Windows on the World

Frédéric Beigbeder

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8:30

You know how it ends: everybody dies. Death, of course, comes to most people one day or another. The novelty of this story is that everyone dies at the same time in the same place. Does death forge bonds between people? It would not appear so: they do not speak to each other. They brood, like all those who got up too early and are munching their breakfast in a lavish cafeteria. From time to time, some take photos of the view, the most beautiful view in the world. Behind the square buildings, the sea is round; the slipstreams of the boats carve out geometric shapes. Even seagulls do not come this high. The customers in Windows on the World are strangers to one other for the most part. When, inadvertently, their eyes meet, they clear their throats and bury their noses in their newspapers PDQ. Early September, early morning, everyone is in a bad mood: the holidays are over, all that's left is wait it out until Thanksgiving. The sky is blue, but no one is enjoying it.

In Windows on the World a moment from now, a

large Puerto Rican woman will start to scream. A suited executive's mouth will fall open. "Oh my God!" Office workers will be stunned into silence. A redhead will scream, "Holy shit!" A waitress will keep pouring tea until the cup overflows. Some seconds are longer than others. As though someone has pressed "Pause" on a DVD player. In a moment, time will become elastic. All of these people will finally come to know one another. In a moment, they will all be horsemen of the Apocalypse, all united in the End of the World.

8:31

That morning, we were at the top of the world, and I was the center of the universe.

It's half past eight. Okay—it's a bit early to drag your kids up a skyscraper. But the kids really wanted to have breakfast here and I just can't say no to them: I feel guilty about splitting up with their mother. The advantage of getting here early is you don't have to queue. Since the 1993 bombing, security controls on the ground floor have been tripled, you need special badges to work here and the security guards who search your bags don't fuck around. Even the buckle on Jerry's Harry Potter belt set off the metal detector. In the high-tech atrium, fountains gurgle discreetly. Breakfast is by reservation only: I gave my name at the Windows on the World desk when we arrived. "Good morning, my name is Carthew Yorston." Immediately you get a sense of the place: red carpet, tasseled velvet rope, private elevator. In this vast airport lounge (350 square feet under glass),

the reservation desk stands like a First Class check-in. It was a brilliant idea to show up early. The queues for the telescopes are shorter (pop a quarter in and you can stare at the secretaries arriving for work in the neighboring buildings: cellphones glued to their ears, dressed in pale gray figure-hugging pantsuits, coiffured hair, expensive sneakers, pumps stuffed into their fake Prada handbags). This is the first time I've been to the top of the World Trade Center: my sons both loved the Skylobbies—the high-speed elevators which ascend the first seventy-eight floors in forty-three seconds. They're so fast you can feel your heart leap in your chest. They didn't want to leave the Skylobby. Finally, after four round trips, I was annoyed.

"Okay, now, that's enough! These lifts are for people going to work, it's not marked Space Mountain!"

One of the restaurant hostesses, identifiable by her lapel badge, escorted us to the other elevator which whisks you to the 107th floor. We have a busy schedule today: breakfast at Windows on the World, then a walk in Battery Park where we'll catch the Staten Island ferry to have a look at the Statue of Liberty, later a visit to Pier 17, a bit of shopping at South Street Seaport, some photos of the Brooklyn Bridge, a tour of the fish market just for the smell of it, and finally a medium-rare hamburger at the Bridge Café. The boys love big juicy hamburgers smothered in ketchup. And large Cokes full of crushed ice—as long as they're not Diet. Kids think of nothing but food, parents of nothing but fucking. On that score things are pretty good, thanks: shortly after my divorce, I met Candace who works at Elite New York. You know the type . . . She makes J-Lo look like a bag lady. Every night she comes to the Algonquin and climbs all over me, moaning (she prefers Philippe Starck's

Royalton which is just down the block) (it's because she's never read Dorothy Parker) (remember to give her a copy of *the Collected Dorothy Parker*, that'll put her off relationships).

In two hours I'll be dead; in a way, I am dead already.

8:32

We know very little of what happened in Windows on the World that morning. The *New York Times* reports that at 8.46 AM, the time at which American Airlines flight 11 flew into floors 94 to 98, there were 171 people in the top-floor restaurant, seventy-two of whom were employees. We know that the Risk Water Group had organized a working breakfast in a private dining room on 106, but also that, as they did every morning, a variety of customers were having breakfast on 107. We know that the North Tower (the taller of the two, crowned with the antenna which made it look like a hypodermic syringe) was the first to be hit and the last to fall, at 10:28 AM precisely. There is therefore a time lag of exactly an hour and three-quarters. Hell lasts an hour and three-quarters. As does this book.

I am in Le Ciel de Paris as I write these words. That's the name of the restaurant on the fifty-sixth floor of the Tour Montparnasse, 33 Avenue du Maine, 75015

Paris. Telephone: +33 1 40 64 77 64. Fax: +33 1 43 22 58 43. Métro station: Montparnasse-Bienvenue. They serve breakfast from 8:30 AM. For weeks now I've been having my morning coffee here every day. From here you can look at the Eiffel Tower eye to eye. The view is magnificent since it's the only place in Paris from which you can't see the Tour Montparnasse. Around me, businessmen shout into their cellphones so their neighbors can eavesdrop on their brainless conversations:

"Listen, I can't babysit this anymore, it was actioned at the last meeting."

"No, no, I'm telling you Jean-Philippe was crystal clear, it's not negotiable."

"Look, the stock's printing on the 'O.'"

"Look, take it from me, sometimes you melt and you don't even cover your nut."

"Well, you know what they say: Rockefeller made his fortune always buying too late and selling too early."

"Okay, we don't want to get whacked on this. I'll get my secretary to snail you a hard copy and we'll nail it down."

"Like a shot, the value split."

"I'll tell you something, if those assholes don't shore this fucker up, the stock is going to tank."

"I was tracking the CAC 40 but everything started crunching through the price level and I got jigged out."

They also misuse the adverb "absolutely." As I jot down the musings of these apprentice Masters of the Universe, a waitress brings me croissants, a *café-crème*, some individual pots of Bonne Maman jam and a couple of boiled eggs. I don't remember how the waitresses in Windows on the World were dressed: it was dark the first—and last—time I set foot in it. They probably

employed blacks, students, out-of-work actresses or maybe pretty little New Jersey girls with starched aprons. NOTE: Windows on the World wasn't Mickey D's, it was a first-class joint with prices to match (brunch $35, service not included). Tel: 212-938 1111 or 212-524 7000. Reservations recommended some time in advance. Jacket required. I've tried calling the number; nowadays it goes to an answering machine for some company specializing in event management. The waitresses must have been pretty, I suppose, the uniform sophisticated: a beige outfit embroidered with the initials "WW"? Or maybe they were dressed like old-fashioned chambermaids, with those little black dresses you just want to lift up? A pantsuit? A Gucci tux designed by Tom Ford? It's impossible to go back and check now. Writing this hyperrealist novel is made more difficult by reality itself. Since September 11, 2001, reality has not only outstripped fiction, it's destroying it. It's impossible to write about this subject, and yet impossible to write about anything else. Nothing else touches us.

Beyond the windows, my eyes are drawn to every passing plane. For me to be able to describe what took place on the far side of the Atlantic, a plane would have to crash into the black tower beneath my feet. I'd feel the building rock; it must be a strange sensation. Something as solid as a skyscraper rocking like a drunken boat. So much glass and steel transformed in an instant into a wisp of straw. Wilted stone. This is one of the lessons of the World Trade Center: that the immovable is movable. What we thought was fixed is shifting. What we thought solid is liquid. Towers are mobile and skyscrapers first and foremost scrape the ground. How could something so colossal be so quickly destroyed? That is

the subject of this book: the collapse of a house of credit cards. If a Boeing were to crash below my feet, I would finally know what it is that has tortured me for a year now: the black smoke seeping from the floor, the heat melting the walls, the exploded windows, the asphyxiation, the panic, the suicides, the headlong stampede to stairwells already in flames, the tears and the screams, the desperate phone calls. This does not mean that I do not breathe a sigh of relief as I watch each plane fly off into the white sky. But it happened. This thing happened, and it is impossible to relate.

Windows on the World. My first impression is that the name is slightly pretentious. A little self-indulgent, especially for a skyscraper which houses stockbrokers, banks and financial markets. It's possible to see the words as one more proof of American condescension: "This building overlooks the nerve center of world capitalism and cordially suggests you go fuck yourselves." In fact, it was a pun on the name of the World Trade Center. Windows on the "World." As usual, with my traditional French sullenness I see arrogance where there was nothing but a lucid irony. What would I have called a restaurant at the top of the World Trade Center? "Roof of the World"? "Top of the World"? Both are worse. They stink. Why not "King of the World," like Leonardo DiCaprio in *Titanic*, while we're at it? ("The World Trade Center is our *Titanic*," declared the mayor of New York, Rudi Giuliani, on the morning after the attack.) Of course, in hindsight, the ex-ad exec in me hardly misses a beat: there would have been a great name for the place, the perfect brand, unassuming yet poetic. "END OF THE WORLD." End meaning not only the culmination, but also the farthest point. Since the restaurant

was on the roof, "End of the World" could simply mean "at the top of the North Tower." But Americans don't like that kind of humor; they're very superstitious. That's why their buildings never have a thirteenth floor. All things considered, Windows on the World was a very appropriate name. And a very effective slogan. Why otherwise would Bill Gates have chosen to dub his famous software "Windows" some years later? As a name, Windows on the World was "all that," as the kids say. It certainly wasn't the highest view in the world: the summit of the World Trade Center was 1,353 feet, whereas the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur rise to 1,482 feet and the Sears Tower in Chicago to 1,450. The Chinese are currently building what will be the world's tallest building in Shanghai: the Shanghai World Financial Center (1,510 feet). I hope the name won't bring them bad luck. I'm very fond of the Chinese: they are the only people on earth capable of being both extremely capitalist and supremely communist.

8:33

From here, the taxis look like yellow ants lost in a gridiron maze. Under the watchful eyes of the Rockefeller family and the supervision of the New York Port Authority, the Twin Towers were imagined by architect Minoru Yamasaki (1912–1982) and Associates with Emery Roth and Sons. Two concrete-and-steel towers 110 stories high. Almost 10,000,000 square feet of office space. Each tower boasts 21,800 windows and 104 elevators. Forty thousand square feet of office space per floor. I know all this because it's my job in some sense. Inverted catenary of triangular cross-section measuring fifty-four feet at the base and seventeen feet at the apex; footing, 630 feet; steel lattice columns on thirty-nine-inch centers, weight 320,000 tons (of which 13,357 tons is concrete). Cost: $400 million. Winner of the Technological Innovation Prize from the National Building Museum. I would have liked to be an architect; in reality, I'm a realtor. Two hundred and fifty thousand tins of paint a year

to maintain. Sixty thousand tons of cooling capacity. Every year, more than two million tourists visit the WTC. Building work on the complex began in 1966 and lasted ten years. Critics quickly dubbed the towers "the Lego blocks" or "David and Nelson." I don't dislike them; I like seeing the clouds reflected in them. But there are no clouds today. The kids stuff themselves with pancakes and maple syrup. They fight over the butter. It would have been nice to have had a girl, just to know what it's like to have a tranquil child, one not permanently in competition with the rest of the universe. The air conditioning is freezing. I'd never get used to it. Here, in the capital of the world, in Windows on the World, a high-class clientele can contemplate the acme of all Western achievement, but they have to freeze their balls off to do it. The air conditioning makes a constant droning noise, a blanket of sound humming like a jet engine with the volume turned down; I find the lack of silence exhausting. In Texas, where I come from, we're happy to die of heatstroke. We're used to it. My family is descended from John Adams, the second President of the United States. Great-granddaddy Yorston, a man named William Harben, was the great-grandson of the man who drafted the Declaration of Independence. That's why I'm a member of the "Sons of the American Revolution" (acronym SAR, as in *Son Altesse Royale*). Oh yes, we've got aristocrats in America. I'm one of them. A lot of Americans boast of being descended from the signatories of the Declaration of Independence. It doesn't mean anything, but we feel better. Contrary to William Faulkner, the South isn't just some bunch of violent, alcoholic mental defectives. In New York, I like to ham up my Texas drawl, to say "yup," instead

of "yeah." I'm every bit as much a snob as the remaining survivors of the European aristocracy. We call them "Eurotrash": the playboys down at the Au Bar, the lotharios who take pride of place in Marc de Gontaut-Biron's catalog and the photo section of *Paper Magazine*. We laugh at them. We yank their chain, but we have our very own, what? American Trash? I'm a redneck, a member of the American Trashcan. But my name isn't up there with Getty and Guggenheim and Carnegie because instead of buying museums my ancestors pissed everything up the wall.

Pressing their faces up against the glass, the kids try to scare each other.

"Scaredy-cat, scaredy-cat—can't even look down with your hands behind your back."

"Wow, this is weird!"

"You're just chicken!"

I tell them that in 1974, a Frenchman called Philippe Petit, a tightrope walker, illegally stretched a cable between the Twin Towers at exactly this height and walked across in spite of the cold and the wind and the vertigo. "What's a Frenchman?" the kids ask. I explain that France is a small European country that helped America to free itself from the yoke of English oppression between 1776 and 1783 and that, to show our appreciation, our soldiers liberated them from the Nazis in 1944. (I'm simplifying, obviously, for educational purposes.)

"See over there—the Statue of Liberty? That was a gift to America from France. Okay, it's a bit kitsch, but it's the thought that counts."

The kids don't give a damn, even though they're big fans of "French fries" and "French toast." Right now, I'm more interested in "French kissing" and "French letters."

And *The French Connection*, with the famous car chase under the L.

Through the Windows on the World, the city stretches out like a huge checkerboard, all the right angles, the perpendicular cubes, the adjoining squares, the intersecting rectangles, the parallel lines, the network of ridges, a whole artificial geometry in gray, black, and white, the avenues taking off like flight paths, the cross streets which look as though they've been drawn on with marker, tunnels like red-brick gopher holes; from here, the smear of wet asphalt behind the cleaning trucks looks like the slime left by an aluminum slug on a piece of plywood.

8:34

I often go and stand before the marble plaque at 56 Rue Jacob. All American tourists should make a pilgrimage to 56 Rue Jacob, instead of having their photo taken in front of the tunnel at Pont de l'Alma in memory of Diana and Dodi. It was here, on September 3, 1783, at the Hôtel d'York that the Treaty of Paris was signed by John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, putting an end to the War of Independence with the British. My mother lives nearby; a little farther up, hidden behind a tree, are the publishers Le Seuil. People cross the road in front of this old building without realizing that it was here, a stone's throw from the Café de Flore, that the United States of America was born. Perhaps they prefer to forget.

Le Ciel de Paris at 8:34 AM. The luxury of skyscrapers is that they allow human beings to rise above themselves. Every skyscraper is a utopia. The age-old fantasy of man has been to build his own mountains. In building

towers into the clouds, man is proving to himself that he is above nature. And that's exactly how you feel at the top of one of these rockets of concrete and aluminum, glass, and steel: everything I can see belongs to me, no more traffic jams, gutters, sidewalks, I am man above the world. It is not the thrill of power, but of pride. There is nothing arrogant about it. Simply the joy of knowing that one can raise oneself higher than the tallest tree and:

You vapors, I think I have risen with you, moved away to distant continents, and fallen down there, for reasons,
I think I have blown with you you winds;
You waters I have finger'd every shore with you,
I have run through what any river or strait of the globe has run through,
I have taken my stand on the bases of peninsulas and on the high embedded rocks, to cry thence: Salut au monde!

What cities the light or warmth penetrates I penetrate those cities myself,
All islands to which birds wing their way I wing my way myself.

Toward you all, in America's name,
I raise high the perpendicular hand, I make the signal,
To remain after me in sight forever,
For all the haunts and homes of men.

The title of Whitman's poem is "Salut au Monde!". In the nineteenth century, American poets spoke French. I am writing this book because I'm sick of bigoted anti-

Americanism. My favorite French philosopher is Patrick Juvet: "I Love America." Since war has been declared between France and the United States, you have to be careful when choosing sides if you don't want to wind up being fleeced later.

My favorite writers are American: Walt Whitman and therefore, but in his own right, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, John Fante, Jack Kerouac, Henry Miller, J. D. Salinger, Truman Capote, Charles Bukowski, Lester Bangs, Philip K. Dick, William T. Vollmann, Hunter S. Thompson, Bret Easton Ellis, Chuck Palahniuk, Philip Roth, Hubert Selby Jr., Jerome Charyn (who lives in Montparnasse), Jay McInerney (whom I met in Paris).

My favorite musicians are American: Frank Sinatra, Chuck Berry, Bob Dylan, Leonard Bernstein, Burt Bacharach, James Brown, Chet Baker, Brian Wilson, Johnny Cash, Stevie Wonder, Paul Simon, Lou Reed, Randy Newman, Michael Stipe, Billy Corgan, Kurt Cobain.

My favorite film directors are American: Howard Hawks, Orson Welles, Robert Altman, Blake Edwards, Stanley Kubrick, John Cassavetes, Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, David Lynch, Russ Meyer, Sam Raimi, Paul Thomas Anderson, Larry Clark, David Fincher, M. Night Shyamalan.

American culture dominates the planet not for economic reasons, but because of its quality. It's too easy to ascribe its influence to political machination, to compare Disney to Hitler or Spielberg to Satan. American art is constantly renewing itself, because it is profoundly rooted in real life. American artists are constantly searching for something new, but something new which

speaks to us of ourselves. They know how to reconcile imagination and accessibility, originality with the desire to seduce. Molière was in it for the money, Mozart wanted to be famous: there's nothing shameful about that. American artists churn out fewer theories than their European counterparts, because they haven't got time, they're too busy with the practice. They seize the world, grapple with it and, in describing it, they transform it. American authors think of themselves as realists when in fact they're all Marxists! They're hypercritical of their own country. No democracy in the world is as contested by its own literature. American independent and underground cinema is the most subversive in the world. When they dream, American artists take the rest of the world with them, because they are more courageous, more hardworking and because they dare to mock their own country. Many people believe that European artists have a superiority complex when it comes to their American counterparts, but they're mistaken: they have an inferiority complex. Anti-Americanism is in large part jealousy and unrequited love. Deep down, the rest of the world admires American art and resents the United States for not returning the favor. A compelling example? Bernard Pivot's reaction to James Lipton (presenter of the program *The Actor's Studio*) on the last *Bouillon de Culture*. The host of the finest literary program in the history of French television seemed completely intimidated by Lipton, a pompous, toadying hack who chairs sycophantic discussions with Hollywood actors on some minor-league cable channel. Pivot, who created *Apostrophes*, a man who has interviewed the finest writers of his generation, couldn't get over the fact that he was quoted in the States by a sycophantic creep.

What bothers us is not American imperialism, but American chauvinism, its cultural isolation, its complete lack of any curiosity about foreign work (except in New York and San Francisco). France has the same relationship with the United States nowadays as the provinces do with Paris: a combination of admiration and contempt, a longing to be part of it and a pride at resisting. We want to know everything about them so that we can shrug our shoulders with a condescending air. We want to know the latest trends, the places to be seen, all the New York gossip so that we can emphasize how rooted we are in the profound reality of our own country. Americans seem to have made the opposite journey to that of Europe: their inferiority complex (being a nouveau riche, adolescent country whose history and culture have, for the most part, been imported) has developed into a superiority complex (lessons in expertise and efficiency, cultural xenophobia, corporate contempt, and advertising overkill).

As for the cultural exception to American cultural hegemony that is France, contrary to what a recently dismissed CEO had to say, it is not dead: it consists in churning out exceptionally tedious movies, exceptionally slapdash books and, all in all, works of art which are exceptionally pedantic and self-satisfied. It goes without saying that I include my own work in this sorry assessment.