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E,PAU

**Journal Title:** Opium and other stories /

**Volume: Issue:**

**Month/Year:** 1983 **Pages:**

**Article Title:** Little Emma

**Article Author:** Csáth, Géza, 1887-1919.

**Imprint:** New York, N.Y. : Penguin Books, 1983.

**Call #:** PH3213 .C69 A24 1983

**Location:** 4th Fl

**Shipping Address:**

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## *Little Emma*

I found this story in a diary. The boy who wrote it was a remote relation, and did away with himself at twenty. His mother recently died and the diary came into my hands. I had for a while no opportunity to examine it, but last week I began reading it, and was surprised by its casual, and simple, directness. I found some interesting items in the third notebook, and transcribe them here, offering them a little condensed, and with a few corrections in punctuation.

Little Emma was the prettiest of my kid sister Irma's friends. Her sweet little face with its gray eyes and her blonde hair seemed lovely to me from the first.

I was in my second year, she and Irma first graders. Other boys liked her too, but never said so because they were ashamed to admit noticing a girl and a first grader too.

But I knew right away I loved her and would always love her, and would marry her too one day, though I was ashamed of it.

Little Emma often came over to play with my two kid sisters and my brother Gábor. Sometimes there were other girls, like Ani and Juli, our nieces, whom we used to kiss in the cellar, in the attic, the garden and woodshed.

September was lovely and warm, and the balmy weather was even more enjoyable than summertime because I was back at school from two to four and eight to eleven in the morning, and playing ball outside was so much fun. We

never tired: we'd run home for a snack, come right out and play till supper.

School was also more fun—more interesting. The new teacher, that is, Michael Sladek—tall with a red face and a thick voice—used a cane.

Our house was in the fifth district, and so our school was on the edge of town. Most of the boys were peasants. Some went barefoot and wore checked calico shirts; others had boots and velveteen trousers. I envied them because I felt them to be different, tougher and braver than I. There was one called Zöldi, four or five years older than anyone else: he carried a jackknife in the cuff of his boot. He showed it to me once, saying, even God can't scare me!

I told my brother, who didn't believe me.

Our new teacher didn't give us reading or let us do handwriting the way our nice first-grade teacher had. Instead he lectured at us, and then called us up to the blackboard to report. If someone talked or fooled around, he'd warn him just once; the next time, he called him up and said, slowly, Lie down, boy! And he'd turn to the class and say, He gets three. Who wants to give them?

This was exciting. Ten or fifteen boys usually stood. The teacher would review the volunteers, call one forward, and hand him the cane.

—If you don't give it to him as hard as you can, you're next!

The class would watch the beating and hear the howling in dead silence. We all admired the ones who didn't yell or weep; but I felt we hated them a bit, too. I've thought about this, but can't explain it.

As for me, punishment didn't scare me. I was perfectly aware that the teacher would think twice about it, my

father being a Major and carrying a saber—he wouldn't have the guts to cane me.

The teacher found out soon enough that Zöldi was best at it, and from then on he did the punishing and did it well. His way of holding the cane differed from the others'. Hardly an hour passed without at least one or two "strokes." And then there were those warm, golden afternoons when we were all so restless—then, the whole of our second hour was taken up from three to four by canings. A boy huddled weeping in every other row.

One of those times I had a nosebleed and was allowed down to the janitor for water to wash it off. The bleeding stopped and I was going up again when I saw little Emma in the girls' corridor on the ground floor. She stood at her classroom door, her back to me, but she noticed me anyway. Obviously she was there being punished. I went to her, wanting to kiss her and sympathize, but she didn't seem at all unhappy. We said nothing, we only looked at each other. She was sweet and proud. As though she meant to make me realize my father was a mere Major, whereas hers was a Lieutenant-Colonel. She took her braid, untied its pink ribbon, and made a new bow. I watched her at my leisure. Each time she glanced up at me my heart beat.

She came to see us the next afternoon and asked me to keep it a secret—she'd been punished and had had to stand outside the door. I said nothing about it. But that evening I asked Irma why.

—None of your business, was her answer.

Disgusting Irma! I'd have loved hitting her right then, kicking her everywhere. She was jealous, she didn't want me loving Emma, and she didn't want Emma to love me.

She wouldn't let her play hide-and-seek with me, but stayed beside her, coddling and kissing and hugging her. She even stopped me from talking to Emma by calling her away, linking her arm in hers and strolling down at the far end of the yard. It made me bitter every time.

However, their close friendship soon turned to hatred. I noticed one day that they left school with different girls. Emma didn't come to visit after that. I asked my sister why they'd broken up, but she turned and ran off. For spite I told Father at table. Irma refused to answer his questions, so she had to go kneel in the corner, and she didn't get an apple either!

Weeks have passed. Uselessly I tried to talk my sister into making up with Emma, but she's stubborn and silent. Her eyes are misty with tears though, and she cries in bed for no reason.

Towards the middle of October, a terrible thing happened at school. For a change the teacher wanted Zöldi to be the first one caned. He called him, Come here nicely now!

Zöldi said nothing, but stood there.

The order came, Drag him here!

A dozen boys surrounded him, even some from the last rows. Many of us were scared of Zöldi, and sore at him too. Even I hated him and at first, no use lying, wanted to help drag him out. But it crossed my mind my father would be contemptuous of me if he ever heard I had ganged up with a crowd against one kid. So I stayed in my seat, choked up, my knees shaking. The boys were puffing and panting, trying to shove Zöldi out of his row; a few were grabbing at his legs where he held to the footboard; others were working to force his fingers from their fierce grip on the bench. It took them at least five minutes to budge him out

of there and get him down on the floor, where he pinned himself tight again. He didn't dare strike any of them though, because he must have realized that the teacher, who stood on a chair watching the scuffling, would have interfered. Sladek's face was brick-red with rage.

Finally they all latched on to Zöldi by his arms and legs. They dragged him up to the desk, scraping his back along the floor.

—Don't let him get away! the teacher shouted. Turn him on his face and hold his hands and feet down good!

With all their strength, exhilarant, the boys followed his orders. Zöldi could get hold of nothing, and they kneeled on his arms, four squatting on his legs, two of them leaning on his head. This was the moment the teacher was waiting for. Calmly he crouched beside them, disposed the boys so none of them would be in the way of the cane, and went to work then, dealing Zöldi half a dozen strokes. They sounded awful. Thick, sharp whistles. I burst into a chilled sweating, yet as if held in a magnetic field, stood on my toes on the footboard so as to miss nothing of the sight. The teacher stopped. Zöldi has taken them all without a peep.

—Will you stop being so *stubborn*, Sladek said quietly. And after waiting, dizzy with rage, he hollered: Answer!

But Zöldi didn't answer.

—All right, my boy, the teacher hissed, it makes no difference to me if you don't answer now—because you will later!

And furiously, faster and faster he went on with the caning. I couldn't even count the blows anymore. Despite all the strength in that big man, he was panting with exhaustion. Finally he stopped, worn out, and hoarsely demanded again, Will you *stop* being so *stubborn*!

Still no response from Zöldi.

The teacher mopped his brow and went on with his "strokings," slower now, pausing after each one and repeating, *Will you stop being so stubborn!*

This went on for another dozen "strokings." Then a terrible howl: Nooo!

The teacher laid the cane down and sent the boys to their seats. Zöldi got to his feet, fixing up his ripped clothes as best as he could—they had been torn in the scuffling—and returned to his place. His face was smudged from the floor, tears fell on his jacket, and he spat blood.

The teacher, however, called him back.

—Who said you could sit down! Get back here right away!

Zöldi staggered up front again, his head hanging. Sladek rubbed his palms together as though he'd just finished a neat bit of work, and said gently, with an unctuous, charitable voice, *My dear fellow, you must realize I gave you that as a warning for the next time. It's most ungrateful in you to disobey your teacher. I discern in you an unfortunate tendency, so I think I shall have to slap your face too.*

The slap, however, became a few slaps, and he went on and on slapping Zöldi's face until the boy sank dazed against the blackboard. But he pulled himself away and ran out the door. The teacher cursed and slammed it after him, and then seated himself at his desk again. You could have heard a pin drop.

I got home, ran a temperature, and became delirious. I was put to bed. My father came and questioned me in the evening. I had to tell him what had gone on at school.

My parents execrated Sladek, and the next week I went to another school in the best part of town.

I couldn't see Emma every day then. My heart bled.

I read in the paper of October 25th that some coachman had been hanged for robbing and killing one of his fares. A long description of his behavior on death row and in the morning under the gallows. That night my parents discussed it at dinner, and my father described a hanging he'd witnessed when he was twenty.

—How I'd like to have seen it, I cried.

—Be grateful you haven't, he said. And don't you ever go to one, because you'll dream about it for seven years as I did.

After school next day, I suggested to my brother Gábor that we might build ourselves a gallows, and string up a dog or cat. Gábor liked the plan, and we worked on one in the attic. We stole a clothesline and made a noose. We quit work on the gallows because we hadn't a handy beam for it, and also worried that our parents would stop us if we arranged hangings out in the yard.

Gábor wasn't too keen on torturing animals, though once he got started he came up with great ideas. The year before, for instance, he'd sliced a cat alive with the carving knife. That was in the garden. Ani and Juli trapped the cat, all of us held him down on his back, and Gábor slashed him down his belly.

We got the rope up over a rafter in the attic. A dachshund had strayed in from the road that afternoon, and we shut the gate, caught him, and lugged him up. The girls were jubilant as Gábor and I calmly prepared.

—You're Judge, Gábor pronounced, and I'm the

Hangman. And I'm reporting: Your Honor, everything's in readiness for the execution!

—Excellent, I said. Hangman, you may do your job!

And I lifted the dog as Gábor tugged at the rope. Then when he commanded, I suddenly let go. The dachshund whimpered distressfully, kicking his yellow-spotted black feet. But he soon went limp and still. We looked at him awhile and then went for our snack, leaving him dangling there. Afterwards the girls hung around the gate and lured another dog in with a lump of sugar. Lugging it in their skirts, they brought it to Gábor for another execution, but he refused, saying one hanging a day was enough. Juli opened the gate and let him out.

For a few days we forgot all about it because we had a new ball and Gábor and I played catch steadily.

Later on we were talking about Emma. Gábor said he hated her because she was a showoff; he said Irma was stupid for having been so crazy about her.

—I hope they never make up; otherwise she'll be back here boasting and all, Gábor said angrily.

Gábor didn't get his wish, because the very next afternoon Irma brought Emma in with her.

—She's repulsive, Gábor whispered to me.

—She's a sweet darling, I said to myself, though I was sore at Irma, too. Because Irma was flooded with pleasure and while we were playing kept calling her aside to hug her and practically choke her with kisses. Yet they quarrelled later anyhow.

—So you won't promise not to talk to Rosie anymore? Irma said, almost in tears.

—I certainly shan't, Emma said firmly, with a grin.

Juli and Ani whispered to one another. Irma, Gábor, and

I were all looking at little Emma—God, how beautiful she was!

Those sunny autumn afternoons were growing to a close. The yard was ours alone: Father and Mother went riding, the cook gave us our cocoa and went back to work in the kitchen.

—Have you ever seen a hanging? my sister asked Emma afterward.

—No! said Emma, with a shake of the head, her hair brushing her cheeks.

—But you've heard about it from your father, haven't you?

—Yes. He said a murderer was hanged, she replied coldly, uninterested.

—You know something? We've got a scaffold all our own, Juli declared.

And we got Emma up in our attic to see an execution. Gábor and I had buried the dachshund in a dump a few days earlier. The noose dangled there emptily.

—Now we can play hanging, Irma said. Emma must be convicted, and we must hang her.

—We should do it to *you*, Emma laughed.

—Hangman, do your job, said Gábor, giving himself the order.

Little Emma paled, but still smiled.

—Don't move! Irma said.

And I looped the noose about Emma's neck.

—Not me, I don't want to be hanged, the little girl whimpered.

—The murderer begs our mercy, Gábor intoned flushing, but the Hangman's assistants seize the condemned! Ani and Juli took her arms.

—No, I won't let you! little Emma screamed, and started crying.

—Mercy is with the Most High, Gábor recited. And Irma lifted her friend up by her thighs.

She couldn't manage it and staggered. I went to her and helped. It was the first chance I'd ever had to hold Emma in my arms. My brother yanked at the line, wrapped his end around the rafter and tied it. Little Emma swung there. At first, she flailed her arms about, and kicked her short, thin, white-stockinged legs. Her movements seemed very odd. I couldn't see her face because the attic was quite dark by then. Suddenly the movements ceased. Her body stretched, as though it were seeking something to stand on. And then she moved no more. A ghastly fright took us all. We dashed recklessly down from the attic, scattering and hiding in the garden. Ani and Juli ran home fast.

Half an hour later, the cook, fetching something from up there in the attic, found her body. She called Emma's father over, before our parents had even come home...

The notes recording this incident stop there. The diary's author, whose misfortune it had been to have become a participant in this terrible thing, never mentions it again. All I know about the later history of the family is that the father retired as a Colonel, Irma is a widow today, and Gábor an officer in the Army.

## Opium

... from a neurologist's mail

For Attila Sassy

True, waking up mornings brings lingering suffering. Unbearable suffering. The morning light roars through the street in thundering chords. Neither frosted glass nor dark drapery can protect one from it, its insulting rhythms penetrating everything, calling one away to mean, inferior beings who believe that merciless vile music the Law of Life and what they live, Life.

Alert, they leap from beds in which they slept through stuporous dreamlessness. They scrub themselves, praising the cold water, though it pains them. They go to work with brawn and brain, and their fatigue shames this heart that no longer needs miserable pleasantries but the one thing merely: the doleful pleasure which says, We have escaped the fray, victorious; we may rest in bloody exhaustion. No pleasure, that: merely cessation of pain. Insensitive to pain, bearing it patiently seems enough to them, and more than enough. They are the wicked. Nonetheless, one shouldn't be angered by them, even if it's their fault that Life cannot be arranged solely for the sake of ancient and holy pleasure—which is, of course, living's whole purpose.

True, one pays for it: the light returning each morning takes its ruthless toll. Wearied heartbeat; eyelids scarcely supporting the sunlight's weight; a skin fearful of the wind. Muscles displeased and reluctant to do their work. The body shudders from the shock of raucous voices, and pain