

# The World in a Box of Matches

By Joseph Schuurman

As I gaze out the police car window, I think that if the world were smaller, I might understand it. If the world were smaller, I might be able to see it all at once and see why things are the way they are.

In our small town in rural southern Ontario there are these people who seem to understand the world. They walk around talking about big issues like they understand them, even before all the facts are in. Take Mark Roberts for example. Mark always seems on top of things, and the towns folk like him too. He's tall, confident, and witty. When his neighbours, the Abara's, shed burned down, he wasn't fazed. He could tell us how it happened; it was old dry wood. And that box of Redbird matches they found later, it belonged to Lukas Vanderbeur. He showed everyone the box of matches. It had Lukas's initials on it. Lukas even admitted he often used Redbird; but he still denied he burned down the shed. The Abaras didn't press charges anyway, but people stay away from Lukas now.

The police thanked Mark, and his reputation increased. It is people like this who seem to have the world in their pocket, who cause me to feel inadequate. I just can't fathom how they could be so confident.

This morning as I walked to school with my trombone for band practice after classes, I saw Mark Roberts chatting and laughing with Laura, William, and some other people who wanted to bask in his presence. I crossed to the other side of the road. For some reason, when I'm around people who always seem to know what's going on, I get shy. So, I hang around with people who seem just as puzzled about the way the world works as I am.

Like Jack, who I bump into in front of the school. I have known Jack for a while now, ever since grade two when his family moved to town. We're still friends and we're in grade ten now.

"Hey Jack," I called.

"Hey," he replied. "Are you ready for our math test?"

"Ready enough."

We walked through the double doors into the school's hallway lined with the numerous trophies' students have won over the years. There's one plaque for someone called Benjamin Bernard who graduated in 1997 and went on to be the founder of a multi-million-dollar computer software company. It suggests he's got the world in the palm of his hand; he practically has the world at his fingertips.

At lunch, after our math test, I sat with Jack. "What did you get on your test?" he asked me.

"Eighty-five percent. But the part of the test I put my name on was torn off. The teacher probably accidentally ripped it while marking it."

"That's why she had to ask whose it was in front of the entire class?"

"Yah, yah. How do some people end up being so successful? They graduate from a small high school, and end up a millionaire," I pondered.

"Well," Jack replied thoughtfully, "I suppose they work hard and diligently to achieve what they want and get a grasp on the world."

I thought about that for the rest of the day, but it seems to me that if hard work and diligence was all it took to get a grip on the world, everyone who worked hard would understand the world. But do they really understand *everything*? If they did, they would have nothing to learn, and their lives would be boring.

I stayed late after school for band practice. When I walked home, the sun was slowly slipping below the trees, bathing everything in a dull glow, and making my shadow tower before me. I was taking a shortcut home through the forest at the end of the football field, when I saw Mark Roberts. He lit a cigarette, dropped a box of matches, and walked around the corner of the school.

Intrigued, I put down my trombone and picked up the match box. It was an empty Redbird match box, the same brand that he accused Lukas Vanderbeur of using to ignite the shed. It was identical in every way except that it was missing the initials L. V. I hesitated a second, then hurried back around the corner of the school, just as Mark's silhouette, surrounded by a red halo from the sun, disappeared into the shadows beyond.

I paused, looked down at the box of matches in my hand, then jogged after Mark. His house was just before mine on the way to school, so I passed it almost every day. It wasn't an impressive house by any means; neither was ours, but his was well-kept. A flower bed lined the front steps that ran up to the door. I slowed down to a walk as I got closer and stayed just behind him. The sun had set, and the streetlights turned on. I felt like a sleuth as I hurried through the dull yellow light cast from the streetlights and slowed to a crawl in the darkness in-between lamp posts while a light snow began to fall.

Instead of going in his front door like I expected, he snuck around the side of his house and removed a rock that was stopping the basement window from closing. He lifted up the window, slipped under it, and disappeared into his basement. I had slunk around the side of his house, and I crouched by the window from where I watched him fumble around. There was a click and a lamp turned on. The room looked like a cross between a carpenter's shop and corner store. A coat of sawdust covered the floor and there were oddities dotting the shelves. He took out a Redbird box of matches just like the ones I saw him drop, and he brought out a corner of a piece of paper. It looked like it had been ripped off a larger sheet. He brought up a magnifying glass and studied it closely. Then he took out a pen and wrote something on the match box. I leaned in to look at the scrap of paper. It was the corner ripped off my math test!

He must have seen me leaning in out of the corner of his eye because he suddenly looked up to where I was. Before he could clearly see me, I was gone. I had seen enough to put the pieces together. I ran to my house, fumbled with the keys, then grabbed the phone and called Jack.

Eventually, he answered and while glancing out towards Mark's house, I quickly told him what I had seen.

"So, you think that it was actually Mark that burned down the Abara's shed?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes," I answered, "and now I suspect he is going to frame me for burning something else. I think he's an arsonist."

Just then an orange glow mushroomed on the horizon by the school. Then flames started to lick out of the school windows. "Jack!" I yelled, "Look out your window, the school's burning!"

"Is anyone in there?" he asked.

"Maybe the band teacher. He said he'd stay late to find more music for us."

Then it hit me. "I left my trombone just outside the school when I picked up Mark's match box."

I ran down the stairs, pulled on my coat, and started sprinting toward the school. When I arrived, I saw a fire truck and police car were on the scene already. The firemen were furiously unravelling the hose from the fire trucks and the policemen were huddled around something. When I turned the corner of the school an officer waved me over.

"Son," he said. "Is this your instrument?"

"Yes," I gulped, trying to speak, "I saw the fire and ran over when I realized that I had left it here."

"And is this your box of matches?" he asked, holding up the Redbird box I had seen Mark scribbling on.

"No," I said breathlessly, "I just saw Mark Roberts. He ripped my name off my math test and forged my handwriting on that box!"

"And the instrument here?" the policeman inquired with raised eyebrows.

"I already told you, I forgot it here after band practice!"

"That boy Mark has a good name around the department," the policeman continued. "Are you suggesting he started this fire?"

I thought for a moment. "Why, yes."

"Well son," he replied, "I am sure you won't mind coming to the station with us to answer a few questions."

With that, I was escorted to the police car and stared out the frosted window as my small, familiar hometown slid by me.

I figure that no one completely understands this world. Some of us try to appear to know more of its mysteries than we really do. If we could really grasp the way the world works, I wouldn't be in the back of this police car. The best we can do, I suppose, is to live with the unknown, rather than trying to master it. And in the process, come to terms with it.