

THE CHOCOLATE INCIDENT

By R. A. Conti

Chapter 1

Ron couldn't stop agonizing about what Connie did with their chocolate. He decided the small Justice-of-the-Peace wedding was a terrible mistake. Staying with her would only make it worse.

Rustling noises woke Connie but she couldn't see anything in the dark. "Ron? You up?" she mumbled, groggy. She assumed he was finding his way to the bathroom.

"Yeah," he whispered.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," he lied. "Go back to sleep." Ron's movements continued in the dark. Connie switched on the bedside lamp and saw him rummaging in his small travel bag. "What's going on? Are you looking for something?"

"Nothing's going on."

"Can I help?"

"I don't need your help," Ron snapped. 'And I don't need you,' he wanted to add, but didn't want to start quarreling in the middle of the night. He also didn't want to explain what he was doing or why he was doing it. He just wanted flee that inn, get far away from Connie as fast as possible, and never see her again.

His grumpiness put Connie off, but her curiosity wouldn't go away. "What are you looking for?" she whispered.

Ron tried to come up with a flippant explanation. "Chocolate," he replied.

Connie thought she misheard him. "Chocolate? At this hour? Tim's kids ate it, don't you remember?" The newlyweds checked into the Cape May, New Jersey inn earlier in the day. Afterwards, they visited Connie's brother Tim and his children.

"As a matter of fact, I do remember," he whispered loudly. Connie hoped no one else heard him.

His strange actions bewildered her. "You don't even like chocolate," she reminded him.

"I didn't want to eat it. I just wanted it."

"It's all gone. I didn't think you cared about it."

"But you didn't ask me, Connie. You just gave it all away."

"You weren't gonna eat it anyway," she insisted.

"That's not the point," Ron replied, annoyed. He'd hoped to leave before they argued, but it was too late. "It wasn't yours to give away, Connie."

"Well, whose chocolate was it then?"

"Nadine and Sam gave it to both of us," Ron reminded her. Nadine and Sam were close friends. The expensive chocolate was a gift from Nadine. She wanted it to symbolize the sweetness of weddings, honeymoons, and marriages. (Nadine was a romantic, but not one who dwelled in fantasies. She and Sam had a solid connection, loved each other deeply, and assumed marriage would be the same for everyone else. It wasn't.)

Connie was familiar with Ron's occasional strange moods. This one seemed bizarre, even for him. She wondered if it was pointless to continue. "Yeah, they gave to us. So what?"

“Both of us, Connie. Don’t you get it? You just gave it away without even asking me. You wasted it on those kids who didn’t even care that it was special.”

“But I already knew you wouldn’t eat it!” she argued, frustrated by his refusal to accept her simple explanation. *Why is he so pissed off about that chocolate?* she wondered.

Ron didn’t answer right away. *If she doesn’t get it now she never will*, he told himself. It was too late for discussion. He was wasting his time, and wanted to escape. “It’s not about the chocolate, Connie.”

Connie felt confused. She wondered if she was having one of those weird nightmares where you’re caught in a bizarre situation that doesn’t make sense and keeps repeating. Then she realized she was awake. A genuine catastrophe was happening in the middle of the third night of their honeymoon. She sat up in bed. “But you just said it was about the chocolate,” she replied, perplexed.

“No, it’s about you, Connie. You’re not ready to be married. The chocolate showed me that. I don’t know why I didn’t see it before.”

“So..., you’re walking out on me..., on our honeymoon..., because of some damn chocolate?”

She still doesn’t get it, Ron thought, bitterly. *Well, I don’t care anymore. I’m done.* “Better now than later. Get it over with. You can go back to your parents. They’re only a mile away.” Connie’s parents took long vacations in Cape May every summer. Her brother Tim lived in the Midwest. He and his kids rented a vacation house near their parents.

“I can buy more chocolate tomorrow!” Connie protested. “All the goddamn chocolate you want.”

“Like I said, it’s not about the chocolate. It’s about us. I thought after we were married we would become an ‘us.’” Ron paused. “I was wrong.”

The cold finality in Ron’s voice frightened Connie. “What do you mean?” she asked.

Ron sighed in frustration. He tried one more time to explain. “You gave all our damn chocolate to those kids!” He said it as if he was explaining something to a child. Connie didn’t like his tone.

“I don’t get what the big deal is,” Connie declared.

My God, why is this woman so dense? And how could I have been so stupid not to see it before? he asked himself. Her failure to understand him affirmed Ron’s doubts about her. He repeated what he meant, yet she still didn’t get it. Ron needed to terminate their conversation and get away from her, now.

“It was ours, Connie. How many times to I have to say this? Nadine and Sam gave it to both of us, not just to you, and not so you could give it all to Tim’s kids. You shouldn’t have given away without asking me first.”

“Like I told you, RON,” Connie replied, “I knew you didn’t like chocolate. I-knew-you-wouldn’t-care.” It was her turn to address him as if he was a child.

There was a long silence. His refusal to accept her simple, logical, and honest explanation baffled her. *He’s so goddamn stupid*, she thought. Ron felt certain she was the one who lacked understanding. “I’ll say it one last time, Connie. You should have asked me if I cared. It’s not about the chocolate. It’s about you.”

“I’m sorry about the chocolate, Ron. Really I am. I promise it will never happen again.”

“You’re right, Connie; it won’t.” His calm reassurance surprised Connie. She assumed his sanity had returned, the crisis was averted, and their honeymoon would continue. She considered enticing him back to bed. *Maybe a good fuck will calm him down*, she thought. He

didn't seem like he wanted sex, however, or anything else from her. She turned over and closed her eyes. *Now, if I can only get back to sleep. I'm sure this will blow over by morning.*

Ron tried to decide if he should leave now or go back to bed and pretend the argument never happened. Dark misgivings buried in his subconscious compelled him to act. There was no point in fooling himself any longer. Their marriage was a mistake. Connie didn't 'get' him. It was pointless to continue their honeymoon.

"Connie, I'm leaving before anything else can happen," he explained softly. "I thought you were ready to be married. I was wrong." He paused so she could reply. She snubbed him. "Good-bye, Connie. I guess I should say I'm sorry, but I'm not. At least, I don't feel sorry. Not today; maybe someday."

Connie ignored him. She wanted the nightmare to stop. Ron walked out. Their marriage ended.

Ron's reliable old Rambler waited in the parking lot. He unlocked the doors, threw his bag in the back seat, got in, started the car, and backed out of the parking space. Ron never wanted to see Cape May again.

The sun rose over the Atlantic Ocean. Ron could have seen the beautiful sunrise if he looked in the rear-view mirror. He focused on the road ahead and never wanted to look back. It was time to erase Connie, and start a new life without her. The only thing he would miss about her was regular sex. He would have to start over with someone else. *Anybody will be better than her*, he thought.

He had a two hour drive back to Aldan. It was a quaint little borough outside Philadelphia. The couple rented an apartment in a new duplex on a quiet street. They had signed the lease and furnished the place together. Now there wasn't going to be any 'together.' He was going back alone.

Traffic was light. Ron didn't have to pay close attention to the highway. He felt free to think about what he just did. Ron hoped walking out meant Connie was gone from his life. He reflected on his feelings for Connie and realized he never loved her, and didn't even like her. She wasn't a bad person. She was gorgeous and sexy, but also dull. There was no passion in anything she did. He never felt she had any passion for him.

His abrupt departure reminded him of the time just after he graduated high school ten years earlier. One July morning he left a note and ran away from his parents' house. Once he was away he realized he had nowhere else to go. Ron was a teenager without a job or independent life. He went back home reluctantly, but regretted it ever since. *Maybe I should have tried harder*, he thought, whenever he recalled that day.

Ron could never imagine what his life would have been like had he not gone back home. He was never even certain why he ran away. Was he trying to get away from his mother, or make her acknowledge his unhappiness? His action didn't faze her. Ron gave up trying to get her to change.

This time I won't go back, he assured himself. *I don't need to. I'm not a kid anymore. I'm an independent adult with a job. I can survive without Connie.*

At the end of his late night reflections, he concluded he wasn't real to Connie. Her failure to ask his permission to give away the chocolate made it clear they would never be real partners. Marriage meant nothing to her. He meant nothing to her. Their wedding was a stupid mistake.

Chapter 2

Ron liked being on the highway and wondered if staying on the road would be best for him right now. He wasn't due at work for several days. No one knew he took vacation to go on his honeymoon. He could show up Monday morning rested. When his co-workers asked about his time off, he could tell them it was great but he was glad to be back. Everyone would have a good laugh. No one would know he had abandoned his bride at a Cape May inn.

Their friends would likely find out, however. *Connie will call them*, he thought. The phone would probably ring endlessly if he went back to Aldan. Everyone would try to talk some sense into him. No one would ask what was wrong, why he ran away, or if he needed to talk. They would assume he was a bad person and ought to make up with his new wife before it was too late. They liked Connie, but he would have to spend his life with her. That was something he could no longer consider doing.

There was a lot of barren New Jersey between the Atlantic seashore and Delaware River. Perhaps he could take a side road and disappear for a while. *There must be little villages hidden in the woods*, he thought. He could find a small motel, rent a room, and take time to think. He could even pretend he was someone else with another life. Any other life would be better than his right now.

The girl behind the counter at the Aura Motel smiled at Ron when he entered the tiny air-conditioned office. He noticed how pretty she was. Her halter top and short shorts left little to his imagination.

Veronica noticed how Ron looked at her and felt pleased. Most customers were older married couples looking for a cheap place to spend the night. It was rare to have a young single guy walk in. She looked past Ron to his car and couldn't see anyone else with him. *This could get interesting*, she thought.

Ron had the same thought, felt embarrassed, and tried to disguise his pleasure at meeting her. "Staying long?" she asked, as he signed the register.

"Don't know. Maybe just one night. Maybe a few. Got nowhere to be right now. Don't have to be back at work until next week."

"Next week is a long way off."

"Not as long as I might like," he joked suggestively. Ron felt ashamed for flirting with her, but it felt natural and easy. She made it easy. He found himself wondering how easy she would turn out to be.

"What kind of work do you do?" she asked.

"Just mindless office stuff, but it pays the bills..., and keeps me off the streets."

"Yeah. It's the same for me. I mean, I like this job, but it can be lonely. I can't go anywhere, you know? I never know when someone like you is gonna wander in."

"I guess it's no fun being cooped up here," Ron sympathized.

"I have most of my fun when my day is over."

"What kind of fun?"

"Whatever kind I can find," she replied. *This girl is too casual*, Ron thought, but he liked that she was friendly. He wanted to learn more about her.

"Well, I plan on enjoying some air conditioning. My car doesn't have any. It's gonna be a scorcher today, so I'm gonna stay in and read. Maybe watch some TV."

"TV's not too reliable here, but it does work. Just not as well as in the cities."

"What else is there to do?"

“Check with me later,” Veronica said. Her eyes sparkled. She looked delicious. Ron hoped she was hinting he could do her later. He suddenly felt better about leaving Connie. Then he reminded himself not to think about her. Their story had ended. Ron hoped a new chapter of his life was beginning.

He was used to hearing people’s stories at the Welfare Department. Desperate people came to him. It was his job to grant scarce funds to help them get through hard times. But he could never give them more than the minimum needed to cope and survive. They were not allowed to become dependent. He never understood why society couldn’t take care of people, but it wasn’t for him to figure out big issues like that. His responsibility was to stay within budget and help as many clients as possible.

Each client’s story was different, but many were vaguely similar. He wondered if there was a welfare clients’ fake book, like the books jazz musicians used to improvise riffs. Maybe clients passed the book around to learn stories they could use in welfare department interviews. He had to sort out false claims from real needs. It wasn’t easy, but he did the best he could.

He thought about Veronica after he went to his room. *What’s her story?* he wondered. *Why is a gorgeous girl like her sitting in the middle of nowhere? Is she stuck?* Ron wondered if she was waiting for someone like him to come along. *Wouldn’t that be something? Maybe leaving Connie was the best thing I ever did.* He tried not to feel too optimistic.

Ron was on his own now. He took back his life, and had a new future (hopefully.) Perhaps Veronica was part of it. She seemed like she wanted to be part of his present, anyway. *I can work with that,* he thought, smiling. He decided to go back to her little motel office and ask her to tell him more about herself. Perhaps she would feel inclined to come back to his room later, if he showed interest. *And maybe not, but I have nothing better to do, and she’s worth the effort.*

“I don’t want you to get the wrong idea about me,” Veronica said after they made love on the double bed in the air-conditioned motel room. Ron was glad he remembered to pack his condoms. “I don’t do this with just anyone,” she added.

“Then why me?” Ron replied. “Not that I’m complaining. I’m just an average looking city kid. Not a handsome farm boy like the guys around here. I wouldn’t know one end of a tractor from another.”

Veronica grinned at his humorous self-deprecation. “But you’re nice. I can tell you like me. I like you. Isn’t that a good place to start?”

“Start what?”

“Whatever you want to start.” Ron thought he detected something like Connie’s passivity. She always asked him what he wanted, and then ignored whatever he told her. He had not yet learned the term ‘passive-aggressive,’ but it applied to her.

“Well, what do you want, Veronica? Really want, way deep down in your soul?” His question stunned her.

“In my soul?” she replied. She lifted up, turned, and looked deeply into his eyes. “I want to go somewhere else. Anywhere else but here.”

“But it’s a nice, quiet place.”

“Yes, it is. But I feel my life is on hold here. My real life is somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. I’m open to suggestions.” Veronica wanted Ron to trust she was revealing the truth about herself, the truth that lived in her soul.

Ron suspected what she was hinting at. "With me?" he asked.

"If you wanted me, really wanted me- deep down in your soul," she replied, teasing him.

"But we hardly know each other."

"But you like me, so far, right?" Ron had to agree he did. She was the best thing that happened to him in a long time; maybe ever.

"Yeah, but..."

"But what?"

"You might not like me."

"But I do already," she assured him sweetly.

"You don't know the truth about me."

"Oh, like you're on the lam?" she joked. "Are you a bank robber or something?"

"No, worse."

"You killed someone?" she asked, aghast, and moved away from him. He didn't like that she moved away, and regretted scaring her.

"Oh, God, no. Let me explain. I just got married-."

"But you don't have a ring on."

"We never got them. I didn't want one."

"Um, why not?" she asked, baffled. *Maybe I shouldn't really be here, after all,* she thought. *This guy might be a little nuts.*

"I thought they symbolized ownership. I didn't feel comfortable with that," he explained.

"But they don't. They symbolize union and commitment." *And love,* she thought.

"I guess I didn't want all that."

"Didn't want?"

"I left my bride on our honeymoon." Veronica was the first person he told. He tried not to make it sound as bad as it was. It sounded bad anyway.

"Ron! You didn't! How could you do that?"

Ron had changed during the day and already saw Connie as part of his distant past. "I realized we made a big mistake," he replied, frankly.

Veronica felt he just torpedoed her optimism. "Maybe you're not the only one that just made a big mistake."

Ron understood what she meant. "This wasn't a mistake, Veronica. I think it was meant to be. Life is funny that way. I listen to people tell me about their lives all day. I could write books. Life is rarely predictable, or orderly. People do stuff for all the wrong reasons, or at least reasons they don't understand when they do them. Then they regret stuff they did, but it's often too late. I spent last night thinking. In the middle of the night I realized I regretted what I'd done. I knew it wasn't too late for me. But if I didn't leave then, I'd never go. It seemed like the best thing to do."

"But what about your bride?"

"I don't really know. All I'm sure of is that I couldn't stay with her. I'm sorry to tell you this right after we just..., well, you know..., but I felt I had to be completely honest. I really like you and feel better with you than I ever did with her. I know that sounds lame, but it's true."

Veronica felt flattered, but also cautious. She was glad Ron told her the truth but wondered if this was the worst thing he'd ever done or just the tip of an iceberg. Maybe he wasn't the nice guy she first thought he was.

"So, you didn't love her?" she asked tentatively.

"Never."

“That’s sad. I feel sorry for her.”

“I guess I do, too. But I’m not sorry about what I did, you know? It was best for both of us.”

“For her sake, I hope you’re right.” Veronica felt sympathy for Ron’s abandoned bride, but didn’t want to know anything more about her or their aborted honeymoon. She preferred to look ahead instead of back.

There was a long pause. Ron thought Veronica was trying to decide if she should leave and never see him again. He wouldn’t have blamed her, but he would have missed her. “Say, are you hungry?” she asked. Ron nodded. “How about I take you to dinner?”

“I was gonna offer to take you. But where? I didn’t see any place when I drove in here.”

“The only restaurant is a little place in the village- the Snack Shack Cafe. It’s bigger and nicer than a shack, and they serve more than snacks. All the locals go there.”

“Sure, but I’d like to treat you.”

“You don’t have to. I eat there all the time for free. My mom owns it.”

“Your mom?”

“Yeah, she owns this motel, too. She inherited the restaurant from her family and this place when my dad died a while back.”

“He died? Oh, I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay. I got over it. I didn’t see him much. He was really busy all hours of the day and night. He rarely came home. I would see him when he ate at the restaurant but he rarely paid attention to me. He mostly sat with his buddies.”

“That must have been real hard for you.”

“I guess I got used to it.”

“But it still makes me sad,” Ron replied. “Kids need their dads as well as their moms.”

“Yeah, I guess they do. But it doesn’t always work out that way,” Veronica replied, regretfully. Ron regretted his comment.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to bum you out.”

“It’s okay. I like that you care. You’re nice. So, food?”

“Sure. Let’s get dressed first. We don’t wanna freak your mom out.”

“It would take more than two naked people showing up at her cafe to freak my mom out,” Veronica joked. Ron wondered what sort of person her mother was, and what kind of town Aura was. He tried not to think about anything except being with Veronica for the rest of the night. He reminded himself his honeymoon had ended, but he was still on vacation. Vacations were for having fun. So far, because of Veronica, this was the most fun he’d had on any vacation he ever took.