

JACKIE KAY

Physics and Chemistry

Before Physics and Chemistry's life altered completely and forever one morning in June, Chemistry added a couple of drops of vinegar to the small pan, then slid Physics's egg in, slowly. Poaching was a talent. Physics hadn't bothered trying to poach an egg for about ten years. Even on school mornings Physics and Chemistry made sure they had a good breakfast. These days the division of domestic tasks in the house was quite simple: Chemistry poached eggs, roasted chicken, made the salad dressing, sent the cards, dusted, chose the new curtains, or the shade of emulsion; Physics made the bed, put the bin out, changed the light bulbs, serviced the car, wrapped the presents, did the ironing, wired the plugs. Chemistry washed, Physics dried. Neither believed in dishwashers – though, at home, in private, they marvelled at those in their staff room who claimed the dishwasher had saved their marriage.

Physics and Chemistry smiled small scientific smiles in the staff room when the subject of marriage came up. One of the more insensitive teachers, Mrs Fife (home economics, big apron) once famously said to Chemistry:

'You are not the kind of spinster I feel embarrassed talking about marriage to. I mean, I would have thought you could have easily got married, if you'd wanted to.'

In the staff room that day, quite some time ago now, there was a gigantic embarrassed silence. It seeped round the staff room making everybody blush. The odd thing was that everyone, the history teacher, the English teacher, the maths teacher, the PE teacher, felt a peculiar mixture of glee and shame, just like they might have for a member of their own family, for Mrs Fife's faux pas. She herself was blissfully unaware. Almost charmingly so.

'Oh dear, have I put my foot in it?' she finally said when the big wallop of silence was too much even for her not to notice. It was down to Chemistry to summon all of her generosity and say, 'I think I prefer the term single woman, it sounds more modern.' Physics fumed by the kettle, stirring her coffee.

When Mrs Fife made her gaffes, when pupils referred to Physics and Chemistry as *the Science Spinsters*, Physics always, always pretended not to hear. Physics was tall with long bones in her face, a long nose, large hands, and thick short hair, greying now. She had more hair than she would wish around her top lip. Recently, she noticed, it was even more of a presence than ever, perhaps it was her age. Still, there was nothing she could do about it; she was not going to subject herself to electrolysis, she'd heard that was painful and Physics hated pain. A coward, pain-wise, Chemistry said so. Physics had never been in hospital or had anything much wrong with her, but the slightest ache would have her moaning for days. Physics overheard one pupil say to another, 'Look at that moustache. She looks like a man.' And again she had stared straight ahead. Every day, in her own silent way, Physics kept something to herself.

At home in their Wimpey house, in Gleneagles Gardens, off the main Kirkintilloch Road, not too far from Bishopbriggs High School, where they both taught, Physics pulled the strings to shut the curtains, and put her slippers on. Physics and Chemistry had identical moccasin slippers, which they replaced every Christmas. At home, slippers on, fire lit – a fake gas fire that attempted to look like a real one, but never really fooled anybody – the *Scotsman* in hand, Physics felt herself physically relaxing. Most of the long school day, she stayed unlit and dangerous as one of Chemistry's experiments, the potential to blow up, to turn suddenly pink, to sparkle and spit, never far from her surface. At home, Physics would tell Chemistry some of the things she had pretended not to hear that day and Chemistry would tell Physics things back; sympathy and hilarity bubbled between them; and Chemistry's eyes lit up like a blue flame.

Some nights they sat at dinner – Physics in her chair by the kitchen door and Chemistry in the one opposite, and the weight of all the things they'd listened to in silence moved around them like molecules. The dinner in the middle of the table, the organic vegetables cooked in lemon grass and coconut oil, sat between them, a bright, colourful wok of strange

ingredients as far as Physics was concerned. If Physics had her way, she would have a roast lamb, two veg and mashed potatoes and a nice wee jug of gravy. She ate all these unfamiliar, oddly upsetting, foods out of love. Her very palate had transformed since Chemistry's culinary habits had turned foreign a few years back. Chemistry always wanted to do things differently. Physics had to be forced to change. In the kitchen, the flushed pleasure on Chemistry's cheeks, the brightness of her voice and eyes, when she held out a spoon and said try this and pronounced some strange words like *gadob gadob* or *sayur lemak* or *sambal tauco*, made Physics want to drop to her knees with love and disappointment.

Physics was not an enthusiastic woman herself, but she admired the quality in others, marvelled at the way Chemistry could stretch her arms out and shout *Yippee*, or do a little skip or clap her hands loudly together and shriek *Yes!* when Evonne Goolagong won Wimbledon. Physics's mother had never smiled much; she thought that people who grinned widely were ignorant or idiotic; Physics's father had wanted a boy. She had never been hugged in her life until she met Chemistry. Even now she was uncomfortable if Chemistry touched her anywhere but in bed.

They sat at dinner, Chemistry boldly eating her Malaysian food with clever chopsticks; Physics clinging to a fork. A bottle of chilled Alsace in a bucket on the table. This wine bucket was another Christmas present from Chemistry to Physics, so that they could have, at home, a semblance of a restaurant. Why go out? Why ever go out? Most nights, Chemistry cooked. At weekends, they had special meals with wine. Physics always opened and poured the wine. During the week, they had quick meals with water or a cup of tea. After dinner, they did their marking. After marking, they'd watch the news. After the news, they might watch one of their favourite programmes, *Frost* or *Morse*, *The Street*, or *Panorama*. Usually Chemistry would fall asleep on the chair and Physics would smoke a cigarette outside the back door. Chemistry was an ex-smoker, the worst kind. Physics usually waited till Chemistry nodded off, sneaked out of the back door and smoked one or two Benson and Hedges. She enjoyed figuring out the constellations on such smoking nights on her own back door-step, puffing upwards towards the brilliant plough. After, she'd lock the door carefully, double-check by shaking the door and then shoogole Chemistry gently awake. Up the stairs they'd go to brush their

teeth and go to bed. Physics brushed her teeth for a longer time than Chemistry to try to get rid of the smell of smoke.

Sometimes they had two teachers from Lenzie High School round – Rosemary and Nancy, PE and music, who also, like them, lived together and bought each other comfortable slippers for Christmas. Neither Rosemary and Nancy nor Physics and Chemistry, ever, ever, mentioned the nature of their relationship to each other. Every Boxing Day for the past eight years Rosemary and Nancy came round for dinner. They brought their slippers with them and the four of them sat drinking sweet white sparkling wine with identical moccasins on their feet, enjoying each other's company. Physics, when she had guests round, was always rather proud of Chemistry's adventurous cooking. 'Oh she gets all the proper ingredients, lemon grass, fresh chillies, coriander, glass noodles.'

Rosemary looked flushed and horrified. 'Is that what that taste is – cor-i-an-der?' Rosemary said, exchanging an oh-for-a-turkey-sandwich look with Nancy. 'Which taste?' Chemistry asked, beetroot with pleasure and effort and heat from the cooker.

'That sharpish taste,' said Rosemary, barely hiding her distaste.

'Oh, that'll be lemon grass, definitely,' Chemistry said with authority.

Physics beamed with pride and poured Rosemary and Nancy a little more festive wine. Rosemary covered Nancy's glass with her hand. 'Not for her, she's driving.'

But mostly it was the pair of them alone at the dining table. Sometimes they'd play music after their dinner. Shirley Bassey was a great favourite. One night at the beginning of their relationship, Chemistry had become a little tipsy and had sung along to *Goldfinger*, flourishing her arms in the air and tossing her hair like Shirley Bassey. Then she swung her hips and Physics watched open-mouthed as Chemistry's ample breasts bounced from side to side. It had shocked Physics to the core and excited her. One year Chemistry got them both tickets to go and see Shirley Bassey as a birthday present for Physics. When they came home that night, Chemistry, bubbling, sang *Hey Big Spender* dancing up and down their living room whilst Physics smoked a rare cigarette indoors. Chemistry leaned right over her when she sang *spend a little time with me* and she sounded, to Physics's ears, exactly like Shirley Bassey. What a woman,

what a voice, Physics thought to herself, now as devoted to Bassey as Chemistry was. Physics blew a perfect smoke ring.

That night in bed, Chemistry slid her golden fingers through the fly of Physics's pyjamas and touched her gently at first, then firmer, faster; until she felt Physics's whole body stiffen and tremble. Then she lay her hand on Physics's flat stomach and waited until Physics lifted her nightdress with alarming speed, and pushed into her quickly, Physics's long fingers going up and up, deeper and deeper; Chemistry holding on to Physics for dear life. It was so much, first Shirley Bassey, then this, so much she felt she could explode. Outside, the sparkling, experimental stars lit up the suburban sky.

They never discussed these nights. Not a word. Not a single word was spoken or ever had been spoken about such nights. Physics had never ever said the dreaded word out loud for fear of it. The word itself spread terror within her. Chemistry was like her flesh and blood, heart of her heart, a part of her. Chemistry was Physics. Everything was relative. What they did in the dark at night in their own small house in Gleneagles Gardens was immaterial. In the morning Physics could almost feel it disappear like a ghost. But Chemistry knew better. The transformation could be seen on Physics's face, a face that was usually pale and pinched became brighter, more effusive somehow. Her eyes became even more familiar, sparkly. The morning after the night before, Chemistry could not but notice that Physics drove their Mini Metro to school in quite a cavalier fashion, spinning and abruptly whirling the car to a stop in the school car park.

Physics and Chemistry's life altered completely and forever one morning in June when Physics walked into the staff room as usual during the morning break and all the teachers stopped talking. Mr Ferguson coughed awkwardly and Mrs Cameron said loudly, 'The Head wants to see you. I'm afraid a parent has been up.'

'Which parent?' Physics asked.

'Sandra Toner.'

Sandra Toner was Physics's favourite and most talented pupil, a girl she encouraged, gave extra homework to, and had promised to spend thirty minutes extra every Tuesday with her.

'What's the problem?'

Mr Ferguson coughed and said, 'We've no idea.'

Physics looked out of the window in the headmaster's, Mr Smart's, office. There was a blur of pupils beyond the glass at break time, one uniform part of another, as if they shared cells. There was the sound of them, high, hysterical, bouncing off the windowpane and back into the playground like a rubber ball. Chemistry was on playground duty; Physics thought she saw her, small and round, in the distance. Mr Smart's face in front of her had changed. There was no doubt about it. It was like witnessing a strange conversion. A man reducing himself. His nose became sharper before Physics's very eyes. He kept moving his tie from side to side as if his collar was much too tight and was about to strangle him any second. His neck lengthening and rising above the collar, appearing for a moment like a snake, high and long, to get some relief, to taste the air. Why don't men like him wear the correct collar size? Physics thought to herself as he informed her he was giving her notice.

'You must understand,' he was saying. 'You must understand it from our point of view as a school. Even if the rumours are unfounded, you understand it is a delicate business, working with young people . . .' Physics, who rarely said more than a sentence to anybody except Chemistry and her students, kept quite, quite quiet. What was it about?

According to Mr Smart, the school gossiped about the pair of them, saying that they had a lesbian relationship, shared a house, a car, a bed. The whole school. It was time for them to go. He could no longer take the risk. Sandra Toner's father had come to him and said he did not want a lesbian teaching his daughter, especially out of school hours. Physics suddenly came to life. Mr Smart, said, didn't he, the *pair* of them. 'Do you mean to say that you have also sacked Chemistry?' she asked, appalled. 'Who?' Mr Smart asked, puzzled. 'Miss Gibson, you know, Iris. Have you sacked Iris?'

'That's . . . that's what I've been saying,' said Mr Smart, stuttering a bit now. 'Maybe you're too upset to take it all in. I can understand. You've both been exemplary teachers, but I've got the parents to think of.' But Physics wasn't listening any longer. She lunged forward; a voice came out of her as she grabbed hold of his collar and shook him; and shook him again. He was wearing a blue-and-white striped tie. She got hold of the tie and pulled it even tighter. 'You hypocritical bastard! How dare you

sack Chemistry,' she shouted at him. 'She is a wonderful teacher. How dare you!' Mr Smart had his arm in the air and was trying to get out of her stranglehold. My God but she was strong for a woman. Suddenly, Physics let go. She gave him one final push and walked out of the headmaster's office, past the school secretary's office, aware that she was being watched, with her head held high, taking long, long strides down the corridor.

Physics and Chemistry's life was never the same since the day they were sacked. Physics now kissed Chemistry in the kitchen over a sizzling wok. Physics stopped wearing skirts altogether. She put all of her checked and pleated and tartan skirts in a big black binbag and drove them to the Cancer Research shop in Springburn. Their new life became experimental, unpredictable. Once they pulled the strings of their curtains closed and lay down on their living room carpet and made love. Sometimes they had been seen at Bishopbriggs Cross, arm in arm at the traffic lights. They opened up a wool shop in Milngavie and called it *Close Knit* – the name made Rosemary and Nancy laugh when they came for their Christmas drink as if they were in on some big secret. It was a strange relief really. Being out of the classroom, the staff room, and the school, selling brightly coloured wool; Shetland wool, Botany wool, mohair, merino, angora, cashmere, cotton, nylon, rayon, wild silk, silk cotton, and patterns, and bobbles and buttons. Plain did the accounts, the opening and closing, the labelling. Purl did the selling, the smiling, the recommending, the ordering. From the very first time, twenty-five years ago, when they had first met, they had this thing between them, this spark. It could always change colour.