

ELISE MOSER

Chocolates from Paris

CLAIRE FLICKED THE SWITCH IN the hallway. Motes of dust hung suspended in the shaft of light that spilled into the living room. The house was cold; Bennett's death inhabited the place like a chill. This was the moment she'd dreaded, the thin slice of time that tore open her loneliness. She'd gone off to Paris, supposedly to attend a conference on Bennett's work; really it was to reduce the number of times she would have to come back to the house alone and face his absence. But the trip had only postponed the sadness.

She kicked her luggage, packed with duty-free goods bought out of habit, into the living room. Perfume she'd never use; Bennett's favourite French chocolates, which would go chalky and stale in the cupboard. She sank onto the couch. In the afternoon dusk she saw her life arrayed around her. On the wall, the first portrait Bennett had drawn of her, in 1920. The world was full of hope then; the lines depicting her stately head had flowed from Bennett's hand like liquid. On the little oak table below, the small-scale model of "Ahab," her most famous sculpture; Bennett had posed for it wearing a borrowed overcoat, his breath white in the unheated studio. She smiled wryly. They'd really imagined they could change the world—stop greed, killing, injustice. But no. The war in Vietnam was still going on, almost ten years now; there was no shortage of injustice in the world. She sighed. And no shortage of loneliness.



Mickey stood stiff under her mother's fingers. Her hands rattled at her sides. "Don't fidget!" her mother commanded, but she couldn't stop. She had Hallowe'en nerves, excitement running through her in spite of her disappointment. Her mother had insisted on making Mickey's costume, even though Mickey craved one from the store—a pink nylon princess

dress, yellow jewels printed on the bodice, and a silver plastic crown. Or a witch's dress with a tall black hat, neon-orange hair glued inside. Adults often admired her homemade costumes as she made the circuit of her small town, but the other kids thought they were stupid, and she agreed.

"There." Mickey's mother turned her around and held her at arm's length to take a look. Mickey wore two pieces of yellow posterboard, one in front and one in back, tied with orange ribbons over her shoulders. Her mother had painted an enormous bright autumn leaf on each side and had bobby-pinned little leaves made of orange, red, and yellow construction paper into Mickey's hair. Mickey hated it, but her mother nodded, satisfied. Mickey opened her mouth to make one last, useless complaint, then shut it again. Ever since Daddy had left this past summer, Mommy looked sad almost all the time. If this stupid cardboard leaf satisfied her, Mickey figured she would just keep quiet.

The doorbell rang. Debbie Sand, wearing a blue version of the princess dress, had arrived. Mommy stuffed Mickey into her brown sweater underneath the cardboard leaves, and pulled a shopping bag up over her little wrist. "Good luck, girls," she said in a happy sing-song voice, and gave a rare smile—but looking behind her, Mickey saw the sad face come back again. Walking down the street in the deepening darkness, she felt the same expression settle on her own features. She kept her head down while Debbie chattered.



The girls stopped under the streetlight at the corner of Homestead Avenue and rifled through their bags. There was, as usual, too much candy corn and too many apples, but there were miniature Three Musketeers and Milky Way bars, too. Mickey's mother didn't allow her to eat any candy before she got home, but she just had to. She and Debbie had a Milky Way each and then checked each other's faces for chocolate smudges before continuing. Mickey was listless, as she'd been lately; Debbie, who looked beautifully princessy in her silver crown, preferred a brisker pace. She jerked Mickey forward by the arm. "Come *on*," she said, her teeth clamped together in annoyance. Mickey swallowed the beginnings of tears. She didn't feel very brisk these days, but Debbie was impatient. They'd been best friends starting in grade three, but since her mother had withdrawn into grief Mickey often felt lonelier with Debbie than on her own. She just couldn't work up the energy to have fun. She sighed and pushed herself forward. Just one more block and then they would part ways. One last block.

You could tell which houses were offering treats by who had their lights on. At Mrs. Applebaum's house they got hard candies. Next door to her was their teacher, Mr. Feldman; smiling beneath his moustache, he gave them jawbreakers. After that there were some dark houses. "Come ON!" Debbie yelled; she was already two houses ahead. Mickey shuffled faster. She was imagining the look on her mother's face if she found out Mickey had snuck some candy. Last year Mickey had come home with a smear of chocolate on the tip of her nose. Daddy had reached around from behind Mommy, swiped Mickey's nose clean with his handkerchief, and winked; Mommy had just laughed. But everything had changed since then. This year Mommy wouldn't laugh.

Mickey looked up. Without realizing it she'd fallen back into her trudging pace. Debbie was nowhere to be seen; she was probably at the end of Homestead Avenue by now. Mickey shivered as the wind blew through her sweater. There was only one house left; it had a light on inside. She would just go there and then go home. She could offer Mommy her miniature Milky Ways—they were the best.

As Mickey walked up the pebbled path, she crunched dried leaves under her sneakers. The real leaves were brown and curled up, not at all like the brilliantly coloured construction paper leaves tangled in her hair.



Claire was startled by an echoing chime; it took her a moment to realize it was her own doorbell. She frowned. Who could that be? While Bennett was alive it could have been anybody—Alexander Calder, for example, clutching a bottle of red wine. She still knew lots of people, travelled regularly to sell her work. But few rang her doorbell here in this little, out-of-the-way town.

She opened the door and stared. It seemed she was being visited by a large piece of posterboard. "Trick or treat," said the posterboard, holding open a paper bag partly filled with candy.

Claire stared. "Oh—" she said, "is it Hallowe'en?"

The solemn little girl behind the posterboard nodded.

Claire shook her head. "Well, I've just returned from Paris, and I'm afraid I don't have any candy"

The little girl's face fell. She stood there, all alone and small. Claire felt her heart contract. It was one thing for an old woman to be lonely Suddenly the house seemed light and warm compared to the cold night outside. She had an idea.

“Come in,” she said, smiling. “How would you like some chocolates from Paris?”