

PETER WEILER

The Márai Connection

(excerpt)

The Secret of the Mütter Museum

Rita stopped in front of a display case. The exhibit on show was the skeleton of the Warrington Twins. Just like the drawings in the caravan, the two bodies were joined by a single head. I didn't see exactly but Rita must have pushed a button and the glass case slid slowly to one side like a heavy door. The whole cabinet shook and the twins' head nodded on their conjoined necks. A dark downward staircase appeared from behind the display. Rita gave me a rough shove in the back and my lungs filled with stale, dank air. The glass cabinet slid back into place behind us and we were submerged in total darkness. I stumbled blindly forward as Rita pushed me down the steps. I reached out in an attempt to steady myself on the walls and trailed my hand over the slimy brickwork. We were now in a corridor with no steps and I could tell we were stepping into a larger chamber by the change in the air. The sound of Rita's breathing moved off to the left as the stench of dankness was replaced by the smell of old furniture mixed with the stinging scent of disinfectant. I turned on the spot with my arms outstretched and tried to decipher where the walls might be. Then I heard a metallic clunk and the space was flooded in cold light. My eyes squinted in the sudden brightness but my pupils quickly dilated at the unexpected sight. I was standing in a vast room with the ceiling soaring at least three storeys above the wood-blocked floor. An operating table stood mounted on a wooden podium in the centre of the space. A circular light pivoted over the table and painted its stainless steel surface a pale yellow colour. Banks of dark, wooden benches led up to the vaulted ceiling on either side of the central podium. The facing wall was stacked high with glass display cases and although they were hidden in semi shadow, I could just make out what appeared to be organs swimming in jars of murky liquid. As I turned around, I was confronted with super-sized specimen bottles containing whole human bodies, covering the wall behind me. Bloated and misshapen, they stared down at me with lifeless eyes, the hair on their heads floating in the formaldehyde.

"Lie on the table!" Rita ordered but I didn't move.

"Did you hear what I said? Get up on the table!"

"I'm not about to do you any favours. Do what you like with me but don't expect me to help."

"Oh, Pam, darling. There's no need for that. It would be better for both of us if we got this over and done with as soon as possible. Would you prefer pain, perhaps?!" I didn't respond.

"Have it your own way!" She lunged at me and smacked me in the middle of my forehead with the butt of her handgun. I fell to the floor and could feel the blood trickling down my face. I lay in a motionless heap with the room spinning around me. She lifted me up onto the table and the cold steel instantly chilled my body. She fastened me down with thick straps around my wrists and ankles and waited silently for me to come to.

"Impressive place, isn't it? It was Dr. Thomas Mütter's operating theatre. He held private demonstrations here for museum members. The cream of local society would sit up on those benches like a theatre audience." And she pointed to rows of wooden seats. "He was fascinated by the workings of the human body. He was a scientist by profession but a fanatical collector at heart. The items on display in the museum are just the tip of the iceberg. He kept all the most interesting artefacts down here in secret. His heirs still store some of the more peculiar specimens here although no one has used this operating table for a while now."

"Why did you bring me here?" I was blinded by the light from the lamp over the table and Rita was standing somewhere in the darkness beyond.

"I haven't known about this place all that long. Our poor, deceased friend showed it to me and I thought it would make the ideal spot for the ceremony. I want to show you something." I could hear as Rita stepped down from the podium and her footsteps on the wooden floor before she opened something. She was unlocking the door to one of the glass cabinets. She came back with a large glass tube and placed it down on the table, next to my shoulder. It housed a human hand and I didn't see anything unusual at first. As I took a closer look, I suddenly noticed something quite disturbing. It had seven fingers.

"He lost it in an accident. They were high school students and they were drunk. There were ten of them crammed into the Cadillac when it hit the tree. George saved his life but he didn't manage to get George out of trouble this last time... He was born with seven fingers but turned his disability to his advantage and learnt to draw fabulously. You have seen the drawings in the caravan. He did all of them and all with his other hand. He managed to overcome his birth deformity only to have his arm, taken away from him. 'Let's see what he can manage to do with an arm missing.'" Rita lifted her hands up to show she was still wearing the white gloves.

"I was born completely normally with ten fingers. All I ever dreamed about was becoming a pianist. The thing I remember most about my childhood is that I spent most of it practising. Everyone else had a normal life in comparison but I had my sights set on other things. It was worth it, they said, because I was extremely talented. Then I had that stupid accident and broke three of my fingers: two on my left hand and one on my right. I couldn't break an arm or a leg like a normal person, oh no. I had to go and break my fingers. That was the end of my musical ambitions.

"Please let me go! Please, Rita. Rita, I'm begging you. Don't do this to me." I tried to free myself but the straps fixed me fast to the table.

"You've got no idea what it means to be helpless. You don't know what good fortune means until you have a load of bad luck. I know. Yes, I know exactly how it feels. You're never in control again. No matter how hard you try, you manage to struggle to your feet and get kicked back down again and again."

"What are you talking about?"

"What idea could you have? You were born in California. You've had everything handed to you on a silver platter. Do you know what poverty is, illness, death? Of course, that all seems so far away at your age. I wasn't much older than you when I lost my brother and my parents. You've got a family!"

"I did until you ruined everything," I said.

"You're a big girl now, sweetheart." She spat these words with a snide grin. "You didn't live with your parents before and you definitely won't after this." Then she went on. "I got married and we wanted children. We tried for years but with no success and then by some miracle I fell pregnant. I gave birth to a baby boy who I lost when he was just one year old. He died before my eyes. He was mine one minute and His the next. He has taken everything from me. He's got it in for me."

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. "But none of this excuses what you're doing."

(...)

(Translated by Ralph Berkin)