

BONFIRES

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Eva arrived at her best friend Sarah's house an hour before the boys were expected so she could help with the party preparations. Eva and five other girls had been invited to a sleepover for Sarah's sixteenth birthday, and each of them had been allowed to invite a boy to join them until midnight.

"You did ask John, didn't you?" Sarah asked Eva as they carried the card table outside.

"Of course I asked John. What kind of a dorky question is that?" Eva sounded irritable, even to herself. This wasn't how she wanted to start the evening of her best friend's birthday. She lowered her voice so none of the other girls would hear. "Sorry. It's just that Betty is coming with Greg."

"But you dumped Greg for John. What's the problem?"

"Oh, I know that, but it gets me mad that Betty jumped on Greg so fast. She's just out to get him because he used to be mine. She'd better leave John alone."

"Well, if I'd known you had such a problem with Betty I wouldn't have invited her," Sarah said doubtfully.

"No, it's OK. We'll just sort of ignore each other. It'll be a great party, don't worry. Besides, you won't notice anything else after Jerry gets here." They giggled in excitement, because Jerry was one of the most popular boys at their school and it had amazed them both that he had accepted Sarah's invitation to the party. Giving each other a satisfied hug, they joined the other girls in hanging Japanese lanterns.

After setting everything up, the girls paused to admire their handiwork. The party was to be held outside in Sarah's back yard, which bordered on some woods. Card tables were stacked

with sandwiches and soft drinks, the stereo was set to blare rock music through the neighborhood, and lanterns were ready to be lit. Most exciting, though, was the large brush pile Sarah's dad had built toward the back of the yard that would be turned into a giant bonfire as soon as the boys arrived. The party would be held by firelight, which turned even ordinary people into romantic figures.

"Why did you make the bonfire so far back in the yard?" Eva asked. "It seems a little close to the woods."

"Isn't it obvious? My parents are going to be watching us out the kitchen window all night long, so we can't make out in the yard without them seeing. I figured if the fire was close to the woods, the couples could just slip away for a while without my parents noticing. At least that's what I'm hoping to do with Jerry. You can do what you want."

Eva eyed the woods speculatively and wondered if she and John would be able to sneak away together for a few minutes. She certainly hoped so. She had known John for three whole weeks and hadn't yet been alone with him. Because he was three years older and in college, her parents had insisted that they double-date. They had barely even kissed up to now.

Eva had daydreamed a lot about what it would be like to be alone with John. She was still a virgin, and hadn't even done any heavy petting. The guys she had gone out with before John had been as timid as mice. Her images of lovemaking came from romance novels, which she devoured whenever she wasn't in school. The heroines and heroes in her novels usually stopped just short of "doing it" until they were married, but they were always in a state of high excitement over each other. That was the way she felt about John. The two of them seemed to have stepped out of the pages of one of her novels. They had fallen in love at first sight when

they met at the mall and everything had been perfect ever since. John was very sophisticated and gentlemanly. He opened car doors for her and took her to fancy restaurants. This was a new world for her and she was thrilled, even though a little uncomfortable. When she wasn't sure how to act, she fell back on her novels and did what she thought her heroine would do.

Everything had worked out reasonably well so far.

Would she let John touch her breasts tonight? She thought her heroine would probably let him get that far but no farther, and it seemed like a good plan to her. She wondered what other girls did with their boyfriends, but they never really talked in specifics. Everyone thought they knew who was a virgin and who wasn't, but she wondered if that were really true. Betty and some of the other girls had reputations as sluts, because they slept with their boyfriends, and she was mildly sorry that she was seen as a goody-two-shoes. "Oh, well," she thought as the boys began to arrive, "I'll just have to see how it goes."

John was the last to arrive, and he made quite an entrance as he wheeled his new sports car into the driveway. "He sure is fine," Sarah whispered to Eva as the other kids gathered admiringly around his car.

"I know," Eva answered, with a certain smugness. He was by far the best looking guy at the party, even better than Greg, who was ignoring her and making a fuss over Betty. John was tall and blonde, and he really did resemble a romance novel hero. "I should remember to tell him that tonight; he'll think that's funny," she thought as she hurried to his side.

The bonfire lit with a whoosh! and Sarah's backyard was transformed into a magical place. Couples danced around the fire and made crazy shadows out into the yard. Eva was having a wonderful time -- she felt beautiful and dramatic and very much like a romantic heroine.

She danced seductively close to John.

After a few minutes, John quietly led Eva back into the woods, away from the others. He pulled her to him for a passionate kiss. "You've been driving me crazy all night," he whispered huskily. "That t-shirt is so tight that your headlights show through, and I've been dying to kiss them all night."

Eva was thrilled by his pleasure in her but she was slightly disconcerted. None of the other boys she had been with had talked like that. She wasn't sure how she was supposed to respond. Was there something her heroine would say? She giggled nervously. He kissed her again, and she felt even more excited and disturbed.

John took Eva's hand and pressed it into his crotch, which was hard and lumpy. Eva had never felt a guy's crotch before, but she knew that the hardness was because of her. John moaned when she touched him and she jerked her hand away. Meanwhile, Eva could feel his tongue in her mouth, searching. For what, she wondered? It felt like it would go all the way inside her.

As they became more involved, Eva felt her resolve to control the situation wavering. Vaguely she thought that she would stop it in a little while, but she was enjoying herself too much right now.

His hand moved down her shirt and up again inside it, and the feeling of flesh on flesh made her giddy. Although she hadn't realized it at the time, she noticed that his other hand had reached inside and unhooked her bra. He seemed so expert at it. She wondered if this were due to experience or age. Suddenly her bra was loose and his hand moved to her bare breast. She had never experienced such excitement at the forbidden pleasure. Her knees were so weak that when he moved to pull her to the ground, she gratefully gave way.

Time passed in a blur. John's hands continued to explore. When he lowered the zipper on her jeans, she inhaled sharply and thought, "This is going too fast. I can't handle this." But she only held her breath and stiffened, without being able to think of words that would make him stop without pissing him off.

Suddenly John sat up away from her. He pulled down her shirt and looked at her solemnly. She could barely see his eyes in the moonlight; they looked a little wild, she thought. In a low voice he said, "I can't do this to you. You're still a virgin. I can't take the responsibility."

Everything was moving so quickly! Eva frantically wondered what she was supposed to say. She was so confused; this was beyond anything in her past experience. Finally she managed to say, "Oh," and wondered how she could sound so dumb. She was usually able to handle situations; why had her brain failed her now?

The moment lengthened as they stared at each other. Finally John said, "Listen, you'd better get up and walk away right now. Because I'm afraid if we stay here I won't be able to stop myself."

Here it was, her big moment. Her world really did seem to pause for an instant, as the novels described. But what was she supposed to say now? Her lines weren't clear. She knew he was just being considerate, that he didn't really want her to leave. But what did she want? She wasn't sure. She felt as though she were floating above herself, watching and wondering what would happen. So she sat, still and silent, as the moment lengthened.

Finally John smiled. "All right," he said. "I'll be gentle. And I love you."

In a trance she let him lay her down and remove her jeans. He did some things but she

hardly noticed. When he entered her it felt like a knife piercing, and she bit her lip to keep from crying out. "What is he doing?" she thought wildly. "Does he know what he's doing? Oh, God, this hurts. What is happening to me?"

After a short time he stopped moving and lay beside her on the ground. "How was it?" he asked anxiously. "Are you OK?"

Her thoughts were wild and confused; she was upset and angry. Without saying anything, she groped frantically for her clothes. John said softly, "It'll be better next time. I'm sorry if I hurt you." He hugged her and helped to straighten her hair and clothes. As they walked back toward the bonfire she thought, "It wasn't at all what I thought it would be. Why does everybody make such a big deal about it?" She shuddered in disillusionment.

They rejoined the others and tried to act as if nothing had happened. Sarah hurried over and hissed, "John's going to have to leave. My parents caught on to what was happening and they're making the guys leave early." She noticed Eva's dazed look and asked, "What have you been doing for so long? I was getting worried."

Eva smiled vaguely and said, "Not much. I'm OK. Don't worry." She didn't know whether or not she could trust Sarah with this experience, even if they were best friends. What if she thought Eva was stupid?

Eva walked John to his car. He was concerned that she was all right. "I'll call you tomorrow, OK?" She just nodded, kissed him briefly, and turned away. She felt numb, and the last person she wanted to talk to was John. Maybe she could deal with him tomorrow. She wanted to be alone to think about this thing that had happened to her, but she had to get through the rest of the sleepover first.

After the boys left, the girls settled down in Sarah's living room to analyze the evening. They giggled just loudly enough to hopefully keep from waking Sarah's parents.

"John sure is nice," Betty said to Eva. "How did you two get along? You must have had fun out in the woods -- you were gone long enough."

Eva realized that Betty was trying to trap her into revealing something that could be turned against her. "Oh, it was fun, but no big deal. I'm surprised you even noticed. I saw you making out with Greg all night."

Betty began to chatter about how great Greg was and how lucky she was to have ended up with him. Eva didn't care a whit what Betty had to say. All that foolishness was far behind her now. She kept wondering if something was wrong with her that she hadn't heard bells and whistles during her first time making love. "Making love" didn't seem to be the right phrase to describe their hasty sex act. She wondered if she had just had a bad experience or if the romance novels were lying. But why would they lie about such an important thing? She heard Betty whisper to Sarah, "Boy, Eva must really be in love. I've never seen her so out of it."

She wasn't sure if there was something she should do after this experience. Take a bath? She certainly felt dirty and grimy. She knew she couldn't tell the other girls, because it would be all over school by morning. Suddenly her goody-two-shoes reputation didn't look so bad. She wondered if she could trust John to keep their secret. The thought that her reputation was in the hands of a guy she barely knew troubled her.

Slowly another thought surfaced, and she was aghast. Oh no, could she get pregnant from that tonight? She thought she had seen him fumble with something in the dark, but she wasn't sure. She had been too embarrassed to look closely. And what about AIDS? Oh, my God, could

I have gotten it from him?

Eva didn't sleep at all that night. Something had gone terribly wrong with her romantic scenario. She thought she understood why the characters in romance novels usually stopped at the crucial moment. The fantasy might be better than the reality of sex. Or maybe, she thought, she just needed to try again. The two ideas battled in her mind -- should she go back to her old life and wait a while longer for any more sex, or should she dive into the experience to see if it got better? She knew that something in her had changed forever, that she wasn't the same innocent girl she had been yesterday. But she didn't know whether or not she liked being this new person. Can people tell by looking at me that I'm ... *experienced*, she wondered? Would John be willing to just kiss me without having sex? What would he do if I got pregnant? What would her parents say? How would her friends react? The whole thing just seemed too overwhelming to be possible.

Before she went home the next morning she made a deal with God. "God, if you just give me my period next month I swear I won't do it again until I'm out of high school. And if I change my mind I'll try to figure out a way to get on the pill beforehand, or at least I'll make him use a condom." Her period was due in a week and she knew it was going to be a long seven days.

As she walked out to her parents' car in the morning, Eva's attention was drawn to the area in the yard where the bonfire had been. It was just a big patch of blackened earth now, with no grass. So much had happened since yesterday.

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