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Arina Patrikova

*How Will the Successful Leaders of
Tomorrow Address the Issue of
Sustainability?*

The Lift That John Built.

(A dialogue in three parts and a jiffy).

By Arina Patrikova

13 pages, including this cover page.

Someone asked me whether, *qua* classicist, I'd be writing on a classical theme. I thought it over and decided against, but took the liberty of scrapping the footnotes, first, and then - of trading the meandering, shot-in-the-dark form of the non-academic essay for the dramatic dialogue, that very classical form that will, hopefully, amuse the reader as much as it gratifies the writer. The resulting resemblances to situations present or past, and to persons living or dead, are, of course, purely accidental. The general resemblance of characters to persons probably living, on the other hand, is intended.

Dramatis personae, in no particular order:

Tony Spurlock, *motivational speaker*

John "Call me John" Budsman Sr., *head of the Corporation*

Jane Stunning, *secretary at the Corporation*

Alistair Moltenhead, *academic*

Vladik Sotkin, *system administrator*

Little John Budsman II (Jr.), *student of English literature, revolutionary*

Leila Bin-Said, *environmental scientist*

Roger Wager, *head of PR department at the Corporation*

Dicky Lovejoy, *Prime Minister*

Jose, *waiter*

Henry, *3 years old*

...

Budsman Sr., *beckoning his guests into the lift*: Round this way, Dick! Oh! It'll be a bit of a squeeze in here, won't it? There, that's better.

Leila: That's an impressive lift.

Budsman Sr.: Yes, I'm quite proud of them myself. Everyone was asking, what was I doing, installing these huge lifts with velvets seats and a mini-bar? Who'd use them? Well, what would you know? Everyone's using them! (*He points at Jane Stunning and Jose in the corner*). They love these lifts!

Wager: *Business Week* wrote about them yesterday.

Tony: You mean that article on the effects of the work environment?

Budsman Sr.: Yes, yes... I like my partners (I never say “employees,” it’s partners!) to feel important, you know. They should feel at home here, and they should feel important. You know why? (*Laughs*) Because they are!

Budsman Jr.: Father!..

Budsman Sr. (*doesn’t hear him, looks around*): Well! I don’t think I’ve seen you before.

Sotkin: No, you wouldn’t have. I don’t travel much.

Budsman Sr., laughing loudly: Did you hear that? “I don’t travel much!” Isn’t he great? I’m John. What’s your name? You just call me John. I like to get to know all the partners. What do you do for this company, huh? Wait, let me guess... Computers?

Budsman Jr., groaning softly: Father, for God’s sake!..

Sotkin: Yes, I’m... well, it’s a bit complicated. I make sure the network stays up.

Budsman Sr.: That’s a bit like what I do. I make sure the network never goes down! (*Laughs boisterously*)

Budsman Jr. puts on earphones. The lift stops between two floors.

Mechanical female voice: We are experiencing a minor difficulty on our way. Please wait a moment, and our journey will resume shortly. Please help yourself to the freshly squeezed juice in the bar, to rejuvenate your senses and experience the taste of nature.

Budsman Sr.: Oh, I’m sorry. It’s never done this before. Do you like the voice? We had a thousand auditions. I was trying to make it, you know, soothing. To make being stuck a pleasant experience—how about that? Use it to take a break, you know? Enjoy the silver lining?

Tony presses the alarm button. **Mechanical female voice:** Are you experiencing difficulties? Why not take a short break and drift away with a glass of tropical fruit juice? We shall communicate your problem to the operator shortly. While we are repairing the connection with the operator, why not let yourself be carried away by positive thoughts?

Budsman Sr.: Looks like we’re stuck. Let me call them up, what do they think they’re doing?

He dials a number.

Budsman Sr.: Hello? Norman? Well, what the hell's going on there? I know it's starting in two minutes, I'm stuck in the bloody lift! Yes, Dicky's stuck in the bloody lift! We all are! Whose bodyguard? Oh... Well, how the ... do I know? Do something! What the hell do you mean, you can't?

Budsman Sr. looks at his phone, perplexed. The battery just died on him.

Budsman, Sr.: Has anyone got a phone? Thank you! (*He tries every phone offered to him in succession*). No reception! I just can't believe it! I can't believe we're stuck here without phone reception! Well, shall we all take a seat?

There isn't enough space for everyone to sit down. Budsman, Wager, Sotkin, Jose, Lovejoy and Moltenhead remain standing. The ladies sit. Budsman Jr. tries to remain standing, but there isn't enough space for that, and he sits down on the floor.

Budsman Jr., seeing Henry under the seat: Why, hello, you! What are you doing here?

Henry: I'm captain Awesome! This is my ship.

The little boy crawls out, sees all the astonished adults and prepares to cry.

Tony, regaining her composure: Does Captain Awesome want an orange?

Henry, forgetting that he was going to cry and un-wrinkling his face: I can only eat oranges from Venus. (*He eyes the orange Tony produced from her handbag suspiciously*). This isn't from Venus!

Tony: Why, no. This is from Pluto. The last orange they've got left there, as a matter of fact. If Captain doesn't want it, I'll eat it.

Henry snatches the orange and tries to peel it.

Henry: I need to wee-wee.

Tony: Can you wait till we land?

Henry: Probably.

Tony: There's a good Captain.

Jane: You are so good with children!

Tony: I've got two.

Moltenhead: This is all rather amusing. Let us suppose that we are stuck here for another hour or so...

Budsman Sr.: Impossible!

Moltenhead: Hopefully, but let us suppose... We shall all be getting hungry and thirsty.

Budsman Sr.: Well, the bar's full of food!

Moltenhead: Yes. However, our little friend, the Captain, just reminded us that there is a further issue.

Lovejoy: But Alistair, we are grown men!

Moltenhead: Yes, but what if it's not one hour, but, say, ten?

Wager: Then, there is the issue of gas...

Budsman Sr.: Of what?

Sotkin: What you really mean is that we have a choice: either we eat and drink, when we need to, and increase the chances of needing to... you know... or we abstain, and remain, relatively speaking, comfortable?

Moltenhead: Why, yes.

Budsman Sr.: Oh, stop it. It's only been, what, ten minutes? They'll get us out.

Leila: What floor are we on?

Budsman Sr.: Somewhere between one hundred and one-twenty. Listen, what are you all panicking about? They'll get us out, all right. Let's get comfortable. I could do with a drink.

Jane: What would you like?

Budsman Sr.: Get me a gin and tonic, will you, ma'am? Thank you. Anyone else?

There is no answer. Budsman Sr. tries all the phones in turn. No network.

1 hour later.

Leila is now standing, to make room for Lovejoy, who has a bad knee. Tony presses the alarm button repeatedly.

Mechanical female voice: We are sorry, but the operator cannot be reached. Please wait a moment while we solve the problem. This could be the moment when you stop and

think about your direction. How can you contribute to the world? How can you enjoy it more? Why not get a refreshing glass of juice to nurture your positive thoughts?

Sotkin: Say, John, did you get her number at the audition?

Budsman Sr.: Yeah, she isn't bad... I'm sure Norman did. Why?

Sotkin: I'll have to kill her when I get out.

Budsman Sr., *still reasonably cheerful and changing the subject:* There's a music channel here. Jazz, anyone?

Leila: It looks like we'll be here for a while. Let's sum up what we've got to consider. Mr. Lovejoy needs to stay seated, or his knee will get worse. Mr. Wager is diabetic. We have decided, in the interests of... general comfort, that only Mr. Wager and... what's your name?

Henry: Captain Awesome.

Leila: I mean, what does your Mummy call you at home?

Henry: When? Today, I'm Captain Awesome, so she calls me Captain Awesome.

Wager: Oh great, a schizophrenic kid on our hands.

Tony: He's not schizophrenic, he's 3. What do your friends call you?

Henry: Henry.

Leila: So, Mr. Wager and Henry will be allowed small quantities of food. Anything else?

Sotkin: Henry is wet.

Leila: He can't help it. For medical emergencies, we have five band-aids, moist facial tissues, aspirin and a few pieces of chewing gum.

Budsman Jr., *aside:* And seven condoms.

Budsman Sr.: Oh, come on, stop the panic. We'll be out of here in a moment, what's the point of counting bloody band-aids?

Leila: You said this has never happened before, didn't you?

Budsman Sr.: Well, it hasn't!

Leila: Then, there is a good chance that something unprecedented is going on outside this lift, as well.

Budsman Sr.: What, the apocalypse?

Leila: Or simply a power cut. Whatever it is, we are in a critical situation, and this invites crisis management. We won't know how serious this is until we get out.

Budsman Sr., *aside:* I'll show them crisis management!

Moltenhead: Now, ladies and gentlemen, may I suggest something? Do let us cheer up. This is certainly no worse than a formal lunch in the Senior Common Room, and the air may even be a little better. We've got some time to spend together. Now, Tony, since it looks like we won't be making the reception after all, why don't you talk to us here? You've got the advantage of a small, grateful audience.

Tony: Well, this does lend "captive audience" a new meaning. What I was going to talk about is altruism and motivation that produces altruistic actions. I'll give you the highlights here, and if you have any questions, feel free to interrupt. Let's have a round table discussion. Today, there is an extreme need for global cooperation, amounting largely to compromise and to giving up immediate gratification for long-term rewards, one of which is our survival on the planet. There are several problems with convincing people to give up a supposed advantage for the benefit of others. First of all, there is the issue of distance. While we may feel inclined to go out of our way to help a friend, we aren't generally hard-wired to feel for others. There is a game I often show people that I can show you now. Let's try it. The idea is, one person is to give a twenty pound note to another, according to his choice. The potential recipients must persuade the donor to give them this money; each gets a turn to put forth one argument...

Budsman Sr.: Who wins?

Tony: Everyone. The money gets returned to the donor, and everyone gets the lesson of our demonstration.

Budsman Sr.: There should be a definite winner. Let's play with a bottle of water. The winner gets to drink.

Leila: How will the winner get to dispose of excess water?

Budsman Sr.: Part of winning is that this issue is left at the winner's discretion.

Tony, *a little embarrassed:* All right, let's play. I'll hold the bottle, and you tell me why I should give it to you, going clockwise.

Jane: Um... I don't really want it.

Sotkin: If you give me the water, I can guarantee that no one will drink it, except in emergency.

Leila: If you give me this water, I will keep it for the person who needs it.

Tony: In this case, why don't I just give it to Henry?

Leila: Because he'll just drink it, probably way before he needs a drink, and then just pee again.

Tony: Doesn't he know best?

Budsman Sr.: Of course he doesn't know best! Giving him stuff at this point is a waste of resources. He doesn't even know if he needs it! He can't tell the difference between need and want! Giving him water is like sending all your money to Ethiopia!

Tony: Next.

Budsman Jr., *looking straight at Budsman Sr.:* If you give me the water, I'll make sure that no irresponsible, ignorant bigot will get to decide who needs what.

Budsman Sr.: Did you just call your father an irresponsible, ignorant bigot?

Budsman Jr.: Well, that's the best idea of him I have.

Budsman Sr., *trying to hit him:* You stinking little pig! Bloody ingrate! You wait till we get out!

Budsman Jr., *dodging:* Well, you withdrew my allowance four years ago. I can't really think of much else you can do.

Moltenhead: Gentlemen, please. It's perfectly reasonable that we don't like one another now as much as we did when we roamed free, but let's not fight. Conflict in such circumstances is costly. Imagine what a mess we'd be in if one of us got injured. Next, please?

Budsman Sr.: Let me tell you a story. Maybe it'll convince you. See, when I was like my son—that is, young, poor, and not doing s**t for a living—I thought we should give everything to relieve the suffering in the world, to save the planet, you know. Well, guess what? Nobody listened, because I was young, poor and not doing s**t. When I started making money, I thought I'd get the influence to change things. Well, damn right! I got the influence all right, but, in the process of getting it, I realised why the world's going where it's going. It's simple. You work—you get money and influence. You don't—and you think the people who worked for what they've got should just give it away. See, winners don't help losers because they know it isn't fair. They know!

Henry: Where's the story?

Tony: Well, I understand where you're coming from, but surely it's not as straightforward as you describe. Take the Acumen fund... And even charities that just "give money away," they do change lives, even if it's just "butterfly effect."

Sotkin: Not enough butterflies.

Budsman Sr.: But what do those lives have to do with my life, really? You know, Montaigne, the French philosopher? He said "we all have enough to do sorting ourselves out."

Moltenhead: Now, John, this isn't quite what he meant...

Jane, suddenly: I agree!

Tony: What do you mean?

Jane: I mean, I'm not rich or influential or anything, but I feel that I work for my money. There's nothing wrong with wanting a nice life—nice things, nice clothes, nice meals. Holidays. Well, look at you. You have a Louis Vuitton handbag. I have a Mandarina Duck. They cost money, which we didn't donate to Oxfam. Why not? Coz we're both happier with these handbags than we'd be without. I need to spend money on myself to be happy. At least that's something I control.

Wager: And no one has the right to tell you how you ought to be spending your money, of course. The question is: why do you need a handbag to be happy? And what will happen when the populations of developing countries need, say, designer handbags to be happy?

Henry: What's "dolloping countries"?

Leila: De-ve-lo-ping. Well, it's like this. Imagine a place where three families live, right?

Henry: Ok... What kind of place?

Budsman Jr.: A very small rock.

Leila: So, one of these families is poor and hungry. This family needs to eat and wants to eat. The second family has enough food, but they want to go to school, learn things and have fun. That's the "developing countries." And the third family has food and education and fun. What they want is the biggest car they can get. That's the developed countries.

Henry: Don't they have enough food for that first family?

Budsman Jr.: Well, imagine that the third family, the rich one, gives the hungry family food. But within each family, there are members who are hungry, members who want to go to school and members who want a big car and can afford it. These last ones in the poorest family sell the food they get from the rich family and buy bigger cars. Get it?

Henry: No. It doesn't make sense.

Leila: Prof. Moltenhead, you're the economist here. How can we explain this better?

Moltenhead: I'm afraid the economic theories we've turned out to explain reality are so crazy that we'll lose all credibility with the child if we tell him about them.

Jose: It's a zero-sum game.

Everyone turns to look at him.

Budsman Sr.: I don't think I've met you before! Call me John... Are you a "partner"?

Jose: I'm a waiter.

Budsman Sr.: Shouldn't you be upstairs, then?

Jose: As a matter of fact, I should be at a lecture two blocks away. My shift ended an hour ago.

Budsman Sr.: Wait a minute... you study at the University?

Jose: Yes.

Budsman Sr., to his son: See? Here's a man who works for a living and studies!

Budsman Jr., exploding: Oh, give me a f***ing break! So what, he works and studies? Just making money to keep buying stuff and paying a***hole taxes to make sure there's more stuff for him to buy! And we can't fault him! He has the right to his comfortable little life! I don't want to be like him. You sure as hell won't be getting my taxes, Mr. Lovejoy!

Lovejoy, a little pale and smiling sadly: Do you think we need a revolution, boy?

Budsman Jr.: Damn right!

Lovejoy: You think a bit of poverty and bloodshed now will save us from a lot of the same later?

Budsman Jr.: I think... I think we can't carry on like we do, that's all.

Lovejoy, *gently*: Well, if you have any suggestions, my boy, I'm open to them.

Budsman Sr.: What about science? What about technology? That'll help us!

Sotkin: I don't think so. There are good reasons why a scientific breakthrough permitting us to change the rules of the game would be, in our world, like winning the lottery--useless.

Jane: Useless?

Sotkin: Yes. Do you know, ninety-nine percent of lottery winners, seven years down the road, end up exactly where they started, financially speaking, and none the wiser. Besides, science doesn't advance to solve our social problems. That's the paradox. The real advances happen at a different level.

Wager: What about the fifth dimension? Virtual worlds? *Second Life*? Doesn't this reduce the resources we use to subsidise "real life" activities?

Sotkin: Yes and no. Depends on how green your electricity is. Besides, we can only take the virtual environments so far.

Wager: What do you mean?

Sotkin: We'll always eat, s**t and receive medical aid in this world. See what I mean?

Lovejoy: You're looking a bit rum, Alistair. Are you all right?

Moltenhead, *very pale and clawing at his tie*: Yes... yes... just need a bit of air. It's getting a bit warm, isn't it?...

Sotkin and Jose remove his tie and lay him on the floor. Tony hands them the water, which gets sprinkled over the old man's face.

Moltenhead: Thank you. Won't you please get the pills in my breast pocket? Silly old heart; what a silly, silly object! (*Sotkin puts a pill in his mouth*). Thank you.

Suddenly, the light goes out. Mobile phone screens flash in the dark.

Budsman Sr.: Oh, great.

Henry starts to cry.

Sotkin pulls out a flashlight.

Tony: This may be the last thing on your mind... but I think I'm glad I didn't give the talk the way it was supposed to be.

Seven hours later.

Moltenhead is asleep, Henry in his arms. They are the only ones lying down. The rest take turns to sit and to stand. Leila is showing Budsman Jr. and Jane tai-chi moves for the neck. Wager and Budsman Sr. are talking quietly. Lovejoy and Sotkin are arguing about chess, while Jose and Tony are sharing Budsman Jr.'s iPod.

Tony, humming: “We all live in a yellow submarine... yellow submarine... yellow submarine...”

Jose: “We all live in a stinking hi-tech lift...”

They laugh.

Budsman Sr.: This isn't so bad, is it, Wager?

Wager: What, being stuck?

Budsman Sr.: Yes. I mean, it's too bad about Alistair, but he'll be all right once we get out, won't he? I'm... well, almost enjoying this. You know, to have all these hours just to get to know people around you. It's almost like I don't even need to eat or p*ss.

Wager: Yes, we seem to be coping well enough. The question is, why can't people cooperate like this on a larger scale?

Budsman Sr.: Well, nobody's going to like hearing this one, but that's an answer.

Wager: What's the answer?

Budsman Sr.: We're better than people on a larger scale. We're leaders. I don't like to sound colonial, but, you know, a degree of civilisation is not without importance... I mean, what's the point of trying to be PC?

Budsman Jr.: Father! You've really surpassed yourself today.

Leila: Are you saying some British people are more civilised than others?

Budsman Sr.: Of course! Some of us are always more civilised than others...

Lovejoy: John, really, I don't think this is the matter. I don't think “leaders” or “followers” have anything to do with this at all. Nobody's been leading anyone anywhere since the lift stopped.

Budsman Sr.: What's the matter, then?

Lovejoy: I don't know. Why don't you urinate on the floor?

Budsman Sr.: Plenty of reasons.

Lovejoy: What's your best one?

Budsman Sr.: No one else does.

Lovejoy: Excellent. Now, Dr. Bin-Said, why have you been standing to make room for me?

Leila: I can stand comfortably, while you can't.

Lovejoy: So what?

Leila: I suppose, you are close enough to me that your unhappiness and pain will affect me. I'd rather have my feet hurt than feel bad.

Lovejoy: Have you noticed, Henry hasn't asked for food?

Tony: Yes, I told him we've got rationing on the ship and that he gets to decide who eats, and when.

Lovejoy: Why did you take care of Henry?

Tony: I felt best equipped to do that.

Budsman Sr.: Oh, cut it out! What is this, Altruists Anonymous?

Jose: No. It's a zero-sum game between us and the lift, but it's not zero-sum among us. It helps to feel important, I think, to remain cooperative. It helps to be absolutely certain that you matter. This said, we are going to have to think about waste disposal very soon.

Wager, shouting wildly: I've got Norman on the phone here! He says... he says they'll be getting us out in a jiffy. (*Calming down*) Just hang on a bit more. Just a little more. It may take them longer than they think.

End.