

Moya Roddy

The Chemist's Assistant

5 It's 1961 and the first man's just walked in Space but where I live it might as well be the Dark Ages. You won't believe this but my father keeps a cane hanging on the wall. On one side of the room is a picture of the Sacred Heart with eyes that follow you everywhere and on the other side, the cane. Like a big question mark saying: what have you done? My friend Maudie says it's corporal¹ punishment and someone should report him. Everyone's afraid of my father. Even my big sister Anne and she's his pet. I'm still sore from last night. I know I shouldn't have robbed the money but it was only sixpence. I don't really remember taking it but I can remember buying Nancy Balls².

10 That's why I'm sitting on a wall on a Saturday instead of being at the Pictures. I didn't get any pocket money cos³ of stealing. I love the Pictures, especially ones with women in them. War films or films about submarines are boring. Horror's all right although they always make the woman do something stupid, like, if there's a vampire on the loose she has to go for a walk on her own exactly where he's lurking. D'ye⁴ ever notice that? Course⁵ that way the hero can come along in the nick of time and rescue her. It never happens the other way round. And the women who get rescued are always beautiful. Plain ones are goners, you can count on that. It's hard to believe women can be that beautiful. Like Goddesses. The women round here are run-down looking except for Angela, who used to live opposite the chemist shop. She had this long golden hair, wavy, that hung over her face. Probably bleached, but she looked like an angel. My mother and the woman-across-the-road were always giving out⁶ about her. Whenever she'd click-clack past on stilettos they'd shake their heads, make tight purses of their lips. Jealous, you could tell. No wonder Angela moved. Here's Mammy now and the woman-across-the-road back from shopping. Yap, yap, yap, they're so engrossed they stop right in front of me like I'm not there.

20 "Have you seen the new arrival at the chemist?" the woman-across-the-road asks, her voice all mysterious.

Mammy's eyes widen and she nods "yes". Then she notices me.

"What are ye⁷ sitting on the wall for?"

25 "I'm not", I say, hopping off.

30 There's nothing to do so I decide to go down to the chemist, see what they're talking about. Grumpy, the man who runs it, hates kids, shouts if you touch anything, as if touching's any harm. He knows me though because I go there all the time to collect prescriptions. Did I tell you my mother's always ill? Nobody knows what's wrong with her but my Auntie says it all started when my brother was born dead. That was before I was born so I don't know. I never mind going to the chemist, the smell is gorgeous. Perfume and powder. It's full of things too. On the counter there's rows of plastic nails, painted, and fake lipsticks with real ones underneath. But it's the bottles of perfume I love. There's loads, different colours too, green, red, frosted, some have stoppers like eyedroppers only fancier with snakes or hearts carved on them. I'm going to buy every one of them when I grow up.

35 When I walk into the chemist, I nearly drop dead. Behind the counter there's a new man in a white coat.

¹ fysisk

² *Nancy Balls*: kager

³ because

⁴ Did you

⁵ Of course

⁶ *giving out*: spredte rygter

⁷ you

But that isn't it. He's black! I've never seen a black person except in films. And here's one. In the flesh⁸. He smiles at me. His eyeballs are really white just like in films. Grumpy shuffles around, kind of embarrassed.

"What's your name?" the black man asks.

I'm not sure he means me so I say nothing.

40 "I am Mussola." He points to himself like I haven't understood the question. I want to tell him I'm just surprised, that adults here don't go round being polite or introducing themselves. I look at Grumpy to see what he makes of it but he's busy shoving rolls of film into envelopes.

"Lecky," I smile back, adding "Colette."

When he holds out his hand, I keep mine in my pocket.

45 "Don't you shake hands in this country?"

"Only if you're older." I try not to stare but his hand is amazing, the inside pink with black lines where the creases are. His lips are the same. Black on the lip part then fading to pink where the skin goes into his mouth.

Mussola laughs, a loud, booming laugh.

50 "You look like you never seen a black man before."

I feel myself go red as a beetroot and run out of the shop.

It's by accident I find out Mussola's on his own there Wednesdays. [...] I peer over the window display, see Mussola filling shelves. I'm about to head off when he notices me, waves me in.

"How are you today Colette?"

55 I shrug.

"I like to practice my English," Mussola explains. He imitates my shrug. "No good."

He laughs his big friendly laugh and I join in. He shrugs several times and I almost wet my knickers.

"Your English is really good," I tell him. "Is that what you're here for, to learn?"

"I am studying to be a pharmacist," he tells me.

60 "What's that?"

"A chemist."

"Oh."

"In my country we need chemists, doctors, that class of person."

I nod, noticing some new lipsticks have come in. The phone rings and Mussola excuses himself.

65 *Luscious Colours for Summer*, the ad for the lipstick says.

When I wave goodbye, he's still on the phone.

That night I put my hand in my pocket, find one of the lipsticks. I can't figure out how it got there. Then I hear sugar and spice⁹ Anne creaking across from the bathroom so I stick it in behind the wardrobe. I'll put it back next Wednesday when Mussola's not looking, I decide.

70 I begin to drop down every Wednesday. Mussola likes me to. He tells me that not many people talk to him so his English isn't improving. I try to teach him slang like "get up the yard" and "you're a right eight¹⁰" but they sound different when he says them. I like the way they sound, so Mussola says them over and over just to make me laugh. He tells me I'm his best friend.

75 Every week I add something new to my collection, perfume, a bottle of hand cream, even a set of emery boards, whatever they are. Mussola says when I'm older I can come and visit where he lives, meet the rest of his family. He says the sun shines there all the time and I'll be able to swim every day. I don't tell him I can't swim because maybe I'll learn. I think my mother is getting suspicious. She told me I'm not to be hanging round the chemist shop, that people have work to do and I'm only annoying them. What did I tell

⁸ *In the flesh*: (her) I virkeligheden

⁹ *sugar and spice*: (her) åh-så-dejlige

¹⁰ idiot

ye, she's jealous of everyone I like.

80 "Go and get this," my father orders, handing me a prescription as soon as I put my school bag down. "And come straight back."

The doctor had to come to the house today and my father's off work so my mother must be really sick. I hate going to the chemist when Grumpy's there because Mussola and me can't talk. Grumpy keeps an eye on him, tells him off later for wasting time. That's what Mussola said. Said he wouldn't stick it¹¹ but he's no
85 choice. I've never heard an adult say that. Adults I know have all the choices.

I play not walking on lines as I go down the road. Now my mother's sick I'll probably have to do all the housework. Goody-goody Anne's studying for the Inter¹² and is let off everything. It's not fair. When I get as far as Maudie's, I stop; I can see her head through the window. She makes a face when she sees me then her mother appears and gives me one of her clear off looks. I glance down, see I'm standing on a line.
90 That's bad luck, I think, then I remember my da's waiting and hurry off. I nearly faint when I see a police car parked outside the chemist. Inside, a guard is talking to Grumpy and Mussola. Keeping one eye on the shop, I pretend to look into a garden as if I'm admiring the flowers. A few minutes pass then all of them come out and get into the car. I close my eyes so they don't see me. When I open them the car's gone. I wait ages and it's only after a while I realise the garden I'm looking into belongs to the house where Angela used to live. I
95 remember how beautiful she was; wonder where she is now.

My father curses when I tell him the chemist is shut. I don't mention the police in case my voice gives anything away. Still grumbling, he puts on his coat, says he'll have to go to another chemist miles away and I'm not to move, in case my mother calls. I nearly say Anne's home but I don't. When he's gone, I mope round wondering what to do. What if they've arrested Mussola for stealing? It'll be my fault if he's put in
100 prison. I put the catch on the bedroom door, feel behind the wardrobe, half-hoping I imagined the whole thing. But it's all there. I sit on the bed, thinking. I know what I should do. I should take everything down to the police station and prove Mussola's innocence, just like they do in films. I lie back, see Mussola's face light up when they set him free. I begin to feel all warm and glowy. That must be how the hero feels when he rescues the woman.

105 After I gather up the stuff, I tiptoe into my mother's bedroom, make sure she's asleep. Then I creep downstairs so as not to wake her. Anne's in the front room, her nose stuck in a book.

"Tell Daddy I had to go round to Maudie's. I forgot to take down some homework. And listen out for Mammy." She barely looks up. Bloody swot¹³!

110 Outside, I hurry for a bit, excited almost, then slow down as I get near the police station. What if they put *me* in jail? Jail! That's nothing to what my father will do when he finds out. And everyone will know I'm a robber. All the same, I can't let Mussola take the blame. He's my friend. The only grown-up who asks me questions, listens to what I say. Walking in through the gates of the station, I stick my hands in my pockets, feel the lipstick's smooth case, the glassy coldness of a perfume bottle. In films things always turn out OK.

"Lecky! What are you doing here?"

115 I blink, see Mussola standing in front of me.

"You escaped!"

"Escaped? Whatever are you talking about?"

"The police. I saw them taking you away."

120 He laughs. "Oh that. It was a technicality. About my papers. There were some forms to be signed. But why are you here?"

"Nothing." I shrug, kicking at the ground.

He imitates the shrug but I can't seem to laugh. We stand a moment, each of us looking in opposite

¹¹ *stick it*: finde sig i det

¹² *Inter(mediate Exam)*: studentereksamen

¹³ stræber

directions.

“See you tomorrow,” he says. “It’s Wednesday, don’t forget.”

125 “I can’t.” I’m about to make up something when I realise I can tell the truth. “My mother’s ill so I’ll have to stay home.”

“Your mother is a lucky woman. Very lucky.”

I screw up my eyes. “What d’ye¹⁴ mean?”

“You are...” He scratches his head. “Fishing for the compliments.”

130 I blush. “No, honest, I’m not.”

“Colette... Colette. If I have a daughter, I hope she will be just like you.”

I see he means it, go all wobbly.

“Have to go. My da will kill me.”

“See you later alligator,” he shouts.

135 “In a while crocodile,” I answer but I don’t look back.

(2010)

¹⁴ do you