



Source: Isabel Kershner, 'Israel's unexpected spinoff from a holocaust trial', *New York Times online*, 06/09/07.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [sibling rivalry](#), [sexuality](#), [home](#)  
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The lift wasn't working again. She turned into the stairwell and climbed the six flights to their floor. She'd had her first kiss on these stairs, with Michael Dandridge, the shock of his thick tongue equalled by the frisk of his hands. She had smoked her first fag, her first skunk, vomited her first cans of lager in the stairwell. Her first steps were practised here, the graffiti signposting each floor. She thought it was lucky she didn't suffer vertigo, lucky that it didn't occur to her that she could fall; nevertheless, she wanted to live in a house, grounded, with a garden and a path that led from the street to the door.

She put her key in the lock; the bass line of John-John's music thrust itself through the fragile wood of the door. The neighbours would complain again. She walked into the crowded gloom of the flat. His door was shut. His trainers, bag and jacket were dumped in the hall. She stepped over them and walked into the kitchen. The bastard had made himself a sandwich and left everything out on the worktop, breadcrumbs were scattered like a signal, a direction for lost children. As usual, his small tyranny pervaded the flat.

Julia tidied the kitchen, peeled the potatoes, opened a tinned steak and kidney pie, pushed it in the heat of the oven and put the potatoes on to boil. She leaned back against the sink, and listened to the blunt thuds of his music. Dust motes spiraled in the sunlight. She didn't notice. She stood there, her two feet pressed into the floor; her lips open over her teeth as she sucked her breath in. She thought for two more seconds about the brother on the other side of the hallway, most likely lying on his pampered back, before she decided to act. She didn't knock, she didn't wait, she tugged the handle to the door and walked in.

As a child, her favourite game had been to dress up as a princess. She wore a cardboard tiara covered with foil, set with plastic jewels. She tottered on her mother's shoes and twirled in a nylon dress. She paraded in front of the mirror, tightening her grip on impending femininity. Sometimes she padded her chest with tissue, to see the self that was still to come.

John-John wasn't lying on his bed. He was standing in front of his mirror in his underwear. He turned sharply from the mirror, and threw his hand up to cover his mouth. He was wearing lipstick. Red, red as a slapped cheek, red as a cliché.

She just stood and looked, wondering at the uncertain substance of her brother. What he had been was smeared by a coat of lipstick.

'What the fuck are you doing?'

'Nothing, just messing around.'

'Are you a fucking queer?'

'No, no, I ain't no batty boy, I was just fucking around.'

'You don't look like you're just fucking around; you look like a trannie.'

'I just wanted to see what it felt like.'

'Have you gone mental?'

Julia walked further into the room, still the room of a ten year old boy, with matching curtains, wallpaper and bed-linen, the crest of his favourite football club replicated over and over, reminding him at every blink, from every angle, where his loyalties had once lain.

'My God, this is weird, why would you want to put lipstick on? Where did you get it?'

She looked at her brother, at the creeping length of his body, the hairs on his stomach, his chest. Their resemblance was over. The code that linked them had mutated. He was a man now. 'You haven't even put it on right.' She wiped the red from his lips with her sleeve, 'Give it here.' He handed her the plastic tube.

'I nicked it from Boots, it's the bestseller. I just wanted to see what girls feel like, you know. I don't want to be a bird, I just wanted to feel...' he took a breath and blinked, 'I wanted to feel soft, d'you know what I mean? I ain't a poof.'

'Sit down.' She stood between his legs, lifted his face, her hand under his chin. His eyes were the same colour as their mother's. 'Keep still.' She twisted the lipstick out of its tube, a gaudy mollusc, waxy and bright. She hadn't been this close to him since childhood. His breath a damp vapour that warmed her skin, she smoothed the lipstick over his mouth, the scarlet coating an invitation. His carpet burned a nylon heat into the soles of her bare feet. Julia stepped back. 'There you go, perfect, very pretty.'

'Don't say nothing to no one will ya?'

'I won't say nothing, John, alright.'

'So,' she said 'do you feel soft like a girl?'

'Nah, I feel like a total twat, like I've just been kissed by some tart.' He rolled a spliff and passed it to her; she lit up, inhaled and emptied her lungs slowly, the plumes of smoke feathering from her nostrils. She handed the joint to her brother and watched his rouged and pert lips close around the papery shaft.

Their mother would be home at any minute. The pie would be burning. She decided to do nothing. They remained cocooned in their rekindled intimacy. Simultaneously, time's trickery, their mother put her key in the lock and—on her fat feet, her stood-on-for-eight-hours-solid feet,—she walked into her home.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Heidi James.*