

When the Earth Snapped

The ground shook as Rhonda took a bite of her petite cucumber sandwich with the crusts cut off. She didn't motion that it affected her though, except for reaching down to pick her wine glass up off of the picnic blanket that was laid out beneath her. She made a little smile and JEanette as she reached down to grab her glass as well.

"I'm really glad we started going on these picnics," Rhonda said a little loudly so that Jeanette could hear her over the Earth's grumblings.

"Yes, it's great to get out of the office," Jeanette agreed as she raised her own cucumber sandwich to Rhonda, as though they were cheersing with their dainty food.

As the Earth settled down, the women set their glasses back down on the blanket. They were sitting in the park outside of what used to be Kansas City, on the Kansas side. It was one of the only places left that could be deemed a metropolis.

The fall of *modern* civilization had been a relatively slow and manageable one; well, except for the deaths that inevitably happened every time the tectonic plates collided with each other.

It was the year 2516, and the United States didn't exist the way it had at the beginning of the millennium. No matter how many scientists begged the country's leaders to take action to give us a few more good decades on this rock, they wouldn't do it. Sure they all said they were going to *try* but it didn't happen.

By 2100, New Orleans and Miami had been underwater for decades, already growing green with algae and moss covering what used to be vibrant cities humming with life. On the west coast, Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco were largely deserted too, though they were technically still above water. Earthquakes had caused tsunamis to wash away everything that dotted the coastline, eventually forcing residents to give up their rebuilding efforts and move inland.

Earthquakes now happened regularly across the country thanks to fracking causing existing fault lines to deepen and new faults to spring off of them every month.

That's how New Kansas City came to be the new capital of the States, no longer United. They'd voted to drop that word after the climate changes washed away most liberal strongholds on the coasts. With those political hubs gone, the country was dotted with people of all political leanings laying down roots wherever they could find a square of land to call their own. However, by that point, political tensions in the country had grown so bad that it was common to see a neighborhood being redlined on account of political leanings as opposed to race.

So the Republicons and Demicons kept to their own districts, with their own industries and rarely interacted unless they had to. It was clear when one crossed into another's area who was who, and the stranger was unwelcome. The only thing everyone could agree on was in 2122 when they agreed to drop "United" from the country's name. They were just states with the abilities to govern themselves.

Rhonda and Jeanette were of the rare Indicon class, which meant that they had the privilege of working at places on either side of politics, though they both leaned Republican. Indicons had to pass a test to gain this status, proving that they were able to be impartial and civil to anyone, no matter what party someone belonged to. Only Indicons were able to work in the cities.

They packed up their picnic, taking one more deep breath before the UV winds set in, making it impossible to breathe in fresh air without a filter mask.

The UV winds were one of the deadliest of the silent killers once the climate started changing. At first, people didn't understand why they were getting diagnosed with lung cancer, since all tobacco and nicotine products had been outlawed. It wasn't until scientists realized it was people who were outside at certain times of the day who were being affected that they realized it was due to increased UV exposure, since the ozone layer was nearly non-existent now.

As they started walking, there was another tremor, but this one kept growing stronger, knocking Rhonda off her feet while Jeanette struggled to keep her own balance. The shaking didn't stop. It continued rumbling and grumbling until Rhonda heard a deep, powerful crack, somewhere beneath her. She looked at Jeanette for a terrified second, fighting to find her feet beneath her as the ground continued jerking this way and that.

Jeanette tried to reach her friend, but it was as though Rhonda was on a piece of grass that was rolling away while Jeanette was paralyzed, quaking right where she stood. But she too had heard the deep crack from far beneath them, and she'd read enough stories about the Great Split of 2107 to know what happened next. One look at Rhonda's stricken face showed that she also knew what was coming.

The ground split, not wide open, but enough to throw Jeanette onto her back from the force of the snap. Rhonda also felt the momentum, but was too scared to look around and see the damage just yet. Everything was happening so fast and all she could do was start straight ahead of her and keep trying to will herself to stand and run. But run where, she thought to, which made her to lose focus and fall back down.

When Rhonda came to, Jeanette was shaking her, and Rhonda noticed that Jeanette's hands were covered in blood. "What happened?" was all she could manage, staring at Jeanette's bloody palm.

Jeanette looked at her own palm, surprised to find that she hadn't even noticed she was bleeding, but she pulled a piece of something clear from it. The wine glasses, she thought to herself, remembering that she fell on the picnic basket. Where was that picnic basket now, she wondered to herself? She'd figure that out later.

"Rhonda, you ok?" do you know what day it is?

"Monday," she managed as she gave a slight nod.

"Ok good," Jeanette gave a sigh of relief. She looked around and saw that there were other people in the park in similar stages of recovery, but a crowd was gathering off near the treeline. Jeanette and Rhonda took a few minutes to pull themselves together before walking over to see what everyone was staring at.

The truth was that there was nowhere the women could run to. They knew that going back toward buildings was ill-advised, and chances were that the Earth snap had crimped a few roads. So they decided to join the crowd, where they knew they might be able to pick up some bits of information by eavesdropping.

It was a huge crevasse about 100 logameasures wide and as long as any of them could see in either direction. It was so deep that no one could see the bottom. Some people were dropping rocks in to see if they could hear them hit the bottom, but that sound never came, no matter how large the rock was that was tossed in.

People were careful not to get too close to the edge, knowing that whenever there was a ground-splitting quake, some sidewalk-cracking shakes weren't far behind. Though those were never really as scary as the first since everyone knew the worst was over.

Rhonda and Jeanette walked back over to where Jeanette had fallen and crushed their picnic supplies. They were both feeling nervous and jittery, which was to be expected after experiencing a big earthquake, but they couldn't help thinking it was something else that was inspiring this feeling of hush.

Normally people couldn't wait to talk about how they felt in that moment, and certainly there was a lot to talk about here, but neither woman felt the urge to. It was as though adding any more words to the atmosphere was enough pressure to cause it to break again. But they felt the cool breeze and for a brief moment they were relieved, like maybe things would work out ok after all.

Then as quickly as the breeze had come, it ushered in the reality that they were now in a race against time to get back to their office and somehow up to their UV wind protection gear. They looked in the direction of the people still gathered around the split who also seemed to have forgotten about the time.

Glancing over, it was clear that what was left of their picnic was now smashed and not worth the precious minutes it would take to gather everything, so they took off running. Almost as an afterthought, Rhonda yelled to the crowd who wasn't looking at them, "Get inside!" Now they all looked over as she motioned toward the buildings on the horizon about seven measures from where they currently were. That yell had taken everything out of Rhonda, so Jeanette followed up, addressing their puzzled looks by hollering, "The winds!"

Slowly a look of realization flooded over the crowd as they too started running toward the buildings. Rhonda and Jeanette were thankful they'd gotten a head start as they wound their way out of the park and into the city.

Their building was on the outskirts, thankfully, but when they looked that way, there didn't seem to be anyone outside, which meant everyone had hightailed it home after the quake. Protocol stated that people couldn't go back inside a building after there was a ground-splitting quake which meant people had to go home.

Residences were built to be quake-proof. They were ugly metal cubes but given all of the environmental conditions people had to contend with now, aesthetics weren't the first of their concerns. Besides, they could decorate the interior however they wanted. While these cubes were meant to withstand UV, radiation, lava flows, and even flooding, they still weren't a match in the event that a crevasse opened up under a home.

Rhonda's and Jeanette's cubes were next door to each other, but were too far away to reach before the winds set in. Getting to their office was their only hope.

Keeping up the pace they were running at was getting difficult, so they slowed as they reached the eerily quiet city gate. Knowing they didn't have enough time to slow to a full walk, they jogged through the gate which had been abandoned by the guard; never a good sign and one they'd never seen before.

They cautiously turned the corner, and then another, now expecting to see their building's roof jutting out from the skyline. It wasn't the tallest building in the city but it still cut a nice figure on its street... but it wasn't there. A huge crowd had gathered where the building should have been, staring down into something.

Rhonda and Jeanette weren't even thinking about how tired they were anymore and sprinted toward the crowd then pushed their way to the front. There was their building, sunken into the crack that had split all of the way into the city. Luckily, it hadn't fallen, but there were people trying to climb up out of it from the windows on the other side. They were bloodied, and there weren't a lot of them, but there was a chain of people trying to help the building workers anyway.

For another moment, Rhonda and Jeanette forgot about the UV winds as they searched the scene to see if they could spot any of their coworkers until a breeze floated through the crowd. "The winds are coming!" Rhonda yelled before she had a chance to think twice. Just like that, the building people and the ones helping them stopped what they were doing, faced with a decision. Surprisingly, the building people realized the safer short term decision was to go back into the building, and in a twist of fate were now helping some people who had been on the edge *into* the building.

Rhonda and Jeanette were on the other side though, so they didn't have the option of crawling into the building, it was too far away. They and everyone else around them looked for other buildings they could run into, but they'd all seemingly been locked and abandoned. Nonetheless, it was their only chance, so they ran to the first building they could, pulling at the big metal door, but it wouldn't budge. Everyone else had followed their lead, trying to get into buildings, all the while feeling the breeze gaining strength, knowing their exposure was growing by the minute.

Over time, scientists had learned that the winds didn't actually cause cancer. What they did was painlessly burn a person's skin, lungs, and anything else they touched until breathing was no longer possible. The damage from a mild UV burn exposure could trigger the body's systems to try and heal it, which is what caused the cancer, but a severe burn from an hour or more of exposure meant almost certain death. It was like a radioactive wind, but one you could count on happening daily as long as the sun was still at the center of the solar system.

The breeze was a steady wind now, and an aerial view would have shown people scattered everywhere like little ants looking for food. Eventually someone's voice rose above the wind. It was faint at first, barely audible amidst the cacophony of coughing that was growing as the wind strengthened. "This one's open!" the voice said.

Rhonda looked for Jeanette but didn't see her, and she also didn't know where the voice was coming from. Trying to follow it the best she could, Rhonda was once again knocked off her feet by a tremor. Panicked and unable to get to her feet, Rhonda scrambled on all fours, still not sure where she was going.

"It's here!" she heard a voice again, somewhere to her left. The tremor continued, but Rhonda felt two arms scoop her up to her feet. It was Jeanette. They gripped each other's hands, determined not to lose one another again and ran in the direction of the voice. But the wind changed, and as it did the direction of the voice seemed to change too. The metal building lined streets were like sneaky echo chambers and it was hard to determine with certainty where a sound came from. But they kept jogging, holding tight to each other, and eventually saw some other people running too.

They followed the people who were running, but after a few dead ends, Rhonda and Jeanette realized these people didn't know where they were going either. The voice had quieted and they had no idea where to go.

Jeanette spotted a parking garage off to the side and pulled Rhonda in that direction. The winds were too loud to talk over now, so they had to trust each other. The garage didn't give them total protection from the winds but it was safer than being directly exposed to them. The moment they walked down the parking garage ramp, they were able to hear how much quieter it was inside, but they still felt like saying something might shake the Earth back awake so they nodded at each other, affirming that each was ok.

The garage housed a couple of cars but was otherwise vacant, making it easy to spot the small group of people huddled in the corner of the garage, furthest away from the entrance and most protected from the wind. The women made their way over there and sat down with the rest of the hushed huddle.

Still holding hands, Jeanette finally asked Rhonda, "You ok?"
"Yup," Rhonda said, and as she did, there was another deep cracking that rumbled up from the Earth and the spiderweb of cracks in the asphalt beneath her started growing until it was beneath all of them.

Rhonda and Jeanette gripped each other's hands tighter as they heard one more final deafening snap.