



Skinny Dotty and Her Chocolates

All I really need is love, but a little chocolate
now and then doesn't hurt!

Lucy Van Pelt

Peanuts, Charles M. Schulz

I live in a co-op apartment in Chelsea, New York City. It's like a small town here—our own little community. There's a family feeling, complete with gossip and tiffs and warm hugs and belly laughs. Skinny Dotty is a fixture. One time I asked if I could paint her portrait. She said, "Maybe if I were younger and didn't have so many wrinkles. But it's too late now." I asked her how old she was, and she wagged her finger back and forth and said, "I'll never tell." I'm left to guess she's seventy-five.

Dotty is shaped like a pencil, her blond hair in a bob where the eraser would be. She loves to wear clothes with pictures of cats on them—baseball caps with cats, T-shirts with cats, sneakers with cats, socks with cats, purses with cats.

Dotty spends most of her time checking on other people's cats and watering plants in the neighbors' apartments. I see her in the lobby, on the elevator, or when I pass through our private garden. Every time I see Dotty,

she insists on giving me chocolate, handfuls of it. I try to refuse, worried about my dental bills and my waistline, but she ignores me and puts gobs of the little chocolates right into my pockets. Because I've tried to refuse, my guilt is gone. I eat each one, slowly, ecstatically, savoring every rich, creamy bite.

The superintendent's office is a cubicle right off the lobby entrance. It has a window that faces the lobby. A million years ago, Dotty placed a glass bowl on the ledge of the window and she fills it with chocolates every single day. I've witnessed the mailman grab whole handfuls and push them deep into his pockets. He thinks I don't see him.

Violet, a cranky, stout fiftyish woman who kvetches loudly at every annual shareholder meeting, regularly swipes more than her share. When she stands next to skinny Dotty, they look like the number ten. When Violet corners me in the lobby and I make the mistake of asking, "How are you?" she responds with her litany of complaints.

Violet snatches handfuls of the chocolates, snaps her fake snakeskin purse open, drops the chocolates in, *plink, plink, plunk*, then she snaps the purse shut. She doesn't even care that I see her. If I were to ask why she took so many, I'm sure she'd say, "Because nobody knows how I suffer."

Violet doesn't tip the staff at Christmas. Dotty tips them and makes them cookies, even though she can't possibly be wealthy. Her husband was ill and out of work for a very long time. He would sit in the garden in his wheelchair with a book on his lap, snoring. Dotty often came downstairs and put a blanket over his legs while he snoozed. He reminded me of a beat-up old lawn chair. One night

Jimmy died in his sleep. That week when I ran into Dotty in the lobby, she looked disoriented.

I asked, "What's wrong?"

"Jimmy died," she said.

"I'm so sorry to hear," I said. "You must miss him terribly."

"Yes, the apartment is so quiet now." Her voice trailed off and she looked down at her sneakers with the cats on them. Then, as if someone changed the channel, she perked up and said, "Want some chocolates?"

I wanted to say something about Jimmy, about her pain, but instead I responded to her question, "Oh, no, you keep them for yourself."

As usual, she ignored me and stuffed a handful into my jacket pocket. As soon as I got to the elevator, I popped one into my mouth. The chocolate felt warm and snuggly and melted over my tongue. I felt a slight elevation in my mood. I slowly unwrapped the next one. I listened to the tin foil crinkle as I whiffed that spellbinding smell. Pop, it went into my mouth. By the time I got to my apartment on the third floor, all five chocolates had disappeared down the hatch and my day had improved 100 percent.

I often saw Dotty heading over to fill the glass bowl with a red and white bag from CVS drugstore. One day while I was at CVS, I walked over to the candy aisle and was surprised by how much those bags of chocolates cost. I suddenly felt bad for skinny Dotty always worrying about everybody else's chocolate cravings. I decided to surprise her and buy chocolates for her. I stocked my cart with Hershey's Kisses, mini-Snickers, Milk Duds, and Reese's Pieces.

I headed back to the building. I entered through the back gate that opens to the garden, and sure enough, there was Dotty, as usual, chatting with a neighbor on a bench. I ran up to Dotty with a wide, proud grin.

"These are for you, my dear!" I exclaimed as I handed over the stuffed plastic bag.

"Oh, what's this? Aren't you sweet," she said, smiling. But when she opened the bag her eyebrows twisted and her smile withered.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"I don't like chocolate," she said.

"But, but . . ." I sputtered, "then why do you always buy it for everybody?"

"So people will smile at me," she said, very matter-of-factly.

I felt embarrassed, as if she were standing there naked. I wanted to cover her up. I wanted to drape a shawl around her bony shoulders. I wanted to fold her little pencil frame and stick her on my lap. It was all I could do not to burst out crying.

I breathed in deeply and summoned my composure. I gave her a gigantic hug and told her how lucky we all are to have her looking after us. Skinny Dotty beamed and handed me back the big bag of chocolates. I walked over to the glass bowl on the ledge and filled it up to the top.

Dorri Olds