



Top of the World

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September Eleventh wiped out my Rolodex. Many former classmates, colleagues, and clients perished in the attacks. My sister, a vice president at J.P. Morgan, was spared because she had cancelled a presentation to take her infant son to the doctor. But Windows on the World, the elegant penthouse restaurant in the North Tower of the World Trade Center, was destroyed. During the Reagan era, my parents used Windows on the World

as a deprogramming room. Whenever I read too much Dorothy Day, criticized Milton Friedman, or thought of chucking advertising to pursue a PhD or to write the next *Grapes of Wrath*, they would wine and dine me at Windows on the World. They wanted me to know what I would lose if I stepped off the velvet treadmill.

Designed by Joe Baum, who had created such landmarks as the Four Seasons, La Fonda del Sol, and the aptly named Forum of the Twelve Caesars, the restaurant spanned an entire acre, 50,000 square feet of velvet, tile, and glass, and specialized in New American cuisine. Three words, three lies. Only an idiot, I groused at our first luncheon, would trade a simple bowl of *pasta e fagioli* for this pretentious wild mushroom bisque. As for the Caesar salad, the Romaine had been printed at the Federal Mint but the croutons were soaked in oil. If a Yuppie had devoured a *zeppola* at the San Gennaro festival and then wiped his mouth with a paisley tie, I could not have been more appalled. Supposedly, James Beard and Jacques Pépin had developed the menu, but

it tasted like airport food, designed for a frequent-flyer class whose world fits into a briefcase.

The food was irrelevant, Papa explained. People came here to eat the money.

With annual revenues of \$37 million, Windows on the World was America's highest-grossing restaurant, so its cachet surpassed the Sky Club's or the Rainbow Room's. For this reason, claustrophobic publicists endured a sixty-minute elevator ride, unkempt bohemians submitted to a corporate dress code, and snooty wine critics paid \$3,000 for a dubious bottle of 1928 Chateau Lafite-Rothschild. A six-month wait for a reservation was routine, but Papa's Seventh Avenue clout always secured a table.

I preferred Angelo's on Mulberry Street but still admired the panoramic view: New Jersey, the Hudson, Midtown, Uptown, the Bronx, the East River, Brooklyn, and Queens. From 107 stories up, the horizon actually curved. On bright days, the skyline shimmered and east Long Island was a polished emerald. On gray days, snow

fell up and clouds tutued the Empire State Building. Below Olympus, the Wall Street traffic was a Matchbox set, and traffic choppers hovered like dragonflies over Roosevelt Drive.

All this could be mine, Papa preached, if I wised up and stopped knocking America. Didn't I know this was the greatest country in the world? Where else could a shepherd boy from Abruzzo, who had never owned a dress shirt until his Confirmation, create haute couture for politicians and starlets? The wait staff nodded and beamed. Coming from Angola, Bangladesh, Colombia, Egypt, Guyana, Jamaica, and Thailand, they believed in the American Gospel. Their faith, hope, and charity sustained them and made tolerable the boorishness of their so-called betters.

Often, I wanted to hurl the beautiful people off the South Tower observation deck. Junior brokers from Cantor Fitzgerald jockey to break in American Express cards. A shapely Republican fundraiser smokes a

Montecristo and explains how Ayn Rand can change her Mexican busboy's life. Norman Mailer threatens the wine steward with an ice bucket. Mick Jagger orders a waiter to snatch a camera away from Andy Warhol, who insists on snapping pictures. A drunken investor baits the Ugandan ambassador: "What did the cannibal say when he threw up the missionary? You can't keep a good man down!"

When I glower, Papa chides me. If the staff were being such good sports, why couldn't I? Yes, these people were swine, but swine dig up truffles. You don't need good people to have a good society, thank God; only good things. Ignore the jerks. Instead, admire America's beauty and power.

Che meraviglia! What a wonder!

Ten years later, Italian newlyweds uttered these very words when they entered Windows on the World. Arriving at 9:00 PM on Monday, September 10, 2001, they were seated at table 64, the last in the dining

room. Thrilled by the view, the starry-eyed bride asked about the bridges and buildings. The groom, who ran a cheese factory in Parma, showed his business card to the steward Carlos Medina.

At 11:30, the couple asked for the check. The captain presented the bill, but when Carlos retired to the kitchen to process the credit card, the company denied payment—a common problem with foreign cards. Very politely, in Italian, Carlos informed the groom, who asked if the 107th floor had an ATM. The only machine was down in the lobby, but Carlos escorted the guest in the elevator. When the pair returned, it was past midnight. After paying the tab, the newlyweds had little left for a tip, so the groom gave Carlos \$20 plus 100,000 lira. Suddenly, the couple realized they had no money to return to their hotel. Carlos chivalrously returned the twenty for cab fare and accepted another 50,000 lira.

The grateful newlyweds would be the restaurant's last surviving guests.

On the morning of September 11, Windows on the World was serving breakfast to its regular patrons as well as members of the Waters Financial Technology Congress. Risk Waters Group Ltd., a London firm providing risk management, market data and computational finance, had arranged a splendid buffet for its 16 representatives and 71 conference participants. They had barely tasted it when at 8:46 AM an explosion ten floors below rocked the restaurant. American Flight 11 had crashed into the North Tower. Waiters and coordinators probably tried to maintain order, but panic and confusion surely spread. What was happening? Was it a bombing? Only seventeen minutes later came the answer.

United Airlines Flight 165 hit the South Tower and within less than an hour the building imploded. At this point, the trapped guests and staff must have known they were doomed. With the stairway blocked and the smoke and flames rising, some couldn't wait. The jumper in the news photo *The Falling Man* is probably sound engineer Jonathan Briley. But most said farewell to their

loved ones. They emailed from laptops, texted from PalmPilots, or used the restaurant fax. The transmitter on the roof sustained the mobile phone network until the last minute, despite the deluge of calls from downtown. The sardonic joked it was the first time Verizon Wireless had never dropped a call.

At 10:28 AM, the North Tower collapsed. The 360-foot antenna and a dozen broadcast offices crashed through the ceiling and crushed the restaurant's 73 employees and a Muslim security guard. Six more workers building a new wine cellar in the basement were buried alive under the rubble. Nothing remains of Windows on the World except a menu, a uniform, some china, a champagne glass, and a grill scraper, preserved at the Smithsonian like artifacts from Pompeii.

The WTC attacks and the resulting recession devastated New York's low-wage and largely immigrant hospitality industry. Citywide, over 13,000 restaurant workers were displaced, including 250 from Windows on the

World. The families of the fallen went begging. Using actuary tables, Kenneth Feinberg, Special Master of the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund, patiently explained why the life of a Dominican dish washer was worth only a tenth as much as a Wharton Business School graduate's. Hotel and Restaurant Employees Local 100 raised relief money but would not assist the non-union workers who comprise 90% of New York's restaurant workforce. Accordingly, two former Windows on the World employees, Fekkak Mamdouh and Shulaika La Cruz, established an advocacy group, Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York (ROC-NY).

The immigrants thought this measure was temporary. Like a cargo cult, they expected Windows on the World to rise from the ashes. Owner David Emil had vowed to rebuild the restaurant and to rehire its staff; but despite press conferences and come-hither offers from Marriott, it never happened. In fact, when he opened Noche, a Times Square restaurant and nightclub described by one reviewer as "Ricky Ricardo on steroids," an outraged

Emil showed ex-employees the door. These ingrates actually wanted a union! Bowing to curbside protests and bad press, Emil hired thirty-five of his old crew. The rest started Colors, a co-operative restaurant honoring the memory of their dead comrades.

Located on Lafayette Street near Astor Place, between Greenwich Village and the East Village, Colors reflects the diversity of its owners. At the January 6, 2006 opening, *Wall Street Journal* subscribers feasted on ceviche, avocado soup, mango pepper citronette, and panko-crusted tofu. Global capitalism, they toasted, had found a silver lining in the cloud of Ground Zero. But within a year, the publicity and goodwill faded, and the co-op's idealism collided with a crowded and competitive market, where 70% of New York's 26,000 restaurants closed or changed hands within their first five years of business.

"The place just stopped making money," admits Jean Emy Pierre, once line cook at Windows on the World, now executive chef at Colors. "We're dead, doing ten,

twenty, thirty covers a night," he sighs, referring to the number of customers. "That was the point where I was like, 'What's going on? Why aren't people coming? What did we do wrong?'"

Windows' former blue-chip clients do not patronize Colors for auld lang syne. Instead, pining for the glory days, when the price of gold and oil soared even on Nine Eleven, they mourn and name-drop on the WOTW memorial website. Meanwhile, the market has suffered the worst meltdown since the Great Depression. After publishing a chortling autobiography, in which he admits that his Delphic pronouncements during the boom years were gobbledygook, ex-Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan practically wept before Congress: "Those of us who have looked to the self-interest of lending institutions to protect shareholders' equity are in a state of shocked disbelief."

As for me, I teach business writing in an upstate Rust Belt, can't afford to take my wife to the local Italian

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restaurant, rarely visit Manhattan, and avoid Wall Street. Downtown makes me ill. Grief, my father suggests over dinner. I'm still mourning the colleagues I lost six years ago. Airborne toxins, an EPA buddy explains, sharing a sub. Ground Zero remains peppered with carcinogens, even if the government claims otherwise. They both may be right, of course; but I have my own explanation.

