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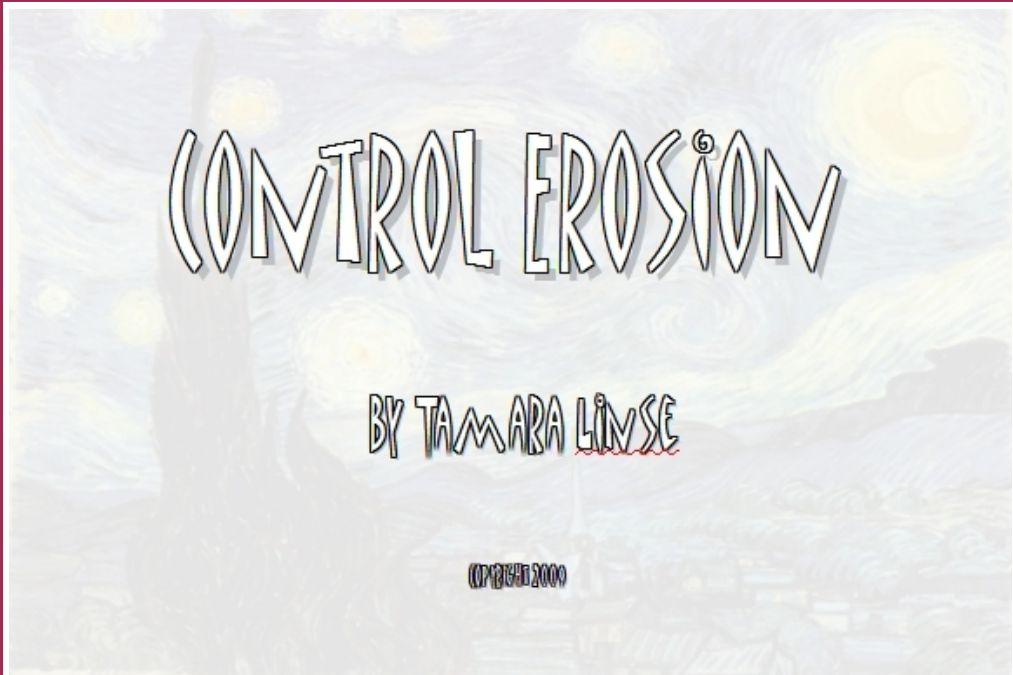
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It was catastrophic failure Norman was worried about. The bridge was being undermined. The river meandered to the left where it came from under the bridge's pylons, and over time the water had seriously undercut the rock riprap that protected the right bank and the bridge itself. It was Baer's Law—because of the forces of the earth's rotation, in the northern hemisphere the right banks of rivers were hardest hit by erosion.

Norman saw everything as a series of forces to be measured, calculated, and—where possible—controlled. Take, for example, the bridge. Gravity exerted a certain predictable downward force on the elements of the bridge, while the ground exerted an equal and opposite force upwards, thus maintaining equilibrium. Cars and trucks exerted vectored loads on the bridge's expanse. Wind exerted a certain amount of force, but on a fairly short beam bridge such as this one, it was negligible. Finally, water exerted a persistent force against everything on the ground—the sand and soil, the rocks, the pylons, the creek banks. The attenuation structure—the rock riprap with its geosynthetic fabric liner—was placed as a barrier between the water and the newly disturbed unprotected soils to exert the force necessary to keep the particles in place, to hold the foundation. There was something comforting about imagining millions of little downward forces, one for each grain of soil, keeping everything in place.

It was water that was the problem. Norman had come to see it as the enemy. No matter how well you designed something, water acted in adversarial ways. If you were trying to revegetate an area disturbed by construction, either there wasn't enough water so that the seed didn't germinate or there was too much of it and it washed away the seed and the soil you'd hoarded in long bench piles over the two-year project and then carefully spread back over the area. Water was crafty. It didn't behave and it even stole from the things around it. It leached minerals and drew off heat. It could even pilfer fundamentals, such as weight, as in Archimedes Principle, which stated that when a solid body is immersed in water, the loss in weight is equal to the weight of the displaced liquid. If you were trying to contain it, it always found a way through, around, or under. As in the case of the bridge, the water was slowly, insidiously, cleverly eroding the structure's firm foundation.

That's why Norman was here now, standing under the green awning of Peccadillo's café—his wife's choice—waiting for her. He had sat in his ergonomic chair at the efficiently designed desk in his state-of-the-art cubicle for three hours trying to figure out the best solution to the bridge problem. There were just too many variables, too many things to consider. What

design would be the most cost effective? The most reliable? The best compromise between the two? Norman's impulse was always to tear everything down and start from scratch, to do it right, but clients didn't want to hear that.

Norman checked his watch—12:12. Jasmine was late, as usual. Norman stepped out from under the green awning to the curb and looked along the street, first to his left and then to his right. Cars came and went, people walked along the sidewalk, a bicyclist zipped across an intersection, but no Jasmine. Being late really bothered him. It was simply a failure of character. It showed a lack of control of one's life, one's time, as well as a complete disregard for another person's schedule. Norman put his hands in the pockets of his dress pants and jingled the keys, kinkle-kinkle, kinkle-kinkle. She should arrive soon. Once while waiting for her, Norman had calculated that she averaged approximately 17 minutes late.

Norman's marriage was a series of forces too, but these forces related to how strongly he or Jasmine wanted something or didn't want something, how hard they held their ground. J force—that's how he thought of the things Jasmine wanted—would sometimes directly counter his N force. Sometimes J force was stronger, especially when it came to their son Tom, and sometimes N force. Norman had to admit, though, by its very nature, N force tended to win out.

Ah, there she was, right on (late) time, her slender frame flowing smoothly through a group of college kids. Her movements were always loose-boned and languid, and her waist-length straight hair was so pale you could almost see through it. She was so beautiful. It always surprised him, how beautiful she was. Before Jasmine, he'd always been attracted to intense brown-haired women who ran marathons or their own businesses. These women always left him bewildered and slightly tired, as if he'd been asked to solve a Fourier transform without knowing what a Fourier transform was. But after Norman and Jasmine had talked for the first time, he'd felt washed clean, energized, buoyed aloft. She did that to him.

When he thought of his life before Jasmine, he thought of Galileo's Law of Inertia, which was also Newton's First Law of Motion—an object in motion tends to stay in motion unless acted upon by an outside force. Norman had been going through the motions, and then here came Jasmine, the outside force.

"Norman, I'm sorry," she said as she stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. "I had to drop Tom-Tom off at daycare, and then I got into my work and lost all track of time." She pulled her shoulders up to her ears and tilted her head sideways like a little girl and said, "You forgive me?"

Norman didn't answer. He noticed three pale strands of her hair hanging from the left sleeve of her black blazer—the one she always wore with jeans—so he reached out and plucked them off. This made her frown. She'd asked him not to do this in public, but he couldn't help himself. He frowned too. She looked away from him and down the street to where the light had just changed from green to red.

They both pulled back into formality. He held the door for Jasmine to walk through, and she said, "Thank you."

The hostess, a chaotic girl with dirty blonde dreadlocks springing like weeds from her head, hurried over and pulled two menus from the holder on the wall. "Just two today?"

"Three if you count the awkward silence," Jasmine said.

The waitress stopped and a blank look came across her face.

“No, just two,” Norman said.

When they reached the table, he held the chair out for her. “I am but a sword in the hand of my empress,” he said with a bow.

Jasmine’s shoulders relaxed. “The perverse law of marital dynamics,” she said and glanced back over her shoulder at him. He snorted.

The tension seeped from between them. Norman sat in his chair. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

They were seated near the kitchen, and to his left Norman could see through the doorway where the chefs like well-oiled machines were preparing food. Norman liked being able to see the kitchen. Everything was so clean and everybody so purposeful. He scanned right to the restaurant itself. It, however, was lunchtime chaos. Everyone talked loudly to be heard over the din, a woman in a business suit yelled into a cell phone, waiters and waitress rushed from one end of the restaurant to the other, people stopped and blocked the aisles. It all pressed in on him and made him feel like he was in a whirlpool, so he focused back into the kitchen. That was better.

“So how is your day going?” Jasmine said as she glanced at the menu.

“Oh, you know.”

“No. What?” Jasmine always asked, but she didn’t really want to know. She wanted to hear that things were getting better, that things were fine. But sometimes Norman needed to talk about it.

“Well, the client on that project called this morning. Called me a shit engineer. He said, what kind of shit engineer designs an erosion control structure that fails within the first year?”

The guy was a real asshole. Norman tried to avoid his calls. He always started with, “You fucked up again” and then ranted for a half hour about how incompetent Norman was and how shoddy his work was, never mind that Norman only took over the project three months ago. Because this was a long-term client who gave Water Management LLC a lot of work, Norman had to grovel and say, “No, sir,” and “Yes, sir,” and “I’ll do better next time.” Hooke’s Law of Elasticity—the amount something deformed under strain was directly, linearly related to the amount of stress. This client deformed Norman, all right. He always tried to steer the conversation to a solution, “Yes, sir, but we can fix this. It’s do-able.” But the man always cut him off in order to re-iterate how he’d already failed and why wasn’t done right in the first place.

Even though Jasmine nodded, she was only half listening. Norman could tell by the way her head bobbed just a little, like she was listening to music no one else could hear. She probably was. Jasmine was a trumpet player and composer, and she was always thinking about her music.

Norman admired her playing a lot. He didn’t tell her—he wasn’t sure why—but it was like she was the priestess of an ancient religion, and she worshipped daily. She was always mindful of it, and everyone always told Norman how well she played. She didn’t play hard and staccato like those old jazz men. She could, but, no, her compositions were fluid and soft and made up of repeating lapping refrains. It was as if the trumpet sound had turned into warm water.

Even though Jasmine was only half-listening, Norman kept talking. He needed to get it outside himself, like an impurity in the concrete that weakened its structure. “I didn’t even do

the design. It was Rosencrans, that guy they fired because he kept locking his keys in the car on the jobsite. That and other things.”

“He said that? The client.” Jasmine was watching him now, mildly interested. Her head was no longer bobbing.

“Yeah. This guy’s a real piece of work. Steps on me whenever he can.”

Jasmine glanced down at her hands and kept her eyes there. “I’ve been worried about you.”

He knew she had been, the way she did everything before he even asked. The house was always clean when he got home from work. She got up with Tom when he cried at night, even when it was Norman’s turn.

“What’ll it matter in a hundred years?” Norman said.

Jasmine’s jaw clenched. “I wish you wouldn’t say that,” she said. “It matters. It matters to you, to us.” She gently slapped the table and bobbed her head. “It matters because it matters to you.”

Norman flooded with gratitude. He knew she was going to say this because she always said it. And he needed her to say it because sometimes it didn’t feel like it mattered at all, to anyone. His little life with his little job doing little designs that everybody took for granted. It didn’t matter, in the larger scope of things. He didn’t matter. But it meant a lot that he mattered to her.

“How was Tom when you dropped him off?” Norman said.

Jasmine smiled, and her eyes focused on a spot six inches above the middle of the table. “Do you know what he said? Every time we passed a house, he pointed and said, buil-den, buil-den. Did you teach him that?”

Norman shook his head and smiled. Just then, a harried waitress came and took their order. Norman ordered a calzone. Jasmine ordered vegetarian spaghetti.

After she left, Jasmine said, “He’s going to be a scientist, I just know it. He’s always pointing out things and classifying them. He got your engineer gene.” She hesitated and then said, “Let’s hope it makes him happy.”

Norman didn’t respond and unrolled his silverware from his napkin.

She continued, “Not a musical bone in his body.”

“I don’t know,” Norman said. “He seemed pretty musical this morning pounding on his tray.”

She laughed, a genuine laugh, not an appeasement. Norman smiled. It made him feel good to make her laugh.

“Shows what you know about music,” she said. “That wasn’t music. That was pure curiosity to see if he could get that plastic bumble bee thing apart. Unsophisticated scientific method, but he was trying.”

“He really does concentrate on things, figures them out.”

“Yesterday he figured out how to get the top off his sippy cup.”

Norman took a breath. He shouldn't say anything, but he did anyway. “This is going to make you mad, but I'm going to say it anyway. Please don't let Tom walk around with that sippy cup of water, please? He just drops it and dumps it on the floor and there's water everywhere.”

“Norman, it doesn't hurt anything,” she said. It was an argument they'd been having since Tom started walking. “He's thirsty. I give him a drink. If it gets spilled—”

“When it gets spilled.”

“WHEN it gets spilled, we clean it up. No problem.”

“YOU clean it up, because I won't let him have it.”

“Did you ever consider that people are sometimes more important than messes? Why does it matter that a little water ends up on the floor?”

“It'll ruin the wood. Besides, he doesn't need to be walking around with water.”

She was exasperated. “Let's not talk about this now. Did you come here just to pick a fight?”

He'd gone over the line. He shouldn't have said anything. “I'm sorry.” He craned his neck forward and focused on Jasmine. “How did your work go this morning? Any further on that composition?”

She sat back in her seat and didn't say anything for a minute. She was considering whether she would forgive him. Then she shrugged just a little and leaned forward. “You know how I was worried about my embouchure? Well, I think I've figured it out. I've developed a habit of tensing too much as I play. Trying to control it too much. Just plain trying too hard. Sometimes my shoulders ache by the end of a session. So this morning before I even picked up the trumpet, I stretched and did a few yoga poses to relax. Then, as I was playing, I made a concerted effort to relax, to keep my body and, most importantly, my lips loose.”

“Uh-huh,” Norman said. When Jasmine talked about her playing she sparkled like light reflecting off water. Her whole body leapt with joy, and her face animated.

“I could help you work that embouchure,” he said and lifted an eyebrow. It was an old joke between them.

She smiled. “Wouldn't want to tire me out before the big game.”

“That's right. Tomorrow's Saturday. The Jazzfest. I'm sorry. I completely forgot. I was going to work tomorrow. This project ...” Norman was so far behind he'd worked six weekends straight.

“What about Tom-Tom? You said ...”

“Well, maybe I could work just in the morning? Then you'll have the afternoon?”

“I've got to help with the arrangements for Jazzfest—we'll call Patty. She'll babysit,” Jasmine said, stone in her voice. Then, to soften things, she said, “There's something about being the only woman in the group. You end up doing the dishes, cleaning up the messes.”

Not in our relationship, Norman thought but didn't say. It's me who keeps things clean,

orderly. Sure, she cleans, but without me her life would be a mess. What he said was, “That’s me at work. It seems like I’m always cleaning up someone else’s mess.”

The waitress brought their food. “Plates are hot,” she said as she plopped them down on the table. “Get you anything else?”

Jasmine looked at Norman, and Norman shook his head. “No, thank you. I think we’re good.” Jasmine looked at the waitress and nodded her head.

After the waitress left, Jasmine leaned her head forward over her plate and narrowed her eyes, and some strands of her hair fell into her red sauce. Norman didn’t say anything. “You know how long you been saying that?” Jasmine said in a low tone.

“What really gets me is I’m always two steps behind,” Norman said. “I just can’t wrap my head around this project. With other projects, I’ve been able to keep it all in my head. With this one, I can’t.” It was because they worked on a lot of sites for this client, and everything was an emergency. No sooner would he get one thing handled and the client would call about something else, something that should’ve been taken care of six months ago. The regulators were understanding for only so long.

“That’s because you’re always screwing with yourself,” Jasmine said. “When a solution presents itself, you immediately think of something worse or bigger or some other problem. It’s like you want to make sure you feel awful.”

She really was just trying to help him, to fix things, to put things back in equilibrium. He knew that. Zeroth’s Law—If two thermodynamic systems are each in thermal equilibrium with a third, then they are in thermal equilibrium with each other. That was the problem, his work was the third system, and it was not in equilibrium. It was pulling their systems out of whack.

“Mike and Billingsly don’t help,” Norman said. “Sure. Mike’s a good engineer and he’s supposed to be working for me on this project, but Billingsly’s always pulling him to do other jobs. I’m supposed to be managing this, not doing the work, and I got nobody to do it.”

“You have a hard time doing that anyway.”

“Doing what?”

“Letting other people do the work. You’d rather do it yourself.”

“It gets done right that way.”

“Yeah, but you’re a manager. You’re supposed to be managing, not charging a hundred and twenty dollars an hour to plug in numbers.”

“It’s hardly just plugging in numbers.”

She tilted her head. “You know what I mean.” She was getting exasperated.

This made Norman feel better. He didn’t know why he did this—drag her into his bad feeling—but it always made him feel better. “Let’s change the subject,” he said. “I think we should get Tom some trucks or tractors or something he can play outside with this summer. Some big ones.”

Jasmine didn’t say anything. She just looked at him and her jaw clenched.

“What?”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“You ...” she hesitated and then because she hardly ever cussed she whispered, “*fucking* pull me into it, get me all riled up, and then you tra-la-la, let’s talk about something else. No. Let’s not.”

“Jasmine. I’m sorry I brought it up. Let’s just drop it.”

“No. No. You brought it up. Let’s talk about it.” As she said this, her eyes intent on his, the left side of her face took on an orange glow. Norman glanced into the kitchen. A cook held a pan of flame in the air. Norman couldn’t tell whether the cook had lit the dish on purpose or not, but he wasn’t trying to put it out. He just stood there waving it in the air.

“Norman!” Jasmine hissed. “Are you listening?”

She was mad, really mad. He rarely saw her this mad. It was out of control. Newton’s Third Law of Motion—for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. He’d been thinking of his job being the action and her compensation as being the reaction, but now he saw that it was never just action-reaction. It was action-reaction-reaction-reaction, way on down the line. It eddied forever throughout their marriage.

“You’ve been bitching about your job and this project ever since you got it,” she said. “You keep saying it’s going to get better, but it’s not. It hasn’t gotten better.”

“I ...”

“In fact, it’s gotten worse. You work twelve-hour days and come home bitching and tired.” Her eyes were shiny now. “I don’t know what to do. When you talk about it, which is all the time, I try to offer suggestions, but they never help. I don’t know what to say. How can I help? What am I supposed to say?” Her voice sounded like a trumpet solo, like one of those old jazz men, little punches of sound as they ran up and down the scales.

“Sometimes I just need to talk about it.”

“So I’m just supposed to listen? How can I do that, just that?” She shook her head.

Norman didn’t say anything. What could he say? That sometimes he needed to be rescued? Even if nothing came of it, it was enough that she tried. So he said, “Really, Jas, I really think it’ll get better.” It sounded lame, even to him.

“No, it won’t. And I can’t take it any more. I might as well be a single parent. I give and give and still it’s never enough. I keep the house clean because it usually helps you feel better—only it doesn’t now. I short-change my music so I always take care of Tom-Tom and I try to have dinner on the table when you get home. It doesn’t help though.” She looked past him and out the plate glass windows. “What’re we going to do?” She said it in a soft voice, not directed toward him. “Is it ever going to get better? No. I don’t think so.” When she said it, Norman’s skin prickled. He extended his hands to bridge the distance between them, but Jasmine ignored them and continued looking out the window.

It was the law he hated, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle—the more precisely the position of a subatomic particle is determined, the less precisely the momentum at that instant can be

determined. In other words, if you overdetermined—overcontrolled—the small things, you couldn't keep track of the whole or its future. There was just too much. What he hated about that law was that it wasn't a law at all. It simply said that there were no rules, everything was uncertain. Norman couldn't believe that. He couldn't.

“Jasmine, please?” he said, his voice wavering. She looked from the window to him. Her eyes firm, she focused on his face for a long time. He kept his hands extended out to her, palms up, and unsupported they began to shake with the effort. Finally, she slowly extended her right hand. It was cool and dry in his hot moist palms. He closed over it. She gently placed her left hand on top of his and held, attenuating his uncontrolled trembling.

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