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Opening extract from

The Glitch In Sleep

Written by

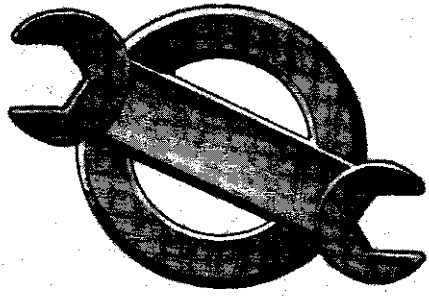
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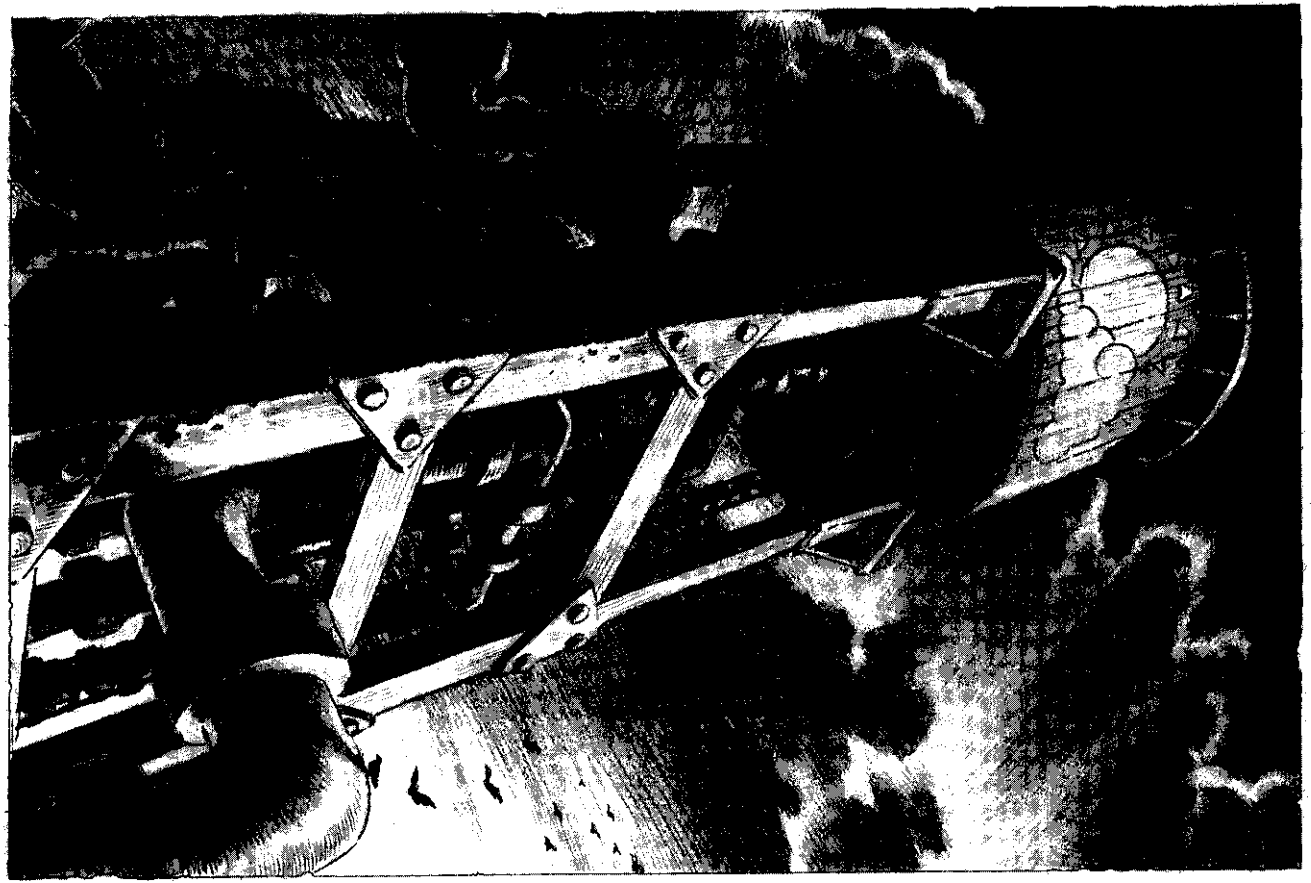
Preface

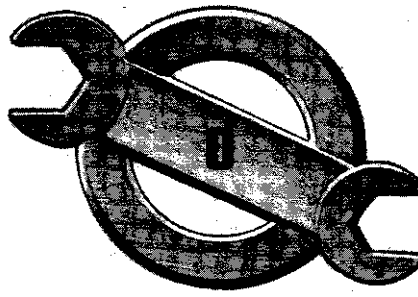
Ever since the beginning of Time, people have endeavored to understand what makes The World tick. How does it work? Where did it come from? And most of all, who built it in the first place?

Charles Darwin had a theory, which he called "evolution." Plato told his students it was just a play of shadows on the wall. And Buddha said that life is suffering, so you might as well have fun.

Confucius, Galileo, Black Elk, Einstein, Jung, Al-Kindi—prophets and visionaries all—each of whom contributed to the greater understanding of The World we live in today.

Unfortunately, all of them were wrong.





High Pressure

Village of Covas, Minho, Portugal

The sun beat mercilessly on Alvarro Gutierrez as he reached down and let the parched earth slip through his fingers. All around him the soil was dry and lifeless, his crops browned and withering.

"*Dame la barra que adivina, Sancho.*" (Give me the divining rod, Sancho.)

Alvarro's six-year-old son handed him the ancient twig that was naturally the shape of a fork. The farmer gripped the ends and held them close to his body, then extended the stem outward and performed the time-honored ritual of divination. He knew in his heart that the rumors of an underground spring were just that—rumors—but he had to try something. Or else . . .

"Nothing." Alvarro tossed the stick aside in disgust. "There is nothing there."

Sancho's eyes fell to the ground.

"What are we going to do, Poppa?"

Alvarro gathered himself, for he knew it scared Sancho to see him so beaten. He still hoped to pass this land on to the boy someday, as his father had done to him, and his father before that. All told, this farm had been home to the Gutierrez family for nine generations, but if another harvest was lost, the shared dreams of his ancestors would come to an end with him.

"Don't worry, Sancho. The rain will come." Alvarro forced a smile. "You'll see, the rain will come."

But the sky was clear and blue.

Rain Tower, Department of Weather, The Seems

Becker Drane had barely stepped onto the roof of the skyscraper, when the Station Chief was already in his face.

"You're late." The supervisor's tie was undone and sweat beaded off his brow. "Didn't they tell you to get here ASAP?"

"I'm sorry—there was nothing I could do."

This was the truth, but the details were too embarrassing to share. Becker had been stuck at Rachel Adler's bat mitzvah at The Pines Manor and there was no way to get away without being spotted by a rabbi or chaperone. But that was no excuse, especially at a time like this.

"Is my Fixer here yet?"

"Already up top, with three of my best men."

Becker glanced skyward. An elevator shaft led high into the air and ended at the top of a gigantic wooden water tower.

Stenciled on the side in fading blue paint was the hallowed symbol of this department—clouds parting in front of a radiant sun.

"Hurry up, kid," begged the Chief. "If we don't get this back online, we're gonna have another Gobi on our hands!"

Without a second thought, Becker was locking the cage of the rickety lift and pushing the lever toward "Up." At twelve years, six months, and eleven days, he was the youngest Briefer on the Duty Roster, but that did not exempt him from the rigors of the job. Today, he had been called into Weather because a large amount of Rain Water earmarked for the Iberian Peninsula had failed to reach its destination, and the cause remained unknown. In situations such as these, a specialist was called in—a member of an elite corps, who could get the job done when no one else could.

They were known as Fixers.

The lift arrived with a rusty clank and Becker stepped onto the top of the Tower. He was not yet a Fixer by any means, but being a Briefer was the next best thing. It required two years of Training in and of itself, and gave one the distinct honor of being a Fixer's right-hand man (or woman).

"Over here!"

Up ahead, four figures stood huddled in the mist. Three were Weathermen—crack meteorologists wearing Badges with the same insignia as the Tower—and the fourth, a twentysomething girl, with double-braided pig-tails and flip-flops on her feet.

"Glad you could make it, Briefer Drane."

Great. If matters weren't bad enough already, the Fixer assigned to this Mission was Cassiopeia Lake.

"Yes, sir. I mean, ma'am. I mean, sir. Sorry I'm late."

Back in The World, "Casey" worked at a surf shop in Australia, but here in The Seems, she was practically a living legend. Becker had only met her a few times before, but he had studied her career in great detail—all Briefers had, because most of them either wanted to *be* Casey Lake or had a major crush on her. (Or both.)

"Stuck at White Castle again, mate?"

"Yessir—Sliders were tasty." Becker breathed a sigh of relief because she didn't seem to be pissed. "What's the 411?"

"Not sure yet. The boys were just filling me in."

At the feet of the Weathermen was an open manhole that led into the cavernous tank below. This was the same Tower that held all of the World's precious Rain, and it was closely guarded to ensure the water within was kept both safe and clean.

"At first we thought it was just a Dry Spell . . ." Weatherman #1 tried to keep his cool. "But when we ran a diagnostic, the sensors reported nothing was leaving the tank."

"This is bad, man. This is really bad!"

Weathermen #2 and #3 were younger (and hipper) than the more straight-laced #1, and though they had big ideas for the future of Weather, they were not as experienced in the clutch.

"If we don't fix the problem soon," shouted #3, "Sectors 48 to 60 could be parched forev—"

"Relax," said Casey, taking control. "How far down to the water?"

"Could be a ways," reported #1, "we're almost at the end of the Rainy Season."

Casey reached into her messenger bag, which was embroidered with the logo of the Fixers—a double-sided wrench inside a circle. Inside that bag were all the Tools one would ever need, but all she pulled out this time was a small black stone. A few long seconds later, a distant splash could be heard in the darkness below.

"Never a dull moment." She smiled mischievously at Becker. Only Casey Lake could be psyched about making a free-fall jump of this magnitude, with no clue of what was waiting at the bottom.

But that's why she was the best.

SPLASH!

When Becker's stomach returned to its rightful home, he was submerged in icy-cold rainwater. Fortunately, both of them had brought along their standard-issue wetsuits, which kept them warm as they prepared to dive below.

"You okay?" asked Casey, spit-cleaning the window of her mask.

"Yeah, that was awesome," claimed Becker, but in truth, he was still shaking from the plunge. He had to pull himself together, though, for there was still a body of water beneath them the size of a lake. "You hear that?"

A vibration rippled through the Rain, along with a mechanical *thrum* from somewhere down below.

"Sounds like the Regulator Pump," surmised Casey. "We'd better get down there quick."

Becker nodded, and bit down on his mouthpiece hard. Though he had been on sixteen Missions before, this one

had come through with a Degree of Difficulty of 8.2 and the Dispatcher had mentioned the distinct possibility of foul play.

"Stay frosty," warned Fixer Lake before she dropped beneath the surface.

"Staying frosty, sir."

With flashlight in hand, he followed her down into the murky depths.

By the time they reached the bottom, the pressure was intense, yet that was the least of their concerns. The Regulator Pump—a hydraulic turbine built into the floor—was doing its best to churn out Rain, but the water wasn't going anywhere. And it wasn't difficult to see why.

Someone had jammed a giant cork into the drainpipe that led to The World.

"Maybe we should call for backup?" asked Becker over the intercom.

"No time," said Casey. "Recommendation?"

Back in the Day, Briefers had merely been in charge of delivering the Mission Report ("briefing" the Fixer), but since then, the job had evolved. Now they also handled small repairs, Tool recommendations, and general assistance in all its various and sundry forms.

"Corkscrew™[1]?" Becker suggested.

1. All Tools copyright the Toolshed, the Institute for Fixing & Repair (IFR), The Seems, XVUIVV (All Rights Reserved).

"Agreed."

From inside her Toolkit, Casey pulled out a metal contraption, which unfolded to become nearly six feet tall. It was the old-fashioned kind, silver, with the two extending arms (not the newfangled kind that do all the work for you) and it took all of their combined strength to manually drill the bit into the cork. But with each grunting twist, the screw sank deeper and the mechanical arms rose higher, like a swimmer preparing to dive.

"Slow down," said Casey, when they'd reached the halfway point. "The minute this thing comes free, the water's gonna move pretty fas—"

"Did you see that?"

A large chunk of cork had broken off from the screw, and Becker thought he'd caught a glimpse of something that broke away with it. He swam over to take a closer look, and sure enough, there it was—a tiny glass capsule bobbing along the bottom of the tank.

"What do you got?" asked Casey.

Becker picked up the tube and looked inside. There was a piece of paper, rolled up like a scroll.

"Looks like a note."

As he cautiously removed the rubber stopper, the first hint of concern spread across Casey's face.

"Be careful. Somebody put that there so we would find it."

In all truth, Becker should have seen it coming. Yes, he'd read the memo about an increase in Booby Traps and no, he didn't miss the slight tingling on the back of his neck, but on that night he was still a Briefer and not as in tune with his 7th

Sense as he someday would be. So it caught him completely by surprise when he unwrapped the message to see what was printed inside:

BOOM.

"Casey, look out—"

But it was too late.

"What was that?"

Back at topside, the ground was still shaking, and Weathermen #2 and #3 had begun to freak.

"The whole Tower's gonna blow!"

"And once that happens it's game over, man! Game over!"

But Weatherman #1 had been through a number of Tropical Depressions, Winter Storm Warnings, and other hard nights like this (which is why he'd been promoted to Weatherman #1).

"Don't worry, Freddy. They'll Fix it."

He placed a reassuring hand on #3's shoulder.

"They always do."

When Becker came to, the first thing he saw was his Briefcase, floating aimlessly a few feet out of reach. His head was still spinning, and he felt as if he were stuck in a Dream—the same horrible nightmare he had had so many times in Training, where he had blown a Mission that cost The World dearly. But

when he saw the shattered wood on the bottom of the tank, everything came back in a flash.

The cork had been packed with explosives, cued to detonate after the capsule came free. The force of the blast had sent Becker tumbling, while Casey and what remained of the cork were driven straight up toward the surface, where they had vanished in the gloom.

"Drane to Fixer Lake, come in! Drane to Fixer Lake!"

Nothing but static.

"Casey, you okay?"

Still nothing. Even if she had survived the explosion, chances were she was out of commission. But there was no time to go in search of the Fixer, for the Mission had taken a terrible turn.

Just as Casey had predicted, the removal of the cork combined with the buildup in pressure had caused a devastating whirlpool. Water was rushing down through the drain, straight toward Sectors 48 to 60, and though that might seem like a good thing, it was in fact quite the opposite. With nothing to control the flow, the entire World's supply of Rain could be dumped on southern Europe in a single burst—unleashing a deluge that hadn't been seen since the days of the Great Flood.[2] There was no one left to stop the disaster other than Becker Drane, and he had to do it now.

But how? The mouth of the pipe had been torn asunder, and there was nothing in his Briefcase designed for this task. The only remnant of their earlier efforts—the Corkscrew—had

2. For more on "The Great Flood," please see: *Classic Blunders of The Seems (Or Were They Intentional?)* by Sitriol B. Flook (copyright XVIUJNN, Seemsbury Press).

been nailed to the floor by the force of the current. And yet . . . something about the way its arms extended over the drain triggered a vague idea. An image was coming into focus—a picture of simple but masterful engineering—that he must have seen somewhere in Training. Or maybe in his own—

Becker was swimming toward the whirlpool before he'd even formulated a plan. From inside his Briefcase, he produced two odd-shaped items, neither of which seemed appropriate to the operation at hand. The first was a section of chain about six feet long—excess slack from a Gear of Time he'd greased a few weeks back—and the other, a lid from a Barrel of Fun. When clamped to the leverlike arms of the 'Screw, it added up to a makeshift version of the same remarkable device he'd seen with his mind's eye: the inner workings of a toilet bowl.

Becker tentatively extended the lid, attempting to use it like the flapper in his commode, but he badly underestimated the strength of the rushing water. It yanked him off balance, then quickly pulled him under the lid and into the drainage hole. Somehow he managed to keep a vicious grip on the chain, but with the weight of a million gallons of water bearing down upon him, it was only a matter of time before the Briefer was sucked down the sluice pipe, and into the In-Between.

It's true what they say about that moment before you die—a flood of images passing through your mind—and Becker was no exception. He thought about the Mission and how at least he could take some solace in the fact that as soon as he let go, the rubber lid would close above him and surely save The World. He remembered Training, and what a bummer it would be that after everything he'd been through, he would

never make it to Fixer. But most of all, he saw the faces of his family. He wondered how they would be notified and if they would be okay.

Becker's arms had finally given out when from nowhere, a hand appeared on his wetsuit and started pulling him from the hole. It was connected to an arm, which was adjoined to a shoulder, which was the property of a girl with double-braided pigtails that he was more than happy to see.

"Somebody call a plumber?"

"You did it!" cried #3, helping to pull the Briefer and Fixer out of the water. "By the infinite wonder that lies at the heart of the Plan, you did it!"

Sure enough, Becker's contraption had restored control of the Rain Tower to the Weathermen, who were already jerry-rigging a way to operate it via a host of ropes and pulleys.

"It's not over yet, mates," reminded Casey, as she tended to the burns on her shoulders and arms. "We've still gotta cross our i's and dot our t's."

She finished wrapping a bandage, then turned to Becker, who was still on his knees coughing up water.

"How you holdin' up?"

He nodded, then held something up in the air.

"Take a look at this."

In Becker's hand was the glass tube that had been hidden in the cork. It was empty, save for a strange image etched onto the side—the image of a cresting wave—and Casey nodded solemnly, for she knew exactly what it meant.

The Tide had struck again.

Village of Covas, Minho, Portugal

"Papi!"

Alvarro Gutierrez turned to see his wife, Maria, walking toward him from the house, their infant daughter in her hands.

"Mr. Ramirez from the bank just called again. He wants to know if we've come to a decision?"

Alvarro looked to his son and to the baby, who giggled and cooed, too young to understand—then finally back up to his wife. In the eyes of his beloved, he was searching for hope, but all he found were tears instead.

"Tell Señor Ramirez that we will never sell this land!" He grabbed his family and pulled them close.

"Never!"

On a hill overlooking the farm, two mysterious figures gazed down upon the scene. Their hair was soaking wet.

"Isn't it a little suspicious?" asked Becker.

"Don't you believe in Miracles, Briefer Drane?"

Casey pulled her Receiver™ off her belt. It was orange, with a retractable wire. She dialed #624.

"Lake to Weather Station, come in."

The voice of Weatherman #1 came back.

"Weather Station here. We read you loud and clear . . ."

"Okay, then let's start it slow." Casey scanned the surrounding countryside, the cloudless sky above. "Vague but palpable, volume 4."

"Vague but palpable, 4." The way he yelled it, you could tell

#1 was shouting directions to someone else, and a moment later, a faint rumble could be heard in the distance.

"Nice," said Casey, psyched. "Now roll it this time, with a slight clap on the end."

The Gutierrez family was trudging back to their house when the first rumble froze them in their tracks. Now they stood together, as a second sound sent chills down their spines.

Thunder, rolling toward them, with a slight clap on the end.

Casey nodded her head in satisfaction. For her, this is what Fixing was all about.

"Cue the clouds!"

The sound of a few switches being thrown piped over her Receiver, before #1 echoed the command.

"Cue the clouds!"

As the family looked up in wonder, a dark shadow moved across their faces. Somewhere in the distance, a dog began to bark, and a flash of lightning split a tree.

The flash had just faded when Casey shouted into her Receiver, "Another one! And don't hit anything this time!"

"Georgie, the yellow lever, not the blue!"

High above, another bolt streaked through the blackening sky.

"Now?" asked #1, ready to deliver the goods.

"Stand by."

"Standing by."

If there was one thing Becker admired about Casey, it was her patience. She never seemed in a hurry to get anywhere, which is probably why she always got there right on time.

"Annnnnnnnddddddddd . . . HIT IT!"

A thick drop of water landed on the arid ground, just missing the foot of Alvarro Gutierrez. And so did another. Maria and Sancho held out their hands, unable to believe their eyes, but it was true. Rain began to fall in buckets, showering every inch of the thirsty land.

As the water dripped from their faces, the family burst into tears, hugging each other as one.

Amid the torrential downpour, Becker and Casey looked down upon the farm below. The dog had joined the family, jumping around and barking, and it was hard not to share in the joy.

"Nice work, boys."

"She says nice work!" A tumult of cheers piped through the Receiver.

"Now low pressure for at least a week and then it's up to you."

"My pleasure!" shouted #1 with satisfaction. For him and his crew, this was what Weather was all about.

"Lake, out."

Casey hung up and sat down beside her Briefer. All around the hillside, there were other farms and other celebrations.

"Do you think there'll be a Rainbow?" asked Becker.

"I don't know. That's up to the Department of Public Works."

Becker nodded, pretending to act like he already knew that. There were so many departments and sub-departments in The Seems, it was hard to remember who did what sometimes.

"Slim Jim?"

He offered Casey his traditional post-Mission treat, and she looked at it curiously before taking a bite.

"Nice maneuver down there by the cork."

"You saw that?" Becker tried to conceal his pleasure. (You have to understand, Casey Lake was like "the man." Except she was a girl.) "It was just L.U.C.K.[3]"

"The residue of Design." She laughed, and he couldn't argue with that.

Below them, the screen door to the Gutierrez home swung shut and the jubilation had begun. Their farm had been saved . . . and their future along with it.

"Let me ask you something, Briefer Drane."

"Yeah?"

"How many Fixers are there in The World?"

Becker thought it might be a trick question, but he couldn't figure out the trick, so he gave the answer that everybody knew.

"Exactly thirty-six, if you include Tom Jackal."

Casey waited just long enough before smiling again and delivering the news that every Briefer dreams to hear . . .

"I think I'm looking at #37."

3. See Appendix A: "Glossary of Terms."