

A Day in the Life of Pressure-Plus

Era: Circa 1990

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When a spell of 20 below weather struck Calgary, we Pressure-Plus employees did our best to avoid the cold air. Each day just before quitting, many of us dashed into the parking lot to start our cars. While the vehicles warmed themselves, we returned to work.

On one particular evening, Hayden had made his way out to the parking lot and was starting his vehicle. While he was out on the lot, he noticed that Hector's car was chugging and humming away. The car was empty and Hector had never left his drafting board.

Hayden returned to the drafting office, and I could hear him down the length as he asked, "Hector, how come your car is running? You didn't go out to start it."

I could see Hector hold out a small box, obviously full of electronic paraphernalia. "It's a car starter," he said.

"You mean you can start the car from here?" Hayden asked.

"You bet."

Hayden was impressed. He poked at the starter for several minutes before dropping it, with obvious regret, onto Hector's desk.

"Doesn't strengthen character," he told Hector and walked past me on his journey back to his office.

The next morning the temperature was thirty-five below. I raced into the building when I arrived at work – my breathing labored in the biting air. I was late, because the snow that fell overnight had slowed the traffic down to a snail's pace. Hector was going to enjoy his car starter tonight, I told myself.

As I walked out to the coffee machine, Hayden was squishing down the hall. More truthfully, he was going clump, squish, clump squish, clump squish. I looked at his feet and noticed that the sole of his left shoe had come loose.

"Did you borrow Hector's shoes for the day?"

"No way, Lois. I was getting into my car and caught my shoe on the door."

"You can get yourself a bottle of crazy glue for around five bucks. That should do the trick."

"What do you mean? I didn't even pay five dollars for the shoes. And I think there's some crazy glue around here."

I knew shoes were cheap, these days but... really... five dollars? "Check with Nora," I suggested.

We both headed for the drafting office, me with my coffee and Hayden in search of Nora, our super-efficient secretary. Nora was cleaning the top of her desk. It was cluttered with time sheets like it is every Monday morning.

"Where's the crazy glue?" Hayden asked.

Nora looked at him blankly.

"I gave you back that bottle of crazy glue," he explained. "Do you know where it is?"

"Oh Cheryl has it."

Hayden nodded, headed down the walkway past Hector's desk, clump squish, clump squish

"By the way," he said to me in a loud voice, "Hector's car starter didn't work this morning. It was too cold." It was obvious Hayden was taking great pleasure in its failure.

Hector ignored the remark. "Hey Lois, have you seen Jeff this morning?" I headed for Hector's desk - wasn't really into working anyway. Hector had that mischievous look on his face that told me he was waiting to drop some bomb.

"Is Jeff back from holidays?"

"Yes and he's taller."

"What do you mean, he's taller."

"He went bungee jumping while he was away."

"Are you trying to say he stretched?"

Hector laughed.

I was impressed. I would NEVER do anything like bungee jumping. "Okay," I said. "He must have gone to California or something, because, sure as shooting, he wouldn't have been bungee jumping in this weather. I got to go check this out."

I went to the back of the main office to see Jeff. He didn't look any taller to me but judging from his color he could have hit ground.

"Hector says you stretched a bit while you were away."

Jeff smiled. His white teeth looked almost childlike in his lean smooth face and his glasses slid down his nose. I couldn't quite get used to the full glasses he was sporting now. The half-lenses that he had worn for the last year fit his personality much better.

"You don't look any taller to me."

"No, I'm not."

"You were bungee jumping?"

"Yeh!"

"What did it feel like?"

"Pretty scary... but... well, really exciting."

"What a crazy guy," I said to Leil who poked her head over Jeff's drafting board. She nodded.

"Crazy? Sure!" Jeff replied. "I get it from my mother. She's been working for years in the psychiatric ward at the General Hospital. Some days, I feel like a Rorschach ink blob. She always tries to psychoanalyze me."

"We mothers need practice," I consoled him.

The three of us laughed companionably, and I returned between the drafting boards to my office.

A half hour later, Harry Scott bustled in. Harry Scott is one of those people who issues grand commands then walks away, leaving some draftee with a problem. Today the problem was going to be mine.

"Would you have a look at the tower on 89314. The gasket blew on Friday."

Comments like that give me a bit of a sick feeling. I had designed almost all the special flanges that we had used during the last year.

"The gasket blew? During hydrotest?"

"No. Actually it blew out in the field."

"After hydrotest? How could that happen? Was it the gasket in the body flanges?"

"Yes. Have you got the calculations?"

"When did I design this vessel?"

I dug through a stack of paper. The calculations were dated nine months earlier – the previous December. "I had a conversation with a guy out at Northco about two months ago," I told Harry, "and he told me that the gaskets for the special flanges have to be ordered with a class rating on them. The windings are different, depending on what pressure the joint has to withstand. I didn't know that back in December, so heaven only knows what they supplied us with."

"Check it out," Harry walked out of my office.

I went to talk with Hayden. Better he hear about the problem from me than from someone else. Then I phoned Northco to get verification of the previous conversation and to find out what

Northco would sell as a standard if their customer didn't specify a particular class rating. The news was not good.

I sent a memo, to cover my butt for another time.

Memo to all Draftees:

According to Bill at Northco, the flexitallic windings in a class 600 gasket are tighter than the windings in a class 150 or 300.

As a result, all special gaskets must be ordered with a class rating. If I forget to put the class on my sketch, please order it (the gasket) with the proper class rating.

...or I might have to go bungee jumping.

Lois

Joking aside, I was feeling quite depressed. Someone could have been killed, I told myself.

At lunch hour, Jeff was talking to Hector and Hayden by the coffee machine. Everyone was interested in Jeff's bungee jumping.

"How high was the cliff?" I asked, still intrigued.

"A hundred and forty feet – well, a hundred and forty-one to be exact."

"What kind of safety checks do they run on the bungee cords?"

"Well, they have three or four of them."

"Yeh, but I mean, how often do the guys that run the jump replace the cords?"

"Oh. I don't know. Those ones looked pretty ratty."

I rolled my eyes and shuddered. "What was at the bottom of the cliff?"

"Water - forty feet of water."

"Did you have some sort of harness around you?"

"No. They just wrap a terry towel cloth around your ankles. Then they wrap a canvas sling around the towel. The bungee cord is attached to the canvas sling - pretty crude apparatus really."

I went back to my office and thought about bungee jumping while I ate my lunch. Then I thought about gaskets that fail while in service. Then I thought about Bhopal and human error.

Hector came in to see me at 1:30, and handed me the baseplate designs for the two towers on his job.

"Lois," he said, "the beams in my skid have changed from 12" @ 40 pounds to 12" @ 26 pounds a foot. The shop used the wrong steel when they put the thing together on the floor. It was an accident. What does that do to your calculations? Will the towers that are bolted onto the steel, stay standing up?"

I put my head down on my desk to portray my anguish, but even that came out forced and artificial. "I'll redo them. Just hope the design works. But it probably won't," I told him.

Several times during the afternoon, I could hear Hayden teasing Hector about remote pencil sharpeners and long-distance erasers. I chose to keep working.

I spent the afternoon reworking the baseplate and skid designs, and realized the problem would carry over to the following morning. Still, I was glad when it was the end of the day.

I think a few other people suffered a bad day too. Hayden passed me in front of Nora's desk at 4:45 and lifted his right foot.

"Did you get your shoe fixed?" I asked.

"Yeh, but I caught the other one when I was getting into Hector's car at lunch hour."

I shook my head in sympathy. "Life's like that," I told him.

He sauntered out of the building just as Jeff whizzed by. "Hey," Nora gasped when Jeff bumped into her. "This isn't a bungee jumping cliff!"

"Sorry," Jeff apologized, "but I have to get to my class. Don't have time for things like eating and politeness." He was still breezing through her space even as he spoke.

"I don't care if you're in a rush; you should have some supper," Nora called after him. "Grilled cheese sandwiches aren't hard to make."

Jeff stopped in his tracks. "Especially if you make them the way my mother does - with an iron."

Nora was puzzled. "...With an iron? You mean the sort of iron you use to iron clothes?"

"Yeh."

"Your mother sounds like she belongs in a mental institution."

"Oh, she's been in one for years," Jeff said. Without further explanation, he turned and hurried out the door.

The final comment on the day didn't come until the following morning. Hector didn't make it to work. About 9:30, Hayden popped into my office, the soles of both shoes tidily glued in place.

"Hector just phoned," he said. "He won't be in today."

"Why? Didn't his starter work?"

"I asked him the same thing. You know what he said, the slacker?"

"What?"

"Not the starter,' Hector tells me. 'I'm sick - real sick. But you don't need to worry. If I don't survive, I'll leave the starter to you.'" Then Hayden threw back his head, laughed and clumped away between the drafting boards.

Well that was a plus for him, but the previous day's tragedies weren't working out quite so well for me... Jeff sent a copy of my memo back – the memo that said I "might have to go bungee jumping". He had added to the bottom of it...

...with or without the bungee cord?



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