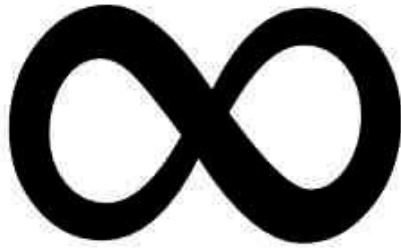


# **A Better Place**

*Book IV of "The Seems"*



*by John Hulme & Michael Wexler*

## COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION

-Official World 2.0 Ballot-



ATTENTION VOTER: Please indicate your approval (YES) or disapproval (NO) to the series of initiatives listed below.

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**Proposition 5: Bad Things Don't Happen to Good People**  
 YES  NO

**Proposition 9: School Week for all World Children Reduced to 3 Days**  YES  NO

**Proposition 18: 'Make All Your Problems Go Away' Button Installed at Select World Locations**  YES  NO

**Proposition 19: End World Hunger**  YES  NO

**Proposition 47: The World is a Lost Cause. It Must Be Scrapped and Rebuilt From Scratch.**  YES  NO

*\*Note: Altering or tampering with this ballot in any way, shape, or form is a violation of applicable laws. To report voter fraud, please contact The Big Building immediately at 1-888-NEW-WORLD.*

**Together, we CAN change The World!**



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## Chapter 0: “Don’t Mess With Mother Nature”

### Donaldson Park, Highland Park, NJ, The World

When the shivers faded and the spots finally cleared from his eyes, Becker Drane was not at all where he expected to be. Instead of rocketing through the In-Between or gripping a pole on the Seemsian monorail, the Fixer found himself in Donaldson Park -- the biggest and best of the many green spaces that dotted his hometown of Highland Park, NJ. Any concern that he’d somehow picked the wrong Moment dissipated when Becker heard a familiar voice, and remembered that it was here on the muddy banks of the ol’ Raritan that this Mission had truly begun.

“IF the Seems is so great, then why is there so much pollution in the World?”

Becker turned to see his younger brother Benjamin standing next to him, dressed in a *Tastee Subs* t-shirt and denim shorts that were perfect for this Saturday in May. Even though it was always good to see the little gremlin, the emotions that swept through Fixer Drane every time he did completely threw him off his game.

“Did you uh...say something, B?”

“I SAID, if The Seems is so GREAT, then why is there so much pollution?” The little boy pointed to the mess of old tires, soda bottles, rusty license plates, and foamy brown sludge washing up on the shore. “I mean, all you have to do is look at this river to see the Department of Nature’s not doing their job.”



Even when he was six and thought The Seems was just a figment of his older brother's imagination, Benjamin Drane struggled to understand why bad things were allowed to happen. Now that he was nine and an apprentice Sunset Painter who knew the ins and outs of the world that made the World, those things made even less sense.

"It's people who pollute," answered Becker, sticking to the party line. "And I've told you a gazillion times, there are Rules that prevent The Seems from interfering with The World."

"Rules, shmules. If somebody doesn't do something soon, all the trees are gonna look like THAT."

Benjamin motioned to a weeping willow that Becker recognized from family picnics and fishing expeditions. Back when they were little, the boys would climb its thick trunk or hide beneath its canopy of leaves. But now the trunk was rotten, and the willow's white and skeletal limbs completely bare.

"Take my word for it, B, no one in The Seems is happy about the state of affairs. Least of all Mother Nature."

Benjamin was about to chuck a stick into the water when his arm froze in mid-throw. "Is that just one of those stupid Seemsian sayings or is there really an old lady named Mother Nature?"

"A little bit of both," Becker chuckled and removed his Bleceiver™<sup>1</sup> from his belt. "I'm actually on my way to see her in about...thirty seconds."

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<sup>1</sup> All Tools copyright © the Toolshed, the Institute for Fixing & Repair (IFR). The Seems, XVUIVVII<sup>1</sup> For more information, please see: *Appendix C: Tools of The Trade*



“What for?”

To explain THAT would take a lot longer than thirty seconds, so Becker threw out a white lie and hoped it flew. “My 7<sup>th</sup> Sense is going crazy and something tells me this Mission’s got my name written all over it.”

The white half of Becker’s tall tale involved the hairs raising on his neck and the shivers running up and down his spine, all manifestations of a Fixer’s most valuable Tool. How Becker knew that he’d be the one to get the Call or that the ensuing Mission would take him to the Department of Nature was the part that made his nose feel longer. But if all went well in the next fifty-seven minutes, he’d have more than enough time to make up for lying.

Maybe even a lifetime...

“Benji?”

“Yeah?”

“Just in case something goes wrong over there, I just wanted you to know you’re an awesome little bro.” The words coming of Becker’s mouth caught him by surprise, mostly because he hadn’t said them the last time he was here. “I take that back...”

Becker reached out and put his hand on Benjamin’s shoulder.

“You’re just an awesome brother.”

Benjamin flinched -- as if he’d been expecting “PSYCH!” or an insult, then flushed red with embarrassment. But Becker thought he caught the hint of a smile on the third grader’s face as he turned back towards the river.



“You’re not the worst in the World, either.” Coming from Benjamin Drane, that was a lot. “Nothing IS gonna go wrong, is it, Becks? I mean, you’re gonna be okay, right?”

“If I can do my job and do it fast, then yeah...I’m sure I’ll be just fine.”

As false as that sounded to his own ears, Becker genuinely wasn’t concerned for his safety on this Mission. What stressed him out more was whether or not he could complete it in time to get from the Department of Nature all the way back to the airport terminal in Washington, D.C. before a very important person got off a very important plane. He HAD to make that meeting, or the Moment he’d been waiting for would be lost. Forever...

But first he needed to save The World.

BLINK! BLINK! BLINK! BLINK! BLINK!

## **Nature Walk, Department of Nature, The Seems**

*“MISSION REPORT, SEEMS-WORLD TIME -- 19:47. ADMINISTRATOR  
DEPARTMENT OF NATURE THREATENING WORLDWIDE GREENOUT UNLESS  
DEMANDS MET BY 25:00. ASSIGNMENT: FIND AND FIX.”*

Central Command had established the Degree of Difficulty as 12 (the highest possible for any Mission) and concluded with the following warning:

*“MULTIPLE CASUALTIES REPORTED. USE EXTREME CAUTION.”*



Ranger Rick shook his head in amazement when he saw who was jogging through the north entrance of the Nature Walk. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you’re early!”

There wasn’t an employee in the Seems who wasn’t stoked to work with the youngest member of the Duty Roster, but Becker Drane was known more for his dedication and laid back attitude than his punctuality.

“Laced up my Speed Demons™ on the monorail.” Fixer #37 reached down to shift his blazing pair of high-tops back into first gear. “There’s not a Moment to lose.”

“Tell me about it,” said Rick, pulling at his thick brown beard. “The old lady’s gone completely ham salad.”

Like most Nature Buffs, Ranger Rick eschewed the stiff park ranger’s uniform he was supposed to wear for a tank top, cut-off jeans, and boots. In fact, the only sign that he was an official staff-member and not some mountain-biker or Tree Hugger was the logo on his sweat-soaked bandanna: the image of a tall and mighty oak.

“She gave us no warning whatsoever. One minute, me and Muntean were trimming the Hedge Funds, and the next thing I knew, bushes started shooting thorns and trees were trying to strangle us with their branches. Muntean got caught up in some Poison Ivy and -- ”

Rick’s eyes darted towards the thick brush that lined both sides of the Nature Walk, no longer trusting their intent.

“She’s dead, and so are Mason and Pryde. The rest of the Buffs...





“...have fallen back to the Flower Plant to take cover.” Becker didn’t want to be rude, but Time was seriously of the Essence. “I had the Department of Health dispatch a team of Care Givers and they should be there any minute.”

Ranger Rick did a double-take. “How’d you know I sent everyone to the Plant?”

“Came on my Mission Report.”

“But all communications between Nature and the Big Building are down. I haven’t even told Central Command yet.”

Damn. Becker would have to be lot more careful if he wanted this to go according to HIS plan. Or maybe a whole lot less.

“Listen, Rick – do you wanna toggle through my Bleceiver or do you wanna get this Department back online?”

The Ranger didn’t look convinced, but with the 25:00 hour mark rapidly approaching, he whispered “Online.”

Becker tightened his own sweaty doo-rag and headed deeper down the Walk.

“That’s what I thought.”

-----

Back in The Day, Nature had been responsible for laying out the foundation of The World – oceans, streams, mountains, the crystal blue ceiling of the cloudless sky. Now that the heavy lifting was done, they played more of a maintenance role, making sure tides rose and fell, or erupting the occasional volcano when it was necessary to blow off a



little steam. The lynch pin of the operation, however, is still the Nature Preserve, a two-hundred square mile forest directly responsible for every piece of plant-life known to man<sup>2</sup>. Working there as a Buff is usually a pretty mellow job, because all you really need to do is make sure the indigenous flora is getting enough water and Love. But if Mother Nature is in a bad mood?

“She’s somewhere behind those trees.”

From the roof of the Green House, Ranger Rick pointed to a seemingly impenetrable circle of poplars, dogwoods, and pines. On a normal day, the emerald, ten story, eighteen bedroom mansion served as a communal living space/chill-out zone for the tight-knit Nature Buffs, but today it had been transformed into a makeshift ops-center. “Far as I can tell, the only way to get to her is to slip in through the sprinkler system.”

“Bad idea,” barked Fixer Drane, removing his Sprecheneinfaches™ from his Toolkit and affixing it to the tip of his tongue. “We need a more direct approach.”

“Who says?” The Buff motioned to what looked like a storm drain in the southwest corner of the woods. “That pipe runs directly under the Grass Roots, and there’s no vegetation down there that she can use to attack us.”

“You’re forgetting about the algae on the ladder,” whispered Becker, not liking the taste of this particular Déjà Vu. “Anyone who climbs down there will be dead before their feet hit the ground.”

“What algae? I’ve been down there a million times, and never seen a spot of -- ”

---

<sup>2</sup> Or woman.



Before Rick could argue any further, the Fixer turned up the volume on the small, thimble-like device attached to his tongue, translating Becker's words into a language that literally anyone could understand.

“ADMINISTRATOR NATURE, THIS IS FIXER F. BECKER DRANE! I'VE BEEN GIVEN FULL AUTHORITY BY THE POWERS THAT BE TO ARBITRATE THIS DISPUTE, AND REQUEST SAFE PASSAGE THROUGH THE WOODS SO WE CAN COMMENCE NEGOTIATIONS.”

Becker waited for a response from behind the towering wall of trees, but heard only a gentle breeze rippling through needles and leaves. He kicked himself for forgetting to wear a Hearing Aide™, slapped one on his right ear, then tried again.

“INITIAL OFFER INCLUDES FULL IMMUNITY FOR THE DEATHS OF RANGERS MUNTEAN AND PRYDE, AND SMOG ABSORBENT CLOUDS ARE ON THE TABLE. I REPEAT, S.A.C.'s ARE ON THE TABLE!”

Becker was starting to think that maybe Rick's failed gambit was unavoidable, when the breeze raised again, and a stern voice that reminded him of his old Vice Principal Mrs. Carlisle whispered in his hear.

“Come alone,” was all she said.

Becker muted his Sprecheneinfaches™ and turned to his guide. “Wait here and I'll have this thing Fixed in no --

“Since when do the Powers That Be capitulate to terrorists and murderers!?” The Nature Buff was still seething at the memory of his fallen comrades. “Let alone give a Fixer the right to approve changes to the Plan?!”



“Since your boss threatened to turn the World into a wasteland by midnight!”

“Bogus! You’ve been lying through your teeth ever since you got here! And come to think of it, where’s your Briefer!?” Rick grabbed the teenager by the arm, refusing to let him descend the bluff. “You’re not going anywhere until you tell me what’s going on!”

Becker looked at his Time Piece™, which read 24:12 SST<sup>3</sup>. That translated to 11:12 AM in Washington, D.C., which meant that if he wanted to get to the airport in time, he had to fix Nature in what, ten minutes? Fifteen, tops? Better to come clean now and deal with the repercussions later.

“Alright, Rick. Chill out and I’ll tell you everything.”

The Nature Buff nodded grimly, keeping himself between Fixer Drane and the Woods just in case.

“The reason why I blew off Briefer Gonzales...why I used my Speed Demons and got to Nature early...and why I knew you’d sent everybody to the Flower Plant...is that I’ve already been here before.”

“To the Department of Nature?” Rick was utterly confused. “Of course you --”

“No...I’ve already been on this MISSION. Almost two years ago to the day, in fact.” Becker cleared his throat, because this was the part he’d been trying to avoid.

“And the reason I knew about the algae attack is that I’ve seen someone get killed that way before.”

“Who?”

---

<sup>3</sup> Seemsian Standard Time.



“YOU.”

This time Rick did a triple-take, and it might’ve turned quadruple if Becker hadn’t filled in the painful silence. “The old lady caught us by surprise, dude. Guess it’s true what they say about her.”

“I don’t understand, Drane.”

“I know it’s hard to swallow, but the reality is, none of this is actually happening.” A second clear of the throat didn’t make Becker’s job any easier. “You and I are inside a Frozen Moment.”

“But it’s against the Rules to go into someone’s Frozen Moment.”

“Not if it’s your own.”

When Rick saw the conviction in Becker eyes, and finally realized what the Fixer was implying, his legs started shaking so badly that he had to sit down in the grass. “Oh no...oh man...”

“You’re not kidding.” Becker smiled sadly. “If it’s any consolation, we both went pretty quick.”

“This can’t be...my wife...we’re about to have our first child...”

“Your daughter’s name’s Alyssa and she’s an angel. She’s got your eyes...”

Rick’s head was still spinning, but something in the Fixer’s grip upon his shoulder told him that even though he would never see her, his little girl would be alright. “Okay, Drane. Do what you have to do.”

Becker nodded – what else could he say? - then raced to the edge of the forest. Two years ago he’d approached this same tree-line covered in Ranger Rick’s blood, and



filled with a burning desire for revenge. It was that rage that empowered him to cut a swath to Mother Nature despite the fact that every Burning Bush and Blade of Grass was trying to cut him to pieces. Tonight, he would need neither his anger nor his Green Thumbs™, for the towering trees and all their allies remained motionless as he jogged beneath.

Even though he was in a major rush, the Fixer took the time to stop and smell the roses. Wasn't that one of the best parts of being in a Frozen Moment? To see what might've been, if only you'd made different choices and things had gone another way? In this case, could a change in strategy allow Becker to negotiate an end to this standoff in less than five minutes, instead of the four and a half days it had taken last time?

“Good to see you again, Fixer Drane.”

An older woman's voice came across his Hearing Aide, and it was only then that Becker realized he was standing directly in front of Mother Nature herself.

“It's good to see you as well, ma'am.” Becker removed his bandanna out of respect for the senior Administrator in The Seems, who was famous for being a bit of a stick in the mud. She also happened to be a two-hundred-foot-tall oak tree, which had it not been for the Tools on Becker's tongue and ear, would have made this conversation even more challenging than it already was. “I wish it could've been under better circumstances, though.”

“As do I.” Mother Nature only spoke through her leaves, and the fury in their rustle was unmistakable. “But I can no longer watch my children in the World be poisoned to death, day after day, without saying -- ”



“ -- enough is enough?”

“Yes. That’s exactly how I was going to put it.”

“Totally understandable, Ma’am. As far as I’m concerned, your demands for amendments to the Plan are more than reasonable.”

There was a long moment of silence, as if the ancient oak was trying to suss out where this shaggy-haired teenager was coming from. “How can you say that, Fixer Drane, when I haven’t given you those demands yet?”

Becker checked his Time Piece again. No time to do anything but come clean, which could definitely go either way. Mother nature would either believe his story and stand down or she would probably tear him limb from limb. That wouldn’t be fun but since he’d already bought the Farm once this year...

“What do you know about Frozen Moments, ma’am?”

### **Dulles International Airport, Chantilly, Virginia**

“NOW ARRIVING, AIR CANADA FLIGHT 1432 FROM TORONTO, GATE 17D.”

Becker’s lungs were about to pop through his chest as he hopped off the people mover and made to his way through the terminal. He’d been in an all-out sprint for the last twenty-five minutes, from the instant Mother Nature agreed to restore relations with The Seems until he burst into Dulles International through one of the last remaining active Doors in The World. Thankfully, when he arrived at Gate 17D, the plane in question was still taxiing, which gave him a few extra seconds to settle his nerves.



As he slipped into a bathroom stall and changed into his old school corduroys and Pumas, Becker didn't feel bad about the concessions he had made to Mother Nature. She'd been a little dubious about the whole Frozen Moment thing, but when he agreed to green-light restocking the Amazon Jungle with unchopdownable trees and Venus Human Traps, her anger was greatly assuaged. How that would go over in The Big Building was another story, but at least Nature was back on --

“NOW ARRIVING, AIR CANADA FLIGHT 1432 FROM TORONTO, GATE 17D.” echoed the announcement a second time. Becker dried his hands with a paper towel then headed back out to the gate.

It never ceased to amaze the Fixer how real it felt to be inside a Frozen Moment. Jet-lagged passengers were disembarking from the plane, carts bearing elderly passengers and their luggage went beeping by, and the sweet smell of fresh cinnamon buns being ladled with melted sugar did their best to drag Becker to the food court. Like all his previous (successful) Fixer Missions, the day he averted a World-wide Greenout had been one of the best experiences in his life, which is why it had been sealed inside a block of ice and stored in the Daylight Savings Bank until that life had ended. But re-living his greatest hits wasn't why he was in this airport today.

While he scanned the travelers for a girl with dirty blonde hair, Becker thought back to that afternoon two years ago, when he and his brother had gone for a walk in Donaldson Park. The Fixer had long been secretly planning a voyage from New Jersey to Washington, D.C., so he could surprise Jennifer when the plane bearing her Caledon East high school debate team had landed. But then his 7<sup>th</sup> Sense had gone haywire and





his Bleceiver had sounded and all those visions of watching his girlfriend kick butt at the International Tournament of Champions before taking her on a Whirl Wind™ tour of the nation's capitol for the single greatest date of all-time had gone up in--

“Fancy meeting you here.”

Becker knew who'd just spoken from a few feet behind him, and he took several deep breaths to warm his fluttering spirit. There was an intricate plan in place for this moment, involving flowers, chocolates, and a brand new mix CD, but when he turned around and saw how pretty Jennifer Kaley looked in her monogrammed debate team uniform, the best Becker could muster was:

“Hey...”

“Hey.”

The two of them just looked at each other for a while, unconcerned with the swirl of passengers or the fact that Jennifer's debate coach had undoubtedly noticed she was locked in some kind of staring, grinning, glowing all over contest with a shaggy-haired stranger and was probably on his way to fulfill his chaperone duties. It wasn't until droplets of water began rolling down Becker's forehead and plopping down to the floor that someone actually spoke.

“Becker, are you okay?”

He knew from previous Fro Mos that he must've looked like someone stricken with a terrible fever, and pulled Jennifer close before it was too late to do so.

“I'm fine, Jenny. It's just...it's really good to see you, is all.”



By the time he took Jennifer in his arms and hugged her as tightly as he possibly could without breaking her ribs, water was pouring down both of their faces and soaking their clothing and pooling about their feet. The walls of the airport had turned to liquid and so had all the people who moved between them. The last thing Becker remembered doing was closing his eyes and trying to feel the heart of the girl he loved beating against his chest, but not being able to because his own was pounding so fast.

And then it was over.

### **18 Easy Street, A Better Place, The Seems**

For a few long minutes, Becker just sat there in the tub, quietly watching the remains of another Frozen Moment go swirling down the drain. He could still see distorted images of an airport inside the droplets, could even smell that awesome product that Jennifer always used to untangle her wavy locks. Becker had no idea what the orange goop was called, but back when he was still living in the World, he would lie in bed after going to the movies with her or just chilling out with Jennifer and her friends and that smell would still be in his nostrils, carrying both the memory of good times between them and the promise of so many more yet to come.

Becker waited for the gurgle of the last drop's disappearance before lifting himself from the tub and padding barefoot through his bungalow. The cords he'd worn at Dulles had vanished as well, replaced by the soaking wet Ocean Pacific bathing suit he always wore when swimming through the past. Usually he'd change into something else



before going down to the beach, or at least wring himself dry of personal experience, but today he just grabbed a towel and headed out the door.

The afternoon sun was high in the cloudless blue sky, and he tried to take some pleasure in the way its rays warmed his goose-bumpy skin. Becker's bungalow was on Easy Street, a pebble strewn dirt road not far from the spot where he'd first arrived on this beach over a year ago. Back then, the sand had been empty save for a dude with a metal detector, but today, when Becker crested the last of the dunes, he was not surprised to see dozens of people scattered about the shoreline. Sweet, he thought. Don't these nimrods have anything better to do?

Though most of the faces were familiar, acquaintances he'd made while bodysurfing or bumming around the boardwalk, Becker didn't feel the need to acknowledge anyone as he wove between their blankets. That wouldn't work with his grandfather, though, and Jackal and Po would surely try to debrief him like they always did. Thankfully, Grandpa Lou was still playing cards with his pals, while his fellow Fixers were over by the jetty, banging around on that collection of driftwood they were trying to turn into a boat. In fact, it looked like the only lost loved one Becker would have to deal with was an eleven-year old girl in a folding chair, burning through her copy of *The Golden Bough*.

"How'd it go?" asked Amy Lannin, pushing a pair of sunglasses to the edge of her nose.



“How do you think?” He threw his towel next to her chair, then angrily plopped down on the sand.

“Did you at least get to see her this time?”

Becker nodded bitterly. “Somehow that made it even worse. Not to mention my buddy Rick’s last chance to meet his daughter just went down the drain.”

“Frozen Moments are meant to be fleeting, Becks,” chirped Amy, the veteran of many a temper tantrum by her childhood best friend. “And for all you know, Ranger Rick is in an even better place than this one.”

“You’re right, Ame. I don’t know DIDDLY-SQUAT about where Seemsians go when they die. But I DO know where people from the World go, and you wanna know what I think about THAT?”

Becker gritted his teeth to stop himself from venting, but it was a futile gesture considering the pristine beauty of the paradise all around him. Waves were gently lapping on the shore, while glorious palm trees swayed easily overhead. Out on the water, dolphins were swimming alongside giddy children, and he could hear music and laughter from somewhere up on the boardwalk. All of these sights and sounds stoked the fires of his anger, and with one last deep breath, he turned to the girl beside him and said what had been on his mind since that stupid Train had crashed into that even stupider mineshaft:

“Being dead sucks.”



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Becker Drane may have bought the Farm, but his story is far from over. Now, in perhaps his most death defying adventure yet, the youngest Fixer in The Seems must venture into uncharted waters and navigate his way back to the World he loves.

Long-lost friends will be rediscovered, old enemies confronted, and a fate literally worse than death looms on the horizon. All this as Jennifer Kaley -- Becker's girlfriend and the newest intern at the Big Building -- finds herself at the center of a political firestorm, an effort to scrap The World as we know it and rebuild it entirely from Scratch.

If Becker fails this time, not only his life, but everyone and everything he cares about will be lost forever...lost in "A Better Place."

