

Hookers and

Hot Dogs

BY MARSHA LEDERMAN

"There are prostitutes at daddy's hotel, you know," Sharon said, conspiratorially to Heather, while they were sprawled on the family room floor, playing Yahtzee. Heather knew Sharon was saying it just to brag about how much she knew, not, as she was pretending, to generously let her little sister in on a secret. There were a lot of secrets, it seemed to Heather, in her family. Being the youngest, she was generally the last to find things out.

She had only been once to the hotel her father owned. The Beresford Hotel was in a seedy part of town, with a lot of drunks and homeless people, and bad men who would rob her or worse if they found her alone. The hotel was dark and kind of dirty and her parents would only let her see the tavern on the main floor when it was closed on a Sunday morning. They wouldn't even let her see any of the hotel rooms.

"They're not for little girls to sleep in," her father said.

"So? I'm not going to sleep there. Why can't I just see them?" she wanted to know.

"Because you don't need to."

This seemed like a silly answer to Heather, who was forced to go to piano lessons and tap dancing lessons and Sunday School—all of which she clearly did not need. She did not need to make her bed in the morning as she would be getting right back into it that night. She did not need to learn French because everyone she knew spoke English. She did not need to eat broccoli because she got full enough on carrots. She did not need to say her prayers because she could tell noone was listening. She had been asking for a big brother for four years, and had yet to receive one. She had even revised her prayers lately to ask for a big *or* little brother, but still, nothing.

In the family room, Heather asked Sharon, "what's a prostitute?"

"A hooker, dummy. You know, a lady of the evening."

At 13, there were a lot of things that Sharon knew. At ten, there were a lot of things Heather didn't. What on earth was a lady of the evening?

Even when they were younger, Sharon had always known more. Like the time when Heather was five and Sharon was eight and Sharon told her that boys went to the bathroom differently from girls. "They stand up, and the pee goes through this thing that looks like a hot dog."

"A hot dog?"

"Yeah, it's down there," she pointed, "and it looks like a hot dog. And they hold it and go to the bathroom. And

they can stand when they go."

Heather silently wondered if it looked like a hot dog with or without the bun. And did it have burn marks on it, like when her father barbecued?

Wanting to investigate, and, despite her prayers, not having any brothers to spy on, Heather stood outside her parents' bedroom door the next morning and listened for the familiar sounds of her father's bathroom ritual – the toilet flushing, the shower, the electric razor. When she heard him walk out of the ensuite bathroom and into the bedroom, she flung her parents' door open and saw him standing by his dresser, nude.

"It's true!" Heather shouted. "You do have a hot dog!"

Heather's parents—her father still standing there naked, her mother reading in their bed – looked stunned. "Shut that door!" her mother roared while her father covered up with the bedspread.

Heather had found out why boys were different from girls. They had hot dogs.

But at the age of ten, she still didn't know what a prostitute was. Or a hooker, for that matter. She didn't want to ask Sharon again, because her older sister had a way of making her feel stupid. They had an even older sister, Charlene. She was 18 and had a boyfriend named Sam whom she had met when they had both worked as counsellors at a summer camp. Charlene knew a lot of stuff, but Heather didn't want to ask her either. Charlene was always busy, on her way out somewhere. Clearly, Heather's parents weren't an option. She decided to forget about it, for now.

Miss Sloaning's grade five class started off the same way every day, unless there was an assembly or a special day at school, like track and field day when everyone split up into teams and competed in various events. But on regular days, it was always the same. From 9:00 until 9:05, after *O Canada!*, Miss Sloaning took attendance and read announcements. And from 9:05 until 9:20, it was quiet reading time, when students could bring their own books from home or the library and read. If they didn't know

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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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