

THE

# LAST TOWER



BRIAN OXLEY



THE LAST TOWER

CHAPTER

02

# THE UNRAVELING



DO Y'ALL WANT ANYTHING ELSE, like dessert?" Rose's interruption shifted their attention to the menus she had thrust toward them as she started clearing the table. The diner was semi-famous for their pies. Each man chose his fruit or cream favorite before she left them again to their conversation.

Matt, as usual, fired the first volley. "How do you think this whole 'new tower syndrome' would start?"

There was a brief anticipatory silence. John responded with a pained expression on his face. "I think it actually started when the towers fell on 9/11; I'll never forget that, never. That was the day the world changed. A lot of people around the planet lost their innocence at that moment. I actually knew a few of the people who lost their lives that day – a corporate financier, a CPA, a friend from India – oh, and then there was this nice woman I once met in one of the offices – all gone now."

Rose bustled up to the table with a tray full of beautiful pie plates. "Need anything else right now?" They assured her that they were fine.

Taking the first great bite of strawberry pie loaded with whipped cream, Matt interjected, “Okay, so the world certainly has changed. Big deal, it’s changed a lot over the past 300 years. You know, ever since the lights came on.”

“You talkin’ about the Enlightenment? The Age of Reason?” Troy asked.

“You guessed her, Chester.” Matt grinned.

David frowned, “Matt, where has science and reason gotten us? We’ve just witnessed the bloodiest century in the history of civilization – along with a lot of science, technology, and utopian ideas. This was supposed to make us smarter and better. Anybody here think humanity has improved over the past several hundred years? New technologies have certainly put new powers into man’s hands – but man’s heart hasn’t really changed. Sure, evil men existed in ancient times, but there was a limit to the threat they posed. Look at us now: One human finger on a button can terrorize or destroy tens of thousands.”

John added, “Well, 9/11 certainly pushed us closer to the edge of an abyss, but the recent economic malfeasance – oh, let’s call it what it is, just plain greed – has taken us to the edge of that abyss. The ugly reality is that many banks are now bled-out cadavers, and ‘all the king’s surgeons and all the king’s men’ can’t stitch ‘em up again.”

Matt jumped in, “John, why do you have to be the world’s most negative economist? Things are working out – they always do. The government rode in like the cavalry and rescued us.”

"I know I'm being cynical," John admitted. "The government might have looked like the cavalry, but too little too late, man. We're surviving, but the game is over."

"What game?" Matt begged with a twinge of temper.

"It's not that long ago, when we could still play 'the real estate game'; then the bubble burst. We knew it wouldn't last, but who cared? It was great fun! Nobody was asking the tough questions. Later on, when the leaders said that they were all surprised by this crisis, it made no sense – at least not to me. We all knew back then that this real estate thing wouldn't last indefinitely. We just didn't know when the *whole thing* would go down."

Troy declared with a smirk, "So – the 'Great and Powerful Wizards' aren't all they're cracked up to be. Who's really in control here?"

David added thoughtfully, "I don't think anyone is in control right now... That's what's so scary."

John chimed in, "The idea that the banks could make money off of us – and then just pass *all* the risk on to an anonymous counterparty – is economics gone mad."

Matt put the question to John, "Is it true that they simply bundled all these toxic loans and just sold them off? How in the world could that happen?"

"Yes, it's called 'hide and seek.' You get a bunch of bad loans, mix them in with a few good ones and – whamo – you get triple A credit. Don't worry, guys, love is in the air. The big surprise is that you don't have to pay your mortgage back – well, not everybody anyway."

Matt sighed gloomily, “Well, at least some of the politicians seem to be using straight talk. I love it when they start resorting to terms like ‘Economic Armageddon.’”

“That’s not straight talk; they’re just trying to put a scare into us so that we’ll do whatever they tell us – that way the bailout will proceed with little or no resistance. ‘Truth is the necessary medicine’ and is going to taste pretty awful. Entitlements gotta be cut, revenues raised. Unless the straight talk includes ‘sacrifice,’ meaning a reduced standard of living, they’re just trying to fool us!” John concluded.

Troy added, “Power, short-term profits, and political advantage sway the hearts and minds of many leaders. I’ve got a fable that illustrates the crux of the issue.”

Matt grumbled because he knew Troy tended to be longwinded and once he started with a story he couldn’t be stopped. Troy was a natural-born storyteller, and, after encouraging Matt to be patient, he began his tale. “Envision, if you will, this Virtual Tower as some grand estate, surrounded by the realm of imagination. Within this realm, wondrous farmlands and wealth-producing orchards flourish. One such orchard can even produce a crop of golden apples. This is an enterprise that is clearly profitable to its investors – in this case, the Goldholders. The scene opens early in the morning, as the sun shines down through the trees bearing golden fruit. Gathered in the midst of the orchard is a group of investors. Their attention is focused on a great scale erected to weigh these golden apples. The task before them is to determine the exact amount of gold that has been gathered over the past





*Goldholders' meeting*

year. When it becomes apparent to everyone that they have exceeded their goal, and are clearly satisfied with the results, the crowd begins to cheer. Yet this cheering abruptly stops when a young boy enters their midst – uninvited, of course.”

“Hold on,” John admonished, “I’ve attended shareholders’ meetings. You had me until you brought the kid into the picture. That just doesn’t happen – at least at none of the shareholders’ meetings that I’ve been to.”

Troy snapped back, “Yeah, well, that’s the problem with too many shareholders’ meetings. The families have no voice. They are stuck with whatever decisions the executives make.”

As Matt sighed restlessly, Troy continued, “Please allow me to finish. The boy approaches the CEO and stands quietly before him. Some in the crowd notice that the boy has stuffed rocks in his pockets, and down the back of his shirt. Noticing the boy, the CEO addresses him in a condescending tone of voice, ‘Well hello, young man, I’m the chief officer of this enterprise. And I’m curious, what are you doing here?’

“The child responds, ‘Please, sir, won’t you weigh me too?’ Hearing this the crowd begins to laugh.

‘Now, son,’ says the CEO, ‘why should I want to weigh you?!’

“‘I heard my father say that you would be here today. He works in your orchard, you know. He says that you have come to weigh the gold and I figured, sir, if there was more weight you’d all be happier. I made myself heavier. I’ve got rocks in my pockets. I know it’s not gold, but does that really matter? You know I want you all to be happy, because my daddy’s



afraid he's gonna lose his job if you're not happy.' Nobody laughs any longer."

The guys were now more attentive and seemed genuinely intrigued by what Troy was sharing; David was drawing intensely as he created more images from Troy's words. "The little boy clearly does not understand the purpose of this meeting. After an embarrassing silence, the CEO clears his throat, 'Perhaps you had better go home now to your daddy.' Dejectedly the boy hangs his head and walks back into the woods, scattering the rocks as he goes.

"Only a few weeks later, the Goldholders are informed in a conference call that the firm anticipates another year of ten percent growth. Now the management, knowing that this expectation may be difficult to realize, makes a decision to initiate across-the-board layoffs. The boy's father shows up for work one day, only to find out that he and several of his friends have been let go. Upon returning home and presenting the bad news to his wife and son, his little boy looks up at him and says, 'Daddy, I tried to help, but he didn't even ask your name.'"

After concluding his tale, Troy looked at each member of the group. "Is business only about making money? Is it right to shed people, not for survival, but for an extra penny of profit per share?"

John countered, "That thinking is not universal. For example shareholders in Japan are not given a status above employees, which is often the complaint we make against their markets."

"Well," Matt interjected, "funny you should tell this 'fable' as you called it. I just heard about a president of a large company



and his Board of Directors who had been engaged in an approval process designed to provide a 40 million dollar bonus, payable directly to – guess who? – Mr. Big himself. At the same time, they chose this board meeting as an opportunity to lay off 10,000 people. Everything was perfectly justified by ‘the data;’ it was a company-wide business review.”

“The news is not all bad out there. I know of a company that was facing significant layoffs due to market conditions. The leader talked to all the employees and proposed a different solution. He believed that when the market returned he would need the people back; so instead of significant layoffs, everyone would take a pay cut – starting at the top – to ride out the storm. Now that’s leadership! My mind is boggled by

the approval a market gives to leaders who initiate layoffs. Some of these become legends, but why do people get credit for layoffs? That seems like the easy path. The harder path requires creative thinking and imagination to find a way to reach financial goals and avoid layoffs. These are the leaders we should emulate.”

Troy jumped in, “I’m not an executive and I don’t know all the ins-and-outs of business, but I do see all around me families who suffer when a father or mother loses a job. Large companies should be required to present a Family Impact Report before any significant layoffs.”

“Huh,” grunted Matt.

“A report that would assess the impact on the community of these impending layoffs. Included in this report would be the cost to society and the number of children affected. Most developers are required by law to submit an environmental impact report. So I say: Give the children at least the same consideration as frogs and birds. Now, you can’t make this the law for every mom-n-pop enterprise out there but it could be limited to those firms laying off, say, more than 200 people in a year, and it would be made public. As leaders consider the public relations implications of such a report, they might consider...uh...alternative solutions.”

The bell above the door jangled as Steve walked in. He pulled up a chair beside the booth, and shook hands all around.

“Glad to have you back, Steve. Heard your Army Reserve unit was recently deployed to Japan for the tsunami disaster – what a tragedy,” said David.

Steve nodded in agreement, “Oh, I’ve got plenty to talk about...but not right now – think I’ll just eat and rest awhile. You can just talk at me. What have you guys been up to? You look kind of intense for this time of night.”

“No, no. Nothing major. We’re just talking about the world collapsing and Web sites the anti-Christ is visiting these days,” feigned Matt with nonchalance.

Troy laughed. “Yeah, and David’s got his pencil.”

Rose arrived for Steve’s dinner order, and the guys gave Steve a hard time as he did, indeed, order the meatloaf *and* the country fried steak. They had all heard that when he was growing up in Japan, wherever he went people patted his head and gave him candy, which made him sick, so he had to wear a sign on his back that read, “Please do not feed me.” Nothing’s changed; except now he needs a billboard.

As Steve glanced at David’s sketches, Matt teasingly divulged some of the earlier conversational details, “Troy just finished telling us another one of his patented tearjerkers.”

David showed Steve his sketch of the orchard with the golden apples, explaining Troy’s point of view. Troy added, “We’ve been all over the map. We’re speculating about what it would take to construct a global tower of power – bigger than the ancient Tower of Babel. Maybe there’s an actual structure that exists somewhere that’s tall enough to accommodate such power with all its global connections.”

“Not gonna happen, dude. It’ll be a network,” Matt jabbed.

Steve looked a bit puzzled, “You guys talking about the tower in the Old Testament? You know I’m a structural



engineer, right? It would take one mother of all foundations to support a tower like the one you are fantasizing about.”

They all laughed. David conceded, “This tower is different. It would not be a single tower, but rather a collection of towers all interconnected virtually. Somewhere within the network, as Matt said, of this Virtual Tower there might conceivably be some kind of a central tower. Who knows?”

“Finally! You are agreeing with me,” smiled Matt.

Steve mused, “Your idea of the tower reminds me of Megiddo of ancient times. This city was strategically located on the maritime route, the Via Maris, which passed through the Fertile Crescent, linking Egypt with Mesopotamia and Syria. Today, thanks to new technology, the trade routes around the globe can be managed from almost anywhere on the earth. The Internet would definitely be the key to your central ‘Tower,’ and it would become our new Megiddo.”

“That is so geeky that you actually know all that without a Wikipedia cheat; I’m amazed you ever got a girlfriend,” cracked Matt.

Rose was back with Steve’s meal and cleared off the empty plates, leaving more room on the table for David to spread his drawings.

Troy, always nobly seeing things from the spiritual perspective commented, “‘There is nothing new under the sun’ – first you’ve got Megiddo, and now the Virtual Tower.”

“You missed your calling, Troy,” said Matt. “Shoulda been a preacher.”

“Well, you know, there is a race today in the world to see who can build the highest structures.” David was well versed in the cultural confidence – the wealthy façade – that height represents. It was a “manly man” way to distract, as it were, from the realities of poverty and hunger, which still burdened so many countries. “These structures are now soaring to dizzying heights, and, at the same time, taking on symbolic significance. Nations are using the latest technology to set new records. The Burj Khalifa in Dubai is the tallest, soaring a staggering 828 meters, and dwarfing its nearest rival, the Skytree in Tokyo. That one’s an impressive 634 meters. There is the Shanghai World Financial Center, and Taipei 101 in Taiwan, and the world-famous Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur. Hundreds of towers and towering structures bristle from the face of the earth.

“Oh, and don’t forget the Kingdom Tower, a planned development in Saudi Arabia. That’s gonna be almost 1,000 meters. It’ll be twice as tall as the Empire State Building, and for what? To attract more tourists who’ll pay money simply to gawk at it. We should go climb a mountain instead.” David was on a roll.

“Oh, and let’s not forget the Burj Mubarak-al Kabir, that one’s in Madinat al-Hareer, what they call the City of Silk. It’s located in Kuwait. That tower’s gonna beat them all. Its proposed height is over 1,000 meters.”

The group paused in mild amazement at David’s grasp of architectural masterpieces. Matt broke the silence, “Well, Mr. Walking Wikipedia, enough of this brick-and-mortar geeking.

Steve, tell us about this trip to Japan with your military reserve unit. Did you get to eat at an Iron Chef's restaurant?"

Troy chimed in, "Yeah, we used to hear a lot about the disaster in the news, but then, suddenly, the news just stopped. What's up with that?"

Steve leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table and got serious, "No lie, I will never forget seeing the devastation left by this tsunami. I tell you, the Japanese are a courageous people – the newspapers and TV gave you some idea of this. But the biggest story has yet to be told."

"What are you talking about, man?" quizzed John.

Steve addressed the group sternly, "I'll tell you what we've missed: Ever since man split the atom we have been on thin ice. And despite *all* our precautions we have lost control of the situation."

Mildly alarmed, Matt asked, "But they do have a handle on it, don't they?"

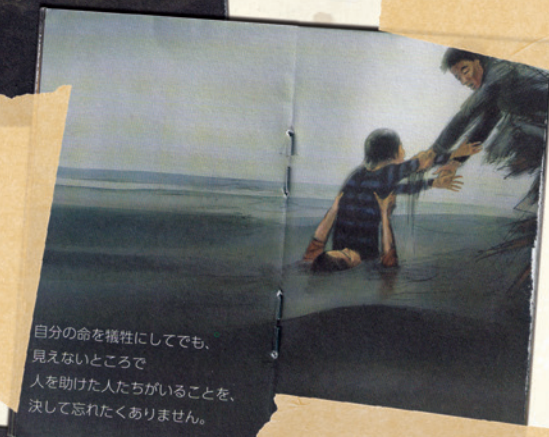
"Not really, they can barely see inside to get a clear picture of all four reactors. It's like a fire-breathing dragon – snorting flames and steam at the intruding cameras. I'm not kidding! The whole thing is crazy. Photo technology allows us to view beer cans in our backyards from space, yet our high-tech video camera can't see clearly inside the reactor's core."

At this point, Steve passed around a small picture booklet. "Here, I picked this up in Japan." Everyone looked at the booklet, which told the story. After a reflective pause, David speculated, "Anyone else seeing a pattern here? First, the Twin Towers fall, followed by the financial crisis, then comes



*Mighty response  
from across Japan*

*Unknown heroes  
sacrificed their  
lives for others*



*Young & old  
put their lives  
at risk for  
the nation*



*Children are  
the future*



日本の未来は、  
今ここに差し出された  
愛の手の中にあります。

子どもたちを放射能から守ろうと  
する多くのお母さんたちに対して、  
私たちは、今も、これから後も、  
どうすれば、その困難を分かち合う  
ことができるでしょうか。  
日本は間違いなく子どもたちの  
安全を第一優先にし、新しい故郷を  
子どもたちのために築き上げると  
信じています。

*A mother's trial*

the mother of all waves, the great tsunami, and now we've got a fire-breathing dragon."

Matt clasped his hands in a prayer-like pose. "Please, please, please...no more conspiracy theories. And let's let Godzilla rest peacefully at the bottom of Tokyo Bay. I think we're all fine." As usual, he was not a big fan of alarmist notions.

Gesturing toward David, Troy exclaimed, "Our Wizards of Nuclear Science must be at their wits' end. It sounds like these reactors in Japan could present a danger to the entire country – not to mention the entire planet."

David responded, “Surely the Japanese people know what is going on.” He turned to Steve, “Don’t they?”

Steve declared, “Look, you guys, I’ve followed this story closely. At the moment the Japanese have only two weapons in their arsenal – limited disclosure and water. All the world’s experts have concluded that the only immediate solution is to douse the smoldering spent fuel with water, in an attempt to cool it down. Can you imagine, with all the available technology in the world – and with all the planning that must have gone into precisely this kind of contingency – that they are still left with only these two options – controlling the information flow and hosing the mess down with giant squirt guns?”

Steve expanded, “The question that still haunts me is whether those nuclear reactors can be safely maintained. It’s not over yet; there are a few reactors that continue to pose a major threat. Better pray another earthquake with a magnitude of seven or eight doesn’t hit. If it does, who knows what the hell will happen. The people fear the accuracy of the information coming from the government. Maybe the government fears full disclosure would set off a panic; but the people from the disaster area are strong and can handle full disclosure.”



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SAMPLE CHAPTER  
FIRST U.S. EDITION  
ISBN 978 1 938068 00 3

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Published by OxVision Books, a division of  
BridgePoint International, LLC, 2135 City Gate Lane, Naperville, IL 60563

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