



Source: Suzanne Goldenberg, 'US looks at Gulf fleet increase', *Guardian*, *LA Times* in *The Age* online, 21/12/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [corporeality](#), [drugs](#), [home](#)

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She stood there with her little legs akimbo, thrust out her chin, and let tears of outrage trickle into her voice.

'Of course I'm not going to smoke weed in my sister's room! Is that really what you think of me, someone without any morals or sense? All I want to do is sleep in my own sister's room, don't I even have a right to do that?'

As tears rose in her voice, her voice rose in her throat. I was so taken aback, firstly that she used the word 'morals', and secondly that she applied it to herself, that I became a little distracted. I knew that by this time tomorrow I'd be picking the discarded knickers and bowls of encrusted old cereal and clandestine fag butts out of the room and wishing that I'd kept it locked. But for now she was working herself up into a state of righteous upset, and meaning it most sincerely.

There's a funny symmetry in me addressing her at the threshold of the room, in the doorway, us facing each other; physically, she's very like me. She has my shape. I am, of course, more thickset, me being her mum and she being the fourth of my children. But we are the same height. She's one of the few adult people I look straight in the eye at, on a level.

We both have small (but broad and strong) hands and feet. Over-generous boobs, not the unmitigated blessing for a young woman you might imagine. We're nearly the same weight, since she has muscles. Out of the four offspring she's the one that caught the dominant gene for brown eyes. Her hair falls in long black ringlets past her shoulders, entirely unassisted. 'Frizzy', she complains, parroting this culture's superstitious recoil from the evidence of what it terms 'miscegenation'.

And she's got the stuff. Before she learned to reign it in, to tamp it down, to hide it, as very magnetic people must, she'd walk into a crowded room and ten foot of space would instantly clear in front of her.

(And see, I remember, walking through the market in Kano, unveiled and slender, long ago. That market has been a major terminus of the trans-Saharan trade route for centuries. And all the men, sitting in their stalls with their goods piled high about them—leather goods, piles of grain, crockery—cheering and hooting and banging on their tables as I passed, till it seemed the whole market was possessed of a Mexican wave caused by my walking through it.)

So there's a symmetry, because our eyes are at the same level and our bodies are balanced the same way and we'll both have to look out for dowager's hump when the time comes, and she keeps nicking my shoes and socks and underpants...

And there's a lack of symmetry because I'm bookish and

she's physical, and I'm introverted and all her awareness and interest is externally directed, and I'm rather reserved and she's...well, she has no natural modesty nor reticence at all, neither mental nor physical. She's like a strange mad boy. I've never known another girl to whom you have to point out that a total stranger might prefer not to know about the boil on their bottom or the precise flow and schedule of their period or the state of their boyfriend's dick.

The whole house was pungent with skunk, creeping under doorsills, insinuating itself behind the smell of stew in the kitchen, tingeing our anodyne telly-watching with the scent of depravity! Little fucker, making my whole house smell like a junkie squat. Yet there she was with tears in her eyes, outraged at my bad opinion of her. She has one fist planted on her hip, the other arm dangling in front of her. The leg that takes her weight bows out slightly backwards at the calf, tense with pressure. She flexes the other knee slightly and turns that foot outwards. She makes her neck long, thrusts her chin forward, opens her mouth very wide till she's sure I can't miss the fact that she's complaining, and accusatory.

'What do you think of me that I haven't any morals! I'm not going to smoke in Jo's room...' Conditioning tells her that shouting will get her what she wants. It works on just about everybody she comes into contact with. (I used to be afraid for her with the company she was keeping until I noticed they were all doing whatever she said.) I don't know what she wants of me though. What does she want from me, when she takes my pants, or my tops, or my fancy shoes, or my raggedy old polyester pyjama bottoms? Is it about affinity, is it about closeness—I wouldn't say we've ever been close though—might it be about carrying the other person with you, part of you, always, whether you can help it or not?

'My child comes in from playing in the sun. I press my nose to the back of her neck, the colour of caramel pudding. A sparse fleece of body hair tickles my nose. I smell salt, and a hot smell with a scorch round the edges, and person, meaty but not heavily so. I sense the slight electric charge about her, and the eddies, turbulence, where it glances against mine.' Years since I wrote that. God, I love the smell of her still.

I'm in the door frame mirroring her, fist on my hip. But mine is an even stronger posture, because I'm not going to bluster. 'I don't want to smell that stuff any more. Yes okay you can stay in here but don't let me find...' etc, etc.

And now she has a new tool in her repertoire: absence of bluster. Won't be long now before I find it being used back at me.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Folake Shoga.*