

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 to greet 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 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, have you been talking to Lot cats again?

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

CECE

Noooo. Denise said no more gossip.

TASHA

She also said 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 a little, concerned.

CECE

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

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

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

TASHA

You try new batteries?

CECE

Yup. *And* I changed the bulb.

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  
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  
Some 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 pleeeeee don't cut through The Lot.

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

Welllll... 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 today, Lulu. Please.

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

LULU

AHEM. "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 exhales haughtily 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. She grins, BREATHEs deep.

**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.

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 OTHER 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  
the safety of this family.

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 we 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 on 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 RING 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)  
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!

Tasha isn't listening. She points both palms at the crawler, which is now SNARLING like a dog and preparing 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.

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 gaping hole where Tasha tore the chain-link fence wide open.

TASHA  
Oh.

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 one on me,  
Tasha Dimalanta!

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  
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 don't mean to be terrible.  
They were just trying to protect  
their young.

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**

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.**