

2022

All Hail Dido, King of the Dildos

Emma Wunsch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/nelle>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wunsch, Emma (2022) "All Hail Dido, King of the Dildos," *Nelle*: Vol. 5, Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/nelle/vol5/iss2022/8>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

Emma Wunsch

ALL HAIL DIDO, KING OF THE DILDOS

The week everyone in town sat Shiva for Johanna Lippmann, a girl I didn't know, Michelle, came to stay with us. Michelle's mother, was my mother's second cousin. Even though she'd rarely mentioned Dana, when she'd called, early one July morning, my mom stayed on the phone for ages. But when she finally hung up, she couldn't answer any of my questions like how old Michelle was, how long she'd stay, or what had happened with Michelle's father.

I was eleven and bored. My mother hadn't signed me up for day camp because she thought I was old enough to be home alone. She worked four tens as a nurse in the psychiatric ward of the local hospital. It was the same hospital where Johanna Lippman had just died but the psych ward was far from oncology. Johanna was beautiful—I knew that because there'd been a lot of pictures of her in the paper but also because she lived in the biggest house at the end of our long street.

My house was tiny with a small unmowed lawn because my mom had read that uncut grass helped butterfly migration. The Lippmann's house, a quarter mile down the road, was so different it seemed preposterous that it was in the same zip code. The house, millions of beige bricks on a circular driveway, sprawled several weedless lots with a vast weedless backyard.

Our street was normally quiet but the afternoon I waited for Michelle, car after car made their way to the Lippmann's. I watched, wondering what it would be like to go inside. Johanna had lived in a beautiful house with two younger siblings and a mom who always wore make-up. On weekends,

their father would pick them up in his red sports car. I lived with just my mom who'd decided to have me with the help of a turkey baster and homosexual nurse friend on route to San Francisco. My mother wore her gray hair in two long braids; she never went on dates or wore make-up. At eleven, I was painted with freckles and had an overbite my mother was ignoring. I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that Johanna had been so beautiful but now was dead.

"The family is sitting Shiva," my mother said. She looked toward the Lippmann's. "It was in the hospital bulletin."

I attempted to blow a bubble with the flavorless Bazooka in my mouth.

"Shiva," my mom continued, "is a Jewish tradition. The family mourns for seven days. People bring food."

I watched a black convertible parallel park. The line of cars was getting longer and I wondered if the Shiva-goers would eventually reach my house.

From her obituary, I knew that Johanna had been an honors student, in the drama club, a runner-up in the state spelling bee, first violin, co-captain of the soccer team, a cheerleader, and animal shelter volunteer.

I did nothing at school except try to survive. Much like the way she'd simply didn't send me to camp, my mother had decided, when I was four, that I was ready for kindergarten. Academics were okay once I learned to read, but by third grade having a social life was impossible. For the past few years, I'd had one tepid friendship with a fat, unpopular Black girl named Dawn who hadn't signed my yearbook.

"What happened is a tragedy." My mother looked at me. "But one can't help but wonder if the leukemia had to do with the pesticides on their ridiculous lawn."

My mother was newly obsessed with the ozone layer and clean water. She'd recently thrown out full bottles of Lysol, Fantastik, and Lemon Scented Pledge, along with ancient Halloween hairsprays. She started yelling when I spent too long in the shower. Sometimes I thought she cared more about

the earth than me.

"I just don't get why Michelle has to come *here*," I said.

"There must be someplace else she can go. We're strangers."

"We're all strangers in a strange land," my mother said. "A patient said that the other day." She sounded pleased.

I rolled my eyes. My mother's patients peed themselves or thought the government had implanted transmitters in their heads. I'd never gone to work with her—it wasn't allowed, but she often talked about her patients as if, in addition to their mental problems, they'd been gifted something invisible and holy.

"Michelle will give you something to do," she said. "All you've done is complain about being bored. And you didn't like camp."

I certainly hadn't liked Camp Owl's Nest. I had no athletic ability or interest in putting on a play. I usually hung out at arts and crafts, mostly to listen to the counselors gossip. The summer before she'd gotten sick, Johanna gave swim lessons, but she'd spent her free periods at arts and crafts with her friend Cassie. I loved watching Cassie and Johanna. They were so free with each other, their ankles crossed together, their long hair entwined as they learned the lyrics that were printed in their cassette liners.

Without camp or an indifferent Dawn, I was alone in my house that sank into itself with stuffiness from the endless heatwaves. When I complained, my mother made exasperating suggestions like learning to play guitar or baking bread. Sometimes I felt more like a patient than a daughter.

A glistening limousine turned onto our street. I knew it wasn't Michelle but still felt disappointed when it sped up to the Lippmann's.

★

When they finally arrived in the same wood-paneled station wagon everyone had, Dana and Michelle were shorter than I'd imagined. Michelle wore short cut-offs, Reebok sneakers, and, despite the blazing sun, a jean jacket. Her blue eyeshadow

looked like it'd been painted. I felt infantile in overall shorts and Keds.

"Thank you so much," Dana said.

"It's not a problem," my mom said. "Arlo is thrilled to have a friend."

No I'm not, I thought. I knew right away that Michelle, like the girls in my grade, wouldn't be my friend. The girls at school thought I was as interesting as a chair.

"Come in," my mother said, mostly to her cousin. "We can have iced tea."

Dana shook her head. "I can't really . . . I'll just use your bathroom."

We walked inside. After being outside for so long, the house felt uneven and dark.

"You can sleep on the pull-out here," my mom told Michelle as we walked into the living room. "Or with Arlo. In her room."

"Do you snore?" Michelle asked.

I didn't answer.

"Well, Maverick?" She stared at me.

Without school or day camp, it dawned on me that I hadn't talked to another kid in weeks.

"No. I don't think so."

"Good." Somehow knowing which door led to my room, she opened it and walked in.

I followed her in, my heart sinking as she looked around. I hadn't thought about what my room would look like to someone like Michelle. Under her jacket, Michelle wore a halter top so tight I could see breasts. I was mortified by my purple walls and the horse pictures I'd outgrown but left up.

"Cool digs." Michelle lay down on my bed. "How old are you?"

"Eleven."

"Get out! My neighbor looks older than you and she's like eight."

I shrugged. "I'm going into seventh grade." I waited for her

to do the math, to figure out I was too young for junior high, but she didn't.

"I'm basically thirteen since I got my period last year. I'm very mature. I almost made out with Mike DiMonto before my mom dragged me here."

I nodded.

"It was super hot." She looked at me. "Arlo is a weird name for a girl. Has Aunt Flo visited yet?"

I blinked. My mother's aunt Florence sent me five dollars every birthday, but she never visited.

"You don't know Aunt Flo?"

I shook my head.

"You know that time of the month. On the rag. Riding the red wave. The red badge of courage. Menstruation." Michelle said menstruation like Men Steeeeeeeew Ation.

I felt so stupid. Aunt Flo! "Yeah, I know. I haven't gotten it. Yet."

"No shit," Michelle said. "But it's a drag. Your bed is comfortable. I'm going to take a nap. I'm probably getting my period." She flipped over so she was facing the wall. I stood there until I realized she wanted me to go.

★

When I went into the kitchen, Dana was gone, and my mom announced she'd taken an overnight shift.

I glared at her. "Michelle just got here."

She shook her head. "I have to work. People are going crazy with the heat and the hospital is understaffed." She dumped tuna and frozen peas into a pot of macaroni. "I made dinner," she said. "Maybe I'll take you and Michelle to swim tomorrow afternoon."

I didn't say anything. There was no way I'd let my mother take us to the town pool. She liked to do laps. The other mothers never swam. All they did was gossip and smoke by the kiddie pool.

Michelle was groggy when she finally came out of my room. "I was dreaming about Mike DiMonto," she announced.

"My mom left," I said awkwardly. "She went to work . . . there's dinner. If you're hungry?"

Michelle looked at the macaroni and peas and rolled her eyes. "Gag with me a spoon, Maverick." She plunked herself on the couch.

"Jesus your TV is tiny," she said. "Where's the remote?"

"We don't have one." I took a bite of the macaroni tuna and nearly choked.

Michelle sighed, got up and turned on the TV, which sputtered to life with the news.

"It's so fucking hot," she said.

I nodded. The fan in the window felt like a mockery. I watched a Mercedes drive up the road, turn around, and park four houses up. There'd probably been more than a hundred people telling Johanna's family how sad it was that she'd died. If I died, I realized it was entirely possible that other than my mom, no one in the entire world would care.

I shoved another bite of macaroni into my mouth, but it was disgusting and too hot to eat. I dumped the rest in the trash even though my mother had started composting.

★

The next day Michelle came out of my room eating a granola bar she must've brought from home. She didn't offer me one. "I need to make a call." She stared at me.

"What?"

"I wanna be alone. It's personal."

I went into my room, which smelled like bread and baby powder. Michelle's stuff was everywhere: balled up socks and bras and scrunchies and Lip Smackers and banana clips and sneakers were strewn on my bed. There were issues of well-read *Tiger Beat* and *Seventeen* scattered on my floor. I wanted to read them but didn't want to ask.

I looked around my room for anything else I might need but realized I had and needed nothing.

"Bye," I called to Michelle who was twisting the phone cord around her finger.

She didn't acknowledge me.

I left and immediately wondered where to go.

I walked toward the Lippmann's but stayed several houses away. Shiva sounded like shiver and I imagined everyone freezing in an overly air-conditioned house. A sprinkler went on and then off on the Lippmann's front lawn. I thought of what my mother said about people who watered their lawns during a drought.

I slowly walked back, wondering who Michelle was talking to. What if Michelle was talking to Mike DiMonto? What if she was telling him all the weird things about me? The idea of a boy laughing at me made me blush.

I sat on my front porch steps. The summer felt both endless and finite. Two blue Lincoln Continentals followed by a red Mercedes drove up the road.

"Where's the party?" Michelle asked.

"They're going to the Lippmann's." I pointed up the block. "Johanna was just sixteen when she died."

"That would suck to die at sixteen," Michelle said. "But kind of romantic. All Romeo and Juliet. Did she have a boyfriend?"

"Probably." I wished I'd known more about Johanna. I wished that my mom had hired her as my babysitter. I wanted Johanna to have waved when she saw me at the bus stop. *She could have helped me*, I thought with a cutting wave of regret that she'd died.

"Let's do something," Michelle said. "I'm bored."

"We can't wake my mom," I said, grateful for the excuse.

"We don't need your mom." She pointed to the garage where I was surprised to see our bikes leaning against the rusty door. Imagining Michelle in our garage, full of shovels and rusted paint cans, felt strangely intimate. *Had she done this when I was at the Lippmanns? Wasn't she on the phone?*

"It's hot. Where do you want to go?"

"Fuck knows." She climbed onto my mother's bike and headed up the street.

My heart started racing. “We can’t go there.” I strained to catch my breath.

“Stop me,” she said flying to the Lippmann’s.

My heart raced as I followed her. I knew the house was big, but out in front of it, it threatened to swallow everything in its shadow.

“What’s gonna happen with all her stuff?” she said loudly.

I cringed. What if someone had heard? “She has—had a sister. A baby sister. And a brother.” I had no idea what Johanna’s sister looked like because she was a baby, but her brother was only a year older and once we’d shared a seat on the camp bus.

Michelle weaved around the three parked cars in the driveway. She seemed unafraid, but my heart was in my mouth.

“So, Maverick do you spit or swallow?” Michelle asked.

“Huh?”

“When you give bjs. Do you spit? Or swallow?” She biked so close to me I could smell her coconut shampoo.

I blinked.

“Well?”

My face sweltered. “Swallow,” I said. “I’d swallow.” I swallowed awkwardly like my tongue was suddenly too big for my mouth. “When I give bjs.”

“Blow jobs, blow jobs,” Michelle sang at the top of her lungs. “On the blow job lollipop!”

I felt like I might throw up. The front door opened.

“Hello?” someone said. I was too terrified to look but it sounded like a man. Or maybe a boy.

“Hello!” Michelle hollered. “Go Gadget go,” she hissed. Without looking at each other, we pedaled all the way down the long block, past my house, past the deli, and over to a small park in town. I hoped she’d stop but Michelle zoomed past the high school, fire department, and garage my mom wouldn’t take our car because they liked Ronald Reagan.

I tried to keep up as she made her way past the racist

country club until she stopped at an enormous tract of gravelly dirt with a dozen half-finished wooden shells of houses.

“What the fuck is this?” Michelle asked.

The place looked as if a sudden alien invasion or nuclear attack had prevented the completion of a single house. Grass anywhere seemed impossible. I tried to remember what my mother had said. “I think they ran out of money,” I spit out, trying to catch my breath. “There are finished ones by the golf course. My mom says they’re McMansions.”

Michelle yawned.

“I’m so thirsty. Let’s go back. I know where my mom hides the Coke.”

“Cocaine?” Michelle grinned.

“Soda. I’m only supposed to have it when I’m sick.”

“Your mom is such a fucking hippie.”

I didn’t know what to say. It was true, but still.

“Don’t feel bad. My mom is weird too. Just not the same shit your mom is weird about.” She kicked a rock. “She lives on Tab.”

I was pretty sure my mom said Tab caused cancer, but I kept that to myself. “Moms are weird,” I said.

“Better than assholes,” Michelle said. “Let’s explore.”

I followed her from house to house—each in various states of incompleteness; three walls here, half a floor there, cigarette butts, empty Pepsi bottles, haphazard piles of nails and screw drivers, heaps of pallets.

We walked into the house across from our bikes. Michelle picked up hammers and half-heartedly sifted through a nest of cables. “We should do something,” she said.

“What?”

“We should do something. Make our mark.” She picked up a marker, held it out and grinned. My heart raced as I watched, in slow motion, as she wrote in chunky block letters right on the floor: MJM ♥ TC.

“What’s that?”

She rolled her eyes. “Michelle Jessica Marsh aka moi loves

Tom Cruise. Duh.”

“Oh.”

“*Top Gun* was the best. I saw it three times.”

“Here, I’ll do yours.” She wrote “A” then looked at me.

“What’s your middle name?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Beatrice? Gertrude? Petunia?”

“No.”

“Marlo?” She laughed. “Please tell me your name is Arlo Marlo.”

“It’s Gloria.”

“Ugh.” Michelle wrinkled her nose. “After Gloria Steinem?”

“Yeah.”

“Pretend it’s for Gloria *Vanderbilt*.” Michelle wrote **AGR** in enormous letters. “She’s rad. So, who do you like?” She raised and lowered her eyebrows. “Who’s the total eclipse of your heart?”

I thought about the boys at school but even the short ones were taller than me and if the girls thought of me as a chair then the boys saw me as dryer lint.

“It can be a celebrity.” Michelle drew a big heart next to my initials. “Who knows what’ll happen with me and Mike but I’ll always love Tom Cruise.”

“Ralph Macchio,” I said. I’d seen *Karate Kid* with Dawn and he seemed like a safe choice.

“Cool.” Michelle added a huge **RM** next to the heart.

I felt sick with worry. Our initials were dangerously close to our names.

“So you’d swallow Ralph’s spunk?” Michelle said. “Given the opportunity?”

“Yeah.” I tried to sound casual.

Michelle grinned. “Sure you would, Maverick.” She ran outside and into the skeleton house across the way. I was relieved to see she’d left the marker.

Spunk, I thought. *Gloria Vanderbilt. Fucking hippie*. How did Michelle know all these things?

"Arlo," Michelle yelled.

I took off, fearing the worst.

But Michelle wasn't being held hostage or accidentally cut herself with a power saw. She was grinning, her eyes shiny.

"Guess what I found?"

I shrugged, annoyed that I'd come to her unnecessary rescue so quickly.

She stepped forward to the side to reveal a peach-colored rubber penis. "It's a dildo," she said. "A fucking dildo." She laughed hysterically.

"Let's go. Let's go home."

"Are you scared? Is Arlo Marlo scared of the dildo wildo?"

"No." I tried to sound annoyed. "I'm hot and thirsty."

Michelle danced around the dildo. "How did it get here?"

I walked out to the edge of the house and sat down. *How did I get here*, I wondered? *Was I actually related to Michelle?*

"Just imagine," Michelle yelled. "Right where you're standing there might have been something kinky going on." She sounded gleeful. "What should we do with it?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? God, you're boring."

My heart sputtered. Boring was a death sentence. Dawn wasn't popular probably because she was Black, and our town was mostly white, but she wasn't boring because she couldn't help but stand out. My mother was weird and annoying, but she wasn't boring. Johanna Lippmann definitely wasn't boring.

Michelle walked around the dildo. *Boring, boring, boring*, I thought kicking an ant hill.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I stood up. "Let's go. My mom will want to know where we are." We both knew this wasn't true. It wasn't even three and even if she was awake, she'd be thrilled that we were gone.

Michelle scowled but walked out the house. She picked up my mom's bike, which was covered in dust, and hoisted herself on. "Goodbye, dildo," she sang. "Say bye to the dildo, Arlo," she said.

“Bye,” I muttered. I didn’t want to say dildo. I didn’t want to listen to Michelle for a minute longer.

I watched Michelle let go of the handlebars. *She’s crazy*, I thought as she rolled through an intersection without stopping. *And I’d rather be boring than crazy*. A station wagon beeped. I imagined Michelle getting run over. Her head on one side of the street, the rest of her body on the other. If she died that would be two dead teenager girls on the same street in one summer. *I’d trade her for Johanna*, I thought, relishing my meanness.

But then, right before my house, she stopped abruptly.

“Holy shit!” She held out a twenty-dollar bill.

“It’s real?”

She nodded. “It’s a gift from the dildo,” she said. “Our lucky lucky dildo.” She shoved the money into her pocket, got back on the bike. “Come on, let’s get ice cream. My treat.”

★

I slept on the couch again that night because Michelle was already in my bed when I put on my pajamas. The couch was simultaneously too hard and soft, and I was already up when my mom got back from working her second night shift.

When I complained about having to spend another day with Michelle, she shook her head. “I have a patient who believes there’s a goldfish in his stomach. He keeps demanding fish food.”

Michelle slept till noon and then took a very long shower.

When she got out of the shower, Michelle walked into the kitchen. She had one towel around her body and one piled on her head, which seemed extremely adult to me. She opened the fridge. I was sitting at the table reading a *For Better or For Worse* collection for the millionth time. I knew it was babyish, but I was envious of the normalcy of the harried mom, the whining brother and sister, and clueless dad.

“So anyway I used a razor I found under the sink. I forgot mine. I’m guessing it’s your mom’s because I don’t think you

have pubes yet.” She turned from the fridge and grinned.

I blushed.

“Although your mom seems like she’d go au natural. I just used it on my pits. Not my veejay. But I probably should. I read in *Cosmo* that men like smooth bush.”

Smooth bush, I thought looking at the comic in front of me. John was complaining that Elly wasn’t losing weight even though she was exercising. He was an asshole, but I knew he was about to break his foot with a frozen turkey at the grocery store.

Michelle slammed the fridge door. “Let’s go visit Uncle Dildo. Maybe we’ll find a hundred bucks.”

I didn’t want to go. We weren’t going to find a hundred bucks. But I didn’t want to be home alone and it didn’t seem like a good idea to let Michelle go by herself. I filled a thermos with water. At least I’d have something to drink.

Michelle rode straight to the dildo house. I struggled to keep up behind her, the sun hammering above me, unremitting.

“Honey, I’m home,” she announced. The dildo was still there, but it gave me the creeps, so I went across the way to a house with piles of twisted cables on the floor. It smelled like pine needles and cat pee, but when it was finished it would be big. Not as big as the Lippmann’s but not far off. I sat on the edge, dangling my feet on the ground, and closed my eyes. I imagined the house with walls and shiny appliances.

“Boo!” Michelle before me, grinning.

“Jesus. You gave me a heart attack.”

She laughed. “Come see it.”

“What?”

“The dildo you dingdong.” She smiled. “I’ll give you five bucks if you touch it.”

“Touch it?”

“Yeah.”

“You want me to touch the dido? For five bucks?”

“Did you say dido?”

“Dildo. I meant dildo.” *Stupid, stupid, stupid*, I thought.

“Dido. So cute. We’ll name him Dido. Like a dog. Except it’s not Fido. It’s Dido. Dido the dildo,” Michelle crooned.

“King of the suburban frontier. Come on,” she ordered.

I followed her to the dildo house. “Johanna Lippman had a dog.”

“Who?”

“Johanna. The girl who died.” It was unfathomable that Michelle didn’t know what I was talking about. “The girl who just died. On my street.”

“Oh. Yeah. Right. Touch it.”

“No.”

“Don’t you want five bucks?”

I shook my head. “Johanna Lippmann’s dog was run over,” I said. “Two years ago by Amanda Renner’s mom on the way to temple.” I knew all this because Johanna and Cassie had talked all about it at camp.

“Who gives a shit?”

“The dog was named Pepsi,” I said. “It was white and small.”

“Pepsi is a stupid name for a dog.”

“Better than Coke,” I said. “Better than New Coke.”

“Are you in love with her?” Michelle asked.

“What?”

“Are you some kind of lesbo in love with a beautiful rich dead girl?” Michelle raised her eyebrows up and down.

My heart sputtered and I felt frozen in the stuffy heat of the house, stuck in my stupid terrible life.

“Gotcha,” Michelle said.

“Huh?”

“I’m kidding. You’re not lesbo. I don’t think.”

“Why are you so mean?” The words bounced off my lips, but Michelle didn’t seem fazed.

“Because my mom is a bitch and my father is a perverted son of a bitch,” she said matter of fact.

Perverved, I thought. *Son of a bitch. Kinky.*

"Anyway, I bought you ice cream yesterday. I didn't have to do that. That's not mean."

She had a point.

"Penises are weird, right," she said. She picked up a tape measure. "*I'm no lesbo but penises are super strange looking. Ten bucks if you pick it up *and* measure it,*" she said.

"No."

Michelle lay down on her stomach, slid close to the dildo. "We'll bring gloves tomorrow. That way we can pick it up without getting cooties."

I left the house and took a long swig of hot and plasticky water from my thermos. I blew my bangs up from my face and wipe the sweat from my forehead. Michelle came outside. I didn't offer her any water.

"Once when I was little my neighbor and I peed in a bottle and then we gave it to the guy mowing her lawn. We told him it was beer," Michelle said.

"Gross."

"I'm crampy," Michelle said. "So bloated." She rubbed her belly and sighed.

"It's hot," I said.

"I think I'd do it with my period. Given the opportunity. I hear blood is a natural lubricant."

Lubricant made me feel weird, kind of warm in my underpants. I thought maybe I'd peed, but then realized it was sweat.

"But I'm not sure about someone going down on me. That's just like . . ." She grinned. "You know what I mean, right."

I didn't know what she meant, and she knew that, and I hated her for it. Without saying anything I got back on my bike and started riding. I didn't care what she did.

When we got back my mom's car was gone, which meant she'd taken another night shift. I was furious. It was her stupid cousin's kid. Why was she so selfish? I wanted a normal life: a brother, a baby sister, a dog, and crappy dad who visited every

other weekend. I was tired of being alone all the time. I was tired of Michelle.

The doorbell rang. Michelle looked at me. I took a deep breath and opened the door to a teenage boy whose face was a carpet, a painful carpet, of acne. He held out three pizzas.

"Um?" I said.

"Finally," Michelle said. "I'm starving." She reached for the boxes. "Arlo, tip him."

"Tip?"

"Never mind," she said. Precipitously holding the pizzas, she practically threw the five dollars she'd offered me at him.

"Uh, thanks." He bent down and picked up the money.

"Ta-ta," Michelle said, slamming the door after him.

"Did you order these?" I asked.

"As if."

I looked at the box. LI PP MAN N. "Oh," I said like I'd solved a mystery. "They belong to the Lippmann's. They're ninety-one. We're twenty-one."

Michelle marched into the kitchen.

I followed. "The Lippmann's are sitting Shiva. People bring food to Shivas." I tried to sound confident. "We didn't buy them."

"They're here aren't they?" She put the stack on top of *For Better or For Worse*.

"But it's a mistake."

"It would be a mistake not to eat them." She opened the top box. "Olives, ew."

"It's stealing."

She opened another box. "Cheese. Hallelujah. Mushrooms. Gross. But still better than your freaky food."

"We can't eat this."

Michelle shook her head slowly. "But we can, Maverick. This is a gift. A gift from Dido. Because we visited." She held a slice up to my face. "All hail Dido, King of the Dildos for giving us this delicious repast." She folded the slice into her mouth.

"What if the Lippmann's get mad?"

“Who are they getting mad at? God? Dido? The pizza boy?”

“We need to give the pizzas back,” I said. “The Lippmann’s daughter. . . .”

“Yeah yeah blah blah. You think pizza will make her or her dumb dog less dead?” She held a slice under my nose. My mouth watered. I took it.

It was amazing.

★

The next afternoon, after my mom went to bed, Michelle and I picked off the mushrooms and ate every slice of the leftover cold pizza. Then we sat in the bathroom—me on the edge of the bathtub, Michelle on the toilet—and took turns shaving our legs with my mom’s ancient disposal razor.

“I’m going to do your makeup okay.” It wasn’t a question. She instructed me to look up at the ceiling as she swiped mascara over my eyelashes. She rubbed something on my face. I was surprised when I looked in the mirror. The mascara wasn’t too thick and whatever Michelle had put on my cheeks had lightened my freckles.

As we walked through the kitchen she took a pair of my mom’s yellow rubber gloves and a package of partially melted birthday candles.

I wondered if Michelle was planning on setting the dildo house on fire. I surprised myself by not worrying too much about it.

We biked together and I wondered if people who passed us on their way home from work thought we were friends. Just two seventh graders hanging out on a summer day. Like Johanna and Cassie, I thought. I wondered if Michelle would want to get ice cream later. Maybe tomorrow, I’d let my mom take us to the pool. After all her night shifts she’d be too tired to swim and might just drop us off. Dawn might still be in Georgia but if she was back home and at the pool I’d ignore her.

But as we rode into the development, the sun slowly setting behind its scorched earth, Michelle screamed, “If any

man is here Arlo Marlo will give you a blow job. Especially if you look like Ralph Macchio.”

I threw my bike down and stormed off into the house that was farthest away. It didn’t have a roof yet, just raw open beams. I felt hurtled by rage and lay down and stared up at the sky.

I was so angry. Angry at Michelle, my mom, the heat, even Johanna Lippmann. When I grew up, I’d make enough money to live in one of these finished houses. I’d get wall to wall carpeting and stock the fridge with Tab and Pepsi. I’d water my lawn every night and might vote Republican.

“Whatcha ya doing?” Michelle bounded in. She stood over me, so close I could smell her salty citrusy bubble gummy odor.

I sat up. “You could get in trouble,” I said. “You can’t just say things like that. You could get in trouble.”

“We’re not getting in trouble.”

“You don’t know that. Terrible things happen all the time. The ozone layer is disappearing. My mom takes care of people who think they have goldfish in their stomachs. Kids get kidnapped in white vans. Kids get in trouble.” I had more to say but my mouth felt thick and cottony.

“It’s blue vans where I live,” she said. “Blue vans with guys who offer you Nerds and force you into the van and have you do things to them.”

I considered this.

She sat next to me. “My dad got arrested. He was cruising.”

I pictured a boat in the ocean.

Michelle exhaled. “He was in the park. Looking.”

“For what?”

He was in the park . . . looking for dido. It’s called cruising.”

I took a breath, but the air felt like sawdust.

“People—men—do it all the time. Homos. There are places to go. Spots. They hide and sometimes the cops bust

them, and a reporter reads about it in the police report and then writes about because the guy is the high school social studies teacher.” Michelle made a noise somewhere between a cough and burp. I wondered if she was going to cry. I realized that I really didn’t want her to.

“We should do something.” I sat up. “Our legs are smooth.”

“For no reason.”

“You found twenty bucks. We got pizzas. Good things happen in threes.”

“Bad things happen in threes too.”

Johanna Lippmann died, I thought. Michelle came. We found a dildo.

“Fuck it.”

Michelle looked at me.

“Go get Dido.”

“Why?”

“The spirit of Dido the dildo is here. I feel . . . feel his presence. His . . . manly presence.”

Michelle snorted.

“Go get him. At once!”

Michelle got up.

I stood up and gathered a mess of nails and screws into a circle in the center of the floor. With a pencil I made a X in the middle of the room. **JL SUCKS COCK**, I wrote in big block letters right above the X.

When Michelle came back, she looked at my graffiti, nodded, and thrust Dido at me. I stepped back so it wouldn’t hit me.

She hadn’t bothered with the gloves. I closed my eyes, bent down and picked it up. It made me think of an eraser. I put it in the middle of the circle, right on the X, right below my graffiti. I lit a candle, held it between my fingers and said, “Dido. We stand here before you . . .”

The wind picked up and the candle went out.

“Dido is powerful today.” I lit the candle again. “We

stand here as your humble servants. We are weak before your power.”

I could almost see the mounds of dirt spewing as the wind got stronger. It felt like it might rain. Wax dripped onto my hand. “We are grateful for your gifts, Dido,” I said. “For the money and the pizzas and for . . . for whatever you gift us next.” I blew out the candle and lowered myself to curl up over my knees like my mother did for her back.

I felt Michelle lay next to me as the wind howled its way inside. I imagined ten years from now, a family watching TV in their den, never knowing a dildo named Dido was right in this spot. My TV watching family in 1996 might not know about this horribly hot summer. Nothing about me or my mom or Michelle or her dad hiding in a bush. They might not know about Johanna Lippmann or the terrible crime I’d committed in their house. In 1996 all of this could be covered by carpet. It was marvelously freeing to imagine this make-believe family into existence that I started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Michelle asked.

“1996. In ten years, it’ll be 1996.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” I sat up.

The wind howled. Michelle, still bent over, started chanting. “All hail Dido, King of the Dildos.”

A crack of lightening snapped so close it felt inside. I held my breath but before the rain started, I started chanting too.