

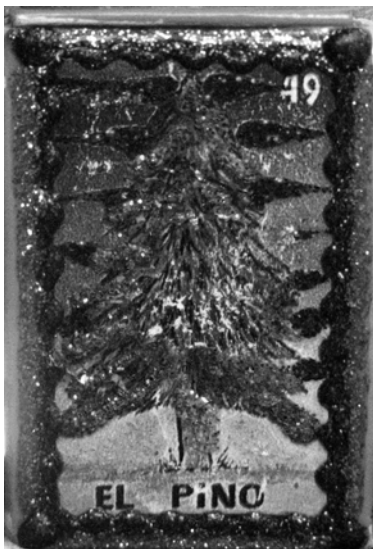
Thinking Inside-Out of the Box

By Debbie Merion

It's always a full day of traveling to leave the heavy grey over Ann Arbor for the bright blue skies and mountain peaks of Taos, New Mexico, but I don't go just for the weather or the scenery. I go there so I can check into a quiet room that looks out over Native American land and study literature and writing in the Mabel Dodge Luhan Historic Inn and Conference Center where D.H. Lawrence, Willa Cather, Ansel Adams, and Georgia O'Keefe have also visited and felt inspired. Taos, like Ann Arbor, is a small funky oasis of a town. Something odd and interesting always seems to happen to me when I'm there. My visit earlier this year was no exception.

At Mabel Dodge, I sat in an adobe classroom and wiggled in my metal chair during introductions from my twelve fellow students. A woman across from me smiled and said "I'm from Ann Arbor." Huh? I'd lived in Ann Arbor for 30 years, but I'd never seen *her* before. It's not that I doubted her: she dressed Ann Arboroid in her sneakers, jeans and sweater. It's just that the coincidence threw my balance off. She said, "I'm Diane," and she had traveled the 1500 miles to Taos with her Brunette, adult daughter and housemate, Erin. We found out later that we lived just a mile from each other back home.

The week passed and our small group of writers, who had flown to Taos to study with teacher and writer Rob Wilder, author of a book of humorous essays called *Daddy Needs a Drink*, became close. We were pleased to discover that the three of us from Ann Arbor had booked the same flight home. We drove together to the Albuquerque airport, bright blue luggage snuggling with a dark green carry-on in the back of a rented SUV. The check-in process went smoothly. We had time to spare and the airport stores called to us seductively. We wandered into a shop called "Earth Spirit" and chatted in an aisle next to some silver angel pins. Diane said, "Good, now we can see Rob's wife's art. He said that one of the stores here carries Lala's stuff." I'd heard about Rob's wife Lala, because she appeared in a few of Rob's essays that he'd read aloud to our little class, but I'd never met her. "What is her art?" I asked Erin. She said, "She makes matchbox shrines."



Pine Tree Matchbox Shrine



Debbie Merion and Kim Hoa

Something twitched inside my head. I thought about the painted matchbox I had in the black purse on my shoulder.

It came into my life two years earlier in January of 2004, when I was visiting my dear friend Kim Hoa in Scituate, Massachusetts. I had sat next to her on the soft, hand-sewn comforter covering the bed in her spare bedroom. She extended her open hand toward me, and sitting on her palm was a little gift for me: an orange matchbox. I wasn't sure what to think at first. The matchbox lid had an evergreen tree hand-painted with cheery red confetti. As a Jewish girl, that Christmasy image has been a little hard for me to connect with. But Kim Hoa and I have never let outward appearances sway us from opening up to know one another more deeply.

Kim Hoa is Vietnamese, 16 years older than me, and a half a foot shorter. Her hair is short and grey now, but when she was younger it was long and black and people mistook her for Yoko Ono. We met 30 years ago in the School of Social Work at the University of Michigan, while we were getting master's degrees. We're as close as siblings—and look about as close as Danny Devito and Arnold Schwarzenegger did in the movie "Twins."

Sitting on the bed, I looked into Kim Hoa's lightly lidded eyes. Kim Hoa caressed my fingers as she told me about how she had picked out the matchbox for me. "I read the paper in every box in the basket, driving that salesgirl crazy" she said, "until I found the best one." The folded strip of paper in the box is green, and says:

"Blessed are those who have the gift of making friends. For it is one of God's best gifts."—Thomas Hughes

We hugged, and on the short edge of the box I wrote "From Kim Hoa 1/1/04" and then stuck it in a little zippered pouch in my purse with my lipstick, reading glasses and toothbrush. I carried it everywhere because it felt special, and it felt special because I carried it everywhere.

I still had it two years later as I stood in that Albuquerque airport store. I opened my purse, pulled out my orange matchbox, and I held it in my open palm for Erin to examine. She and Diane had seen some of Lala's creations in a store in Santa Fe. Erin looked at the painted evergreen tree and said "Yup, I think that's it." She turned the little treasure over like a china cup, to read who created it. The back of the matchbox said:

MAGIC MATCHBOX SHRINE

Each shrine contains worry dolls from Guatemala, healing dirt from New Mexico, turquoise for protection, and a yinyang bean for harmony. Carried in purses, the car, or home, these shrines bring blessings and good luck to the carrier. Ooh LaLa Designs 2003

"OoLaLa— that's her," confirmed Erin. I felt a little wobbly and wandered down the aisle, trying to find something to fix my gaze upon. A few steps later my eyes were glued to a woven basket with a colorful jumble inside, sitting on the display case in the most sought-after location in any store—next to the cash register. It had been there, next to us, all the time—the matchbox sisters and cousins of the matchbox shrine that had been my traveling companion for so long.

"You have to write to Rob and tell him the matchbox story," Diane said to me, while holding up a matchbox with a painted ladder on it. And so I write. The box, like the story, has layers to

peel away and notice.

My little matchbox shrine has the number 49 in the upper right corner. My 49th year was a huge transition for me. I changed directions and stomped my foot on the gas. When I turned 50, Kim Hoa made a rare out-of-town visit to Ann Arbor. We giggled and chatted nonstop, revealing secrets. Our hearts pumped into each other's.

But it took the Albuquerque airport spotlight on my matchbox for Kim Hoa to tell me more about the story of the box, and for me to begin to really understand it. When I told her about the birthplace of the matchbox, she wrote to me:

I bought the magic box in the museum store of the De Cordova College of Art in Lincoln, MA. The reason I bought it was the dolls that lived in the box. It appears that one can assign a negative/ troublesome thought to a doll, and then put her to "sleep" in the box; thereby freeing the owner from the burden of the negative or troublesome thought. I like that. Whisper your pain to me, I'll carry it for you and share your trouble; and better yet I'll process it for you, away from you in my "sleep." Abracadabra! Your tomorrow will be brighter. Every woman needs such a friend. Moreover, I just adore the painstaking creation of all those dolls (how they all fit in that small box is fascinating to me) with their intricate hairdos and costumes. Magic, truly magic.

I took in a deep breath, and her words swirled in my belly. For two years I had ignored the worry dolls, but now, two things had changed. First, because of Kim Hoa's explanation, I understood how to use the dolls and didn't feel the least bit silly about it. Second, I learned that a close family friend of ours was quite ill. Suddenly I had tons of worries to tell these tiny dolls, and I found myself whispering into my matchbox, and feeling comforted. I explained to my husband, "They want to hear your worries, like a dog wants to protect you from strangers—that's their job!"

I bought a second one of Lala's matchbox shrines from the basket in that airport store. Painted on the outside of this matchbox is a single open hand, where Lala has painted a gold ring like a wedding band. I gave that box to my husband, to help him with his worries. Inside, it says on white paper.

"A drop of ink may make a million think."

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