

what a word meant, they could put up their hand and ask, but not until 9:20.

It was a few days after Heather's puzzling conversation with Sharon that Justin Sharpe's hand shot up after the quiet reading period was over. "Miss Sloaning," he asked, "what's a prostitute?" Justin had been reading some sort of adult detective book. Heather couldn't believe her luck.

Some of the kids in the class giggled. Miss Sloaning looked mortified.

"A prostitute," said Miss Sloaning, "is a bad woman who gets paid to be intimate with men. And it is a word I strongly advise you never to use again." She strode over to Justin's desk. "Let me see that book."

Heather raised her hand. "Yes, Heather?" asked the teacher, hopefully, desperate for a topic change, a question about a proper *children's* book.

"My father has prostitutes at his hotel."

More laughter from the classmates, more mortification from Miss Sloaning.

As soon as she had a chance, Heather visited the school library, just down the hall from her classroom. She found the dictionary. She had work to do. She got to the i's first. *Intimate*. "Marked by close acquaintance, association, or familiarity. Very personal, private." From what Heather could tell, it sounded like there were ladies at The Beresford Hotel who were being paid to be her father's acquaintances. This didn't make any sense. Why did her father, who had lots of friends, need to pay to have more? Did he pay all of his friends? Would she have to pay hers one day?

Just as she was flipping to the p's, Karen Saunders from her class approached her. "Don't you know what a prostitute is?" Karen asked.

"No, what is it?" Heather was excited.

"A prostitute is someone who screws men for money." "Screws?"

"Don't you know what screw means, you dimwit?" Karen's voice dropped to a whisper. "It's when a man sucks on a woman's boob and she sucks on his thing."

His hot dog.

When Heather got home that night, Charlene was in a rage, accusing Heather of using her new mauve nail polish, without her permission. She sat at the dinner table, knife and fork waving, yelling. "You're only ten. Stay out of my stuff," she chastised her over the liver and onions.

"Yeah, well you screw Sam and dad has prostitutes at his hotel."

Silence. Then shouting. Heather was sent directly to her room. "She's not to have any more food," her father bellowed. "Not even one bite!" Heather filed this information away. Outbursts—an excellent tactic for avoiding liver and onions.

In her room, Heather waited for the door to open, for her mother or father to come in, sit down at the edge of the bed and explain what was known for some reason as the birds and the bees. The door did not open; the conversation did not happen. Ever. Heather couldn't figure out

what birds and bees had to do with prostitutes and hot dogs anyway.

She learned in health class two years later that a boy's hot dog was really called a penis. And she learned in the schoolyard not long after the liver and onions incident that screwing meant something entirely different from what Karen Saunders had described, and that there really wasn't an official name for Karen's nearly-physically-impossible act. As for the prostitutes at her father's hotel, Charlene was kind enough to explain that the prostitutes slept with men who paid for rooms at the hotel, and not with their father. "And I don't screw Sam," she confided in Heather. "We only kiss and stuff."

And stuff?

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VALERIE THOMAS

Island Magic

Cinnamon, passion fruit, nutmeg, melons,
mountain streams,
waterfalls, lush vegetation, roti,
rum punch, blazing hot sun,
long white sandy beaches
coconut water, roast saltfish and breadfruit
oildown, mangoes, sugar-apple
palm trees,
winding, narrow, potholed roads
boiling springs, hibiscus,
round babies
bright smiles
friendly faces
A "how d'you do"
black, brown, yellow, white
African, Indian, Asian, European
a pot pourri
Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Shango, Muslim
together
a nation
sights, sounds, and smells
that special mix
Home sweet home to me

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