

Where There's Smoke There's Fire *by Bev Falconer*



There was a lane behind our house and across from that was the bush. These were our playgrounds. We knew everything that was going on behind our houses. When my brother, Doug, and I saw that Mr. Stephens was going to burn his big heap of branches we went right down there to help him.

Mr. Stephens had been saving up some of his garbage to get the fire going. He said the waxed paper bread bags were really good for starting a fire and he let us scrunch them up. Then we helped him rip up Shredded Wheat boxes and egg cartons and stuff, and roll newspapers up tight 'cause they burned for a longer time that way.

He put a lot of dry wood scraps in to burn too because he said the fire had to be really hot before the branches would burn. As the flames reached higher they started crackling and the sap sizzled and sputtered from the cut ends of the branches. I asked Mr. Stephens if we could cook potatoes in his bonfire. When he said yes we raced home.

"Wipe your feet," mom called out as we burst through the door. She sniffed the air and asked, "Where have *you* been? You smell like a bonfire."

"Mr. Stephens is burning a bunch of branches. Can we have potatoes to cook in the fire?"

"Is Mr. Stephens right there?"

"Yes."

We knew mom didn't trust us around fire and matches since that time we were practicing to put on a shadow play in the basement. You know, that play where a doctor cuts open the patient and pulls out a long string of sausage links – they're supposed to be his intestines. Anyway, we hung up a sheet for a screen and needed to have some light behind us. We weren't allowed to use flashlights and waste batteries, so we decided to try candles.

There were a bunch of candle stubs and candle holders that we used when the lights went out. We sneaked them and some matches from the kitchen cupboard. Then downstairs we balanced the candles on a sawhorse behind us. The candles were sort of wobbly so we propped them up with some plasticene then lit them. We took turns looking from the other side of the sheet to see how the shadow was. It wasn't clear at all.

“I think you have to stand closer to the sheet.” But that didn’t help much.

“Let’s try moving the candles closer behind you.”

Just then we heard a clip, clip, clip – it was the heels of mom’s shoes as she came down the wooden sidewalk to the basement. Oh, oh. As mom opened the basement door Doug and I looked at each other nervously. She came in and boy, she nearly had a conniption!”

“Just what were you two thinking?! You could have burned the house down. If one of those candles had fallen on the wooden planks...” she just shook her head, speechless. She took the candles over to the laundry tubs and doused the flames. “Now put these back where you got them, and after this remember to ask for things and not just take them.”

That was last year and she was still stewing about us with candles and matches. She was a real worrywart. I think that’s because she grew up in a big city – Glasgow in Scotland and she wasn’t used to doing all the things we do. Now we just wanted to get back to Mr. Stephens’ bonfire.

“So, can we have potatoes?” I asked.

Mom went to the cupboard and picked a couple of potatoes for us.

“They’re pretty small. Can’t we have bigger ones?”

“Potatoes take a long time to cook – these will be big enough.”

“Okay.” We took the spuds and raced back down the block.

We looked for a good spot in the bonfire to put our potatoes, but when we got closer it was pretty hot. So we used a poker to push them into the centre of the fire.

There was a bushel basket full of dried up weeds ready to burn but they weren’t to go on the fire ‘til the end because they would make so much smoke. I saw some dried up stalks in that basket and thought they would make great cigarettes – well they would be long cigarettes – like you see in magazine pictures of ladies smoking, dressed in fancy evening dresses. I picked up a stalk and touched the end to some coals and held it there until it glowed red. I blew through the stalk.

“You don’t blow, you have to suck the smoke,” my *younger* brother informed me.

“I know,” I said (although I didn’t) and quickly sucked. The smoke caught me off guard and I coughed and spluttered. I tried to hide it so I wouldn’t seem like a dummy but my eyes were really watering and gave me away. Doug laughed – the brat! I wasn’t quite as glamorous as the magazine pictures.

By the time the branches were pretty much burned we dumped on the dried weeds. The smoke billowed up and stung our eyes. When the weeds had burned down we looked for our potatoes in the smoldering ashes. We got them out with the poker but it was a while before they were cool enough to pick up. I carefully bit through the cindery skin into the hot potato. I've always liked that burned taste – like when I forget to turn the toast in time, and burn it. The potato was good – sort of gummy on the outside and harder in the centre – not really cooked but I sure like the taste. When I wiped my hands on my blue jacket I looked down and saw the filthy mess I had made. “Oh no, Mom’s going to kill me.”

I remembered to wipe my feet before I went inside – I was already in enough trouble! When Mom saw us she said, “Oh my goodness what a mess. Go back outside I’m going to get the whisk and brush you off. We’ll hang your jackets on the porch overnight to get rid of that smell of smoke.” I couldn’t believe it. She didn’t yell. She even asked if the potatoes cooked alright.

Mom didn’t like the smell of smoke but I sure did and I buried my nose in the sleeve of my jacket and took a big sniff of it before I took it off. And then I was thinking that, even though Mom grew up in the city, she was a pretty good sport.