

from *Sugaring Off*

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FIRST SNOW

Snow was coming down in big, white clumps, and I felt very empty inside. I remember the snow that cold autumn and the stillness. There was a grim hush about the city and cold, icy winds, gusts of freezing air, swept down Park Avenue. At night the city was deserted. It felt desolate. In the early mornings, I could hear the sirens from the ambulances, all day I felt the brutality of Christmas.

At the Barbizon, I had a small room at the top that overlooked a courtyard, high above Lexington Avenue. It was painted in thick beige and trimmed in maroon, a dark green carpet on the floor. There was a single bed and a black telephone. The bed had a spread with ruffles with a print like Little Red Riding Hood's dark forest. I stayed in my room most of the time, only going out to eat meals. Josie Jones had dropped me. The first week I dined on burgers, sandwiches, and salad from the hotel coffee shop. My parents called me every night to tell me to come back home to Alabama. My father, a courtly Southern gentleman, was horrified that I had settled in New York City. But he sent money to pay my hotel bills. I could hear the sirens below in the streets of the city, and the roar of the subway trains beneath me. One night a woman threw herself to death from a window at the Barbizon Hotel. She had been living in the hotel like me. I woke up to a chilling scream, as she landed on the ledge beneath my window. In New York, I was surrounded by death.

I had no clothes except the ones on my back, and I lived on salami and cheese, which I ate in my hotel room. Sometimes I ate breakfast at the Barbizon Hotel Coffee Shop with all the chic young women going to work each morning. I had no job, and I envied them. I was still waiting for my English wardrobe trunk, which had been shipped from New Orleans.

At dusk, I saw a beautiful couple out for a stroll on Central Park South. Central Park South was like a necklace of diamonds at night. Life and death existed there side by side. The man in a tight black frock coat looked like a Movie Star director with a mane of gray-black hair, and his lady, a woman in a jet black, long coat with dazzling auburn hair and green eyes. Their beauty gathered like the night. He held her by the hand so that it looked as though they were partners in a dance, two peacocks strutting their stuff for all the world to see, and they moved with a stately elegance. I fell in love with them at once. I wanted to be the couple, to enter them, possess them, and I knew I never could. Seeing them made me lonely, envious, and aware of how poor I actually was. It was the dusk of a very cold bright day in December. There was a hint of snow in the frosty air, which made the lights along the strip glitter. It created a dichotomy between those who were cold, like me, and those who were warm, like the lovers I had just seen.

I went shopping and bought a long black coat with a belt at Bloomingdale's and a pair of black velvet suede boots with high tops that came up to my knees. The coat gave me a very dramatic

look in the white snow outside, and it was also very warm. Then, a month later in January, I got a job at The New York City Opera working for a famous opera conductor. I had my hair done at Elizabeth Arden's and opened a charge account there. I gave Sir Rudolf Bing as a credit reference.

As I left the salon, it began snowing again. When I got to Fifth Avenue and Central Park, the street had a thick coating of snow. The snow swirled in the air, the wind whipping it about, and through the black trees I could see the buildings of the city with their lights, the lighted windows, squares of yellow gold on the snow, like lamps behind fog. I walked down Fifth Avenue with lights twinkling in the shop windows and snowflakes falling.

AUCTION

Late in November, on a midnight flight from New Orleans, I came to New York City from Alabama in search of a better life. Before leaving New Orleans, I held a furniture sale in my French Quarter apartment for everything I owned, including my French white Fiat with the red leather upholstery, and sold all of my possessions to perfect strangers, who tramped up and down the wooden staircase from the courtyard. Then I gave my scrapbook full of love letters and pictures away at a cocktail party and arrived in New York with ten dollars. I planned to stay with my New Orleans friend Josie Jones, who lived at 145 East 62nd Street. Her apartment was right behind the old Barbizon Hotel for Women, where Sylvia Plath and Grace Kelly had lived. I had come to New York to take a class in Opera Management at Brooklyn College being taught by Sir Rudolf Bing, former general manager of The Metropolitan Opera. When I arrived, it was a cold winter's day and snowing heavily. I took a limo from the Upper East Side all the way out to Brooklyn College only to learn the class had been canceled. When I finally toured Brooklyn, the limousine couldn't navigate the snow, and a woman called the driver a "bum." Josie Jones was also unreachable. I ended up spending the next several nights with a theatre director and his wife, whom I had known in New Orleans. I slept on their couch, and they couldn't make love for a week or so they told me when they put me out a few days later giving me the cab fare to go elsewhere, and I moved in with Josie. I promptly contacted the director of Brooklyn College. "Why didn't you call me about this in New Orleans before I came?" I cried in my terror at being alone without plans in New York City. "I've come all the way from Alabama to take this class," I said. "It's the most important thing in my life!" Then he promised to put me in touch with Sir Rudolf. Sir Rudolf called on Thanksgiving Day, when I lay in my bed in a deep depression. He said he was sorry about my coming all the way to New York just to take his class, when it had been canceled, and that he would call again soon to arrange a meeting. He had an English accent and sounded very far away.

Roaches crawled about in the unwashed dishes in Josie Jones' windowless kitchen. She always put the garbage outside her door, and each morning the super would collect it. I wasn't sure why I had come to New York and regretted that I had used the money my parents sent me in New Orleans to attend my grandmother's funeral in Collinsville, Alabama, to come to New York. She

had left a Christmas card for everyone, although I wouldn't be home for Christmas, in which she had written: *I love you all dearly/ Now don't shed a tear/ I'm spending my Christmas/ With Jesus this year. Love Grandmother.*

Josie and her friends took me to a porn movie on 42nd Street. *The Devil In Miss Jones* was in Technicolor with naked men and women in chains wearing dog collars, having chocolate sauce licked off their bodies by people in leather. I was shocked. She also treated me to a meal at The Clam Broth House in Hoboken, New Jersey, after the movie. We took The Path, a dirty, smelly underground train that curved like a long silver snake beneath the Hudson River. Later that night back in New York, I learned that Josie was on drugs, and that most of New York had keys to her apartment. That was when I decided to move into the Barbizon Hotel For Women. Above the telephone by my bed in Josie Jones' apartment, I wrote in lipstick on the wall: Sir Rudolf Bing called me on this telephone. Then I left.