

*THE MIDDLE  
of  
SOMEWHERE*

Joyce Senatro

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August, 1922

Mamma called it “the middle of nowhere.”

Lauretta Maria Hahn, the new school teacher for Grovesville, Pennsylvania, stood alone on the dirty, wet wooden train platform, shivering from a cold drizzle that bit through her clothing, and wondered if Mamma had been right.

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“Why would you want to go to such a place?” Teresa asked her daughter a month earlier, after Lauri had described the teaching position she’d accepted in the small coal town.

She and her parents had just returned from Indianatown, Pennsylvania, following Lauri’s graduation from the State Normal School for Teachers. It was considered one of the finest in the northeast. The County school superintendent, Richard Groft, came a week before graduation with a job offer for her. He told her the families were needy and the living conditions harsh. Lauri considered it a worthy challenge.

“Because they need me, Mamma. Last year, a woman teacher never came back after Christmas, then they hired a man and he left a month later. The poor students had no school for the rest of the year. There is nothing but mine work for them in those towns. If the children don’t get a good education, they’ll live in poverty all their lives.”

“What’s wrong with the place, or the people, that no one wants to stay?” Teresa asked. “Haven’t you wondered about that?”

“I don’t expect it to be easy, Mamma. You didn’t raise me to choose what’s easy.”

“A-hem,” came from the other side of the patio table, where Lauri’s adoptive father sat reading *The Hartford Courant*.

She was seventeen when Mamma and Jake married and he adopted Lauri and her younger brother, Carl. Jakob Hahn had always been more of a parent to Lauri and her brothers than their birth father, but since Dan and Bert—Lauri’s older brothers—were too old for adoption, they carried on their Italian name, Barile.

“Do you have something to say, Jakob?” Teresa asked.

“No, you’re doing fine, love.”

“Jakob, talk to her. We’ve heard what life is like in some of those coal towns. The conditions are as bad as Nico and I had in New York when we first emigrated to America. I couldn’t stand that for Lauri.” She eyed her daughter. “It was terrible. Please don’t do this.”

“Mamma, it’ll be all right. I didn’t become a teacher to work in a plush private school. What did you always tell me was most important when I chose a career?”

Teresa parroted the words with her daughter. “Making a difference.”

“I spent the last two years in that part of the country,” Lauri said. “I haven’t seen Grovesville yet, but it’s near Johnstown, and not too far from Pittsburgh. It’s not the middle of nowhere, Mamma. Jake, tell her I’ll be fine.”

Jakob leaned forward and, for a moment, seemed to enjoy the breath of air from a soothing breeze that rustled leaves in the tall, broad, thick-leafed shade trees in the back yard of their West Hartford, Connecticut home. The symphony of chirping birds created a harmonious morning concert.

He eyed his wife. “You brought her with you when you marched in the suffragette parades, Tesa. What she wants to do now, she learned from you. Much as we might wish she made another choice, it’s Lauri’s decision and she doesn’t need our permission.”

Teresa’s expression told them she didn’t welcome his reminder. She sighed. “I know, but I don’t have to like it. And I’ll worry every day.”

Lauri hugged them both and whispered, “Thank you, Jake,” into her father’s ear.

When Teresa went into the house, he pulled Lauri aside. “I’m not as comfortable with this as I wanted your mother to believe.”

“But why? I know life will be difficult, but I’m ready for that.”

His brow furrowed. “It’s not the way of life I worry about. There have been vicious battles between the unions and coal mine owners for the past few years. People were killed. It could still be dangerous, Lauri.”

“We were told about that at school. The unions are trying to make coal mining more humane, and it’s getting better.” She saw his doubtful expression. “It *is*, Jake. The strikes and fighting were in the past. Now they use negotiations, especially since John L. Lewis became head of the coal mining unions. And the unions don’t have any connection with the schools. Don’t worry.”

“I never go out of my way to worry. But I know you and your mother. Neither of you are content to be bystanders. Promise me if anything does happen there, you’ll stay out of it.”

“I promise.”