

Girl Power!

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Each Monday in the cafeteria brought about the same lunch table discussion of the weekend's sexual escapades. Everyone had a new tale to tell, of sweaty palms and bulging body parts. Everyone except me. I had once considered making up stories, but knew I didn't possess enough experience even to make up a good lie. My brief encounter in the locker room with my hairbrush would only gross people out. And besides, that was way too personal.

I actually dreaded lunch time on Mondays: six girls who wore way too much dime store make-up and bras stuffed with gym socks, munching on carrot sticks, and laughing about Billy Myers' hairy butt, while I looked on with wide, innocent eyes. It was like the Knights of the Round Table, only what we discussed were things like how to get rid of hickeys with frozen spoons and whether or not jumping up and down before sex could prevent pregnancy.

Justine was reporting to us her weekend rendezvous with Peter Simms, with her usual Oscar-worthy performance. As always, my eyes were focused on my lunch tray, using my spork to make trenches in my mashed potatoes. I looked up in time just to hear Justine's dramatic summary: "Yeah. We did a lot Saturday night. Next weekend we'll definitely do *it*."

It. Never before in the history of the English language had a word conveyed such power and intrigue with only two letters, especially for an eighth grader. We all knew doing *it* was something as exalted as winning the Pulitzer Prize or shaking the President's hand. Doing *it* meant you were someone, you were going places, and you were a *woman*. Doing *it* involved maturity and poise. It involved...well, actually, I didn't know exactly what it involved. To be honest, I wasn't sure if anyone did.

There was an envious silence from the group, and Amanda gasped. She and Justine had been locked in a bitter rivalry ever since sixth grade when Justine was first to get her period. Amanda always had to be first. She was first to get boobs, showing them off in her tight T-shirts with "Girl Power" written on the front. And she was the first to introduce us to smoking, pulling the contraband out of her backpack. We watched with baited breath by the middle toilet, as she showed off the treasures she had stolen from her stepfather: a solitary, half-broken Marlboro and lighter with the naked lady on it.

Justine stabbed one of the beets on her tray with her spork. "Yeah. When we stopped making out, Peter's testicles looked just like this." She held the purple, bulging heap into the air like a warrior proudly wielding his enemy's head after a bloody victory. "We'll definitely do it next weekend," she said. She smugly eyed Amanda with a Cheshire cat grin.

"So, Daphne. How'd you do this weekend?"

Suddenly, all eyes were on me. The jig was up. There was no way I could keep wearing my mask of ambiguity with six pairs of probing, eighth-

grade-girl eyes on me. My mind was moving faster than a hamster in a wheel. Could everyone see the panic in my eyes? Should I confess I had stayed home with my parents Saturday night, choosing to break my date with Harry Windsor's cousin, to play the altruistic daughter? Or should I oblige my duty as a member of the Cool Girls of the eighth grade, and fabricate sordid tales of pelvic thrusting and shag-rug burns in a rec room?

"We all know you had a date with Stan Windsor," Marlene said.

"If Stan's anything like his cousin, Harry, I'll bet he was all hands!" Justine said. She batted her false lashes and did her best leading actress smile.

What was that supposed to mean, I wondered, as the entire clique erupted in laughter. I joined in with a toothy grin, hoping to appease the Goddesses of Cool. I closed my eyes and imagined how my date with Stan would have gone, our bodies pressed close together, as if we had been the end product of some experimental vivisection.

The truth of the matter was, I wasn't even allowed to date yet. Mom always said, 'Girls shouldn't date until they're sixteen. You girls move way too fast these days!' And actually, I was perfectly content with her theory; but apparently, I was the only one in the group who was. I cringed when Amanda divulged the 'top secret info' about David, the 11th grader who always cruised the junior high parking lot after school, being uncircumcised. Her face was all red with excitement and her words spilled out so fast, it sounded as if she were speaking some foreign dialect. To me, she actually was. And I would have died, had I discovered Billy Myers' excess body hair, while it made Justine feel like Magellan or something. Even though our lunch time discussions certainly intrigued me, the prospect of discovering Billy Myer's hairy butt made me want to puke.

I closed my eyes and knew I had better start concocting a good tale-and fast. My table companions grew silent out of courtesy; after all, I had to concentrate if I wanted to tell my story in vivid detail. Being cool meant not only being able to tell stories full of lies, it also meant being able to tell those lies well. And why couldn't I lie? After all, how truthful were the girls when they told of their weekend adventures? Did Marlene really make out with Jason Miller's college-age brother? And did Traci really turn that gay guy straight with one kiss when she went to Niagara last summer? Was Stephanie really the reason Mrs. Hildebrandt's husband left her? Considering the fact that he moved in with his nineteen-year-old secretary; it was highly improbable. After all, his secretary had curves and her own car. All Stephanie had was braces and a ten-speed.

"Well, come on. Let's hear it. Spill your guts!" Justine said, smashing her beets with her spork. Somewhere across the din of the crowded cafeteria, poor Peter Simms was probably writhing in pain.

"Yeah, hurry up before the bell rings," Amanda urged.

I could feel little beads of sweat begin forming on my upper lip. My entire junior high status rested on what I was about to say next.

"You did go out with Stan, didn't you?" Leslie said.

Good ol' Leslie, I thought with a painful smile. Whenever you're stand-

ing on the edge of humiliation, she's always there to push you in.

"Of course," I managed to say.

Good. Keep going, Daphne. That's one lie down. Just a few more to go. I looked up at the clock on the wall. Five minutes left of lunch period. If only I could stall for five minutes, the girls' minds would go from tawdry sex to geometry. If only I could change the subject...

"Does anyone know if we have a test next hour?" I said.

"Don't change the subject, Daphne," Leslie said.

"Well, it must be something good if she's trying to get out of it," Amanda said.

"Come on, tell us! How was the date?"

The girls were vicious. They were tearing into me like a pack of wolves. They each had an appendage in their jowls and were viciously shaking their heads back and forth with frothy teeth, growling with carnivorous pleasure.

"Don't you guys ever have anything else on your minds?" I said. I was hostile, but it came out sarcastic.

"Ooh, it must be really good!" Marlene said. Her eyes sparkled with delight from underneath her heavily made-up eyes. She looked like a raccoon. A big, fat raccoon. I hated her in that minute. I hated them all. They weren't really my friends, after all. True friends wouldn't pressure me into making up sleazy lies. True friends wouldn't have pressured me into accepting a date with Harry Windsor's lactose-intolerant cousin in the first place. But no other girls in the school would have given me as much status as the six that sat before me. Without them, I wouldn't have been invited to Ben's bar mitzvah, or Kelly's pool party where all the boys took off their swimming trunks. I hated them. At the same time, I would do anything to please them.

But I needed to stick up for myself. I needed to have some self-respect, some dignity. I needed to voice my opinion and be one against six. After all, if they were my true friends, they wouldn't care that I didn't want to date until I was sixteen, like my mother said. True friends wouldn't care that I was nervous even having a boy for a lab partner in biology. I needed to stand up for my beliefs and for eighth grade girls all over the world. I needed girl power!

I was confident now. I was strong. I was invincible. Hell, forget girl power. I was woman, hear me roar! The song began running through my body like an intravenous drug.

"Daphne, are you gonna tell us or what?" Amanda snapped, now irate. "What happened with you and Stan Windsor last weekend?"

I took a deep breath, and looking back at them, I managed to squeak out the only words that popped into my head. Just three little words:

"We...did...it."

Six pairs of eyes bugged out of six little eighth grade heads then, and just as I tried desperately to pull those three, damning words back into my big, fat mouth, the bell rang.