

Prediction of a Disenchanted World “Inside the Iron Cage”

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“No one knows who will live in this [iron] cage in the future....” – Max Weber, [The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism](#)

I would prefer not to relay the following very strange story given to me by a fellow sociologist, but he had done me a number of favors, and since he asked me to do him a favor in return, I feel obligated. I don’t know what to make of the whole thing. Following this brief introduction, you will find the manuscript he handed me. I realize you are getting this third hand, but there’s nothing I can do about that. I don’t know his friend. When he asked me to print it for him, I told him I would prefer not to, but then guilt got the best of me, so here it is.

This is one of those stories hard to believe. When I first heard it, I thought it was a joke, some sort of parable, and my friend who was telling it to me had had too much to drink or was just pulling my leg. I’m not sure. Like so much in today’s world, the difference between fiction and fact has become very blurry.

Let me call him Sean, since these days holding a strong dissenting opinion can cost you your job. He is a professor who, like the character David in John Fowles’ story, “The Ebony Tower,” teaches art history. And like Fowles’ character he is a very frustrated academic. In Sean’s case, he has had to contend with the transformation of his college from a place of learning to a place where “Woke” ideology stifles dissent. Perhaps more importantly, he has suffered from extreme writer’s block. He had just been telling me how, after years of writing copiously in his private journals, he had grown nauseated by it because it seemed so self-involved, concerning self and family stuff he was sick of. He wanted to write articles and books, yet when he tried, he couldn’t. All his energy had been going into his futile daily journals, where he felt trapped by family matters. Until one recent day at the bar where we regularly meet, he heard this strange story. It jolted him.

Here is what he told me over beer at the tavern. I am paraphrasing, but because his tale was so startling, I know I have the essentials right. He said:

“It was late in the afternoon last Wednesday when I came in here for a beer. I was feeling very tired that day, though depressed would be more accurate. The teaching routine seemed absurd to me. I wasn’t writing. I felt at a dead end. I guess I was. Anyway, you know that guy Tom whom we’ve talked to here before? Well, he was here and we got talking. The place was empty. It turns out his last name is Finn – Tom Finn. His father was Russell Finn, the famous painter, you know, the one the mainstream media gush over. A realistic sentimentalist is the way I’ve heard him described, although I would say he was a sick fabulist trying to repaint history for Hallmark Cards. Anyway, so this Tom Finn had had a few beers, and as he got talking, the both of us had a few more. It became obvious that he was obsessed with his father. He didn’t say that exactly, but I could guess it from the snide remarks about him he’d laugh out of the side of his mouth. I asked him about a big traveling exhibit of his father’s paintings which I had recently read about in the newspapers; had he seen it? ‘No,’ he said, ‘I don’t go to that kind of crap. That’s his bag of marbles.’ Things like that.

“It turns out the son is also a painter, but he said nothing about his own work, just that he painted. He talked all about his father’s work, how his father stole ideas, wasn’t very good, etc. I told him I agreed that his father’s work was overhyped and mediocre, but that my experience studying art taught me that was true for every era. I was trying to be nice, something I tend to overdo. I got the impression he turned to painting by default, it being some kind of knee-jerk reaction to his father, some kind of Oedipal contest.

“It turns out his real obsession is toys, no shit, and he got very animated as he talked about them. He wanted me to come over to his house to see his vast toy collection. The invitation was so weird, and with the beer’s effects, I couldn’t refuse. It was nearly dinner time, so I called Sara and told her I’d be late. I was actually interested in what made him tick. I mean, why would a grown man – I’d say he is in his mid-forties – collect fucking toys? And weirder still, he said his specialty was tiny plastic figures of all sorts. Of these he had more than 25,000 – for some reason he emphasized that number – that he’d periodically put on display at local libraries.

“So I followed him over to his house which is on that street adjoining the university where a number of art history professors live. Oak Terrace, I think it is. I couldn’t help laughing when I saw all those abstract sculptures decorating their lawns. It was getting dark and they were spotlighted. What a juxtaposition – so perfect – so-called realism and cerebral abstraction side-by-side. And both utter bullshit. I was reminded of a description of Russell Finn’s paintings that I once read: Cute wallpaper for readers of Reader’s Digest.

“Actually, Finn’s house is quite cute itself. When we were going in, I had to restrain myself from saying to him, ‘Life’s cute, isn’t it?’ I don’t think he would have appreciated that, although it’s very possible that he wouldn’t have known what the hell I was getting at. He’s a toy collector after all and what’s cuter than that.

“I’ll tell you this. I wasn’t prepared for what he showed me. He took me down to his finished basement, which he called ‘the laboratory.’ When he switched on the lights the room was empty except for the walls. They were covered with shelves about six inches apart that ran from wall to wall and ceiling to floor. It gave the large room this incredibly bizarre look as though it were a prison cell. There were even spotlights that illuminated the shelves, upon which, right along the outer edges looking out, he had lined up his collection of little figures. As we stood in the middle of the room, it was as though thousands of little people were staring at us, the giants. I felt as though I was hallucinating. Finn just chuckled

when I said, 'Pretty fucking amazing!' Then he said, 'I like the perspective, don't you?' I knew he didn't expect an answer and I could only chuckle in response, even as I felt a chill on the back of my neck. It was so eerie that I had to contain a shudder. For a brief moment I had the feeling that the door we had entered was going to shut and be bolted and that something terrifying was about to unfold.

"But at that moment he gestured to me to follow him to another door, over which a sign read, 'The Family Fun Room.' 'This is my favorite,' he said with a smile.

"In the middle of this pink painted room there was a cage that extended from floor to ceiling, and in the cage, sitting on stools, were two life-sized and very realistic figures of a man and a woman. They were both dressed in those black and white stripped prison uniforms you've seen in old movies. The woman was facing away from the man. I couldn't tell who the woman was, but I immediately recognized the man. It was Finn's father, down to the most realistic detail. He was holding a small toy figurine and was looking into its face. The door to the cell was padlocked shut. 'That's to make sure they can't escape,' Finn said with a straight face. 'Now that I got them where I want them, I can't take any chances. They're dangerous and can cause me a lot of grief.'

"He then closed the door and we went upstairs. Neither of us said a word. He offered me a beer, but I declined. I felt spooked, some dreadful feeling in my gut. I told him I had to be leaving, which I did. On the way out I noticed a framed photograph in the foyer. It was a picture of Finn at about the age of nine or ten with his parents and sister. They are sitting together on a couch, the two kids caught between the parents. No one is smiling. Behind them on the wall is the father's famous painting of a family of four sitting on a couch. In that one, everyone is smiling and the father in the painting is Finn's father. As you probably know, that was one of his father's favorite techniques - to put himself in his paintings. Such a cute double-message: I did it, of course, but how could I have done it when I'm in it. You're left wondering: who really did it? Who executed the painting of these happy people. But since it's all supposed to be so amusing, you're left to chuckle, to think, how cute, how tricky. You're supposed to smile. But no one was smiling in the picture on the wall. It seemed like a house of smoke and mirrors and I was damn glad to leave.

"As I drove home, I sure as hell wasn't smiling. There was something terribly disturbing about it all. I felt nauseated, disgusted, really disturbed. Maybe it seems obvious, but I felt there was a connection between this weird experience and myself. A double connection, actually. I won't go into all the details now, and you know about my writer's block, but this bizarre experience has left me with a new sense of freedom, some kind of opening to a new way to write that at the time I couldn't put my finger on. I've come to think of it as writing beyond a cage of categories.

"I thought about all the stuff we talk about, the political propaganda about everything, the loss of a sense of reality, the illusions and delusions with the digital technology, the warmongering by the U.S against Russian, the covid bullshit, all of it, all the stuff we share over beers. Especially the disconnect between the private and the public and the two-faced nature of a way of living that is so fucking phony. I realized why I had been hiding in my notebooks, how they had become my cage.

"To top it all off, when I got home and told Sara about my experiences with Tom Finn, the cage and all, she didn't believe me. She accused me of having drunk too much, which I had to admit I did. She said I was scaring her with such a ridiculous tale and that I was sounding

like a deluded conspiracy nut.

“Anyway, I’ve told no one else about Finn. I’m afraid they wouldn’t believe me either. You’re a sociologist and know all about Max Weber’s prediction of a coming disenchanted world with its iron cage. Shit, I feel like I had a small glimpse of it. Do you think anyone would believe me if I told this story?

“Do you?”

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This article was originally published on the author’s blog site, [Behind the Curtain](#).

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