicar's eyes did a swift once over the girl.

'Could you tell me if there are any churches around here that give out food?'

His face relaxed. 'Yes, well it's not actually church run, but there is a van that parks not too far away.' He gave her directions. It didn't sound that far.

'Great, thanks. Could you spa...'

'No.' He smiled with a look that said he knew she was going to ask. 'No, sorry.'

'Well, thanks for the tip. Merry Christmas.'

There was a loose group gathered around an oil drum fire on some derelict land next to where the van was parked. Thoughts of food brought warm saliva trickling into her mouth. Her legs had different ideas though and propelled her toward the siren call of the crackling flames. She moved in close, nodding and mumbling to the nods and mumbles.

The heat washed over her, softening and relaxing all it touched. She shivered feeling herself unclench, the relief bringing tears to her eyes again. She looked down, hiding her face and joined in the shuffling, turning dance.

A cheery middle-aged couple in woolly hats and scarves and fingerless gloves handed out cups of steaming soup and bendy slices of bread from the open side of the van. The girl accepted the food with a mixture of embarrassment and gratitude. She took it to the back of the van and perched on the bumper next to a woman with lime green painted boots. The soup was oniony and hot, and gone too soon.

The woman with the boots saw the girl staring at the empty cup and told her to go and get some more.

She was even more embarrassed to be asking for seconds, but the woman in the van didn't seem to mind. In fact, her cheeriness reminded the girl of her Auntie Pam for whom a request for seconds was proof of the tastiness of her cooking more than an indication of hunger. Not that she'd ever been properly hungry before, although once she would have said that she had been.

"Aven't seen you here before," said the woman with the green boots when the girl returned.

'No, I've only been on the streets for a week.'

The statement was the first time she'd admitted her situation. All week she'd been telling herself that once she told Rox what that putrid arsehole had done, Rox would kick him out and she could move in. All week, which felt like a month, while she'd had no luck with Rox's mobile.

"Ow's it goin'?"

'Not so good. I was staying with my sister, but she's sort of vanished and I can't go back there. I've not been doing too well with begging. Not sure if I'm doing it in the right places.'

The woman told her about a couple of places where she might have some luck begging. She had just begun telling the girl about an empty house she and her boyfriend had found when he elbowed her and they began arguing about her telling the girl about the house. She hissed at him to keep his fucking voice down, but he spoke louder saying he didn't fucking care if she heard him.

The girl's mind flashed back to Rox's flat and her sat in the toilet listening to Rox and her boyfriend arguing. Rox had told him to keep it down, but he hadn't given a fuck either. Without thinking about it she stood and began walking away from the van. She realised what she was doing at the same time she realised she didn't know where she was going. She heard the woman shouting after her, but kept walking. Her feet felt like there was glass in her shoes. All she wanted to do was sit down somewhere warm. She heard running footsteps behind her and the

woman shouting for her to wait. She stopped, but didn't turn.

'Hey, look there's a place you can crash just off the end of the high street. It's boarded up but you can get in through the back.'

The girl stared at the ground as the woman gave her directions, then mumbled thanks and began walking again without looking up. The snow had stopped, but the wind blew even colder than before, chilling the tears streaming down her reddened face.

The high street stretched on like a nightmare. Sounds morphed; hissing tyres, sirens, car horns, and voices swelled and eddied, pouring in on her confusion. More than once she was jostled and only just avoided going over on the slush-slicked pavement. She couldn't raise her head to see where she was going. The sight of all those careless faces and clean clothes hurt more than her feet. What had she done that was so bad?

Again her mind flashed back, this time to an image of her mum in bed. By the time she'd come back from the hospital, the cancer and the chemotherapy had shrunk her to doll size, complete with smooth hairless head. At times stood there watching the waxen figure that seemed to be shrinking before her eyes, the girl had been aware of something else, something huge and dark that filled the room. She could smell it and, if she stayed in the room too long, would feel it slowly winding around her, getting into her clothes and hair and trying to slide into her nose and mouth. Her dad had shouted at her when he saw her holding a T-shirt over her nose and mouth. He'd shouted at her mum as well though, and in his sleep.

She stopped in a doorway next to a newsagent, debating whether or not to try begging. She decided on ten minutes. A couple of quid would get some chips to stop the yawning feeling in her stomach, and then she could find the boarded-up house that the woman had told her about. She'd just put her bag on the floor when a man walking past her let out a whoop. She looked up to see him do an about turn and go back into the newsagent. When he came back out he was smiling. He paused as he passed her and held out a scratch card.

'Here, I've just won fifty quid. Guess I can afford to pass a bit of luck around.'

The girl accepted the card, which turned out to be three cards, not knowing what to say. A pound would have taken her to the chip shop, but maybe she'd win more than a pound.

She was suddenly confused. Should she run after him and ask him for a pound instead? Would he think her ungrateful and just take the cards back? Was she being ungrateful?

The moment to act passed, leaving her staring at the cards. She scratched the coating off the boxes on one of the cards. None of them matched. The latest cruel joke that God was playing on her. Tax on the daft was what her mum had called the lottery and scratch cards.

Maybe she could sell the other two. Who would buy a scratch card from a beggar though?

She picked up her bag and began walking, head down.

She reached the boarded-up house as the snow began falling again, fat wet flakes that settled on her clothes and bag. The snow by the back door was trodden down with large prints.

She stood frozen with indecision. Maybe the woman with the green boots had come back. If she didn't stay there, she didn't know where she was going to stay. Either way, she couldn't stand there all night. She took a deep breath, pushed the board back and climbed in. Inside she stood still, listening. Nothing. Just a cold, damp feeling and the smell of mouldy carpets.

Suddenly the darkness echoed with the sound of a man coughing somewhere in the house.

She stood paralysed, squeezing her legs together against the urge to pee. It definitely didn't sound like that woman's boyfriend.

A disembodied laughing voice followed the coughing before it too descended into a hacking cough. The girl turned and climbed back out into the night.

Her feet seemed to freeze to the snow. Her seized up mind wouldn't move. She didn't know now what. She didn't even know where she was.

She walked back the way she'd come toward the shops and lights of the high street, the pain in her feet vying with the pain in her stomach for attention. The wind burned her eyes making them run. If only tears were money was one of Rox's favourite sayings. If only tears were food more like.

She crouched in the doorway of a motor discount shop, and put a baseball cap she'd found down in front of her. She'd left her piece of cardboard at the station. People walked past with averted eyes. Occasionally someone would drop some coins into the hat without making eye contact.

The large bulk of a man blocked out the light. Her stomach tightened. The man crouched in front of her, taking care that his long coat didn't touch the ground.

'Alright there?'

His eyes flicked from the girl to the street.

'Smoke?'

He held out a pack of cigarettes.

The girl shook her head, her mouth suddenly dry, the knot in her stomach tightening.

'I can offer you something more than spare change,' said the man.

The girl said nothing, just wished he would give her some money and go.

'How does a warm bed, hot bath and as much food as you can eat sound?'

Still the girl didn't speak.

'My daughter's away over the holidays, so there's a room,' he continued, 'and my wife would be pleased to have some female company. You could wash and dry your clothes and be on your way tomorrow with some cash in your pocket.'

Images whirled through the girl's mind; warmth, carpets, hot water and soft towels. All the warnings about going with strange men clanged in her head. But he seemed okay, too posh to be dodgy, and if his wife was there she'd be safe surely. She bit her lip and her eyes grew hot. If only Rox were there, she'd know what to do.

'I can see you're worried. You don't have to though, it'll be okay, I promise.'

The girl's head snapped up.

'No...er...no...' the word stuck in her throat. She coughed. 'No, thanks.'

The man stood abruptly and dropped a coin into the hat. 'Well, Merry Christmas then.'

The girl watched him disappear into the crowd. A shiver ran through her. She looked into the hat. She picked up the two-pound coin and looked at it to make sure it wasn't one of those Euros someone had thrown down the other day. Well at least she had enough money for some chips now.

She walked slowly, trying to catch people's gaze. Those that did meet her eyes looked straight through her and walked by.

A man stopped in front of her outstretched hand. 'Aren't you a bit young for this lark?'

'It's not a lark,' she replied softly.

'No, I guess not.' Her gave her a two pound coin. 'Sorry it's not much, I'm on the rock 'n' roll meself.'

'Cheers, much appreciated.'

After that she walked with her eyes down and both hands in her pockets. She didn't have the energy anymore. Legs, bags and coats flowed around her, and jostled her from behind. She knew she was walking slowly, but she couldn't walk any faster. She felt transparent and shaky.

Much further down the road she came to a chip shop.

'Sit you down in the warm, love,' said the woman, motioning to a stool beside a fruit machine in the corner as she passed over the hot, damp parcel.

Unexpected tears leapt into the girl's eyes. She looked down quickly, mumbling thanks.

She ate slowly, trying not to burn herself, feeling the food warm her with each mouthful. The slower you ate, the quicker you got full, another one of Rox's wisdoms.

She looked out of the window and her bedraggled reflection looked back, eyes deep in shadow beyond reach. She ate the chips mechanically, her mind as blank as her stare. She was barely halfway through before she was full. She wrapped the rest up and shoved them down the side of the sleeping bag. The thought of being hungry enough to eat cold chips, maybe even for breakfast, sank into her. She quickly pushed the thought away, but the weight stayed.

An unwillingness to go back out into the cold darkness held her to the chair like a magnet. She tried to think of the best places to sleep. Somewhere out of the way of drunk men, but not so out of the way she might get attacked. Maybe she should try phoning Rox again. She might get through this time.

She stood, steadying herself on the fruit machine. 'Cheers.'

'No worries my love. You look after yourself eh.'

'Best I can.'

She stepped out of the door, looked up and down the street, sighed, and carried on in the direction she'd been going.

The woman in the chip shop watched the hunched figure go past the window

and shook her head slowly.

Walking was easier now she was warmer and had some food inside her. If only she knew where she was walking.

She turned into a tube station, avoiding the eyes of the attendants. It was so much warmer out of the wind. Again, Rox's phone didn't even ring, just that woman's newsreader voice saying that the person's phone was switched off. She hung the receiver softly in the cradle and stared at it without letting it go. Her vision blurred as hot tears welled up and ran down her face. Why was her phone still switched off? What could have happened to her? Maybe her putrid boyfriend had nicked her phone to stop her telling Rox about him grabbing her.

'Alright there?'

The girl's head spun round. She blinked to focus, wiped her eyes, and blinked again. Two policemen looked down at her.

'Making a phone call is it?'

The girl shook her head. 'Finished.'

She picked up her bag, walked out of the station, and just carried on walking, staring down. There was no point watching where she was going anyway. She didn't know where she was.

She walked past an alley through a cloud of warmed air and stopped. She turned back and walked into the alley, and found the source of the warmth. A steady stream of beer scented air flowed out of an air vent in the wall. She stood in the shadows, lost in the sensation of warm air wrapping around her.

A big wheeled bin overflowing with flattened boxes caught her eye as she turned to warm her back. She put her bag down and walked over to it. Putting one foot against the bin she managed to push and pull a box out without pulling the rest down. She opened it up and positioned it under the vent. It was big enough for her to sit in. She got the sleeping bag out and climbed into it in the box. She sat with her legs drawn up and the sleeping bag pulled over her head like a parka. Cocooned in warmth she leaned against the wall. The sleeping bag smelled of chips.

The scratch cards. She remembered scratching one. She couldn't remember why she hadn't scratched the other two, but she hadn't, or at least she couldn't remember if she had.

She rummaged in the pocket of her coat and found them. She held them up to the light and peered at them. A picture of a roast turkey surrounded by golden eggs winked in the light from passing cars. She didn't like turkey much. Her favourite bit was the toasted skin with its smoky, chewy taste. The thought brought saliva flooding into her mouth, and other thoughts of crunchy, fluffy roast potatoes, crusty stuffing and gravy.

Her stomach growled. She blinked and looked at the card vacantly, blinked again and tried to scratch the card. Having no nails made it difficult. She couldn't remember biting them. She never used to bite her nails.

None of the boxes matched. Again she wasn't surprised.

The other card had crackers with gold coins spilling out. She'd never had a

cracker with money in. Just jokes that weren't funny and a hat that didn't fit, and stupid plastic toys. Nothing that was worth having to hold a thing that exploded in your hand and smelled like a firework. She always pulled hers with her mum. She didn't feel safe with anybody else. She wouldn't even look at the cracker, just at her mum's raised eyebrows and smiling reassuring eyes.

The corners of her mouth twitched into a smile.

A bottle smashed in the alley. She flinched, hitting her head against the wall. She looked down at her hands. One still held the cards, the other clasped nothing. She looked at the bin, back to her hands, out into the street, back at her hands.

She scratched the other card. Nothing. She let both cards fall and pulled the sleeping bag up.

A group of men staggered raucously past the alley. One dressed as Santa lurched out of the arms of the two supporting him and vomited noisily against the alley wall. Jeers and laughter echoed around the alley.

The girl pressed closer to the wall.

The group rolled on, scooping up the spattered Santa as they went, trailing shouts and laughter.

She'd never thought about Santa throwing up before. But then she'd stopped thinking of Santa as a real person a long time ago, once she'd found out he was a lie. That had been like somebody had died. Even though she never saw him, he was the Grandpa she'd always wanted. He would always answer her letters and bring her what she asked for. And when adults warned her that Santa wouldn't bring her any presents if she didn't behave, she knew in her heart it wasn't true. Santa wasn't like that.

But Santa was a lie. Men dressed up, lying. Baby Jesus, Virgin Mary, lies. That's why adults got vague when you talked about Jesus and Mary. They knew. Everybody knew. They just told kids to get them to believe, and do what they were told. Growing up was finding out what the lies were.

She sank into fatigue, dimly aware of the cold condensation from her breath dampening the nylon sleeping bag, and her heartbeat moving her head slightly, rhythmically, against the wall.

The old-fashioned railway carriage rocked gently to the quiet clickety-clack of the train. She had a blanket draped around her made of yellow velvet. It was thick and felt like hamster fur. People dressed in old-fashioned clothes carrying presents were walking past the door. They all looked familiar. Everybody seemed happy, and whoever looked in at her smiled.

The door opened and the conductor stepped in. The conductor was her Grandpa, broad and gentle. She recognised him even though he didn't really look like Santa, his head bald on top and freckled and his smiling face stubbled with white. He held a cup out to her with his big hand. A delicious chocolaty smell wafted toward her.

Glass smashing nearby punctured the dream. She looked around confused, the smell of beer and vomit chasing away the flimsy memory of chocolate.

It was cold. Her toes felt like they were being pinched with pliers. Her brain felt

like treacle and took a lot of effort to work out the fact that the warm air had stopped. The bar must have closed. Well there was nothing she could do now; she'd only get colder if she moved.

She hunkered down deeper into the bag and hovered in the twilight zone between awake and asleep, growing numb to the cold.

Someone calling her name startled her to wakefulness. She pulled the sleeping bag off her head and listened. It had sounded like her mum's voice.

She looked up. A single star shone faintly through the sulphurous glow, just like in the Nativity, only they had a nice barn full of straw and each other.

A bright dot of light blipped across the sky and was gone. A shooting star. Someone must be dying. Her mum had told her that a shooting star was someone's soul leaving.

She should make a wish...only there was no point; it was probably a mobile phone satellite, not a shooting star. Everything beautiful was always taken away.

A dead weight of loneliness and despair pressed down on her. She pictured herself huddled against the wall, surrounded by the concrete and brick of the labyrinth. She was never going to escape. She would just keep walking until she faded out all together, and then her ghost would be trapped there, wandering the streets and alleys.

She pulled the sleeping bag back over her head and started to cry.

'Mum...' she keened quietly, holding herself and rocking. 'Mum...'

'It's alright love, everything's alright now.'

It was her mum's voice. The girl pulled the sleeping bag from her head and looked up. Standing over her, surrounded by a soft light, was her mum, just like she'd always been, hands on hips, smiling. She even smelled the same when she bent down and lifted the girl into her arms.

The next day the girl was found, the cold morning light illuminating her cyanosed smile, two scratch cards on the ground beside the box forming a sodden cross.

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