

THE FOURTH REPORT

CASE STUDY

Thomas Osei had chosen public sector engineering for the same reason some of his classmates had chosen it and most had not: he believed that infrastructure was a form of care. Roads, bridges, and water systems were the physical expression of a community's commitment to its own people. That belief had survived his first year, and his second, and the particular kind of fatigue that set in around year four when the gap between what the work could be and what the system allowed it to be became something you stopped being surprised by and started just carrying. He was in his seventh year now.

The bridge was a two-lane crossing over a creek bed that ran fast in spring and dry in August. It served a cluster of farms, a volunteer fire station, and a school bus route that had no viable alternative. Thomas had first flagged the deterioration in his assessment three years ago: concrete spalling on the underside of the deck, early-stage corrosion in two of the primary support members, and drainage issues that were accelerating the damage. The report had been thorough. It had been acknowledged. It had been added to a prioritization list that contained, as far as he could tell, more bridges than the department had any realistic prospect of funding in the next decade.

The next year he wrote a second report, then a third. Each one careful, each one precise, each one absorbed into the same process and producing the same result. Now he was sitting at his desk with the assessment template open on his screen and his field notes from last week's inspection beside him. The numbers were worse. Not dramatically—the bridge was still within the boundary of what the rating system classified as acceptable—but the trend was clear and the margin was shrinking. He knew how to write that up. He had written it up before.

He had written the previous three reports out of a conviction that documentation mattered, that the careful accumulation of evidence would eventually move someone to act. That conviction had felt like professional responsibility at first. Then it had felt like persistence. Now, sitting with his field notes and the open template, he was not sure what it felt like. The bridge was worse. The margin was smaller. And somewhere between the first report and the fourth, the act of writing had begun to feel less like contributing to a solution and more like recording a problem for the file. He was not sure when that shift had happened, or whether noticing it meant he should write the report differently, or whether it meant something about him that he was not ready to examine directly.