

MIDDLE WITCH

"Pilot"

Written by

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EXT. THE LOT - TWILIGHT

An abandoned parking lot stretches in every direction, overgrown and buckled. A gray CAT trots through the weeds.

She passes a row of rusty streetlights, and the long-dead lamps flicker on one-by-one as if greeting her.

EXT. BACK YARD - DAWN

The cat approaches a row of townhouses crowded along a chain-link fence. She stops at a gate strung with bells, peers up.

TASHA DIMALANTA (12, Pinay, mixed, chubby) sits cross-legged on the porch roof, scribbling furiously in a notebook.

CAT

Middle Witch, have you read your horoscope today? Bad omens.

Tasha cocks an eyebrow, unimpressed. She has stacks of faded friendship bracelets on her wrists, scabs on her knees.

TASHA

Stay outta my stars, cat.

The cat shrugs and slinks back into the weeds.

CECE

"Beware, Gemini!"

Tasha turns to find CECE DIMALANTA (7) leaning out her window in pajamas. She reads aloud from THE MOON CITY GAZETTE:

CECE (CONT'D)

"Trouble brews--"

Tasha swipes the newspaper out of Cece's hands.

CECE (CONT'D)

Hey, don't!

Cece hauls herself out over the windowsill onto the roof, getting tangled in some wind chimes along the way.

TASHA

Cece, I know you haven't been talking to Lot cats again.

Cece plops down to watch Tasha fold the newspaper into a plane.

CECE
 (through a big yawn)
 Noooooope. Denise says no more
 gossip.

TASHA
 She also says don't stay up all
 night! It's the first day of
 school, Ce!

Cece hunches her shoulders defensively. Tasha clocks the move
 and frowns, concerned.

CECE
 Well I decided I'm not going to
 school anymore. And I didn't TRY to
 stay up all night.
 (quieter)
 My flashlight just died.

Cece pulls a small, well-loved flashlight from her PJ pocket.

Tasha trades her newspaper plane for the flashlight and
 WHACKS it experimentally against the roof. Nothing.

TASHA
 You try new batteries?

Cece cocks an eyebrow like *gimme a break*.

CECE
 YES.

TASHA
 Hmmmm.

Tasha flips her notebook open to a triangle that's been
 erased and re-drawn more than once. She plunks the flashlight
 down inside the shape.

Cece watches closely. This matters.

Tasha holds her palms open over the flashlight. Focuses.
 Exhales.

When Tasha SNAPS her fingers, a shower of white-hot sparks
 flies up from the triangle. Tasha hisses and lurches back.

Upended, the flashlight rolls off the roof and lands with a
 thud in the grass.

Tasha slumps. Cece pats her on the knee.

CECE
That's okay. Denise said be careful
with that stuff anyway.

Tasha GROANS and hurls the paper plane.

TASHA
Ugh, I'm so TIRED of careful.

The paper plane sails off into The Lot, a glinting dart in
the rosy sky.

TITLE: "MIDDLE WITCH"

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

The tiny kitchen is in disarray. There's a half-folded pile
of laundry on the table, and steam shoots out of a SCREAMING
copper kettle on the stove.

DENISE DIMALANTA (21) stops digging charred *longganisa* out of
a skillet long enough to raise a hand and SNAP her fingers.
The burner under the kettle turns off neatly.

DENISE
(over shoulder)
Tasha. TASHA. You up?

Denise upends the skillet over the sink, shakes it violently.

EXT. BACK YARD - MORNING

Tasha bursts out the back door, pulling a cap on backwards.

Denise leans out the kitchen window. Curtains printed with
crescent moons billow around her. She holds out a teapot.

DENISE
Get orange juice, too. And hurry!

Tasha reaches into the teapot, pulls out some wrinkled dollar
bills, and stuffs them in her pocket.

TASHA
Yuh.

DENISE
I mean it, T! We CANNOT be late
today. Bus comes at eight-thirty.

TASHA
Denise, I knooooow.

Tasha jogs over to where her bike leans against the fence. There are tarot cards stuck in the spokes: The Chariot and the Knight of Swords.

DENISE
And pleeeeeease don't cut through The Lot again.

Tasha rolls her eyes so hard you can almost hear it. When she yanks her bike up, the tiny gold bells on the gate JINGLE.

INT. CONVENIENCE STORE - MORNING

A normal convenience store. LULU (55) sits behind the register reading a newspaper through thick glasses.

Tasha SMACKS a box of toaster pastries on the counter, then a carton of OJ, then one, two, three grapefruit.

Lulu gazes down at her over her glasses.

LULU
You're out early.

Tasha spies a display of plastic flashlights on the counter. She inspects one.

TASHA
Wellllll... Denise burned breakfast.

Tasha frowns at the flashlight price tag and puts it back.

LULU
Again? No wonder your horoscope is so bleak. Listen. "Beware, Gem—"

TASHA
Not interested, Lulu.

Lulu SNAPS the crease out of her newspaper and begins again with more force, wagging her eyebrows for drama.

LULU
AHM. "BEWARE, GEMINI! Trouble brews in your darkest heart! Heed your elders, sharpen your knives, and wherever you go, tread carefully."

Tasha glares. She slaps her money on the counter and tries to scoop all her groceries at once for a huffy exit. But the grapefruits make a run for it.

LULU (CONT'D)

Whoa there. Let me get a bag.

Tasha reaches for the fruit but then the juice and pastries slip.

TASHA

NOPE! No bag!

Finally Tasha gets balanced. She HUFFS and stomps away, all the drama drained from her exit.

Shaking her head, Lulu returns to her newspaper. She repeats the last line of Tasha's horoscope to herself like it's a sitcom theme song:

LULU

(sing-song)

Wherever you go, tread carefully.

The bell over the door JINGLES as it shuts behind Tasha.

EXT. CONVENIENCE STORE - MORNING

Tasha stuffs everything into the milk-crate on the front of her bike, sullen.

She scowls back over her shoulder at the store and then across the street to a jagged gap in the chain-link fence that bounds The Lot on all sides.

Beyond it, wind moves through the weeds like a wave through water. The HUM of cicadas rises like siren song.

Suddenly a paper plane folded from the horoscope section of THE MOON CITY GAZETTE glides over the top of the fence and lands neatly at Tasha's feet.

It's a dare. Tasha's gaze narrows. Her nostrils flare.

EXT. THE LOT - CULVERT - MORNING

Tasha hurtles through The Lot, pedaling hard as thick weeds whip against her ankles. The tension melts from her face and she BREATHEs deep. She's almost smiling.

EXT. THE LOT - NEST HOME - MORNING

Tasha abruptly hits a rut in the buckled pavement, and the jolt sends a grapefruit flying.

She SKIDS to a halt just in time to see the grapefruit bounce down a slope and land at the foot of an enormous nest on a huge dislodged slab of concrete.

In the middle of the nest sits a sea foam green EGG. It's the size of a cantaloupe and glows as if lit from within.

Tasha approaches slowly, transfixed, and wipes her sweaty palms on her shorts. She picks up the egg. It washes her arms and face in turquoise light and hums softly.

Tasha gazes down at it and drums her fingers thoughtfully on its pebbled surface. Then she tucks the egg in her bike-crate and leaves a grapefruit in its place in the nest.

As she rides off, the giant concrete slab beneath the nest begins to shudder. Then it lurches upward on concrete crab legs, dirt and rust crumbling off in chunks.

It staggers forward a step.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Cece lies on the floor, limbs thrown out dramatically, a star chart draped over her face like a shroud. She wears only one shoe.

Denise steps over her to get a coffee mug from the shelf.

DENISE

Second grade is so FUN, Ce. I promise.

CECE

(muffled)

I HATE fun.

Denise frowns. She leans down and peeks under the star chart.

DENISE

Hey.

CECE

Hi.

DENISE

How long have you hated fun, Mama?

Cece shrugs, and the star chart CRINKLES.

CECE
Probably forever.

Tasha ducks in the door and tosses the toaster pastries at Denise. Then she flops into a chair and drops the glowing egg on the pile of laundry like it's nothing. It HUMS softly.

Denise narrows her gaze like a predator sizing up prey.

DENISE
Where. Did THAT. Come from.

Cece pops up to see.

CECE
WHOA COOL.

TASHA
It's for you, Ce. Way better than a flashlight, right?

Eyes big, Cece reaches for it, but Denise steps in the way.

DENISE
You cut through The Lot!

TASHA
So? Nothing happened!

DENISE
(rising)
That is not nothing. That is unidentified Lot fauna.

CECE
Oh oh oh I can identify it! Just lemme—

DENISE
GO FIND YOUR SHOE.

Cece SIGHS and stomps unevenly out of the kitchen.

Denise and Tasha glare at each other for a good long minute.

TASHA
What, you mad I didn't get *you* one?

Denise SNORTS. She uses a dish-towel to pick up the egg, careful not to touch it with her bare skin.

DENISE
I'm mad you don't give a crap about
our safety!

TASHA
What!? I do too give a crap!

Denise marches the egg to the hallway, and Tasha follows.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Denise steps over Cece who now lies face-down on the hallway floor, still wearing only one shoe.

TASHA
WHAT is the big emergency, Denise?
It's an EGG!

Denise pulls a pillowcase from the closet shelf and shoves the egg inside. It glows through the daisy-print fabric. She ties a tight knot to close the opening.

DENISE
It's a LOT egg. From the LOT.

Denise pushes the egg into the closet. Tasha watches, stung.

TASHA
Well, Mom went out there all the
time!

Denise SLAMS the closet door and takes a step toward Tasha, challenging her.

DENISE
And where is she NOW, Tasha?

They're almost nose-to-nose now, eyes fierce and fists trembling.

On the floor between them, Cece sits straight up, frowning.

CECE
Uhhhh, you guys hear that?

A low distant GROANING, like rocks breaking. All three girls rush for the back door at the end of the hall.

EXT. BACK YARD - CONTINUOUS

The girls CRASH out the door. They stare out over the fence.

Far off in The Lot but staggering closer by the second is a CONCRETE CRAB as big as a car. It carries the giant nest on its back, and it's headed straight for the house.

DENISE
(yelling)
THAT!

Denise jabs an accusing finger at the creature.

DENISE (CONT'D)
THAT is why we don't got out there,
Tasha!

TASHA
Oh my god...

Cece grabs a handful of Denise's bathrobe and yanks.

CECE
Please can I keep it? For science?

A bus HONKS, probably two houses away.

DENISE
NOPE.

She pushes both girls back inside.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Denise herds Cece and Tasha down the hallway.

DENISE
Move move move!

She snatches up two backpacks from the floor and practically shoves the girls through the front door.

EXT. FRONT YARD - CONTINUOUS

A Moon City school bus has pulled up to the curb. The bus driver HONKS again. The younger girls turn back to Denise.

TASHA
Denise. I can help.

Denise shakes her head, incredulous.

DENISE
You've helped *plenty*, Tasha.

The bus driver HONKS the horn a third time.

DENISE (CONT'D)
(roaring, at bus)
RELAX, Jerri! They're coming!

CECE
Denise, I only have one shoe on.

DENISE
And I love you for it. Bus.

She shoves a whole box of toaster pastries at Cece and both backpacks at Tasha and SLAMS the door shut.

Cece and Tasha turn and face the bus. A first grader is licking the inside of one of the windows.

The driver opens the door.

BUS DRIVER JERRI
(yelling)
Come on already, Dimalantas!

Tasha and Cece look at each other. Then they hop off the porch together and run around the side of the house, away from the bus.

The driver LEANS ON THE HORN.

EXT. BACK YARD - DAY

Denise stands barefoot in the middle of the backyard with a baseball bat resting squarely over one shoulder and her bathrobe rippling dramatically in the wind.

She stares down the approaching crawler, gaze steely. The crawler is fifty feet away now. Forty.

Cece and Tasha sneak around the side of the house and crouch at the corner of the porch.

TASHA
(whispering)
If she doesn't hurry, the neighbors
will see.

Cece nods soberly and takes a huge bite of a blueberry toaster pastry. She holds it up for Tasha who takes bite too without tearing her eyes from the scene.

Thirty feet away now.

We can no longer hear the bus horn or the engine. Wind tugs at the bells on the gate and they JINGLE delicately.

Twenty feet away. The crawler's footsteps sound like a ROCKSLIDE. And Denise hasn't moved an inch.

CECE
What is she DOING?

Ten feet away.

DENISE
(to crawler, roaring)
BEAST, THIS HOME IS PROTECTED.

Tasha GROANS.

TASHA
Of COURSE. She's gonna TALK to it.

DENISE
TURN BACK NOW.

Five feet away.

TASHA
Okay, this is ridiculous.

Tasha strides out into the yard CRACKING her knuckles.

TASHA (CONT'D)
Denise, I'm helping.

Denise spins, upset but not remotely surprised.

DENISE
Tasha, don't you DARE.

Tasha isn't listening. She points both palms at the crawler, which is now SNARLING like a dog and rearing up to heave itself at the chain-link fence.

DENISE (CONT'D)
Tasha, no! Stop!

Tasha focuses intently, EXHALES. She SNAPS both fingers.

There's a flare of light and a sound like CRACKING ICE. The crawler EXPLODES, dusting Denise and Tasha in concrete dust.

Tasha beams proudly.

But rising out of the rubble now are six smaller concrete crawlers, the size of St. Bernards! They're disoriented but intent on staggering toward the house.

Which is much easier now with the gaping hole Tasha tore in the chain-link fence.

TASHA

Ohhhh.

The crawlers pour into the backyard, straight at the girls. Denise GROANS and hoists the baseball bat up above her head.

DENISE

(roaring)

The gate spells would have held!

She SMASHES a crawler as it comes barreling at her. It breaks into several pieces the size of watermelons, all of which pick themselves up and scramble toward her again.

Cece quietly ducks inside the house, unnoticed.

TASHA

A bewitched gate only works if
SOMEONE takes care of it!

Tasha KICKS a crawler headed straight at her. Then another.

Denise winds up once more and SHATTERS a big one headed for the porch. Four more watermelons.

DENISE

Don't try to pin this on me!

Tasha helps Denise shove a bigger one off the porch stairs.

TASHA

At least I was DOING something! Lot
monsters don't listen to REASON!

DENISE

No, YOU don't listen to reason! You
can't just throw magic around like
you know what you're doing. You're
not trained!

Tasha GROWLS and heaves a medium-sized crawler at Denise. Denise CRACKS it mid-air with the bat. A shower of apple-sized crawlers.

TASHA

Well I'm not trained because NO ONE
is TRAINING ME.

CECE
EVERYBODY SHUT UP.

Denise and Tasha turn to see Cece standing on the porch holding the pillowcase-swathed egg high above her head. It glows steadily through the fabric.

All of the crawlers course-correct toward Cece, crowding around but not hurting her.

Denise and Tasha stare wide-eyed as Cece slowly descends the stairs and marches toward the hole in the fence. The crawlers jostle at her sides, growling softly.

TASHA
Oh my god. Be careful, Ce.

DENISE
So, so, so careful, Mama.

Cece nods, frowning with concentration. When she edges backward through the hole in the gate, the crawlers squeeze through, too.

EXT. THE LOT - CONTINUOUS

Tasha and Denise follow as Cece leads the whole herd a safe distance from the house. Then Cece unties the pillowcase and gently drops the egg onto the back of the largest crawler.

Immediately, the crawlers surge past her, carrying the egg out into The Lot, HUMMING like a swarm of bees. The girls watch them go for a moment.

CECE
They weren't TRYING to be terrible.
They just wanted to protect their
baby.

Tasha kicks at the dirt and steals a glance at Denise's somber face.

EXT. BACK YARD - MORNING

The gray cat steps delicately through the gaping hole in the fence and leaves one small, red shoe on the porch step. Like an offering.

INT./EXT. STATION WAGON - DAY

Denise drives, silently. She's dressed in a polo shirt embroidered with the words MOON CITY VIDDY and a name tag shaped like a VHS tape. She seems very tired.

Tasha slouches beside her in the passenger seat, and Cece is somewhere in the back. But all we can see of her are her red shoes propped up on the armrest.

Denise pulls up in front of the Moon City Elementary School. She pats Cece's feet.

DENISE
Your stop, mama.

CECE
(very quietly)
I can't.

Denise SIGHS raggedly and puts her forehead on the steering wheel, defeated.

DENISE
I'm trying, you guys. I really am.
But I need you to meet me halfway.
(beat)
I miss her, too.

Tasha watches Denise's shoulders rise and fall. Then she turns and dangles herself over the back of her seat.

TASHA (TO CECE)
Hey. I talked to a Lot cat this morning. She said you're gonna make a friend this year.

Cece cocks an eyebrow, unimpressed.

CECE
Don't. I'm not a baby.

Tasha points at Cece's backpack on the seat beside her and waggles her own eyebrows meaningfully.

TASHA
No, I mean it. School is way better with a FRIEND.

The backpack shifts slightly. Something is moving inside.

Eyes wide, Cece peeks inside. A tiny concrete crab claw SWIPES at her nose. She snaps the flap down, beams at Tasha.

Tasha grins back.

CECE

Okay bye guys I have to go bye!

She bounds out the side door.

Denise pops up, surprised. They watch Cece climb up the front steps of the school, hugging her backpack to her chest.

Denise turns to Tasha and studies her face. Tasha manages a serious face for about two seconds and then rolls her eyes.

DENISE

Thank you. For the help.

She punches Tasha's shoulder gently.

TASHA

Don't get used to it or anything.

Denise laughs and the engine ROARS back to life.

EXT. SCHOOL STEPS - DAY

Perched on the school steps, the gray cat watches the station wagon pull away.

She twitches her tail and turns to one of the lion sculptures on either side of the school doors.

CAT

She was like that even as a baby,
you know. Stubborn. Takes after me.

The statue doesn't respond. The gray cat SIGHS.

END.