

“One afternoon...in our St. Petersburg house, I was led down from the nursery into my father’s study to say how-do-you-do to a friend of the family, General Kuropatkin. His thickset, uniform encased body creaking slightly, he spread out to amuse me a handful of matches, on the divan where he was sitting, placed ten of them end to end to make a horizontal line, and said, “This is the sea in calm weather.” Then he tipped up each pair so as to turn the straight line to a zig zag—and that was “a stormy sea.” He scrambled the matches and was about to do a better trick when we were interrupted....With a Russian, flustered grunt, Kuropatkin heavily rosed from his seat, the loose matches jumping up on the divan as his weight left it. That day, he had been ordered to assume supreme command of the Russian Army in the Far East.

...This incident had a special sequel fifteen years later, when at a certain point of my father’s flight from Bolshevik-held St. Petersburg to southern Russia he was accosted while crossing a bridge, by an old man who looked like a gray-bearded peasant in his sheepskin coat. He asked my father for a light. The next moment each recognized the other. I hope old Kuropatkin, in his rustic disguise, managed to evade Soviet imprisonment, but that is not the point. What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme: those magic ones he had shown me had been trifled with and mislaid, and his armies had also vanished, and everything had fallen through...”

Vladimir Nabokov
Speak, Memory

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from...

Museum of Matches

an interdisciplinary project developed
by Sasha Chavchavadze

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