

*Red Coat*

by

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“You need a new winter coat,” my mother said as we drove down Main Street.

It was one of those warm autumn Saturdays when the sun lingers hazily, when parched brown and dusty fall leaves scatter about. Winter seemed far away, really. I hadn’t even thought about a new winter coat.

We angle-parked the Nash sedan in front of Grodin’s Store, the most likely place to find a good winter coat.

Mama and I hesitated at the store windows, shaded from the warm, autumn sun by a large, gray awning. We stood together under the overhang to consider mannequins wearing the “New Look,” the newly-arrived style of the fifties. Longer, fuller skirts with cinched waists were now “The Mode.”

“Oh, these are pretty, aren’t they, Mama?”

“Longer. They can use more fabric now. After the war, skirts were short because they had to use less material. Better now . . . covers the legs better.”

Mama always sees the practical side.

“Well, let’s see what they have,” she said as we entered the store.

Mrs. Grodin looked up from her paperwork, “Afternoon, Ladies. How can we help today?”

“Sissy needs a good winter coat. Do you have anything nice for her?” Mrs. Grodin’s eyes scanned my overly tall, awkward, thirteen-year-old body. “Yes, just the right one! The color will be beautiful on Sissy.”

She vanished and returned almost instantly. She held up a wooden hanger from which draped a garment of the most extraordinary, exhilarating color. It was red. No, not just red—a red that was cherries and strawberries and raspberries all mashed together—the red that streaks the whipped cream on the shortcake—luscious, delicious, glorious *red*.

This was a red that *demand*ed attention. (And it demanded also a bit of courage. It was, after all, the conformist, everything-must-match 1950s.)

I loved it. Mama and Mrs. Grodin went on about what a beautiful color it was on me. Mrs. Grodin said flattering things . . . that my dark hair and dark eyes and fair skin looked wonderful against the “true red” of the coat’s soft wool fabric. (I was not used to hearing compliments.) I soaked up this strange news like warm sunshine.

“Oh, Mrs. Grodin, I love this! Thank you, Mama!” I hugged and kissed my mother.

I was thrilled. This was truly, the most wonderful, most beautiful article of clothing I had ever had! I wanted to skip out of the store! I clutched the brown-paper-wrapped box to my heart. Joy!

When we arrived home, my father had just settled into his well-worn easy chair to read the evening paper and to smoke a cigarette from his second pack of the day.

“Daddy, look at my new coat!” I quickly unwrapped the box and slipped the coat over my shoulders.

My father lowered the paper. Slowly and firmly, his lips disappeared into a thin line. A furrow—no, a valley—appeared between his thick brows. The brows lowered, and he spoke through his teeth, “My god, what the hell is this? What the hell is this ugly color? My god, you look like a jezebel! Someone will think you’re looking for a man. All you have to do is stand on the street!”

My thirteen-year-old heart raced and raged. Jezebel? What? Why? Instead of screaming, “You’re so mean! I don’t care if you don’t like my coat,” I stood still, silent, waiting for the rage and pain to go away, at least to diminish.

At last, my heart recovered and spoke so clearly, so defiantly, so definitely that I wondered if my father and maddeningly-silent mother could hear:

*“Be strong and wear red. Follow me, your heart. You know who you are and who you will be. Wear red.”*