

CHAD TALKS: A Moving Tale of an Incredibly Shrinking Pianist, among other things

Written by Administrator

Friday, 20 June 2014 10:05 - Last Updated Friday, 20 June 2014 10:05



Hello. I am Chad Coles and I haven't spoken up in a while because I lost my voice. I lost my voice because I lost my nerve; I lost my nerve because I continue to shrink. Once, I stood at 6'2" and weighed 196 pounds ... I was a concert pianist, a rather good one, and came in second place in the 1987 Van Klipburn Competition in Texas for my interpretation of Rachmaninov's "Groove Thang" ... We called it that. It was actually a real knuckle buster -- Rocky's Third Piano Concerto ... Even then it was obvious that I was losing weight and height. My skin was changing, too. My hands grew stiff. I didn't let any of that stop me. If I hadn't botched a few measures in ... well. That doesn't matter does it? I didn't really want to go to Russia. Not then. I wanted to go to a Russia that was robust, not crumbling, not chumming it up with Ronnie Reagan and getting beat by the Afghans. So maybe I made a little mistake or two -- intentionally, just to show them. Because I knew in time it wouldn't matter who won the competition. Go ahead. Name the winner. Can't, can you?

Sigh. Over the years I continued to shrink and shrink and finally my dear mother came to me and said "Chadwick, my darling, you have a terrible illness and it is not going to go away. I could spend our substantial family fortune on a cure, but there isn't one. You are turning into a freak, a tiny plastic figurine and I fear for your future." My mother was a clear-eyed, no-nonsense woman, and she wouldn't say something to hurt me. She only ever spoke the truth. Herself, Charlotte Magdalena Geldman-Coles, was a marvelous pianist. If it weren't for the Crimean War she most certainly would have had her own career as a concert pianist.

No one knows why this happened to me. Mother suspected it had something to do with nuclear testing -- I was born some time between Krakatoa and the first atomic bomb experiments in the Bikini Atoll. She tried numerous quack remedies, and one morning, looking up from my bowl of broth-of-hen's-tooth, she said, "Chadwick, my little angel feather, eat whatever you like, you are shrinking and shrinking and there is nothing I can do."

Though she was born in Odessa -- the real Odessa, not the places here in the states that are full of Mennonite farmers and overweight teenagers -- her accent disappeared and she developed a delightful southern drawl which enamored her to the ladies auxiliary in Mechanicsville, Alabama, where my father, a doctor, had a small office. Back in Odessa he was

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considered the finest physician in the region; he treated women's maladies for the most part, and was a strong believer in the healing powers of salt baths and laudanum, the latter to be taken with honey or smoked with sparrow feathers. His practice grew prodigiously but when war broke out, the Turks captured him and we never saw my father again until, one purple day in February, he showed up at the residence of a former Regent of Odessa where we were living in a barn with some other fallen aristocracy; a cow with crooked horns named Crummyski and his pet, a monkey who clutched a tiny skull -- all that was left of the child to whom he was given as a playmate. What happened to the child I will never know. One thing about this monkey I knew right off: It was best not to refer to anything about the past. He is stronger than the strongest person on earth and once, when we were making our escape across the frontier, a group of Cossacks were about to murder our entire entourage and their intention was to rape my mother in front of us as we were tortured to death. You do not need to know all the brutal details of that horrid event except that the monkey disarmed and tore the limbs off five of the toughest men on earth and then proceeded to remove their gonads. Even my mother, who was about to be shamed in front of my father, begged him not to take his vengeance too far, lest the next batch of bad guys do the same to us. The monkey pretended to not hear a thing she said. But he did not kill them; he left that squad of five, armless and sans manhoodlian-powered macho-men and tossed them into a ditch. Next I remember a terrible train ride in a sheep train. One of the sheep fell in love with the monkey and she is with us today. They never engaged in any sort of romantic physicality, but their love is strong as a rip tide.

How we wound up in Mechanicsville is a wild and weird story that began on a barge on the Erie Canal of all ways to start an episode. More on that trip, another time. We had relatives in Prague who got us steerage on a ship from the port of X and from then on, our lives took on a more normal routine. There was a piano on the ship and my mother was invited up from steerage, a stinking place full of displaced persons such as you might find in any rural soup kitchen, and she performed for the captain. It was surreal. My father, treating the many diseased persons in our compartment using only gripe water and spirit-talk, had no idea that the captain was taking advantage of my mother some four or five times a day. For these services, he paid her in gold coin; I still have one of these. By the time we landed in the American port of K, my mother was quite rich, but hid this from father so as not to shame him. He was a distracted man whom people likened to Anton Chekov, because he was Anton Chekov. Who the person who went on to be known as Anton Chekov actually is, is a Russian mystery. At any rate, my father wrote some 4,000 short stories and twice as many poems, 14 songs for boy's choir and the first Agnostic Mass known. All these were lost in the terrible fire you all know about so well.

Suffice it say we ended up in Mechanicsville, a very small southern town. The monkey was immediately put to work in the cotton fields, which he agreed to as long as he was allowed to keep the skull. With one arm he heaved more cotton than any of the very talented field workers there, a mix of white trash and the sons and daughters of former slaves. It was a share cropper's land and the monkey was made to do things that embarrass him to this day. Once they dressed him up as Othello and had a good laugh with the sheep playing Desdemona. At some point, the monkey got hold of the share cropper's favorite son and had pinned him to the rafters in a hay barn for two hours; I say "pinned" but that's not really true, he simply held him upside down using his one free arm, dangling him from the loft by his testicles; he had stuffed

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the young sir's maw with cotton balls so he could not scream. The boy was so traumatized he never did get right again, but we were left alone and the monkey was not forced into any further theatrics.

Here, too, my mother's prodigious talents as a pianist gainsaid her access to the upper crust of that backwater and when the wealthy learned my father was a doctor, not a shoe-maker (a skill he acquired from his own father), as well as a first class weaver of tall tales, we became, shall I say, the talk of the town. No! More than that! For we made a fortune performing in concert halls (such as they were) and army barracks and ... well. Mother was always smart with her money. Father was less so, being more a man of abstract thought and more interested in others than himself. Eventually we -- that is, the monkey, sheep, the red-headed step-child who was the offspring of the captain of the tramp steamer that brought us to America, my mother and father, we ended up living in a mansion in Mississippi, near the headwaters of GAH and there I began taking serious lessons on the piano and the monkey and the sheep would listen. If I made the slightest error, the sheep would go "baaaaaa" and the monkey would hide his face behind the skull, so it was not necessary for my mother to act like a Chinese Dragon Lady to get me to attend to my practice and in just two year's time I had mastered the rudiments of most of the Western Canon and, at the time, could play the thorniest Bach fugue backwards, if necessary, just so I could get to bed early. I was very fond of sleep because I was growing so fast.

Odd to think of those years between 11 and 13 when I grew from 4'6" to my eventual height of 6'11" and then, ever so gradually, began shrinking and by the time of the Van Kliburn competition, was merely 6' 2" but I had extraordinarily large and powerful hands. The monkey would exercise my hands until I, too, could swing one-armed from tree to tree in the primeval wood out back of the manse.

Well, you know most of the rest of the story and if not, then we can fill you in on the details bit by bit. How we arrived at tinytowntimes.com is an uncommon bit of imagination, but it did involve meeting the Tall Animal Revue and a traveling show run by a certain Missy Hoolihan. The rest, as they say, is history.