

## THE DIORAMA MAKER

AS TOLD BY THE DIORAMA MAKER  
HIMSELF, WHO SET OUT TO SOLVE  
THE ULTIMATE RIDDLE, AND IN MY  
VIEW, SUCCEEDED

I do not make my own figurines. I find them, or rather, they find me, in, how shall I phrase this... *chance encounters*. These have occurred all around the world. According to my register, I have over one-hundred thousand of them in my diorama.

Take, for instance, the four-inch bronze miniature of my favorite goddess, Athena. (Her statuette technically exceeds a height of five inches if you take into account the sharp projection of her spear.) I added her to my own pantheon of figurines after she nearly killed me in a marketplace in the ancient city of her namesake. Here is the story of how I found her — a story within a story:

*After I bumped into the case that held her, my little goddess of war and wisdom came crashing down over my head, depriving me for a split*

*second of my consciousness. The Greek merchant who owned her, after offering a hand to help me up, lifted her by the plume of her helmet and said, 'My goddess, Athena, born from Zeus's head; you cannot go back again' — as if the figurine had acted upon its own volition.*

*The merchant then returned the bronze Athena to her shelf, where she stood stone still among a dozen other Athenas that had been cast in the exact same image.*

*'I'll take her,' I said.*

*The merchant then removed a different Athena from the shelf.*

*'No, not that one,' I said. 'I want the one that fell on me. She made her presence known to me for a reason.'*

And so it goes with every figurine that now inhabits my diorama. I have tuned my senses to detect their silent cries.

It took me thirty-five years to complete my magnum opus. I commenced at daybreak on a Saturday morning on my dining room table. By Sunday evening, my wife had grown weary with my project and made me to move it to the garage. Six months later, I began to feel as if the walls of my

workspace were closing in on me. My garage, I realized, would be far too small for the grand plan I had in mind. I needed more square footage, somewhere that was enormous, a place with high ceilings and hallowed halls, somewhere that could contain the vast expanse of my idea. I didn't rest until I found a workspace that was as wide open as a great medieval cathedral. After sixteen days of searching, I sold my sailboat, cashed out my savings and purchased an abandoned warehouse in the middle of a remote forest.

In the beginning it was a slog. It took me a full week to transfer the diorama from my garage. I dismantled it carefully, piece by piece, in absolute secrecy. Over the next two years, I added to it day by day with meticulous precision, expanding its circumference until it covered the entire interior of the warehouse, save for a narrow aisle that I kept around the perimeter for working access and for viewing. I cursed myself for not finding a bigger workspace, yet still I knew that there was nothing out there bigger that I also could afford. The walls of this decrepit building thus became the outer limits of the world I was creating.

I learned, with time, not to let my work consume me. I worked maniacally for my first three years, sawing boards, mixing chemicals, sandpapering, gluing as if my life depended on it. I became a shadow image of my former self. A thick beard drew itself upon my face. I lost nearly half

my weight and my hair grew down past my shoulders.

In those beginning years, I would often work myself into hallucinations, dreaming that I was but another figurine that I'd discovered in a shop of curiosities in some far-flung corner of the world. In instances such as this, I would become as physically inanimate as the little figurines that had come to populate my realm. Night would pass, the world would revolve once more, and just as the break of day was beginning to splinter sunbeams through the giant windows of the eastern wall, I would imagine a light blue mist settling over this world of my creation; some sort of magic fog that would make my diorama come to life and forever set it into motion:

*My figurines would first begin to twitch and then a calmness would sweep over them; one would take a clumsy step and then fall over; the others, looking on, would then take possession of their motions until they began to move around more fluidly; I would watch them rise, one by one, and then together; as they each began to strive, experiment and suffer, a vague splendor would possess my figurines that I could not ascertain; with their actions they'd find words, and with their words they would slowly gain a comprehension of this the world that I'd given them; I would watch with rapt attention as they each began to set about their ways dynamically, searching for meaning,*

*classifying, looking for joy and clarifying just what their struggles were for; I would follow their progress, mesmerized, until my vision faded, awaiting the first rogue, stargazing figurine to consider the great riddle of their origin.*

As delightful as these reveries were when they befell, my windows of perception would always dim back to reality. Whenever this occurred, my temper would flare, and I would begin to ruin things. In each grand vision that I had, the world that flashed before me was always far superior to the one that I had built up until that moment. I disassembled my diorama, recklessly, and began to build again at least a thousand times.

I learned that if I set my mind on nothing else besides my work, then my progress would stagnate, and I would grow irritable. My wife left me midway through my fourth year of construction. At the beginning of year five, I devised a simple set of parameters that would help me safeguard both myself and my creation. For the next twenty years, I had the following posted on the wall where I'd walk in:

*For starters, I must not allow myself to tinker in my warehouse for longer than sixteen hours a day, except for on the weekends.*

*Secondly, I must not allow anyone to see my diorama (even though it's tempting), and I must*

*not permit anyone to do so until it is complete (if ever such a time will come).*

*Lastly (and this is key to the natural advancement of my grand endeavor), I require myself to take a trip each year to travel the world in search of figurines.*

As with all first loves that stun the mind and forever alter it, the first figurine I found introduced to me a hidden level of existence; one in which all of time can be condensed into a single moment, and all of space can be collapsed into a single place within the heart. Another story within a story:

*I was walking through a quiet pocket among the swarming labyrinth of Istanbul (through an age-old courtyard in Çukurcuma). I wasn't dreaming, but I was thinking of dreams; the dreams of day that are sprinkled into life and not the type that only visit while we're sleeping. Had I been thinking of anything else, like where I'd find my next kebab or Turkish tea, the chance encounter I was about to have would not have been nearly as so meaningful.*

*First, I felt the presence of a shadow brooding over me. I remember looking skyward and seeing nothing but a distant lonesome cloud. As I took my next step forward, I was overcome with an*

*out-of-body sensation, as if I was viewing myself from somewhere high above the courtyard (in which I stood alone, oblivious, operating solely on the basest of instincts). Simultaneously, as I stopped to gather myself, a small object crashed to the ground before me, snapping my consciousness back into my body. In that moment (which I now recall as the most consequential moment of my life), I remember thinking that the object must have been something like an acorn or a chestnut. But I wasn't next to any trees... I was in a space wide-open, where there was no apparent source around me from which any object could have fallen. Nevertheless, something had fallen from the clear blue open sky. The object bounced around chaotically in front of me before at last it came to rest beside the insole of my foot. I kneeled to look at it, astonished. It was a plastic figurine of superman.*

What did I make of this? This figurine to me was from the land of dreams and yet it had somehow wedged itself into the land of my reality. In that instant when I first saw this little superman lying in the dirt before me, my imagination grew its wings.

From that point on, my collection of figurines grew in the order they called out to me. I'd come across them anywhere I'd go, like for instance, the time I found a rhinoceros carved from rosewood while I was trailing a real one through a Rwandan

bush, or when I reeled in a porcelain ballerina while I was trolling the depths of Lake Champlain. Hooded strangers began to approach me in the streets of foreign countries to hand them over to me without so much as a word of warning or of comfort. I came to suspect that I was not finding my figurines as much as they were finding me. Their rate of arrival only increased. For a time, whenever I would open my front door, there would be a batch of new arrivals spread out across my doorstep. Several years passed in which I'd find at least one new figurine for every half hour I was awake, and two while I was sleeping. (I would arise each morning to find them gathered on my nightstand.) Once, upon returning home after a long flight from Tierra del Fuego, I opened my suitcase and found that my belongings had been removed and my suitcase filled with statuettes, miniature busts and an eclectic mix dolls and tiny soldiers, all of which were eyeing me with uncanny eyes that were expressionless. In all the strange encounters that made my astounding stockpile grow, I never suffered from a single episode of panic, paranoia or confusion. Each new figurine that found its way to my possession made my heart begin to race at the prospect of adventure.

In that beginning era, before I began construction — *before my diorama was even an idea* — I had no system to keep an inventory. I simply had all my figurines compiled haphazardly throughout my home: in drawers, on dressers and in cabinets; in



boxes and in piles spread out across the floor. I became obsessed... 'Mad!' some said. My friends became concerned, saying that I was undergoing a prolonged, manic episode. My boss gave me an ultimatum. (I refused and lost my job.) Those closest to me held an intervention, the result of which had little effect, except that everyone I knew began to distance themselves from me.

Then, and throughout the decades since, I have become a man misunderstood. To the outside world, I have grown disturbed, aloof and senile. I am now known merely as '*the man who has taken to the woods.*' In all these years I've spent resigned to my secret paradise (traveling now and then to mysterious places all alone), no one has inquired about what exactly it is that I am up to, nor has anyone feigned interest. I am now seen only as a wild thing, harmless only in that I am a loner. My warehouse has become my most delightful hermitage.

For a span which lasted the whole of thirty-five years, I spent the great majority of my days arranging my figurines into a scene that tells a stunning story. One could say that I spent all that time creating them a home. Now that my diorama is complete, my figurines have become the inhabitants of a staggeringly beautiful world; one that is built at scale, with oceans, mountains, rivers, towns, wilderness and deserts. In the sixth year after I moved my diorama to my warehouse, I rebuilt the seven wonders of the ancient world. I then built seven that I foresee in the

future. In years seven and eight, I built a circus in a mid-east prairie, a suspension bridge over a central canyon and a ballroom in the southern steppes. In year nine, after I installed a moonroof, I laid a set of train tracks of which I originally intended to roll through the lush green hills of the northern countryside, but I had to divert the tracks like a snake through the grass when I decided to pepper the region with swampland. My tenth year was quite productive; years eleven and twelve, more so. I built waterfalls (which now hang like curtains over cliff walls), airports, castles and casinos (some of the castles *are* casinos), shipyards wherever a port would fit, and also a vast array of skyscrapers (some of which are situated perilously close to volcanoes that I fear someday will blow).

One day, at the end of year thirteen, after I had finished connecting the last two mountains of a jagged western range, I rolled in a scissor lift and began to string down gemstones from the ceiling: pearls, alexandrite, sapphires, amethysts. A few months later, once I had at last completed this elaborate task, I hung mirrors around the walls so that the world would reflect back in upon itself, infinitely. From that day forward, after a long day's work had left me satisfied, I'd pour a drink and sit in one of my favorite carved out valleys and observe my work before me such that I was not its sole creator, but an intrinsic part of it.

My first fourteen years were full of false starts, ill-

advised decisions and a basic misunderstanding of diorama architecture. My lack of perfection disenchanted me. It was not unusual for me to blowtorch entire regions in a single afternoon, thereby upending years of my toiling upon the fleeting whims of my aesthetic eye. I treated my diorama as if everything in it were expendable, with arbitrary fury. I thus made an addendum for a fourth rule in my fifteenth year in order to bring an end these all-too-commonly regrettable self-inflicted disasters. (Most often, these were tragic.) I drafted the new rule as follows verbatim in my journal, which I'd kept since Day One when I first began to build:

*Though I still permit myself the liberty to alter the structures and landscapes of my diorama, I hereby vow to never again do anything to interrupt the spirit of its forward development.*

This meant, in essence, that I surrendered my discretion to destruct.

The result of this new rule was fascinating. To begin with, once I started a project, I always finished it, even if I began to loathe it. Hence, my rate of growth increased exponentially. I also planned new additions much more carefully, with vision boards, blueprints, calls to experts and compulsive research. Once I began to detest a particular venture, I forced myself to work on it as if it were indispensable to the whole. As a consequence, I started to have specific

areas that I felt a certain spite for, such as the canals I built for my collection of Vikings in year sixteen, as well as the suburb of Victorian dollhouses that I installed for various families of bobbleheads and barbies in years seventeen and eighteen.

I became convinced, since my stomach would often cringe at the sight of certain scenes and figurines, that evil had grown a foothold in my world. Even so, whether I was creating in the name of virtue or of some deceptive wickedness, behind my every hammer swing since the day I first began assembling had been a force delivered from the underlying dream that if I was able to build the diorama well enough, endowing it with systems that instilled order, recursive logic and cycles with natural feedback, then someday, if such a feat were possible, the diorama would assume an innate directive of its own.

In year nineteen, after another trip to summon figurines from remote locales around the world, I installed a safari, a Shinto shrine, a series of caves, a ski slope, a Mayan pyramid and several minarets. With these new additions (and their new resident figurines), the physical layout of my world I finally fancied well enough established. That is, with one significant exception: I still had yet to find an apt location for where I could place my little superman. Although he had been the very catalyst that had crystallized my imagination so I could conceive of building this diorama in the first place, it was my

assessment that the diorama still had too many flaws to put him in it. To address these imperfections, I began to replace the artificial elements of my handiwork with organic materials at the dawn of my second decade of construction.

My initial refurbishment I undertook upon the rivers flowing eastward from my tallest mountain range. I removed the surface gels and glazing mediums that I used for flow-effect, then I excavated the resin that gave the imitation water its substance and its depth. Next, I tamped down layers of clay and silt into my interlacing network of riverbeds before I filled the rivers to their brims with several hundred buckets-full of water from a spring in the forest outside the warehouse.

In year twenty-one, after wringing dry a textbook on hydraulic engineering, I built a series of dams, pumps, water wheels and water basins before I spent the next ten weeks sorting out, through trial and error, how to connect the diorama's water supply to the flow of the spring outside the warehouse. Crude, backbreaking work this was until one worthwhile afternoon when I, the hermit, went to town to consult a certain distinguished plumber. What he helped me to discover after I explained to him my problem was that I needed to build a dry well in order to capture excess runoff and enable drainage. This turned out to be one of my most instrumental projects. Because of it — now that the spring outside was flowing through my diorama in a beautiful,

unceasing symphony — I was able to begin to grow and systematically maintain innumerable effects that have since lent to the infusion of my diorama with the magic breath of life.

My stage of implementing earthly materials brought in critters from the forest: coyotes, birds, rabbits, deer and so on. A fox broke in during the winter of year twenty-two and began to live inside a stadium. When I endeavored to evict it, I discovered it to be accompanied by a litter of fresh born cubs. (I did not have the heart to throw them out.) I began to find rats, snakes, lizards and various vermin that I do not know the names of. I welcomed them with open arms. One summer (I forget if it was the summer of year twenty-three or twenty-four), while I was away in search of figurines of marine life to stock my oceans, rivers, lakes and ponds, a beaver, apparently, broke into my warehouse to build a dam across one of my larger rivers, flooding a basin in which I had been growing a vegetable garden in the process. Although the beaver was no longer present by the time of my return, I celebrated. A living, breathing animal had treated my work as something real.

Around the time that this initial wave of undomesticated creatures had started to proliferate my warehouse, peculiar changes with regard to the static positioning of my figurines started to appear as well. At first, I thought I was misplacing them. This came to my attention on a certain fog afflicted morning when I found my bronze Athena standing in the

observation gallery of a launch site for a model rocket. I had forever kept her standing guard at the confluence of two rivers in a far east bonsai forest (within a region throughout which I had densely populated with scaled-down sets of dinosaurs, megafauna and club wielding barbarians). I moved my favorite goddess back to where I'd always kept her, only to find her the day thereafter standing near the rocket launch pad yet again. After each time I returned her, the next day I'd find her moved. I could find no explanation. And she was not the only one.

A pattern thus emerged. Whenever I'd return to start the day anew, several figurines were somehow changing their coordinates overnight, having commuted to new environs. My Hungarian dancers were regularly departing their hilltop tavern that I'd constructed just for them, opting instead to gather around a distant placid lake (around which, under a veil of secrecy, I had buried a chest of pyrite — to resemble of gold). For the first time, I grew nervous; paranoid, if I must be frank. The evidence that I was not alone was overwhelming. I went to great lengths to investigate, executing a methodical stealth reconnaissance. I became a spy in my own land, fashioning together an alpine ghillie suit to help me blend into the mountains. I would lay still for days on end, like a well-trained sniper seeking retribution. But in all those days I spent invisibly surveilling, I observed not a single incident of tampering, intrusion or foul-play in any way. My figurines, it seemed,

would only shift in their positions whenever I wasn't watching.

I installed video surveillance to help me keep an ever-watchful eye upon my warehouse. Whenever I would find the slightest evidence of meddling, I would check the footage at once, only to find recording gaps and out of focus imagery. Next, I underwent a phase in which I worried that what it was I was exhibiting was an initial onset of dementia. This did not last long. My mind was as sharp as ever, and I was its diagnostician. Such dire straits I had fallen into to solve this great enigma that I soon began to suspect the recent arrival of animal life that I had let invade my warehouse. Without foresight, I had opened my world to the world beyond, and now I was paying the price.

Creatures, I remember reasoning, are often cleverer than what we give them credit for. My figurines were now accompanied by an abundance of birds, butterflies, bats, bumble bees and all the wondrous forces of the world outside my warehouse. I had traded order for entropy; invariance for chaos upon the wings of chance. I thus came to accept, naively (seeing that my diorama was no longer at a standstill), that each alteration I could not account for was something that could be explained with a rational mind, within the bounds of logic. In accordance with this principle, I began to attribute each change not of my own to the caprices of some untamed ordinary critter. Really, it was beautiful.



At night, I began to lay in fields and marvel. I'd rest my head on mounds and hills look up at the stars. They dazzled realistically. The mirrors I'd hung around the walls gave my diorama the impression of sprawling on forever, extending its horizontal plane in each direction for as far as the eye could see. As I would lay there, content and all alone, trying to decipher which were the stars I'd hung and which were the stars strung up in the sky beyond my moonroof, I'd listen to the midnight orchestra performing in the forest outside the warehouse: I'd hear the distant howling of a wolf, an owl hooting, the wind that made the tired old building groan. This world I'd built, for so long, had been so quiet and so still; but now, by my twenty-fifth year of construction, it was brimming with vitality.

It did not take long for me to grow accustomed to finding my diorama modified. In a way, this was the very feat that I had set out to accomplish. Self-regulation had always been my aim. But aims have a tendency for inducing tunnel vision. Accepting an objective has been realized simply because the criteria aligns does not mean we've found the truth. Truth is something greater; it is above deduction, above coincidence, above what appears before us. Things that make sense often blind us to what is really there. And my sensemaking, although it had been comforting (and even necessary) in order for me to lay down the fundamental building blocks of this world I was creating, had begun to create a

boundary around the aspirations for which I had been striving. My work, which had started as an imaginative vision, had over the years progressed into something physical. At long last, I could sense my work becoming imaginative again. For twenty-five years, all I'd thought about was expansion, refinement and orientation. Now it was time for cultivation. After all the energy, ambition and devotion I'd poured into it, I was beginning to feel as if my life's work had developed into something that had grown beyond me, as if what I had spent so long creating had finally been born. And yet, it still felt incomplete. I knew I still had much more work ahead of me before I could recognize the truth of what my diorama really was.

The following is a journal entry I made in year twenty-six, a year of which I spent surveying in detail just what precisely I had made, reflecting upon my diorama's history and mapping out the timeline of its future:

*To this day, I have still not found a proper location to place my little superman, the first figurine I encountered so long ago. At just two centimeters tall, with his arms forever outstretched above his head into a V of Victory, I have always kept him in my pocket and carried him with me everywhere I've gone. I could place him anywhere in my diorama, on any ordinary pedestal, or in a garish monument built especially for him, but I*

*cannot fathom to consider my work complete in any way until I am able to find him a most befitting home. Had he not fallen to me from the clear blue open sky, I never would have begun to build this diorama in the first place. (Perhaps I would still be a married man.) This figurine has been a constant reminder of a great, mind-blowing mystery that I cannot comprehend. From where had it fallen? From what incredible world? The lack of insight that I have for a viable answer has been the very thing that has allowed me to view this world around me with the understanding that I am ignorant of almost everything that makes it what it is. For all there is that makes this world we live in wonderful, we are all, for the most part, as oblivious as figurines. For all we know, we are the inhabitants of a diorama of our own that is inconceivably enormous, the walls of which we call so cryptically, 'the edge of the observable universe'. When and if I ever find a way to see beyond this edge, I will find a place to put my superman.*

From year twenty-six on, I didn't travel. In fact, I seldom left my warehouse. The rules that I had posted at the entry were no longer of any use. I could bend them now and even break them if that is what I pleased. I had no need to continue gathering figurines. I could hardly keep track of the ones I had on display already. With time, I learned to embrace

the uncertainties, the mysteries, the ever present chaos.

In year twenty-seven, I began to make up reasons for any rearrangement of my figurines that would flummox me, as if to inoculate my own conception of my diorama with narratives for things that made no sense. At last, my sensemaking had abandoned its inherent disposition of passive acceptance and had entered that of a more active and inductive state; one of distinguishing, taxonomizing and ascribing serendipity. This transitioned into what would become my main preoccupation for the next six years (years twenty-eight to thirty-four) in which I entered a new frontier of diorama making: that of writing my diorama's history, of delineating the vicissitudes of its social and economic functioning, and of parsing out the inner and qualitative nature of each figurine. In other words, I began to tell their stories.

This was the true and ultimate alchemy which provided me the impetus to propel my extravagant project into its final state; the transformation of my diorama into a full-blown, epic masterpiece. Each figurine was its own clean slate, and I had over one-hundred thousand of them. To make their stories authentic, I would take long, ponderous walks around my perimeter for viewing (and out across the catwalks I'd installed in year thirteen) in order to contemplate each figurine, weaving together the complex webs of what their interrelations appeared to be inside my journal.

As I did this, my figurines, it seemed, would shift about minutely. I would enter the lands in which they lived so I could kneel down and study them up close. Sometimes, especially if their inert, unblinking eyes had been painted over with a gloss, I would see myself shining back in clear reflection. So small was I inside those eyes, as if I were the figurine; as if they had been the builders instead of me; as if without them, I, too, would be inanimate.

I developed a detailed narrative for each and every one of them, stipulating down to the finest detail what would bestow them each with meaning, their idiosyncrasies and innermost contradictions, as well as what each of them were and were not willing to suffer for. At the end of my thirty-fourth year of construction, after I had completed this lengthy, albeit gratifying stage of chronicling and programming, my diorama, I noted with immense pleasure, had blossomed into something that had become embedded with a meaning that was incalculably richer than if it had forever remained a scene without a story. The truth of this world, I came to recognize, was not in how I had physically composed it, but in how it had become configured in my imagination.

I've lived a wonderful life inside this warehouse. Within its walls, I've grown into an old and wrinkled man. And yet I feel as if I haven't aged a day. In all the years I've spent here, every layer of my ego has been finely stripped away. How my diorama came to

be will fade with time. That it ever came into existence in the first place is the miracle. Without my little superman, I would have spent my life on something second rate compared to this. Because of him, I have dedicated my life to the creation of something beautiful.

No one can destroy what my imagination has built. Here, my figurines are real. When I look out across my diorama, I see a world that is quivering with meaning; a world that was once frozen in a moment but now has thawed; a world where a greater truth has been revealed to me beyond my sensemaking.

It was late in the afternoon on my thirty-fifth anniversary since the day I started building the diorama on my kitchen table. I knew I still had one thing left to do. I climbed my ladder and opened my moon roof. Beyond it, all day, there had been nothing but a clear blue open sky. I admit, it broke my heart to do it, but the time had come. I took my little superman — who I had grown to love, who had become a part of me, who had guided me through life and helped me to become a little less oblivious — and I strapped him to the model rocket on the launch pad and lit the wick.

Out loud, I said a countdown: ‘Five, four, three, two, one.’

Ignition.

The sound was beautiful. I felt the rumble in my chest. A burst of flames pushed the rocket up.

Athena was watching. So were all my other figurines. (They know things that I do not.)

As the rocket exited the warehouse, through the moonroof, the gemstones hanging from the ceiling shimmered red hot against the rocket's blinding glare. I ran outside, into my secret forest, and watched the rocket travel skyward. It soon became a speck and then it faded into nothing, the same way it appears that we live dust to dust, from mystery to mystery.

I walked back into my warehouse. For the first time, I looked upon my diorama as if it was complete. A whole world glittered before me. I was stunned. I wondered where my little superman was heading. I hoped he might have been on his way to landing before someone who was daydreaming in a courtyard, before someone who was unaware the incredible miracles unfolding all around them, before someone, anyone, who had yet to see the profound beauty of this world. I hope that right now he is giving someone the same gift he's given me. I hope, and my hope is my reward.