

"Ya Gotta Match?"

Sue Winger

THE OLD man, muttering unintelligibly beneath his breath climbed shakily into the bus, the knuckles of his puffy hand white as he tightly clutched the bar on the door. His whole body quivered, as though he were palsied, and it was with extreme difficulty that he extricated a crumpled ticket from his pocket to give to the driver. A battered hat, nondescript in color, partially covered his face; an ill-fitting, threadbare jacket, which appeared to have been plaid at one time, and a pair of baggy trousers clung abjectly to his stooped figure. He carried no baggage.

Tremulously, he swayed down the aisle, inadvertently stumbling against seats along the way, scuffling his poorly-clad feet along the floor—an almost grotesque figure. About midway the length of the bus, he lurched sideways and settled himself in a seat next to the window, giving at the same time a wheezing sigh. As though from habit, he folded his hands in his lap—soft, swollen hands, mushroom-like, useless.

Several other people entered the bus and, choosing seats at random, hardly noticed the huddled figure by the window. The old man peered about with eyes that were only faintly curious. At last the driver started the engine with a roar; the wheels began to roll, and the roar became a low throbbing.

The passengers settled back. The old man, however, groped inside his frayed jacket with a trembling hand and pulled out a solitary cigarette. Laying it on the seat beside him, he searched his jacket again, this time more frantically, and then the pockets of his trousers, but he found nothing. Weak from the effort, he slumped back in a little heap and looked about. His fingers twitched spasmodically. He merely sat for a moment, and then he leaned toward the stylishly dressed couple diagonally across the aisle.

"Hey . . . hey. Ya' got a match?" The face bore a striking resemblance to the hands—soft and puffy, like a mushroom. The little eyes were deeply embedded in circles of flesh, and the nose, like the brim of his hat, seemed shapeless. There was a peculiar childlikeness about the face, an innocence springing not from inexperience or purity, but from emptiness, from a blankness of mind.

The woman, who was seated next to the aisle, shrank back noticeably. Frowning at such an indelicate intrusion, the man placed a protective arm about his wife and said gruffly, "We have no match. We have nothing to give you."

Whatever gleam or lustre there had been in the eyes of the old man seemed suddenly clouded. There was only a dullness, and perhaps a memory in his brain of the others who hadn't had anything to give, as he repeated, "Ya' got a match? Ya' . . . got . . ."