

## The Middles

“Aunt Brenda wouldn’t get in the photo again,” Heather said, rolling her eyes. We were talking about the behavior of our aunt at her sister, Sadie’s eightieth birthday party.

“I heard when Kaitlyn Murphy overdosed, she stood outside gossiping until the coroner drove away. Is that true?” I asked.

“Yep, she acted like it was a parade,” Heather said. “Not an ounce of respect for the dead or the grieving.”

“She’s always like that, a stone-cold witch,” Pearl said.

Of course, Pearl wouldn’t say the b word. Pearl wasn’t her real name; we just called her that forever because in the 80s she always wore a string of pearls. Now, she wore a silver cross around her neck and a white blouse with the collar buttoned up tight. Her real name was Kim, but in our family, everyone gets a nickname. Hers was Pearl.

“She just needs to be the center of attention at all times,” T-bone said about Aunt Brenda. T-bone, whose real name was Mark, was one of my cousins. We must have at least 30 cousins on our mothers’ side of the family, but only 6 of us sat around the firepit at T-bone’s house. The 6 of us were all second born kids. We called ourselves the middles when we were kids, and we were close back then, and even to this day, in our 50s, we stay in touch and have a group chat.

“She wouldn’t get in the photo because she’s still mad at Aunt Hettie, which has been going on for years,” I said.

“Which no one including her remembers why she is mad,” Heather, who we called Goth, said.

“Well, she’s 77, and she’s running out of people to fight. That’s why she’s hanging onto this grudge,” I said.

“You’d think she’d realize her time on Earth is short and get over it,” Pearl said.

“She’s always been a troublemaker, and she’s still stirring the pot. She told everyone that Dawn wasn’t taking care of Aunt Doris when she was sick, and then Dawn’s drunken sister-in-law, Melody, got in Dawn’s face, and now, Dawn thinks she should have done more for her mom.”

“Well, that just pisses me off,” I said.

“You know Dawn. She likes to keep the peace,” Goth said.

“She’s right about keeping the peace. You can’t say anything about how Aunt Brenda acts because then everyone’s pissed at you,” T-bone said.

“They like to maintain the status quo,” Goth said.

“You mean give in to the craziest one,” I said.

“Bingo. I need a cigarette,” T-bone said.

“I thought you quit,” Wendy said.

“I did, Peanut. Then I didn’t. Then I did again and so on and so on,” He stood up, wobbling a bit from all the booze and walked a little away to light a cigarette.

We called Wendy, Peanut, because she was the youngest of us.

“Those will kill you,” Peanut said.

T-bone laughed. “Dude, we’re in our 50s. I’m fat with high cholesterol and diabetes and God only knows what bad genetics has done to me, so I hardly think this cigarette is what is going to do me in.”

Peanut made a small umph sound of disapproval. Peanut became a health nut a few years back, marathons and all that stuff.

“Maybe she’s a vampire,” Goth said. She was drunk. She’d had a few too many White Claws.

Big Bobby laughed. “Goth, you’ve watched *Interview with a Vampire* too many times.”

“Think about it, Big. Vampires can’t have their photos taken, so maybe that’s why she won’t get in a photo.”

“We’ve seen her in pictures,” T-Bone said. Being the oldest, T-Bone was always the official leader of the Middles.

“Only when she was younger, maybe she became a vampire later on,” Goth said.

“Cut it out,” Big Bobby said, playfully, kicking her chair. Big Bobby was the big, silent one in our group. He always protected us although he rarely needed to throw a punch. He just stood around and looked menacing. He still looked like that but more in an old biker sort of way. Bobby was secretly a teddy bear that was afraid of all things spooky. We’d harass him about it but never mentioned it to others. We kept each other’s secrets.

The others liked to remember the good stuff: swimming in the river, riding bikes, and no one knowing where you were for hours, the Gen X stuff that people brag about on TikTok. But I remembered the belts and the brutal backhand slaps and the inappropriate touching. Over the years, we’d talked about it but only in whispers like touching a bruise but never pushing too hard on it.

“Well,” I said. “I think she’s a bitter old woman.”

“Who may or may not be able to curse you,” Goth added.

We all laughed. I was drunk, too, warm liquor moving through me, relaxing me.

“Worm,” Goth said. “I stand by my vampire theory.”

My nickname was Worm. It started out as bookworm because I read a lot, and then it was just worm. My real name is Mary.

“I think we should drive by her house and flip her off,” Goth said.

We burst out laughing.

“We’re not teenagers anymore,” Pearl said.

“Right, we’ve matured,” T-bone said. “We should definitely moon her.”

This started another round of laughter and crazy reminiscing about our teenage antics.

“I’m game for the mooning,” Big said.

“We’re drunk,” Goth said.

“Pearl’s sober as a judge,” T-bone said.

“We taking your truck?” Pearl asked, holding out her hand for the keys. He dropped them in her hand.

“Pearl, I’m shook, as the kids say. You participating in unlawful behavior,” Goth said, teasing her.

Pearl rolled her eyes. “I was always the getaway driver.”

“True,” Peanut said.

And then we were moving toward the truck, Pearl and Goth in the front seat. We all had the look of unbridled mischief on our faces, but we were drunk, old people trying to get into the bed of a truck. Giggling and grunting, we managed it.

We drove up the hill, the warm Appalachian night air hitting our grinning faces. In our youth, we must have walked that hill a thousand times.

And then we were in front of our aunt’s house. Her lights were still on.

“She is probably in her basement, torturing babies,” Goth said.

And we laughed hysterically.

“Ready,” Big Bobby said as we rolled to a stop in front of her house.

We all stood up and started shouting obscenities at her. Some of the neighbor’s lights came on, and then we all pulled down our pants and mooned her. And then we yanked up our pants, and as Pearl drove away, we fell into the bed of the truck, laughing like we were 16 again.

We made it back home and resumed our drinking around the fire. The night was filled with the sounds of crickets, the river flowing by, the crackling of the fire, and in the distance the screech of bats.

And then her voice, “You think that’s funny.”

We all jumped.

“Jesus, Aunt Brenda, are you trying to kill us?” T-bone said.

The night was suddenly very still.

“Where’d you come from?” Goth asked.

“I’m 77, not dead. I can still walk down the hill,” she said.

“Did Uncle Dick bring you?” Goth asked, clearly not believing her.

Big Bobby, Peanut, and Pearl seemed to have lost their voices.

“No,” she said. She stood between Big Bobby and Pearl. If it was one of the other aunts, we’d have offered her a seat, but no one really wanted her to get comfortable.

“What do you want?” Goth asked.

“You think it’s funny to wake up my neighbors and moon an old lady. This is a small town. Folks will talk.”

It felt like we were kids again, being reprimanded, and I was not taking that.

I stood up. “That’s rich coming from the biggest gossip in town.”

“You accusing me of something?” she said. She always did have dark eyes, but here in the night, they looked like large black holes.

“Yes,” I said, “Being an absolute witch to everyone. You need to get over whatever issue you have.”

“Worm,” Big Bobby warned.

“No, we’ve all had bad crap happen to us. But eventually, you need to learn to deal with it. You can’t live your life using what happened to you as an excuse for treating others badly.”

What was I doing, saying the quiet part out loud? I had long suspected that Brenda’s anger had nothing to do with her sister or anything that happened in the last twenty years but something long since passed. Some people get bitten by a snake, and instead of getting rid of the poison, it becomes part of them. Aunt Brenda was poisoned, and everything she touched poisoned others.

We stood there staring at each other. The wind picked up, whipping our hair around wildly. The fire crackled loudly.

Goth stood up, next to me and then Peanut did and then T-bone. Big Bobby moved to stand behind me, and Pearl stood in front of me. Pearl reached up and removed her cross necklace.

She stepped forward. “Aunt Brenda,” she said, taking her hand. To my surprise, she did not resist Pearl’s touch. “You need to forgive.” Pearl placed the cross in Aunt Brenda’s hand. She screeched and dropped the necklace like it burned her.

“Rotten brats, I curse you,” she said, stalking off into the night.

No one moved. If it were another aunt, we'd have followed her to be sure she made it home safely. But the other aunts would not have come out at night, and they certainly wouldn't curse us, well at least not in the supernatural way.

Goth bent down and picked up the cross. "Did you see that? Silver burned her. Totally a vampire."

"Cut it out," Big Bobby said.

"How do you think she cursed us?" T-bone said.

"Boils, definitely," Peanut said.

Everyone laughed, though not as carefree as before.

"She doesn't have the power to curse anyone. She's not a witch, just a crazy, old woman," I said.

"But maybe a vampire," Goth said.

We laughed. We spent the rest of the night, talking about other things and then made our way into T-bone's house to sleep it off.

The next morning, we all woke up with a hangover and a bad case of poison ivy. We were all sure this horrible itching was Aunt Brenda's curse. T-bone's wife, Janette, gave us aspirin and an industrial sized bottle of calamine lotion.

"I told him there was poison ivy out there, but he didn't believe me," she said. "And what is this I hear about you mooning your aunt?"

We all smiled at each other. We would have laughed, but that might hurt our heads too much. All our phones dinged with a text message.

*My mom died this morning.*

It was from Aunt Brenda's son. T-bone dialed his number.

“I’m so sorry, man,” he said into the phone, that was on speaker. “What happened?”

“They’re not sure. Dad said she had a burn on her hand. He helped her bandage it, and then they went to bed. She never woke up.”

T-bone talked for a few minutes and then hung up.

“Silver poisoning, totally a vampire,” Goth said.

We all nodded in agreement.