

# The Big Dipper

*by* Meg Pokrass

The pool was four feet deep, and we bought it at Target half off. You could float on your back and think, “fun times are here,” because at least you weren't burning hot.

Mom and I watched it fill up with hose water. She looked around at the back yard, the neglected fruit trees, and said, “I've got to call those idiots and make sure they get a gardener.” It stunk from rotting fruit and dog poop.

I wasn't going to worry about anything. I would just float on my back in my bikini. I would be weightless. There was an annoying flea bite in the crook of my arm, which I sucked on.

The pool was going to be my way of making more friends. I was sick of the two friends I had from last year. Lila and Blythe were both considered to be strange. Lila wasn't ugly when she washed and brushed her long hair—about once a week. She memorized animal facts. Blythe looked like Pinocchio. She was a violin prodigy. She had a European hair cut—short, black, severe. She was proud of her breasts, which were large, adult size. I didn't have any breasts yet, but the doctor said not to worry.

I wanted to know if late development meant small breasts. Mom said it didn't, that she had been the same way. “Worth the wait,” she'd say with an exaggerated wink. Now that dad had his own place and his bi-polar disorder, she had all kinds of new expressions.

In my new pool, I would float on my back when it was dark, looking at the stars. Nighttime swimming had been my dream.

Since there was no one else, I invited Lila and Blythe for a nighttime dip on Saturday. Lila couldn't come because her family needed to drive to Oxnard. Blythe said she sure as heck would be able to make it. She was all about nighttime and pools and stargazing.

“Show me the big dipper,” Blythe said. “I want to make sure you know which one it is.”

Blythe was wearing her bikini bottoms, but she left her top on the side of the pool. The pool seemed much smaller with her beside me. I was glad it was cheap.

Terribly absent were Lila's cigarettes.

I pointed to the area of the sky where I saw the Big Dipper.

"Uh huh," she said. "A long bent ladle, right?"

Blythe looked wet and slick—her womanly breasts gleaming. I felt angry at her for taking her top off.

"It looks like a crooked dick," I said. The pool was a bee cemetery. I scooped two up and threw them out.

"I don't even really know what a ladle looks like," I added.

I could hear all the neighborhood dogs talking to each other. A bee might have been marching down my arm. Something tickled.

"You know what a crooked dick looks like?" Blythe said. Her face was large, or maybe it was the moon.

"Not exactly," I said, trying not to let my eyes get caught on her nipples, "but I've seen them, and they all have different shapes."

True. I had a subscription to Playgirl. My mother had given it to me for Christmas instead of a new bike. Once she'd found a beat-up copy of The Happy Hooker under my pillow. I'd stolen it from a garage sale. When I came home from school, I found it laid out on my dresser next to my hair brush and retainer case. Nothing seemed to freak her, as long as she had two martinis.

"So, like... whose?" Blythe asked.

"I haven't seen that many dicks, I just have..." If I told her I had a subscription to Playgirl she'd tell Lila, and then God knew what would happen when I stopped being their friend. The water in the pool was getting cooler, the smell of new plastic making things worse. I hoped she hadn't peed in the pool, though I would not put it past her.

"I have a lot of cousins," I said.

She smiled at me so brightly then, she almost looked pretty. She squealed, half laugh, half death cry. She said she was getting cold—hey, what a great idea, let's bake oatmeal cookies.

Suddenly she said, "Could you imagine sucking one of those?"

"God, no," I said, fast and soft. Her eyes looked back at me big, full of thought. She moved in.

"What do you imagine they taste like?"

I knew better than to speak.

"Corn on the cob," she whispered into my ear, spitting, "with a bit of salt."

This was not happy news. I knew that violin prodigies lived exotic lives, they were much older than other teenagers. They traveled to Europe.

I imagined Blythe kneeling in front of an audience, her mouth open like a baby bird.

"I'm not ever going to do that," I said. It sounded fake, as if I were acting in a play.

Blythe moved to the far side of the pool. The moving water sounded smooth. She kept still, cupping her chin in her hands. I wondered if our friendship was done.

Her nose was cartoonishly off-kilter, as if a person had sculpted the middle of her face blindfolded. She practiced three hours a day after school, was going to be on CD covers wearing velvet dresses. She was going to be rich. She already knew everything that was going to happen.

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