

## Paper Nest

Emmy Haustrom died for me, but they cut him apart to entertain the crowd. The slip knot was still on his neck when the man from city hall cut him open. He had a pair of shears, longer than his tall hat, and he used them to break Emmy's ribcage. He took out Emmy's heart and his lungs and his intestines, and he weighed them on a steel scale. A man with no sweat on his shirt and a megaphone in his hand announced the weights to the crowd. That wasn't the end of it. They were giving Emmy's skeleton to an anatomy professor at the university, so everything had to go. They had to strip him down and hollow him out. Goodbye guts and skin and fingernails. There was a tub of weak acid to take off the clingy, demanding morsels of Emmy that would not leave his bones behind. The man from city hall wore Emmy's coat home. The man with the megaphone already had a clean shirt, but he took Emmy's anyway. He folded it and carried it home tucked inside his dry armpit. The executioner got Emmy's socks. I don't know what he did with them. What do you do with a dead man's socks? But I know what they did with Emmy. They boxed him up, bagging the little loose bits so nothing would be wasted, and sent him away to the university with the anatomy professor. There he would open Emmy's skull, take out his brain, and fill the empty space with ball bearings. He expected Emmy's head to hold less—or more—balls than normal people. This would show that he had been born wrong. Too much extra room, or too little.

I didn't see what the professor did to Emmy. I read about it in the paper. Emmy was always in the paper. Except they didn't always call him Emmy Haustrom. The name was too long. It was almost half a column, just by itself. So they only used it when they wanted to remind you that he was foreign. Otherwise, he was Emmy Haus. Emmy Haus was a union organizer. That's what he called it, anyway, in the interviews in the back pages. *Agitator* is the word that the paper used up front and in the

headlines. He was a union agitator. I don't know. It doesn't make sense to me. Those words are opposites, aren't they?

Whatever Emmy Haus was doing, organizing or agitating, he was doing it at the Marcheford match factory. He had the workers outside the factory, in the streets, yelling and pointing and marching in front of streetcars and doing just about anything but paid work. Once I read that he dragged a man down the street on horseback. The man wasn't on the horse though. He was behind the horse, with a rope around his neck. If you read the back pages, you found out that the man didn't die, and he was a scab besides. I don't know why that meant he deserved to get pulled over half a block of cobblestone and whatever had fallen off the undersides of a few hundred boots, but this was a big deal to Emmy and the workers. They were always quoted in the back pages, talking about scabs and gun thugs. It was one of these gun thugs that they hanged Emmy for killing. Emmy didn't kill him though. The paper got that wrong. I know for sure.

I know I talk about the paper too much. Maybe I sound obsessed. But I have to know this stuff. It feeds me. You can't sell them if you haven't read them, not well, anyway. I've seen kids try. It's terrible. You don't sell half as many copies as you would if you had read them, and you look like an idiot. That's all laziness does. It makes you look like an idiot, and then you starve. Yes, some of them can't read, but there was a time I couldn't either. But I can read now. So there are no excuses. Some of them learn just enough to read the headlines, but that's no good. You think you're going to make sales repeating the same six words, over and over? What if someone comes over, ready to buy, and asks you a question? Even if it's just a simple one, even if it's just about the humidity or the fog, what are you going to say? Like I said, laziness just makes you look like an idiot. But even if you don't sell much, it's a respectable job. It's not like the other options. It's not like being a whore. It's nothing like being a whore.

Whoring pays better, but there's no dignity in it. You might get yourself killed too. I know a couple girls who whore, and they're always hurting. Even if it wasn't for the shame, they wouldn't be able to walk with their backs straight and their chins up. Even if they didn't get beat the night before, they can't walk

right. Sure, they get gifts from the Johns sometimes. But what good is that? I see girls standing around wearing dirty sacks with one half of their face beat red and the other half beat blue and earrings worth two weeks of good meals hanging down past their shoulder blades. How gaudy is that? It's a waste too. Those girls aren't getting any more use out of those earrings, or their bodies, than that executioner will get from Emmy's socks.

There's no waste in the newspaper business. If you have papers left over at the end of the day, great, you can live in them. And I don't mean that like some kids try to live in a favorite book. I'm not talking about imaginary nonsense. I mean that you can really honest-to-god live in them. If you can save up enough of them, all you have to do is find an old stone foundation. The building doesn't even have to be there anymore. In fact, it's better if it isn't. That way you don't have to worry about waking up one morning to find that it has fallen down, or been knocked down, on top of you. You don't have to worry about digging yourself out of a pile of bricks and boards and trash with your fingertips. You don't have to think "Oh my god, oh my god" when a nail goes through your thumb and you don't have to spit dirt for a month afterward.

So, really, it's best if it's just a foundation. Then all you need to do is find a hole, or make one. When the stones are old and the building is gone, this part isn't that hard. Most foundations start to break up long before they tear the building down. You just have to make sure the hole is large enough for you to fit comfortably, but not so large that the wind will get at you during the winter. That's not a problem for me, because I've never been big, even for my age. Could be rough for a grown man or a fat kid though.

The deeper you can get into the ground, the better. Then you take your newspapers, every issue you can get a hold of, and tear it into strips. It has to be strips. Balls of newspaper take up too much space. You won't have any room for yourself, let alone clothes or spare food or a toy or two. It will just be you, in a hole, choking on paper balls, all night, every night. And if you don't tear the paper up, if you just lay it out and stack it up flat, then it won't insulate at all. It'll be a nice rug, and you won't be sleeping on sharp rocks or a pile of dirt, but you'll still be cold.

And you'll get even colder, because that flat paper will suck up any wetness it can find. Wet papers stay wet forever and there rip real easy, so after your first rain you'll be finished. That's why you have to have strips. Just spread those strips all over. Cover the floor. Pile them extra thick wherever you plan to sleep. Keep some more nearby and heap them up when it gets freezing. If you burrow in and tuck your fingers under your knees, frostbite can't touch you. Dump some strips on top of the stuff you don't want stolen, especially food.

Soon you'll have a home, and you'll have built it yourself. You won't have stolen a thing, and you'll be living off nobody's work but your own. Plus, you might as well do something with those extra papers. The company won't buy back the ones we don't sell. And who can blame them. What good is day old news?

But I was telling you about Emmy Haus. I never met Emmy. I only saw him once before the day they killed him, from far away, on the night the gun thug died. I saw him out in front of the match factory, with the striking men, while I was going in the back with the gun thug. He had his back to me. He was facing the picket line, and he was speaking, or yelling, to his men. I couldn't tell if he was speaking or yelling because I couldn't hear him. I was too far away, and there was too much noise coming from the street. The paddy wagons were idling between Emmy and me, and there was almost as much noise coming from their engines as there was black exhaust. The striking men at the front of the lines had already begun taunting the police, and the police, of course, had plenty to say about the mothers and fathers and sisters of the striking men too. All I could see of Emmy above the crowd was his thick shoulders and the back of his head, the same head that the professor from the university is filling with ball bearings today. It didn't look too large or too small then. It looked a little fatter, or maybe a little more muscular. It's really pretty hard to tell a fat head from a strong one from behind. And I only saw him for a second. I had just found him in the crowd when the gun thug had the steel back door unlocked and was urging me inside. So I never knew Emmy Haus.

I did know the gun thug. For days, maybe more than a week, he had been buying from me; the evening edition, at dusk,

before he went to the Marcheford match factory to push back the picketers. He smelled like snuff and black powder, but he was thin, skinnier than you'd expect a gun thug to be, and he was almost totally bald. He would act strange too. He would talk to me. Not just to complain about the price, or to look over my head and try to get yesterday's scores for free either. He would smile at me, and he would say, "You remind me of my girl. You look just like my daughter."

That's how I knew he was dangerous. One of the whores told me once that johns always say stuff like that. They'll tell you that you are just like their daughters, or that you look like their sister did when she was younger. Then maybe afterward they will hit you, or ask you to do something really sick. So I knew right then, with him smiling at me and saying I reminded him of his little girl, that I needed to be careful around him.

And I would have stayed careful, if I hadn't had a hungry day. It was the day that they had the highway bond resolution on the front page and the picture of the man with phossy jaw buried in the back pages. I had paid everything I had almost nothing left from the night before, so I had to get the day's stock on credit. When I saw the bond resolution there on the front page, with a picture of councilmen with heavy coats and heavy eyelids below it, I knew I was screwed. I don't care how good you are. You can't sell a bond resolution. I read the whole damn article, and I'm still not sure what a bond resolution is. I read the whole paper that day. That's how I ignore my stomach when it's slow, and I can't sell enough papers to pay my debt to the company, let alone to pay for my lunch. I read every column and every little smudged black caption under every blurred dotty image.

That's how I found the picture of the man with phossy jaw. The picture showed the man's face from the side. Everything from his top row of teeth up was normal, or maybe his skin was a little pale or maybe his eyes weren't focusing just right. There's only so much you can tell from a newspaper photograph. But if something was wrong with his skin or his eyes, you would never have noticed it even if you met him face to face, because you'd never look up there. Maybe you would try to, so you'd seem polite, but the whole time your mind would be on his mouth. That's because there was nothing below that top row of teeth.

Well, there was something. There was a nub, a tiny sunken imitation of a lower jaw, tucked up under that upper row of teeth. You could barely see it through his rotting molars. The caption said he had worked at the Marcheford match factory, just like Emmy's striking men. It also said that no one knew if working at the factory had anything to do with having the bottom of your mouth fall off. No one's bottom jaws were falling off outside the factory, but that wasn't proof of anything, I guess. The article said they named it phossy jaw after the phosphorous they used to make the matches, so someone had already made up their mind about the cause.

The picture got to me. Not because it was ugly, or because the man was deformed. I've seen ugly pictures before, and I've had plenty of people buy papers from me who barely had enough fingers left to turn the pages. No, the picture got to me because they buried it. If it had been on the front page, I wouldn't have been hungry that day, or the next, and they never would have hanged Emmy Haustrom. Not for killing the gun thug, anyway. That man's little jaw-nub would have fed every kid with a stack of papers to sell, even the dumb ones, even the ones that can't read. You could have sold that ugly picture to anyone. Those councilmen with the heavy coats would have bought it just as fast as the men who didn't have enough fingers left to turn the pages. Everyone would have been satisfied.

But they put the picture of the man with phossy jaw in the back, so I had a hungry day. Hungry days are rough, because half of the time you are sluggish and you can't think or talk fast enough and the other half you are prickly an on edge and your teeth are grinding and you're more likely to take a bite out of someone than sell to them. Either way you're not moving papers, and that means you'll just get hungrier. And the cycle keeps going until you give up and count the day as lost. Then you crawl into your home in the foundation, and chew on one of your leftover pages until the print runs off. You can suck on your paper pacifier until you fall asleep, and hope that you'll make enough morning sales to keep your stomach from robbing you of another day.

I was about to give up for the day when the gun thug came for his evening edition. He bought it without even looking

at it. He didn't read the headline about the highway bond resolution or see the picture of the councilmen with their big coats and blank eyes. He just put the coins in my hand and took it. The whole time he was buying, he was looking at me, not the paper. He didn't ask me about the paper either. Instead, he asked me if I was sick. He said, "You don't look too good. Are you sick?" He was standing over me, looking down. I couldn't see how he was looking at me. I didn't what kind of good he had expected me to look. All I could see was his skinny neck, the wrinkle under his chin and the inside of his nose.

So I didn't say anything about me. I just read him the headline again. But he wasn't listening to me. "Have you eaten?" he asked. I thought he was just being smug. I imagined him holding a big sugary piece of fried dough over my head, way up past those open nostrils. I didn't want to look at him anymore. I looked down, and found myself directly facing the handle of the revolver hanging from his belt.

"Did you hear me? I asked if you were hungry."

I had heard him, and he hadn't asked that, not that exactly. But now he had asked it, and with the revolver's handle in my face, I decided I might as well answer honestly.

"Yes."

I didn't say anything more than that. It seemed like a dumb question to begin with, and I didn't know where he was going with it. I didn't want to say anything more than I had to. He had his paper, anyway. What was he waiting for?

"I thought so. You look hungry. Or sick. Or both. My little girl had an awful fever a couple months back, and she looked just like that."

Oh, there it was. His daughter again. Now I could see what he was after, but I didn't say anything.

"All we could get down her was broth. She just brought everything else right back up. Do you think you could keep something down?"

"Maybe."

I answered fast. I didn't want to think about what he really meant. Plus, I was sure there was pity in his voice, on top of everything, and hearing that was worse than thinking about what he wanted to do to me.

"I guess you're pretty shy. My daughter is a quiet girl too."

*Shy.* I knew what that meant. Shy was something you played at if the johns wanted it. From what I've heard, they want it a lot. I wanted to tell him off now. I wanted to let him know that shy was the last thing I was, but I was still hungry and I was still looking at the handle of that revolver. So I just said, "I don't know."

He laughed at me. "No, I suppose you wouldn't know. You've never met her." His voice was full of condescension. I wondered if that was how he spoke to his daughter too.

I didn't have time to say anything about that, because right away he had another question for me.

"Do you want to get something to eat?"

"With you?"

I didn't think about it before I said it. I must have sounded suspicious. I don't think I sounded afraid. However I sounded, he laughed at me, again.

"Don't worry. It won't cost you anything." The condescension was still there. "There are boxes and boxes of food in the factory cafeteria. It's all gonna be rotting soon, because of the strike. It's well past being day old, but I wouldn't think you'd care about that." And then he laughed some more.

I wanted to punch him. I wanted to make him swallow the hunk of snuff in his cheek. I wanted to grab the few strands of hair he had left and pull. But I would have had to stand on the tips of my feet to jab him in the chin, and he wasn't lying. I was hungry. I probably wouldn't have wanted to punch him half as bad if I wasn't. And he had that revolver. He could force me to do whatever he wanted anyway, and I wouldn't get a meal out of it. But I'm talking like it was a rational choice. The truth is that between his tone, my stomach and that revolver, there was no way I could ever have made a rational choice. All I knew right then was that I couldn't reach his hair to pull it, and somehow that meant I had to go with him.

"OK."

"OK? Good! Come on then."

He started off for the match factory right away, and I followed him. He didn't ask me anything else. He didn't have

anymore condescending questions about how I was sick or hungry. Instead, he talked about his daughter. The whole way there I heard nothing but stories about how the fever had gotten to her, and how they had to wrap her up in six or seven blankets at a time and how they had to keep the fireplace so hot that he and his wife would be sweating all day and kick the sheets off their bed at night. Imagine him talking to me about blankets or warm fireplaces, or about his wife. Meanwhile the whole time I wasn't saying a word back to him because I was thinking that this was it, that I'd finally become a whore.

I didn't do anything about the thought. I followed him all the way to the factory and up a concrete ramp to the heavy door in the back where they would load the crates of finished matches into trucks for the big sellers and onto sleds and carriages for the small sellers. It was on the way to that door that I saw Emmy, or the back of Emmy's head, talking or yelling to the picket line. The gun thug saw me looking, and finally said something that had nothing to do with his daughter.

"Looks like I'm going to have to break a couple noses tonight. Yes, looks like it."

That was all he had to say about it. He said it as a matter of fact, like he had done the math in his head and he knew that he would have to break exactly two noses that night. He said it as professional knowledge. I could tell you that the man with phossy jaw should have been on the front page, and he could tell you that he would have to break a couple of noses before the night was over.

I didn't know what to say about that, but it turned out that I didn't have to say anything, because he went right over to the door and unlocked the padlock. He must not have been interested in my opinion on the subject of broken noses, or he figured I didn't have one. He had to bend down and pull to raise the loading door, which squealed and protested and knocked against the door frame the whole way up. I thought he would walk right in when he had the door open, but instead he turned and waved for me to go first.

"After you, miss."

He waited there, and as I passed him, he pretended to take off his hat, even though his wasn't wearing one. Then he

gave me his condescending laugh again, just so I knew the courtesy wasn't serious. Just so I knew I didn't really deserve it. Once I was inside, he walked through the door and left it open behind him.

He barely let me get inside before he made his move. He didn't even feed me first. I was standing there, just inside the doorway, squinting in the dark, trying to figure out which the kitchen was, when he stepped behind me and touched my hair. He didn't pull it or stroke it. He just put his whole palm down on top of my head.

He didn't say anything, or maybe he didn't have time to say anything. I don't know how much time went by after he put his hand on my head. When the palm came down, and I felt his fingers in my hair, I thought the building was falling. I thought it had been knocked over by a strong wind, or blown apart by dynamite, and that it was all about to fall on top of my head. I thought I was trapped down below my feet, inside the foundation, and that the weight of the whole building, now in heaps and chunks, was lying on me. I thought I would have to dig myself out with my fingernails. And then I shot him.

I know you want the details. I know you want to know how I got the revolver out of his belt before his free hand could stop me. You want to know how I knew I had to pull the hammer back before I could fire it, and how I could have found the trigger so fast with him right there. And how did I do all of that while I was turning around so I could point the muzzle his way. Or maybe you're not into the practical stuff. Maybe you'd rather have me tell you what it looks and sounds and feels like to shoot a skinny, almost bald man in the gut. Maybe you want to know if I blew a hunk of stomach out, or if his hand made it off my head in time to hold it all in. Or would you rather I tell you about the sound of the gunshot, or what he said when the bullet hit him? Or was he such a hard man that he just took it, without screaming or crying or calling for god?

I don't know. I can't tell you any of that stuff. I can't give you any of the bits that make for a good story. I don't remember it, or I didn't notice it to begin with. All I got was the headline—*Gun Thug Shot in the Gut by Little Girl*—and maybe a subheading ("victim claims she looked just like his daughter"). I

got that much in the moment that the revolver fired, and then I was on my knees from the recoil and they were scraped from the concrete and the gun was on the floor and so was he. I didn't look to see if he was alive or dead. I got up and ran out. I didn't pull the loading door back down. I didn't check to see if Emmy and his men were still standing in the street. I just took off. I couldn't think to do anything else.

I didn't see any of the stuff that happened afterward. I read about all of it in the paper. By the morning after I shot the gun thug, there was already a story about how they had found him with the bullet in him and how he was dead. It was only the next day that they ran a story about how Emmy had been arrested for the killing. Then there was a story just about every day of the trial, but it was a short trial. Next thing I knew there was a headline saying he that he had been hanged, complete with a picture of all the men from city hall standing around the gallows with Emmy hanging there stiff and the executioner taking off his socks.

Don't think that I didn't try to do the right thing. I did. The day after they arrested Emmy, I walked right up to a cop and told him that I did it. I didn't even let his revolver scare me away.

"Emmy Haustrom didn't kill that gun thug," I said. "I did."

But all he did was snort at me. He just looked down at me and snorted like I was a liar.

"Lord, they sent a kid this time. What did Emmy Haus ever do for you, kid?"

"Nothing," I told him. "He did nothing for me."

And I wasn't lying. Before they hanged him, Emmy had never done anything for me. But he must have done something for somebody, because the cop let me know that all day people had been coming to the police to say that they had killed the gun thug, and that Emmy hadn't done a thing. He told me he wasn't about to believe me anymore than he was going to believe any of them. They were sure Emmy did it. It was indisputable, and the rest of us should just stop wasting the time of important public servants like him and give our bribes back to the union.

So that was the end of it. They took Emmy and they hanged him, and it didn't matter what I said or did. All I could do was read about it and live in a nest of the papers when I was couldn't read about it anymore. And soon there wasn't much left to read. The stories about Emmy must have dried up faster than the table they cut his body open on.

I guess his bones must be yellowing in a glass box somewhere in the university's anatomy department. His skull might be on top of the professor's bookshelf, still full of ball bearings. Maybe there's a plaque on that glass case or on top of that bookshelf that says his name and why he was hanged. And maybe tens of hundreds of years from now, some student will become a professor by writing about those bones or that skull full of ball bearings or the man they belonged to. Then Emmy Haustrom's name might show up in a paper again, or a lot of them.

I know that won't happen with me. I don't expect anyone to have much to say about my bones. I suppose someday someone will be digging in the foundation of a building that fell over a long time ago and find a little mummy, wrapped in newspaper. I'm sure they won't be looking for it. When they find it, I just hope it gets to them. I hope they say, "Oh my god." I hope they open their eyes real big, and that they can't breathe for a second, and then they just say, "Oh my god. Oh my god."