The Dam Builder

by Nicholas Waller

For the second night that week, Andersen was woken by the distant sounds of building.

He stepped out in front of his isolated cabin and gazed up the valley wall to where a dark sky met the blacker skyline. A rumbling noise of construction, almost drowned in the roar of the river, was again carried delicately on the mountain breezes. Riveters, perhaps, and cement-mixers, and even great earth-moving trucks, the vibrations merging into a deep hum at the edge of perception.

He strained to listen, slowly conjuring up a sense of a wide clearing in which a mysterious lattice-work of girders was being erected. An electricity pylon, a helicopter platform, microwave transceivers? Or all of these at once, combined according to secret plans drawn up far away?

It was perplexing, because according to his site chief at the dam there was no other work going on anywhere nearby. She'd even run a special check when Andersen had first mentioned hearing late night noises and found nothing, neither military, official nor civil. He'd accepted this at the time, but here the sounds were back, clearer than ever.

As he he turned to go inside he caught a flash of light in the corner of his eye, but when he looked up it was gone.

Next morning he was tired from his distrubed sleep as he drove down the track to the dam site. Rain fell half-formed from the dank clouds clinging to the cliff walls. He tried to focus on the route ahead, occasionally glancing over at the river as if to reassure himself of its continued existence and power.

Water had always fascinated Andersen, rivers particularly. As a child he had sat by streams for hours on end, transfixed by the incongruity that something so fluid and ephemeral as water could nonetheless hold to a constant pattern, splashing round rocks in the same arcs and foaming in the same pools continuously as if carved in steel. It was an illusion. The water was always fresh, always new, constantly brought together from a million sources in a series of unique instants. It was never the same river, he was never the same boy, and the world moved on too and was never the same again.

Often he had stared intently at the flow pattern of a tiny fraction of some river, trying to understand its complexity and predict what it would do when he introduced a stone or branch to change it forever. And after building his little dams he liked to walk on downriver, watching the flow, aware that, as rivers were always going somewhere, down into lakes and oceans, he had altered not just his microcosm but the shape of the whole world's water.

As he grew up and studied geology and hydrology and the theory of river structures, Andersen never lost this holistic sense of the world water matrix as a sublime interrelationship of ice, mists, rain, seas, streams, groundwater, snow, springs, and clouds, air and even the bodies of all living things. Made of simple molecules, the water system was a huge wrought structure in his mind, webbed and twinkling, dynamically molded

by the hot sun and twisted by the spinning earth. Changing these patterns by his own personal action was sculpture on a grand scale.

Andersen stopped the car where the river gave out into the new lake, the early stage of the dam's mighty reservoir whose surface would eventually be far above his head. The valley had been prepared for its new role, transformed into an ugly wasteland churned by caterpillar tracks and dotted with stumps of the trees cut down and dragged away before the flood.

But ahead of him, pale in the mist, rose the wall at the end of the world that made it all worthwhile, the smooth grey curtain of the dam itself blocking off the valley like an installation by Christo. Inside that colossal structure channels had been cut to carry controlled waterflows for irrigation and drinking, and new turbines waited in their housings to supply electricity cleanly and safely to the region and far beyond.

Soon the road would be submerged, and his cabin and eventually this land too would fall silent under the water. He wondered abut the river itself. Would the little surface whorls and vortices still somehow curl as invisible currents deep in the reservoir? He liked to think so.

He knew they would be there, but Andersen was still annoyed to see the group of protesters gathered round their brazier at the main gate, grubby but unbowed, saying nothing. They came in sunshine and the rain, mostly from the nearest village, little more than a sprawl of shacks and small farmholdings a couple of kilometres below the dam.

Andersen was waved through security, aware of the villagers' bleak gaze. He hoped they would come round eventually, when they saw the dam working to their benefit. But at least the old days of overt surveillance and physical confrontation were long over.

The business day did not begin well. Disturbed by the nocturnal sounds, Andersen was irritable with his site chief, Lane, for failing to track down whatever mysterious construction activity was causing them. She ran yet another interrogation of the records and checked again with the relevant government agencies before reporting back to him, stonily polite.

"I can only repeat that the only building work of any kind within at least fifty kilometres is our dam itself, and no part of its plans call for a large ancillary structure high on the valley wall three thousand metres upstream from the main site, as you well know."

Andersen nodded. He did know, too well. He had drawn and lived those plans for most of a decade, organising them into shape, chivvying them through countless reviews and bureaucratic hoops until finally seeing them turned into massive reality.

"Is there really nothing else?" he said, guietly.

Lane sighed. "Nothing. Apart from our own barracks, the only nearby habitations are the villages, and they're downstream. There's certainly no building going on there."

He knew what she meant. The villagers in the shadow of the dam were worried and sullen, planning nothing for a future they did not believe in.

"Perhaps you're dreaming it," said Lane helpfully. Andersen smiled.

He had to stop bringing up the problem. Living alone in the valley several kilometres from everyone else was no help. There was no-one to share the listening. He couldn't ask anyone up from the dam, not now.

Suppose no one else heard sounds? Would they have to report him for cracking up?

Maybe it would all cease now that he knew, really knew, that there was nothing there.

Again that night, the second night in a row, Andersen heard noises, louder and earlier than before. They started suddenly, with a bang that made his heart beat faster. Wearily he went outside.

There was no mistaking it. The sounds were clear and distinct. And as he looked up he saw two bright lights below the level of the skyline. They seemed to dance before his eyes, mocking him.

The structure seemed larger than ever, with more engines running, and so, he assumed, more people working on the project.

He had to take the initiative and walk up the valley side and see the land for himself, on the ground. On the first fine day he could get away, he would.

As the weather reports promised, the next few days were wet, the clouds hanging low over the valley. The reservoir benefitted, rising as the water pounded off the mountains. Andersen spent long days down at the dam, listening to the rain as he worked. It rained at night, too, thrumming on his roof and massaging his mind with fingers that gently soothed while he wove a perfect tune to accompany his thoughts.

Best of all, he slept well and no longer heard the sounds of building. He began to dismiss them as the product of over-tiredness brought on by stress.

But late one night, all too soon, the rain stopped. Andersen woke instantly. There was a spacious silence for a short while, an open hum of absent raindrops in which he imagined the dark clouds parting.

Then he heard the distant clamour of metal bashed against metal. He turned the stereo on, high, to block off the noise.

The next day dawned bright and clear. Andersen rose early and stood outside the door. The sky was a perfect blue, the air cool and fresh in the shadow of the high valley wall. He breathed deep, enjoying a sense of anticipation he had not experienced for a while.

By that night, though, he was exhausted and frustrated, reviewing unhappily the day's long walk.

It had started well enough, though he he'd been in danger of going too fast too soon. But he'd made good progress, up through the trees and an area of scree, past heavy landslip boulders, up to the higher reaches of the valley side. He climbed steadily even as the sun grew hotter, and every now and then he stopped and looked round, checking on his house and the river and the valley as it curved away down towards the dam itself, which he was never able to see no matter how high he got.

And as he went he looked carefully for any sign of tracks, bulldozers, heavy lifting equipment, power generators, massive frames of metal. Any evidence at all.

There was none.

He found as he got higher that the heat and the rhythm of his steps and breathing seemed to set his mind wandering, drifting alongside him as though detached. The whole valley side took on the feel of an ineffably mysterious location, as unknowable as the top of Everest had once been, in this case not because it was inaccessible, but because it was so ordinary. It was just grass and soil and rocks and shrubs and bushes and little insects in the sun, a marvelously complex ecosystem in its own way, and as much a product of thousands of millions of years of the unfolding universe as anywhere else on earth. He found himself wondering how many places there were like this, invisible although open, unappreciated because so normal.

And if the shape and texture of the ground was assumed, but not actually known... well, maybe there were secret stories to be told of special powers latent in these hidden sub-landscapes; local gods and spirits perhaps...

But no. The whole valley had been comprehensively surveyed from all sides by geologists, civil engineers, business managers, photographers, cartographers and even the freelance artist hired to render pleasing impressions of the finished project; and before them, no doubt, had come farmers, travellers, warriors and hunter-gatherers with their own special skills, who knew this land more intimately than anyone since. Even so, as he watched his feet pushing through the grass, Andersen had wondered whether any other human had ever walked exactly where he now walked.

And then, finally, he realised he could no longer see his house, as it had fallen below the shoulder of the slopes. And as he had been able to see lights from home, so he should have been able to see his house from the building site. Which meant he must have walked right through it.

But there was no sign of anything there before, ever. He stood still, breathing and blinking.

He had got above the site, that was all. He could not have looked properly. And so, determined to use all the hours until sunset, he took a long, slow-descending, zigzag course home, though he had brought no food and found no streams of fresh water to fill his bottle, and by midafternoon he was dehydrated and dizzy, but still he carried on regardless, an automaton, unthinking.

By seven darkness had fallen and he was down in the valley, just upstream from his house, barely able to push his leaden legs out in front of him. He felt light-headed, as though his mind was going to drift away into the gathering night and all that held him to this earth was the newly felt physical weight of his muscles.

There was nothing up there. No building site, no floodlights, no chopped trees, no power lines or oil stains or discarded tins of soup or plastic bottles.

As soon as he was inside, Andersen had a long cold drink that made him feel a little ill. He sat down in his favourite chair and looked out over the darkness that covered the river, and rested, closing his eyes.

With a sense of its inevitability, he heard the sounds of building. Stiffly, he got up and went outside.

He looked up. There, where he had walked, where he had been walking all day, were lights. At least ten bright lights shone out over the valley and as he watched, more came on. The noise of engines, of saws, of metal on metal and even of people shouting echoed round the valley.

He went inside and slumped on his bed.

Briefly, before he slept, he saw again the pounding of his feet on the hillside, sweeping through the grass and stepping on tiny flowers that he only now noticed.

The next day the sky was dull and cold, threatening rain. Andersen overslept for the first time in years. When he finally got up he moved carefully around his house, under no compulsion to hurry. It was late afternoon before he made it down to his office.

"Heard any more sounds?" asked Lane.

He stared at her for a moment. "No. No more sounds." He started walking away.

"Wait!" she said. "You've got-"

Andersen slammed his office door.

He felt on edge, waiting for something to happen.

It was often like this towards the end of a project. The heroic time of hewing the valley and raising up the mighty dam was over. That set of operations was being wound up along with the workteams involved. New people would come in to operate new procedures, people who would run the turbines and check the water for silt and be responsible for the mundane but key administration of an ongoing utility sending power to the grid and water to the cities for the next fifty or a hundred years.

Doubtless he would go on to other things, but this morning Andersen felt a sense of loss, as though he had no real function. He went down to the model room and watched the scaled-down version of the dam going through its paces. Usually he found it absorbing, a good map of a complex reality, but today he could not shake off a feeling that both he and it were already part of some museum. He left before he antagonised the model team.

Better to go and see the real thing. Stuck in his office, dealing with technical issues and rounds of meetings about details, he felt he had not looked at the dam itself for too long.

Still feeling the previous day's exertions, Andersen walked stiffly up to the PR area constructed for the benefit of news crews and visiting VIPs, and sat down gratefully on one of the benches. From there he got a complete view of the huge sprawl of the construction site and all its ancillary buildings. The most impressive element was the mighty sheet wall of the dam itself, dramatically counterpointing the natural forms of the rock of the valley as though a sculptor's knife had been taken to lumpy clay and smoothed it out to show how the world should really be.

Behind the dam the reservoir was rising rapidly; in fact, it was surprising just how quickly. Andersen tried to imagine it full, a real and awful volume defined by the dam curtain itself. On one side would be the placid surface of a reservoir; on the other an abyss of empty valley in which the yawning excess of space emphasised the mass of water held back by man.

It was beautiful. How could anyone oppose such a thing?

But they did. He remembered the long arguments and judicial reviews. No matter how many geologic surveys or computer simulations his people did or how often they made their technical explications, always the answer from the villagers and the urban professional environmentalists was, yes, but we don't believe you, we don't believe your dam is either safe or necessary. Tempers frayed and it was all too easy to imagine some people taking it into their minds to create a danger where none existed, simply to prove a point.

Questions of sabotage, and big technology versus the people? How had Andersen got on the wrong side of that confrontation? He'd started as an idealist loving waterflows and rivers, and that, for him, had led inexorably to hydropower engineering and dam-building. Water was a clean source of electricity with none of the problems of nuclear power. As a student he had known his way was so obviously right, so simple. But in real life, events and circumstances and possibilities were so much more confusing. Over the years he had been sucked in, becoming compromised, partisan.

He recalled telling the villagers that things were out of his hands. He was not the one who made the decisions, he was simply charged with building the structure and they all had to wait for the results of the commission of inquiry. But when the entire project was in danger of being cancelled following an insignificant landslip, after tens of millions had been spent, he had argued passionately for continuation, lobbying politicians, organising supporting evidence, hiring PR people to put his case. Why?

He believed in what he was doing, but it was more than that. He was thinking of his standing in the hydropower world. He did not want to be known as a man who had a huge project cancelled under him; did that mean he was willing to risk other people's lives and livelihoods just to further his own career? Was he any different from any nuclear evangelist for the clean atomic future?

Yes, he thought so, though of course he could not guarantee there would never be another Vajont or Hsinfenkiang. And even if he could, a big dam was more than a possible future danger. It completely altered the local world world. The villagers knew the weather, they knew the mountains, they knew the farming in this area, they knew the rocks and shapes of the hills and the valleys and the ancient trackways through the landscape, they knew the smells of all the winds. Who was he, Andersen, to come along and carve his water power fantasies in their lives?

It started raining, again. Andersen tilted back his head and drank the fresh water falling from distant seas. He revelled in the sense of getting soaked. Too many people ran from wet weather, scurrying indoors and turning their backs on it. Better to celebrate it!

Slowly the dam and all its activities drifted behind driving sheets of heavy rain. Darkness gathered as the sun set somewhere beyond the clouds, and as the floodlights came on the dam site was slowly transfigured into a spectacular light show dazzling in its intricacy.

When he was thoroughly wet through Andersen got up and walked back down the hill. He noticed that the villagers had abandoned their post at the main gate and gone home, driven away by the storm.

The block housing his office was quiet but not deserted. Teams worked all through the night, monitoring water levels, keeping an eye on the rain, testing the turbines. Security guards patrolled the perimeter. Someone would be experimenting late on the model, or working at the computers on various research projects.

Andersen sat in his office and turned out the light. People researched into water because they liked water, not because they wanted to make money; maybe he should move on, chair a university department or something else a little detached from the brute economy. Or was that evidence of a naive belief in research as pure and disinterested?

As he dozed off at his desk his mind turned over a floating series of tiny self-contained waterfalls, shown to him as exhibits in a collection of hydrodynamic possibilities.

He was jolted awake by his pager bleeping over vast spaces of darkness. It was three in the morning and pouring with rain. Sleep vanished. He picked up the phone.

"Andersen."

"Ah - hang on sir." Then Lane came on the line.

Seismic activity. We had some shearing - "

Trouble.

"Where are you?"

"Northside... Coming."

Andersen moved as if in a dream, leaving the phone dangling. Seismic activity?

Lights were going on, people opening doors. And the alarm sounded, whining away through the rain. Outside, unrecognisable figures were running, splashing through the water. Tremors made the floodlights bounce.

Lane - where was she? Ahh -

Above the thrumming of the rain and the wail of the sirens Andersen heard something else. Rockfall.

"There - look!" said Lane, pointing.

A part of the valley side seemed to be sliding, but it was hard to see. Searchlights played across the area, confusing rather than explaining. He could hear it, though, they could all hear it.

"The valley wall! It's coming away!"

Andersen shouted. "Let the water go! Open the sluices!" And then "Off the dam! Off the dam!"

There were people on the dam, but they could not hear him. He did not know what to do next, he was ecstatic with indecision; and then he realised people were holding him, restraining him.

"No!" said Lane. "Get under cover - "

On the south side the valley wall and part of the dam gave way suddenly and slowly, magnificently, cracking and bursting with an appalling majesty only half visible in the swinging lights.

Andersen stopped struggling to watch, amazed. The thing they had worked to build for years was coming apart in seconds.

The dam waters crashed thunderously through the broken structure and down into the lower valley with a sound beyond comprehension, an impossible display of titanic power. It was a man-made, man-killing disaster, a terrible beauty, a plane crash, a sinking ship, a hydrogen bomb...

It was glorious.

Never mind the men on the dam or the villagers in their homes being swept to oblivion. Never mind his reputation. His heart pumped the flood, urging it on as he marvelled in the unique waterflow he had created on a scale no-one could better. The hoarded power designed to drive a million homes and factories was now discharged in an explosion of creation...

For a moment he felt it was worth it, a celebration of the Earth, the resourcefulness and mighty implacability of nature.

And then as swiftly as it had arrived his exultant mood departed and he felt empty, drained.

The rain still fell and the flow, lower now, rushed through what had once been his dam in a fast, evil torrent as it sought to become sea and the rain again.

The next days passed in a haze for Andersen as international media crews with their dishes camped on-site, and a government enquiry was set up. People from far away places impounded documents and looked into everything, trying to understand. Geologists took samples of rock, structural engineers investigated twisted metal, others probed, pried, investigated, querying management procedures and practices and decisions. Why did you do this. Where are the minutes for that meeting. How much sleep did you have. Did you investigate the track record of these consultants. Did you take into account this memo from your junior engineers. Did you understand the implications of this result.

Questions, always questions, and an ever-changing ever-present group of people on a rota, day and night, jostling him, blaming him, accusing him, asking him what he had done and why he had done it, talking of negligence and murder. He heard of the villages destroyed, families washed away to nowhere, their bodies unrecoverable, and some part of his body and mind managed to cope and look sensible and act as if in control. Responsibility for this disaster was being focussed on him, and he knew that the mood of the inquirers and the telecrews and the whole world demanded that he admit his guilt, as if a simple admission would solve everything.

And he agreed with them. He took the responsibility, not because they demanded it but because he felt it, not because he had caused the disaster but because he had gloried in it.

Above all, though, he wanted to sleep.

Eventually he was allowed to spend a night at home, undisturbed. He sat listening to the unchanged river gurgling in the valley.

It seemed to Andersen a long time since he had heard the sounds in the night, and he wanted to hear them now.

He was almost certain that the structure above him was some mysterious instrument of execution that would come sliding off the hillside in retribution. He had ignored the warning the noises had sent him, and now he was going to pay.

He imagined lights dancing in the air and the roar of his own destruction and he welcomed it, he wanted an avalanche of rock and metal and wood and mud and tangling wire to embrace him and sweep him away into the river and wipe his guilt from the world.

He went out onto the porch, calmly. But the night was dark and cold and clear and silent.

Andersen looked up at the hillside.

There was nothing there, no-one left in the village to bang metal and shine the lights above his head.

All he could hear was the sound of the gurgling river, and his heart beating in his chest.

In the morning an official car arrived. Andersen climbed in without a word. He was driven back down to the dam site.

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