

One Split Earth

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Merlot was a spot on the invisible line that separated East from West of the contiguous United States. Oh, it wasn't the exact middle of the country; that was Lebanon, Kansas. Merlot residents never forgot that they were Lebanon's little cousin. But they were proud of their proximity to fame. So much that they actually staked the point and put up a monument. Most children had at least one school trip to the "Heartland" marker—the stone construction that marked the split between one half of the country and the other. Occasionally, travelers would seek out the "Home Is in Our Heart" plaque, also, but most didn't

even know it existed. Geo-politically speaking, they were all in the Midwest, no matter where you stood. It meant a lot to the residents, but to the outside world, they were just another corn field.

Chariot hadn't gone on one of those school trips. His mother had been concerned that the marker was really the center of a satanic ritual site. Or, worse yet, that it was the spot to which the mother-ship called all of her abductees. Chariot's mother hadn't wanted any part of either scenario.

Chariot's mother had been fantasy prone, which Chariot had been told was why he got the name "Chariot". Some movie had been playing when his mama dropped him in the hospital lobby and it got cross-pollinated with her interpretation of the event. That's what the doctor on duty had said, anyway. Years later he'd asked the staff what had happened. They said she'd crawled in doubled-over in pain and when she rose to sign the paper work he'd popped out; just slid right down her leg. His mom had been late for everything, including his own birth.

She'd taken to bed the last few years of her life, starting when Chariot was twelve. His grandma had pretty much been raising him since then. His most vivid memory of that time was that Grandma'd stopped buying the good chocolate. She'd always had these really good truffles that came in their own wrappers.

When he started living with her, though, she replaced them with waxier chocolate.

“What happened to the good chocolate, Grandma?” he’d asked, eyeing the false contenders.

Grandma had sighed. Of all the challenging things in this boy’s life, he was worried about candy. Then again, though, those chocolates had been the most stable thing in his life. “Oh, honey, those candies are three dollars a bag. I used to buy them when I saw you twice a year. I can’t buy them every day, though.”

Chariot had been downtrodden. Those chocolates had been his favorite thing about visiting Grandma. He also remembered the look on her face when she’d realized what he’d been thinking.

“Chariot, honey, you’ll soon see that there’s more to life than fancy chocolates. How about we save those chocolates for special occasions?”

Seven years later and Grandma still took care of Chariot. Though Chariot now took care of her some, too. He got a job at a grocery store, so he got a tiny discount on the really good chocolate. He bought a bag every pay day and shared it with her.

He only worked three or four days a week. He was very fortunate that his grandmother wasn’t in a hurry for him to get

a full-time job. His mother had been her only child, so Chariot was her only grandchild. She had no one else to support, and she planned to leave the house to him anyway, when she eventually passed on.

The grocery store was clear across town. He rode his bike by the Heartland marker every time he made the trip. He'd always said he'd stop one day just to say he'd been. He never did, though. He also passed his friend Lovetree's house. Lovetree went by his last name because his first name was even more embarrassing. Chariot had seen his mail once. His name was worse than Chariot's.

One day he started early so he could stop by Lovetree's house. He banged on the door, but there wasn't an answer. His friend spent most of the time in his basement, or his "hub" as he called it. Lovetree was a surveillance junky. He needed to know about everything everywhere. He was like Earth's stalker. He didn't actually do anything with what he saw; he just had a warped need to know everything all the time. Chariot was fascinated with all of his equipment.

He went to the side of the building and tapped on the tiny window close to the ground. It was the only source of natural light for Lovetree's information dungeon. Chariot heard him leave his post so he must have heard him. The front door opened

and Lovetree called for Chariot to come around. Chariot could barely hear him because he was trying to loudly whisper, which only succeeded in making him sound ill.

When he got up to the porch, Lovetree pulled him in. "Man, this is some weird stuff."

"What are you talking about?"

"You ain't heard, man?" Lovetree pushed Chariot ahead of him, rushing him down the stairs.

"Lovetree, you know I don't watch the news or anything. That's why I have you and Grandma. You'll tell me if there's something weird going on in the world, and Grandma'll tell me if I have to bring an umbrella."

Lovetree nodded. "True, brother, but this is some weird stuff. Everybody's been talking about this."

"What is it?" Chariot was impatient. He had to be to work in an hour, and it'd take him twenty more minutes to cycle there.

"Okay, you know that weird crazy-ass billionaire guy?"

Chariot nodded. Everyone knew about Christopher Mengan. He was always in the newspapers at the grocery store. The latest

headline had been that he'd skydived in the Pacific and landed on a row boat.

"Get this," Lovetree continued. "He bought airtime last night on all of the major networks, even some of the cable channels. He went on a crazy rant about a split in the world. I'll play it for you."

He brought up the billionaire's website. The video was on the front page. Eleven million hits already, according to the tiny writing underneath the video. It was frozen on the billionaire's face, but instead of controlled zeal, his face was contorted in what looked like mad delight.

Lovetree played the video for him. It was three minutes of Mengan jibber-jabbering about a split Earth. The only comprehensible statement he made was that something was going to happen. He didn't say what, but he said it would only happen to half of the Earth.

"Man, this is driving everyone nuts. All the commentators are speculating about this. What does it mean? What's going to happen? Why just half? More importantly, which half? He doesn't say. Most people are assuming Northern and Southern Hemispheres. A few are saying it'll split at GMT. I'm not convinced, though.

That's one crafty fellow. It's going to be something sadistic. Something we're not expecting."

Chariot didn't know what he meant by any of that, but he trusted Lovetree. When Chariot got to work he understood why Lovetree had been freaking. There was a general sense of panic emanating from the customers and his co-workers.

He came home to absolute panic from his grandmother.

"Grandma, it's gonna be okay. What can that crazy man do to us? We're nothing to him. We're not even a spot on the map for him. He couldn't care less about the middle of the United States."

"I know, sweetie. You're right. It just feels so disruptive. How dare he address the whole world like that? I don't care how much money he has. He has no right to intimidate us."

"You're right. He doesn't. So stop letting him, okay Grandma?"

She nodded. She was close to retirement, and really all she wanted to do was stay home and tend her flowers. The next day she blew off work and did just that.

Chariot got on his bike early the next day. He noticed something weird when he got near the marker. There were people there—lots of people. He'd occasionally seen one person, but there were upwards of thirty milling around that day, each with unsure, scared looks on their faces. Chariot steered around them—way around them.

He got to his friend's house and saw him peeking out from behind the curtain. He must have been waiting for him. The door opened and he saw Lovetree's hand wave him in. Chariot was creeped out.

"What's with all the secrecy? Between you and Grandma, I'm ready to build myself a bunker."

They were back down in the basement. All five of the monitors were set to various news channels, each with maps displayed showing points along the middle line of the country. He saw Merlot. He looked up the map and saw Lebanon.

"So I guess you don't about this yet, do you?" Lovetree asked, handing Chariot a soda from a mini fridge.

"Uh, no. You know I don't anything until you tell me. I guess I should be grateful I have you as a friend."

"Yes, sir. You should be. Some wanker in a think tank decided that the most damage would be done if you split the U.S.

right down the middle...right down our little line. You'd split us in half; pitting the Western U.S. against the Eastern Seaboard and South America. Canada would be cut in half, too. Not only that, but that'd split Asia right in half. Most of Asia would be cut off from Europe. Australia would be completely cut off from Africa and Europe. Usual alliances would crumble.

"So where does that leave our little sweet spot?" he continued. "A magnet for all of the crazies. People are rushing from both sides of the country toward our median. Everyone wants to be as close as they can to the line, so that they can hop back and forth in anticipation of the outcome."

"Do we know when this thing is supposed to happen?"

"No. You saw the video. He didn't say a word about when. This could all be a sick experiment for him, to see how bent out of shape we'll get. He's rich enough—he can afford to spend a few mil on a joke."

"This is kind of messed up."

"Heck yeah, man. Hey—when's your last day of work for the week?"

"Today. I'm off for the next few days."

"Excellent. Why don't you and Grandma stay here, then? I have bars on my windows. Go work your shift, but come back right away. Maybe ask your Grandma to pick you up so you can bring some supplies. Come to think of it, maybe Grandma could buy some stuff now? I have a feeling there's gonna be a run on the store."

He wasn't wrong about that. Chariot arrived to mass chaos. There were a hundred or more people waiting to get into the store. He called his grandmother on his cell phone. He just asked her to bring all the groceries from the house and go straight to Lovetree's. Grandma had always thought Lovetree was weird, but in this case she was happy not to be alone.

There were so many people at the grocery store that the manager told Chariot to just stand at the door and make sure no one got out without a receipt for their items. He said it was cash-only, and the ones without cash were trying to grab-and-go. After an hour, most of the merchandise was gone. The manager had just straight-up shut down the pharmacy because there was no way to verify prescriptions, and most people trying weren't due for refills, anyway. He was sending people to the hospital for medicine.

Chariot heard people talking about going to the home supply store to buy tents. He gathered that they were going to camp out

on the line. He wondered how long they could keep that up. Months? He witnessed fights between neighbors. One man lived next to the line. He heard his neighbor across the line say that he was sure his side would be safe. When the man asked how he could be sure, he said "Because God built the Baptist church on my side." The man lunged at him, screaming about how his daddy had built that church, and he'd make sure the neighbor was never allowed back in.

Shortly after that the manager shut down the store. When Chariot got back to Lovetree's house, he saw his grandmother's car in the driveway. He was happy to know she'd gotten there safely. She answered the door when he knocked.

"I've been up here for the last three hours," she said, as she led him back to the kitchen. "Your friend spends all his time downstairs, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, he's kind of obsessed. He doesn't work, he doesn't even go outside. He just spends all of his time looking at those monitors."

"Well, I'm glad I didn't go to work today," she said, as she took a bag of coffee out of a bag. "The market's crashed, sweetheart. It's all gone. That jackass Mengan divested himself completely. I'm starting to think he did this as a swan song."

Like he meant to disappear, and he wanted to take our sanity and well-being along with him."

"What do you mean?" She knew he didn't understand any of her work jargon. He usually let her talk, anyway. He figured if it was something important, she'd explain it.

"Well, he single-handedly dropped the market himself by selling all of his stocks. Then the limp remains of the market were crushed by people and their stupid speculations. There are people selling what they claim to be 'safe spots'—areas along our median. The problem is those people don't actually own that property, so it's turning into a mess of property disputes. Cruise boats are selling tickets for hundreds of thousands of dollars per person to sail to the Indian Ocean. It's going to be so crowded the boats won't have room to move. I guess the cruise companies will make a boatload of money, but you know there are going to be casualties." She measured the coffee while Chariot filled the pot with water. "You know, your mother would have been fascinated with this. She was always interested in the screwed up way people behaved, and she always knew there was something dangerous about this median."

Chariot smiled. His mother had warned him about the median. A few minutes later the coffee pot beeped that it was finished brewing. Chariot got three cups from the cabinet above.

His grandmother looked at him thoughtfully. He got three cups out without having to be told. She loved that he thought as much about other people as he did himself. "You know, I figured with a name like Chariot, you were meant to bring people together."

"Yeah, but who would have thought under these circumstances?" Something occurred to Chariot; something he didn't like. "If the market crashed, then what are we going to do for money?"

"Money means nothing now; all that matters are things—tangible items. The clothes I brought from your closet, the hundred or so cans of food I brought from our pantry. That's what our lives will be judged by now. Not paper or digital wealth."

"How long before the power goes out, you think?"

As if on cue, the coffee maker's lights went dark. Then within a few moments, auxiliary power came on. At that moment, they both knew they'd made a good decision holing up in the fortress.

Chariot poured two cups of coffee and went downstairs to let his friend know he was there.

"So, what's the what, Lovetree?"

"What isn't the what, man? This is madness. The economy has fallen apart. Governments are falling apart. The National Guard is coming to the median. Forecasters are speculating that they're going to build a wall to keep the Easterners on their side and us on our side."

"Crap, man! My Grandma's house is over there!"

"Yeah, bud, but I would suggest you stay here. Most likely someone's already squatting there. People are coming from the East Coast and the West Coast. They're converging here."

"What about the billionaire? Has he said anything?"

"No, man. He's gone dark. His website is offline. No one knows what happened to him, but it's too late to stop the crazy train. Everyone's panicking, but no one knows about what."

Chariot handed his friend one of the cups. Lovetree raised it in a mock toast, as they watched the anarchy in the city streets and the rural communities on all five monitors.

Mengan picked a place to watch the festivities. It was going better than he'd planned. He'd discounted Lebanon—too touristy. He wanted the small town experience. He'd found it, he thought, in Merlot. Plus he liked the French name. He'd settled on a house the east side of the marker. It looked abandoned. It was hard to tell because the influx to the median had just

started the day before. Still, all of the food was gone from the pantry and a lot of the clothes were gone from the closets. It seemed abandoned enough to him. He rocked in the rocker on the porch, drank beer he'd brought from Germany and watched the long procession of cars, trucks and RVs travelling down the road towards Middle America.

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