

# MALBONE CHOCOLATES

BY J.L. FECAROTTA

## **Synopsis and notes:**

This story is about an Italian immigrant family in New York City at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Malbone Street Train Accident is the biggest transit accident in US history and in this fictional story we find out what happened to two recently orphaned young men, and one's dream to become rich through a heist of a nearby Museum. Note that this work reflects the historical and well-documented racial tensions between the Italians and Irish of the time.

This work was written as part of a NYC Midnight Contest, 2019, winning Honorable Mention.

This is the edit following their excellent feedback. – JLF

**Malbone Street Chocolates, Brooklyn, New York**

**November, 1919**

Tommy Feddaduci hated making Chocolate Soufflé more than anything else in the world. It was the humidity of the New York summers mostly, he figured. Nothing he took out of the oven lasted more than ten seconds. Each little chocolate mound of deliciousness would collapse in succession, as if some invisible goblin was walking on the top of them, squishing each with glee.

Grandma Feddaduci never had trouble with the soufflés, and though she didn't yell, shook her head and mumbled in Italian every time Tommy failed. Tommy didn't care - this shop wasn't his destiny, of that he was sure. It'd had been a year or so since his parents passed in that train wreck. Ever since the Feddaduci brothers lived, and worked beside their grandmother every

day. Malbone St. Chocolates was her dream, started over twenty years ago with Grandpa (God rest his soul), to bring traditional Italian sweets over from the mainland. Tommy's Dad wanted him to take over someday, and he never got the chance to tell him that it wasn't going to happen. Maybe his younger brother Bram would take it; he was a far better chef anyway, almost as good as Grandma nowadays.

Tommy knew down deep Grandma was an amazing woman. She'd just turned seventy, but you wouldn't know it. Wiry and short, achieving five feet tall only with the help of padded, well-worn shoes, Grandma could out-hustle Tommy and Bram any day of the week. It was only after the Malbone Street train wreck did Grandma Feddaduci start to look her age.

Malbone Street Chocolates, or simply Malbone, had a reputation that followed it through the five boroughs of New York City and even to Long Island. This was precisely why Tommy couldn't stay – there was no way to live up to that expectation, nor did he want to.

His destiny was Miami, with Amy O'Leary by his side, and he hoped even his little brother. *Wouldn't that be wonderful? Everything he loved together under the warm Florida sun.* His dreams focused mostly on Amy. As he was stirring a giant pot of chocolate, Tommy remembered the day she came in for the first time as if it were yesterday.

*The bell to the door chimed, and when Tommy turned to face the customer, he thought he'd had a stroke. It was a girl holding a sign, but he couldn't think straight. The letters seemed to fade into the hazy background of the world, surrendering all of its contrast and light to Amy. Eventually, he realized she was talking to him, but couldn't make out the words.*

*"Hi," he said after she paused. It was all he could muster. Her eyes seemed so blue that they glowed. He had to look away.*

*She smiled a bit and held up the sign again.*

*“Well, hello to you as well. You folks are lookin’ for a delivery girl?”*

*“Yep,” Tommy said feebly.*

*She held up the sign a bit more, and Tommy realized she was giving it to him.*

*He took the sign from her, their hands touching. Amy's skin glowed next to his olive skin. She had red-blond hair, and a nose that was perfectly straight, dotted with little red freckle, as if to draw more attention to the eyes that caused paralysis in men.*

*After another pause, she said, “So, laddie, you in charge here of this fine establishment?”*

*“Oh...me? No,” Tommy replied, still monosyllabically. He tried shaking his head, to break the spell. He’d never seen an Irish girl up close. It was always their goons coming down to rain pain down on unsuspecting Italian boys. The coppers wouldn’t do anything since they were the potato eaters as well. Tommy hated the Irish like any self-respecting Italian. That was, until today.*

Fortunately, Grandma hired the girl, bearing no ill will towards the Irish. For the next few days he saw Amy daily, but Tommy wanted more. He was filled with a desire to win Amy and take her away from all of this. Then, as if almost in answer to prayer, he heard about an upcoming funeral.

“Tommy, we must-a prepare! We have an order for a chocolate service at a funeral service in two weeks! It’s da the Natural Museum just across town. It’s for some guy named O’Malley. *Oppulento!* We gotta get baking; it is next Sunday!”

He knew what that museum had in it: gems and diamonds from across the world. Including one he’d had gawked at for years - the Trinity diamonds, worth a cool three million

dollars. A plan formed in his mind, solidifying like candies in a tray.

#

Tommy was surprised by two things the following morning: how difficult it was to talk his brother Bram into the plan and how important it was to him that his little brother was part of this. Tommy had taken care of Bram since Mom and Dad passed. Out of the train wreckage their relationship had grown closer than any brothers could under normal circumstances. The searing pain of losing Mom and Dad fused Tommy and Bram like two pieces of iron. It was them against the world after that. The truth was, no matter what he told himself, there was no way Tommy would leave his little brother behind. Bram being the good Catholic choir boy, wouldn't agree to the plan until Tommy mentioned to him how much it'd help Grandma.

“Look, Bram, there's this one target. They call it the Triplets. It's three big diamonds that will set us up for life even if it was the only thing we got. The first bucks we make, it goes to Grandma...she's not getting any younger, Bram...don't you think Mom and Dad would want Grandma to live her last few years in comfort?”

Eventually, Bram collapsed like one of Tommy's Chocolate Soufflé attempts.

Having successfully gotten Bram onboard, Tommy moved to his next target, armed with flowers – Amy O'Malley. She'd been packing up her bike and would be riding off with a sack full of chocolates. Tommy wanted to test the waters and see where she was at emotionally.

“Amy, you don't spend much time around after work.”

“I have school work, as should you boys.”

Tommy had finished high school, barely, but Bram dropped out. He was almost done anyway, and who needed school if all you were going to do with your life is push truffles into little boxes?

“Amy, I think we’d be good together. What do you say we go out? Just a cup of coffee?”

“Tommy, I’m only seventeen-years-old.”

“I’m twenty. What does it matter?”

“I don’t think so, Tommy. I’m here to work and deliver chocolates. Then it’s me studies and to help Mother with the household duties. Life is hard, Tommy.”

She started to get onto her bike. Tommy’s moment was slipping away.

“What if I told you it didn’t have to be? What would you say if I told you I’m gonna be rich? Would you hang around then?”

She giggled. “Tommy I don’t care ‘bout money. Lovin’ money...well that’s the root of all evil y’know.”

“Yeah but if you could be rich, wouldn’t you?”

“Doesn’t money just bring its own set of problems?”

“Not as much as poverty does.”

“You’re a silly boy, Tommy Feddaduci,” Amy said as she pedaled her bike away. She looked back, and smiled, her hair catching the light in such a way that her whole face looked like it was glowing. Tommy knew it. He saw it in her eyes – obviously she likes and needs money. Who doesn’t? People didn’t deliver chocolates for the fun of it. He knew at that moment the minute he showed her how he could treat a lady, Amy would be his.

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It was finally funeral day at the Natural Museum. As they were setting up Tommy noticed, way in the back, Amy was standing next to a pillar. Though dressed in black, she was still radiant. He met her eyes and smiled, but it was unreturned. Tommy recalled this was a service for a dead Irish guy, so perhaps she knew him. Then the priest moved towards the

flower-covered podium and began to speak.

This was their moment. The entire room, including the three guards, were focused on the priest, and as he bowed his head to pray, so did they. Tommy had to elbow Bram to take off his cooking gloves and put on clean ones. He'd been working alongside grandma and giving out chocolates to people as if this were just another catering gig. Bram's diligence was unnecessary. Grandma had events like this figured out, needing help for set-up and clean-up afterward. But here he was, booties, gloves and all, working as a chocolatier.

After Bram took off his gloves, the Feddaduci boys bolted towards the back of the museum, through a set of doors, and straight to the target. The room was empty and dark, the only light source being a skylight far above their heads.

After meandering past sculptures and paintings galore, they found the rare gems room, and in its center were the Triplets. Even in the dim light, they glowed with white fire. With a practiced smoothness, Bram lifted the cover off of the Triplets and Tommy used a chocolate dipping spiral to pick up the necklace with one smooth motion and put it into Bram's pocket. Bram put down the glass case. The whole thing took maybe two seconds.

No alarms, as expected. Tommy had read that they'd been running a bit short on funds these last few years, and the security of the Museum had been lax. If it weren't him, someone would hit this place, and soon.

They returned to the chocolate fountain, Bram took out the necklace and tossed it in, and Tommy used the dipping spiral to push it to the bottom of the basin.

No one noticed. Tommy smiled at his brother, who'd grown pale. Nerves or not, he'd never been so proud of Bram.

Memorial services were always a bore and long, but for Tommy, this one lasted an

eternity. He thought they'd never finish feeding people. It turns out that grief builds quite an appetite for chocolate-covered marshmallows and strawberries. The whole time Tommy made sure people didn't dunk their sweets too deeply into the vat of melted chocolate.

Once the service was over, the boys rolled out the fountain to the back, cleaned it out, and recovered the necklace. To their horror, the diamonds were gone.

"Where are the diamonds, Tommy?"

"Keep looking...they're here," Tommy replied, his voice deep and thunderous, as if he was summoning them. Then they heard a clink. They'd wedged themselves in one of the fountain's drain ports. They had come out of the necklace, no doubt due to the heat of the chocolate. Tommy washed the Triplets, dried them with his shirt and stared at them.

"Oh dear Lord, Tommy, how are we gonna fix this?" asked Bram, shoving his brother to attention.

"It's fine. I'll fix it. Look at them little brother. Look!"

In the daylight they were astonishing, glimmering blue-green and white in every direction on his hand.

Bram seemed unaffected. "I don't know about this, Tommy."

"Leave it to me, little brother. Just leave it to me."

That night Tommy barely slept, the Triplets safely under his pillow.

#

That next morning Tommy started the day like any other. He shredded chocolate blocks, Grandma worked the phone, and Bram cleaned the front. The plan was to wait for lunch, fix the Triplets, and then see what they could get for them. Uncle Frank, down at the pier, would be able to help with that.



The front doorbell chimed. Tommy looked up and couldn't believe his eyes. There was an enormous cop darkening the entrance to Malbone Chocolates, swinging his baton while proficiently whistling the melody *My Wild Irish Rose*. Tommy normally handled the customers, and Bram wasn't going to start now as he dashed into the walk-in cooler.

"How are you this morning, Officer...O'Brien?" Tommy said, spying his nametag.  
"What can we do you for?"

"We got a bit of a problem. It looks like someone made off with some jewels last night from the Museum."

"Is that so? That's awful," Tommy said, smile wide, trying hard to sell confidence, ignorance, and innocence.

"It is awful, young man, because we saw some chocolate footprints in the area. How would you explain such a thing?"

A brief flash of surprise entered Tommy's mind. *Bram forgot to take off his booties. He shouldn't have helped Grandma before the heist.*

"Well, sir, our chocolates are the best in New York. I'm sure the stuff was everywhere."

Grandma came out of the back room.

"Is there a problem Officer?" she asked.

"Ma'am, as I was telling the boy, someone robbed the gems out of the Museum yesterday."

"My boys were working with me, Office, and I'm certain of that."

"Of course, I was just dropping in to ask if you or your family saw anything suspicious yesterday during the service?"

"No, not a thing. Thank you , officer," Grandma said, her tone final.

The man smiled crooked. “Well, then, there it is. Well, if any of you hear anything, please don’t hesitate to give us a call, day or night.”

No one said anything. The officer laughed dismissively, took a truffle, and left the store. Tommy saw the look in his eyes and knew he’d return with some sort of warrant.

Grandma was incensed. “How dare he come into my store and throw accusations! There were ten times more Irish than Italians at that service, and he comes to my store!”

She trailed off in a litany of Italian cuss words and went to take her customary lunchtime nap. Once Tommy was sure she was asleep, he pulled out the Triplets, along with the necklace that had held them, and showed them to Bram.

“Brother, we need to send these diamonds out of here now. Amy will be back for the afternoon batch soon, and I have an idea. How would you like to make some truffles?” In less than a half-hour, Tommy was filling a box full with slightly larger-than-normal truffles.

“Bram these are beautiful. This is some fine work,” Tommy said. The boy was talented. He even got the necklace to fit inside a soufflé without it falling.

“You’re an amazing chocolatier, Bram.”

“Thanks brother,” but he didn’t smile. The stress was getting to him.

“Would you relax?”

“I’ll try.”

Tommy was quickly paging through the orders for tomorrow.

“Look, here. It’s an Irish wedding in Brooklyn. Amy’s taking them up there this afternoon, and the wedding isn’t until 6 p.m. We’ll just go up there and grab them before the wedding starts.”

“Tommy...what if-”

“Don’t worry about anything, Bram. This will work, and soon we’ll be in sunny Miami laughing about all of it.”

#

Not an hour after Amy left with the wedding delivery, the cops showed up. They had their warrant, and though Grandma protested, they poked and prodded every piece of chocolate in the place. Grandma held her chin up high, despite tears rolling down her cheeks, as the cops stabbed each chocolate with a toothpick, searching for the diamonds. They took shoes, gloves, utensils, dusted for fingerprints, and then they were gone. While Grandma replaced damaged chocolates, the boys bolted across town to the wedding.

Once there, Tommy’s stomach sank. There were no boxes of chocolates stacked. Amy was gone and someone had emptied all of the desserts onto shiny metal trays.

“We didn’t make it early enough,” said Bram.

“You think?” barked Tommy.

Just then a large woman floated towards them, her giant cobalt dress flowing behind her, frills flapping in the afternoon breeze. She had a hat on with plastic birds and a glimmering necklace that reminded him of the Triplets.

“Can I help you, boys? Are you from the Malbone Chocolates too?”

Tommy wondered how she knew, then looked at Bram. He’d left his apron on, the logo at the very top. In red letters. Bram got pale as milk, and his eyes grew wide and glassy.

*Stick with me, brother!*

“Yes ma’am, we’re from the store. Our dear sweet Grandma said you might have gotten the wrong chocolates. Do you know which tray they’re on?”

“Oh, I’m afraid we’ve scattered them about. They’re so good! I ate a few when they first

got here. I'm the mother-in-law - all nerves, you know! Please send your grandmother our most sincere gratitude. The truffles were amazing. I might have eaten them all, my dear chap," she said, laughing as she walked away.

"How did she eat our diamonds, brother?" asked Bram.

Tommy refused to believe it. He remembered how the cop searched their store. He found some toothpicks, and as secretively as they could, the brothers started stabbing chocolates.

Nothing in the truffle mound, nor in the chocolate soufflés. The wedding was to start, and over a million dollars in diamonds were out of the boy's reach, trapped in sugary cocoons of their own making.

They collapsed behind a dumpster behind the English mansion. It was a magnificent house, one of those rich folk on the outskirts of Brooklyn.

"They ate them, little brother. They ate three million dollars' worth of diamonds."

"But Tommy, a whole necklace?"

Bram was right for once. It was ridiculous that she could have consumed an entire necklace. The smell of the dumpster was pungent and disrupted his train of thought.

"We should-" Tommy started, and then realized something that should have been obvious.

"We should what?"

"Garbage!" Tommy yelled.

"We should garbage?"

"No, brother, we have to come back tonight. They must have thrown the bad ones away after it got "crunchy"! They must of tossed them out without inspecting the chewed mess closely."

“We’re going to get complaints. Grandma will hear about it.”

Tommy laughed. “Bram, you kill me.”

#

The boys found a hardware store nearby and picked up a flashlight, one of those fancy ones with a battery in it. They returned at dusk and the dumpster was packed full. Tommy didn’t delay – he jumped in and dug and dug through each garbage as quietly as he could, Bram shining the flashlight into the stinking mound. The battery-power wasn’t as wonderful as Tommy hoped as they required their power to be cycled on and off, creating a risky light show.

Their search proved fruitless, and they collapsed once again against the giant dumpster, of which they now inherited its smell.

Then Tommy froze. “Bram, there’s another explanation...but you’re not going to like it.”

He explained to his brother that these folks, being rich, weren’t going to wait for the city to get the sewer system hooked up. They had their very own septic tank, and things pass. When he finally understood what Tommy meant, Bram’s eyes opened wide, and he covered his mouth to stifle a cry.

When Tommy opened the septic’s riser, the smell washed over them like a blanket, wiping out the already horrible scent of the garbage.

“I’m not going in there, Tommy!” cried Bram. He had a wild look in his eye.

“I’ll go, but you have to keep light on me.” Tommy grabbed a nearby pool net and jumped into the septic tank, human refuse covering him up to his chest.

#

Bram threw up at least five times. Tommy couldn’t feel anything, smell anything, or even

see. Netful after filthy netful they pulled up horrible visions, visions that would haunt them for the rest of their lives. They found nothing close to a diamond. Then all of a sudden a bunch of light flooded the space. Tommy could see much better but then realized what had happened.

“FREEZE! You’re under arrest!” a voice in the dark called out, with an Irish accent.

The cops had arrived. Tommy helplessly scrambled in the muck, trying to get away. Bram didn’t move, because deep down, in his heart of hearts, he was relieved. It was finally over.

#

The news of the Great Museum heist grew to epic proportions. The nation was laughing at them, calling them the Crap Bandits. Tommy coughed into his napkin. He’d caught some awful bug in this prison, which made his captivity even worse if that were possible.

The next few weeks flew by. The lawyer said they got off easy - Eight years in the clink and three for Bram because he was younger. Yet, Tommy’s chest burned when he thought of his brother squealing to the cops. Tommy didn’t crack, not even when they claimed they had his brother’s prints matched to ones left at the museum or the gold flakes they found under Tommy’s pillow. His brother honest to a fault.

Through the trial and now in his cell, something continually gnawed on Tommy’s mind. It was that lady in the big-blue dress-

*“Can I help you boys? Are you from the Malbone Chocolates too?”*

Too. Too....

Then one morning he woke up with the realization that should have been obvious from the start. His love, his blind spot – Amy O’Malley.

#

Bram Feddaduci loved making chocolate soufflés. The artistry was intense, and they reminded him of Grandma and Tommy, God rest their souls. He always laughed when he saw Grandma show his older brother how it was done, time after time.

He turned on the store sign. Amy's Sweets glowed in the early Miami morning. Shortly after, Amy walked in, looking as beautiful as she did three years ago, when she was waiting outside of the prison for him. Grandma passed of old age and maybe heartbreak at their crimes. Bram was angry for a long time at Tommy that, but after he died of influenza in prison, Bram forgave him too. Maybe heartbreak over not being rich killed him, too. Tommy wanted so badly to have it all, have it now, and to not have worked for it.

What Tommy didn't know was that Amy was smarter than both of them. She knew the boys were up to something. When she delivered the chocolates, Amy asked the nice lady in blue if she could help set up. Of course, when Amy saw the box with the obvious checkmark, she held that one back. She ducked into a nearby park and carefully sucked the chocolate off of each diamond, gasping every time with the beauty of them.

The cops never asked her anything, even when she turned them in for a reward of \$150,000 dollars, a fraction of their worth, but plenty for Amy and Bram to start their new life. Of course the cops she turned them into had names like Walsh or O'Connor.

Tommy always said the cops didn't touch the Irish. He never saw his own faults, and it was far easier to blame it on the Irish cops than his own greed and avarice. Would Tommy rest now, seeing his dream realized in his brother's life? Or would their parents torment him for ruining his life and bringing down their beloved Malbone Street Chocolates?

Eventually Bram would find out, but not for a long, long time.