

We Have a City

Caleb Tankersley

The message was twenty feet tall when propped up, scalded into a rusty scrap of metal. It washed ashore on a beach near the California–Oregon line. No one had seen it the day before, but that morning it jutted from the sand like it had been buried for decades, a chunk of some long-sunken hull.

The investigators tried to figure out the message. The letters were all jumbled. The code breakers went to work, wiring away with heavy computers. After days they came back with two answers. The message either said “Joaquin on the Promenade” or “Send Rubber.” None of the code breakers knew Joaquin, so they decided the message was asking for rubber.

The investigators were ready to walk off the beach, but the message had made news. People came from miles away, driving like in a dream, drool running down their chins as they unloaded trucks full of new tires and scrap rubber they’d found along the road.

The codebreakers brought in a team of welders. The welders threw ropes over the piece of hull and hung themselves like fruit over the rusty surface. They scorched in what the codebreakers told them. Floating in the air with their big helmets, the welders looked like spacemen. A crowd of people watched and drooled. When the message was done they got in their trucks and drove back to their houses.

The codebreakers had the welders write: “Hey! Here are some tires. What do you need them for?” They tied the metal with the welder’s ropes and attached a net large enough for all the tires and scraps of rubber. A big boat tugged the metal and the tires out to sea and let them sink.

The investigators smoked down the beach and laughed. “This will not work,” they said. Then they went home. The codebreakers and the welders waited. After two days they started trickling away. After a month the last welder put her hand on the last codebreaker’s shoulder. “Let’s go home,” she said.

The half-ship ran aground two years later. No one had seen it come in. They just found it on the beach. The entire ship had been split down the middle. On the missing side it looked like a child’s diagram, every room open to the sea. People posed for pictures. On the side of the hull was a message. The codebreakers and welders rushed back. “We were right!” they said. The investigators

didn't smile, but they came.

This time the message took longer. The codebreakers had to bring in a bigger computer. They had fights over interpretations. After weeks the message was deciphered. The welders lit torches and made an arena on the beach, and all the people gathered to hear what the codebreakers had to say:

“We need the rubber because down here, where you can never reach, we have a city. Thanks for the tires! Tell Joaquin we said hi!”

The crowd gasped. The investigators said, “That’s the end of everything.” The codebreakers said, “This is the beginning of everything.” The welders said, “How did they cut the ship like that?” And of all the factions, the welders were right.

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