

When the Heart Emojis Stop *by KAT GAL*

If I am honest, I am not sure if I love our soon-to-be-mommy meetings. I feel like it is expected of me to reconnect with these women from high school now that we were all married and pregnant at the same time.

What's the point? I've wondered many times throughout the past months. I have my friends. "But they are not expecting. You need support from women in your shoes." Maybe mom is right. She also says that I need to start making friends with women at the same stage of life with the same goals. By goals, she means popping out children after children. By stage, she means married and expected mothers. By stage, she hopes stay-at-home mom. By suggesting new friendships who were on the same path, she absolutely means I need to stop the after-work happy hours and Friday night outs, even if I was drinking virgin drinks.

I can't say I like my mother's idea for my life. But maybe she is right. Maybe I will be thankful to have some mommy friends once the baby is here.

I am lucky they invited me anyway. I am lucky our due dates are just days apart. I was not close to them in high school. They were cheerleaders, I was a bookworm and an art kid. I still am, in my heart. But to the outside now I am a copywriter at a marketing agency. It is more acceptable than my dream of writing novels and teaching high school English. It makes more money too.

Aubrey loves these meetings the most. She is her usual high school self. Loud and bubbly. And pink. Oh, so freaking pink. She looks like a glittery cupcake.

"Let's talk about baby names.", I can't help but roll my eyes at her suggestion. But the baby name books are already on the table. "I love the name, Mackenzie. And Makayla. And Hailey." If she says Kaylee next, I die. "I also love Kaylee. I think I love Kaylee the most. How about you girls?" Just shoot me.

Okay, I have to admit, it does help to have others to talk about never-ending morning sickness, even well into my second trimester, weird cravings for ice cream with pickles, new stretch marks, and my changing body. These girls have the best tips for maternity pants.

We meet once a week. First, we go to prenatal yoga, then we sit at a coffee shop and chat. We have a Whatsapp group. Kaylee shares the most. She has planned out her little Kaylee's futures outfits for the first year. Kaylee will be one of those annoying Instagram moms, I bet.

I try not to judge. I'm trying to fit in instead.

I'm really trying. I am trying to find the mother in me. The mother that dresses like an adult and likes to talk baby stuff with other mothers. "It will come." According to my mother once the baby is here it will be so magical it will bring out all my maternal instincts. I am not sure. I am trying.

"Girls, I can't come to the next two meetings. Hubby and I are going on a vacation. I will be out for two weeks. Have fun without me." Aubrey is so lucky, I stare at the message with jealousy. I need a vacation too. Instead, I am sitting at work and feeling nauseous. At this time it's not morning sickness. It's all her pink heart emojis.

"Girls, I have a headache. I can't come this week either. Have fun without me." Three weeks without Aubrey is almost like a blessing. The other girls are less bubbly. They even make fun of Aubrey's cupcake clothes. The first time, I am feeling like I am fitting in.

"Girls. I hate to do this, but my mother-in-law is in town. I can't come. I miss you all." Okay. It's getting weird. And still too many heart emojis.

"Has anyone seen Aubrey lately?" Shawna's question is on point. Actually, neither of us has seen her for nearly four weeks now. We haven't heard from her other than her cancellation texts. "Oh, well, she will come next week. Aubrey would not miss these baby meetings by choice." Shawna is right. Aubrey loves talking babies. She even loved talking about babies in high school.

"Girls. I know, you think I'm flaky. I can't come again. Raincheck? I miss you all." Only one heart emoji this time. What's going on with her? "Should we pick another day of the week? We miss you too.", I message her back. "Yes, we totally can change the day." The others agree. She doesn't text back. "Aubrey, are you okay?"

We never hear from her again.

"She thinks she is better than us." That's Shawna's conclusion. And we don't miss her. We don't think about her. It's less pink and fewer heart emojis without her. It's more real talk. It's more swearing. It's virgin drinks at the local bar. I start to enjoy my mommy group more.

Four months later we are all sitting at our usual cafe. Shawna is breastfeeding. The other babies are sleeping. Finally. My little Lilly was crying up a storm just five minutes ago, but she is calm and sleeping finally. I can focus on my cupcake.

Then we see a familiar sight. "Girls, look, that's Aubrey." Shawna is right. That was Aubrey, leaving the pharmacy across the road. "Aubrey!" I yell, but she can't hear me. Or she doesn't want to hear me.

"Something is different about her." Shawna is right.

Aubrey is not wearing pink. She is in blue jeans with a black sweater and a black jacket. Black sunglasses and a blue baseball cap. She is not wearing make-up. Her stomach is flat. She looks like a skeleton. She doesn't have a baby with her.