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**2.1 - LA MARINA**

Maybe the Music School at Newcomb College wasn't the most prestigious place to start a concert career, but girls still majored in Music, and some were even good at one instrument or another. Lynne played the harpsichord and was well aware of and reconciled to the fact that she was not and never would be a Landowska. That was how her old pianist friend Shaw—a really cute guy with wavy black hair—put it, accepting that he'd never be a Horowitz. He'd dropped out last year and was now driving a Yellow Cab. Such self-realizations were not easy, but they were essential to peace of mind. Consequently Lynne was fairly content just being a harpsichord major, with her eye on perhaps giving private lessons someday. The only career she wanted was wife and mother. Shaw was happy in his hack, but maybe that was his aspiration. \

After evaluating her musical talents, Shaw suggested she go into modeling for artists. "Lynne, you could set the world of art back a century," he joked, "like a Renoir bather, the ivory fullness of your body, cascades of red hair over your curving shoulders." Of course she enjoyed such praise of her charms since that was precisely the effect she strove for. He was sweet to notice, but he'd never asked her out on a date the whole three years they'd spent in classes. It seemed they were nothing more than friends, though quite good ones. She'd missed his company this fall of her senior year, though since taking up cabbing, Shaw still gave a call at times.

It was a good thing Shaw never made a pass at her because he'd have presented a serious temptation. Remaining faithful to her dear Robert wasn't the easiest thing. Robbie graduated last year from Tulane Law School (Now that was some prestige!), and was back home in Virginia practicing, waiting for her to finish too. Being so far away from him was painful, but it was an impetus to practice. Add not having Shaw to chum with, and it made for gruesome weekend nights in the apartment, roommates out, nothing to do but watch television.

By mid-December Renoire-esque Lynne was getting fed up with the doldrums of staying home, even though she spoke with Robbie every week, and they wrote frequently. (His letters were so sexy she climbed the wall.) So she was easily swayed on a Saturday night when Shaw phoned inviting her out with him to meet a couple East Indian men he recently got to know, fresh from India, Tulane grad students. They'd asked him to introduce them to some nice American girls, strictly honorable intentions, mind you, just for company, as they knew very few people here. She didn't feel like a welcome wagon hostess, but such international socializing, strictly on the up and up, mind you, might actually be fun and a welcome change of pace.

Picking her up in his bright yellow but battered taxi, Shaw drove down Claiborne Avenue explaining how he'd met the Indians as a fare. They'd offered him a hundred dollars for a tour of the city, he said. The way Shaw described it, he drove around for maybe 150 miles showing them everywhere and telling them everything he could think of. A lot of it was probably fanciful at best. "Great guys," he assured her, "one a Moslem, one a Hindu. I even took them to La Marina to show them the nightlife in the Quarter."

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Lynne was scandalized that Shaw went to dives like that dangerous sailor bar on Decatur Street. Rumor had it as a very violent place and definitely not the kind of place well-bred Sophie Newcomb girls went. "Why that place?" she asked disgustedly.

"I picked up this hot lady named Angie the other night," Shaw answered exuberantly. "She was going to work as barmaid at La Casa de los Marinos. So I went in for a beer. Really a jumping joint. That's where we're going tonight."

"What!?" Lynne yelled. "You can't expect a self-respecting young harpsichordist to go into that dangerous dive?"

"You'll love it," Shaw insisted. Though she protested vigorously, he assured her she'd be perfectly safe with three escorts who had only the most honorable of intentions. She sank into a sulk as the taxi rolled across Canal and into the Quarter. Suddenly the street got very dark and dingy. Decatur Street along the river and wharves was definitely the unsavory edge of the French Quarter, the Wild Side. She'd never even ventured there during the day (except around Jackson Square and the French Market), much less rode along it at night with strange women and rough-looking men everywhere, walking along the street from one dark little bar to another. However, as repelled as she was by what she saw, truthfully Lynne was just a tad curious and excited about this adventure into the underworld.

They parked alongside the Jax Brewery, a huge gray castle-like building that loomed over the Quarter houses and docks along the waterfront. As soon as Shaw opened her door, she heard a deep throb of Latin drums. It came from a building across the street on the corner of Toulouse with two ranks of rotten balconies, both upper floors quite derelict with broken windows, or none at all. To her amazement Shaw took her hand as they started across the street.

"Gotta protect pretty ladies around here," he quipped. "If anyone suggests anything, just politely say no. We'll pretend we're together—if you don't mind." No harm in that, she figured, pretending with a cute guy like Shaw, curly-headed, strong jaw, and that fragrant pipe he always smoked. They went up to a pair of grimy black-green swinging doors at the corner near the streetlight. Just like something on the Left Bank in Paris, Lynne fervently hoped. Above the door hung a small Falstaff beer sign and the name La Marina. It had to be unbelievably loud inside for it to be this loud out on the sidewalk.

When Shaw opened the door, a deafening blast of Latin music nearly knocked her over. Inside, there was a huge, dimly lit crowd, a jungle of bodies. He led her inside by the hand. A tall olive-skinned man in a white shirt with stains down the front was playing vigorously on a Conga drum, adding to the hubbub of laughter his own syncopated rhythms. Lynne loved the music immediately, obviously pure ethnic Latin American with driving beat, occasional Spanish words she could recognize like "*corazón*" and "*bailar*." Very few people in the crowd paid her any attention, which was a comfort. It was too crowded and dark to see much of anyone else, even those you had to squeeze around and through. Most of the light in the room came from the bright, battered Wurlitzer that delivered peals of thunderous music, and from scattered beer signs. In the heavy stench of beer and smoke in the long, narrow room, she self-consciously followed Shaw's hand toward the bar. Someone else's hand ran appraisingly across her breast, but she couldn't figure out who did it.

Squeezing between two men, one of whom was frantically shaking maracas, oblivious to everything, Shaw made it to the bar and ordered two Dixie beers from a buxomly nonchalant barmaid wearing only scanty shorts and a scantier halter—in December! Then Lynne suddenly realized that the dark mirror behind the bar was not a mirror at all, but a long window into a

room beyond where the bar circled around, and yet another crowd jostled in the beer-sign glow. Out of the swirl of crowd, another hand slipped across her buttock, and she recoiled.

They moved on back into the melee and past the brazen juke box. The rhythm that pulsed from the old machine really did make her want to dance, and indeed nearly everyone in the crush was moving to the beat, as much as space allowed. On their passage of the room, the record changed, an incredible silence for a brief moment, a silence in which the shouts and laughing of the crowd blossomed forth into a full-fledged din, only to be ridden down once more by the overwhelming waves of the next song.

Through a low arched door into the other room, they made for its far corner where there were somewhat fewer people, and one could at least move an elbow. Of the people Lynne could make out in the dimness of the neon, most of the men were dark, foreign-looking, actually rather intriguing. "This is the Second Room," Shaw shouted in her ear, tightening his arm around her waist. She had already fairly well figured that out.

Looking over Shaw's shoulder, Lynne's eyes met those of a big tawny man with a wide nose and lips, fairly frightening. The man grew shorter as he stood up from a stool, motioning her toward it. "Lady please sit," he said in a polite, gentle voice, showing large white teeth. Shaw thanked him, and the "Lady" climbed onto the high wooden stool along the wall which, up close she could see was dark green, not just black. Overhead, high in the vague darkness, she could now make out the motionless blades of ceiling fans. Now the rhythm of the music was pounding right through her. Dear Shaw stood close by, and the donor of the stool disappeared.

Leaning close again, Shaw shouted, "That's Angie behind the bar. She used to be a Playboy Bunny!" Lynne could only nod and laugh. So this was Angie, Shaw's entry to this fascinating exclusive club, even more provocatively dressed the other barmaid. Men were so silly about such things. Most of the other women, (several couples were actually dancing around this bar, in spite of the crowd), were dressed in Angie's style, looking suspiciously like whores, but far be it from her to judge. She sat up straighter and more dignified on her stool.

Shortly Shaw proposed to teach Lynne to dance what, he shouted, was the "merengue." There was minimal space for dancing, but she liked it very much, forceful swaying of the hips from side to side, very formal postures of the arms and shoulders. She tossed her long red hair as she danced and soon became aware of many men in the crowd watching. Her dancing lesson, however, was cut short by the arrival of Shaw's two new Indian friends.

They, too, were dark, both with raven hair, but neither looked like the other men in the Latin crowd. One, the shorter with the longer hair, whose name Shaw shouted as Raj, was really quite striking with great doe eyes like some of those fabulous pictures of Hindu gods Lynne had seen in Art History textbooks. Even the curve of his molded lips and nostrils was classical in a strange, alien way. He was so divinely beautiful for a man that it made her uncomfortable. The second, taller one with close-cropped hair, whose name was Ramzan, had a lean, sharp look more like what she was used to. She knew instinctively that he was the Moslem, though she'd had no more exposure to Arab types than to Hindus. Ramzan had piercing brown eyes that moved over her throat and long hair appreciatively. In shouted remarks she discovered they were both in civil engineering, a subject with which she was not even passing familiar. Then the four of them smiled at each other through the decibels, and Shaw led Lynne back into the dance.

Now as she moved to the merengue, she was distinctly aware of attention from Ramzan. (His Hindu friend Raj kept watching the passing crowd, holding his beer can daintily.) Nothing like attention to lift a girl's spirits, she devoted herself to the dance with abandon. Lynne exulted

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in dancing with Shaw, the rhythms so seductive, so sensuous. Ramzan's thin-lipped, but soft smile made her wonder how honorable his intentions actually were.

In the interim between dances, Raj brought a friend over to meet them. It was that really cute blond cashier guy Lynne always saw in the Snack Bar at school. After a funny pause and puzzled expression, Raj introduced him as Norman. The boy smiled brightly, but confusedly. Then the music started again. Lynne definitely wanted to sit this one out because it was a strange different rhythm, and the men clustered around her stool, like a royal court. They conversed in more shouts. She gleaned that Raj was a Brahmin, his disturbing beauty taking on something of a mystical quality in the beer-sign light. Also, Ramzan had been for two years in France before coming to this country. Lynne always wanted to go to Paris, but this was neither the time nor the place to hear his account. They could only smile at each other. There was something dignified and thoughtful about him. But a Moslem, she wondered...

Handsome Norman returned from the bar, bringing another beer for Raj, and stood nearby looking totally bewildered, clearly no more an habitué of such dives than Lynne. Shaw asked if he'd ever been to La Casa before, and the fellow shook his head. He said he'd just met Raj today and got invited to come here tonight. Soon, at Lynne's instigation, Shaw danced with her again. Ramzan was rapt with her the while, and Raj talked animatedly with Norman, his hands flashing thin-fingered gestures like those Shiva statues, and the kid was hypnotized.

Afterwards, Shaw proposed to take them into what he loudly and logically advised was the Third Room. Strung out through the crowd, they struggled to the Decatur end of the Second Room and a low-arched doorway. The door was swung open flat against the wall and startlingly painted with a sunburst face of some Aztec-like mask in flaming colors. There was a step up into a new chamber and a new deafening song. Another jukebox filled this room, and the din of the old song disappeared without a trace. Again beer signs glowed like weak, bloated stars, and a moon-like clock over the (this time) mirrored bar said ten till three, which couldn't be right.

This room too was full of loud and boisterous people, many watchful leaners with glass or bottle in hand, couples dancing, young men and girls sidling and wiggling their way through the milling horde carefully guarding burning cigarettes or drinks. Again in the dim heights of the room as though in the black depths of water lurked the long blades of more motionless fans.

While Shaw got drinks, Raj pointed out to Lynne and Norman the murals on the dark green walls above the heads of the crowd. At the far end in the livid glow of the jukebox, a pallid nude flung herself toward the corner, a knife in her back spouting blood into the darkness behind. Her hair seethed into streams out behind, tremendous locks tangling about a speeding motorcycle with dark, suicidal rider, tresses curling into a scarlet whirlwind cape round a sardonic matador and curling horns. Closer to the door in this flood of hair, was a ghost-like, glassy-eyed nude with an ape's hairy hand on her breast. It was a dream-like frenzy floating above the mass of dancing, laughing, living people.

In the midst of the Latin music, to Lynne's surprise the next song up was "The Twist." Instantly the room became even more frantic, virtually everyone wiggling furiously, laughing hysterically and forgetting about partners. Ramzan stood out the dance, perhaps disapproving. What about those belly-dancers? Lynne put some belly-dancer into her twist for his benefit, her hair reminiscent of the nude in the mural. Even Norman loosened up to the familiar music, really twisting out in his green corduroy jeans. But Raj simply couldn't stay with the rhythm. When the song was over, they all dissolved with laughter.

By this time Lynne was starting to think La Marina was rather fun, and though it was so tremendously loud, she loved the music, the dancing. Everyone was so polite after those first few

hands in the crowd. It was easy to dance her way through another beer and several more songs, with Shaw and others, even Norman. Then Shaw suggested they move on to another place called the Seven Seas on St. Philip. Raj and Norman decided to stay in La Marina. So they left the two beautiful guys there among all the Latin sailors and whores.

The entire rest of that evening in the Seven Seas, a beatnik joint draped in fishnets and floats, Ramzan displayed unflagging interest in Lynne, but to her relief, he never acknowledged the electricity between them. Later, terribly proper but intense, he sat with her in the back seat of Shaw's cab like real passengers telling her fascinating stories of India and Paris. His riveted attention was unnerving, and before the evening was over Lynne was wondering what exactly it was he evoked. Largely, it was curiosity about his religion, and her weakness for flattery.

So she was easily convinced to go out with him again during the next several days, once to the peaceful Napoleon House (which she'd known for some time, a haven of classical music and genteel drinks), and a few times back to La Casa de los Marininos, only two blocks away. Of course, their friends were always there. Shaw's nagging passion for the barmaid Angie, though he spent much time patronizing her, so to speak, showed no hope of consummation. The former bunny was impregnable. Raj turned out to be an ardent Socialist, though of Brahmin caste, and far more into philosophy than civil engineering. He was also a great admirer of James Dean and practiced the attitudes very effectively in the dark shadows of La Marina. To Lynne's surprise, Norman, indeed a sophomore, and even worse, a Chemistry major, turned out actually to be named Tommy. It seemed Raj simply didn't know his name that first night and made one up on the spot. In the hubbub Tommy didn't object. However, as Raj continued to do, Lynne kept on calling him Norman, which he seemed to accept like a title.

Very soon in the course of her social evenings Lynne found herself actually wanting Ram to make some kind of move. In two weeks of escorting, he just shook her hand upon greeting and on parting gravely said goodnight. Perhaps his intentions really were "honorable," but what about his intense gaze? Once in an amber corner of the Napoleon House, she once asked what he was thinking about when he looked at her, and he said quietly, "We do not talk of those things." Then he added enigmatically, "Here." His tone of voice and the dark gleam of his eyes suddenly made her fear maybe she was playing with fire. She got the impression of an overwhelming, strange passion lurking under his dignified behavior and polite manner.

The night before she was to leave for the holidays with Robbie in Richmond, Ram took her to a party thrown by his Math teacher. On St. Ann Street in a lower slave quarter behind a lovely patio, the apartment was once the kitchen, an ancient open fireplace in the center of the big room. Their host, Dan, an instructor working on a doctorate, was a rather dissolute young man, judging from the amount of gin he drank. He looked almost like Shaw but with glasses.

It was a small group including also Raj and Norman, of course. There was another group of Dan's friends, an attractive Jewish boy named Ken with a pretty blonde girl Lynne knew from school named Rose, and a few others. They sat around the fire, chatting, listening to jazz records, and drinking a rather sweet red wine. Lovely Raj and Norman, dark and light, perched on the high hearth of the fireplace, near the crackling flames, warm in the chilly winter night. Ram and Lynne sat close on the sofa. He even put his arm around her shoulders at one point, very chastely. It was a mellow time, everything so soothing, almost enchantingly so.

From his seat by the fire Raj delivered an almost non-stop stream of deep conversation which made him the automatic focus of the group. Norman sat entranced by those delicate fingers flashing in the firelight, and Lynne watched that dreamlike Krishna beauty, so foreign and mysterious. At times Ram interrupted his friend's social tirades and philosophical treatises

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with wry rebuttals, but Lynne really couldn't follow what they were on about. At the height of the evening Raj consented to sing an Indian song, a long, chant-like succession of unintelligible but lovely words. He accompanied himself with a rhythmic patting on his thigh. Unsure if it was religious or not, when he finished, they hesitantly clapped.

Since her flight to Richmond was early in the morning, Lynne soon had Ram take her home. She really hoped he'd at least try to kiss her goodbye, but he just held her hand for an extra moment and said he hoped her trip would be pleasant. Not a word about anything else, and so she rested easy about returning to Robbie unsullied.

Lynne's nine days away were a delightful, delicious change of pace since she spent them largely lost between the sheets with her sexy Robbie in the snowy Blue Ridge Mountains. He always made her feel so physical, and every detail of his gorgeous body excited her. It proved that the only thing she truly wanted was to marry this man as soon as she could, and they even set the date for June 15. No other man had ever made her feel this way, most certainly not Ramzan with his inscrutable gaze. So when Lynne flew back into warm New Orleans just before New Year's to prepare for exams, she figured it would be easy to wait out the coming spring semester, as faithful a fiancée as Robbie could ever want.

With renewed commitment to Robbie she felt perfectly safe in going out with her exotic new friends to the Quarter again for the New Year's Eve celebration in La Marina, which Shaw assured her would be memorable. He came by with Ram, who greeted her ceremoniously, with no question about her trip, for which she was grateful. Maybe as a result of her recent marathon with Robbie, her body felt very alive next to this strange man.

Indeed the frenzy level in La Marina, like the volume of the music, was super high, everyone intent upon an unparalleled night of debauchery to bid farewell to 1961, the upside-down year, as Norman dubbed it. Lynne's "court" of gentlemen enthroned her on a stool at the middle of the second bar, a safe island in a writhing mass of humanity and jungle of driving rhythms. Ram and Raj took stools on either side to protect her from the pushing crowds. There was definitely no room to dance. Norman was frequently cut off from them by the surging bodies and had to push and struggle back to his place beside Raj.

Suddenly the exquisite Indian lit up a Salem. He was certainly becoming westernized. She asked Ram what he thought about the Hindu's behavior, actually shouting in his ear. Ram laughed, "This is part of the Dean image." He also told her Raj had met a lovely girl named Anne just before Christmas and was desperately in love with her. "He sees her only twice, and she does not know." Raj did look rather tragically gloomy, which was only magnified by his unearthly beauty. Imagine having such a prince in love with you. What if it were he instead of Ram who looked at Lynne with passion in his great soft eyes?

As the midnight moment approached, the crowd seemed to mill faster and grow more frantic with revelry, but in the last minute the vast number of drunken revelers in the three rooms grew still. The juke boxes cut off in the midst of "*corazón*," leaving a dizzying silence. Some barmaid began to count down at thirty seconds in an authoritative voice, and after 'one' the cheer that arose, though not quite as loud as the earlier music, was thunderous in its own way. In that moment Lynne leaned over and kissed Ram's cheek, and he looked down, maybe blushing.

Meanwhile Raj took Norman by the arm and kissed him on the mouth, after which he shouted, "Happy the New Year!" Poor Norman was thunderstruck, standing there with his beer bottle, stunned. And Lynne realized that he was terribly, desperately in love with melancholy Mr. Raj Dean. Happy 1962!

When Ram took her home, she him to kiss her, but he had only pressed her hand. The next week practicing for finals, Lynne heard from Ram a couple times. In passing, he informed her that their friends Raj and Norman were continuing their wild carouse right through exams, out till very late every night in La Marina. She was concerned about their academic careers, but Ram assured her that Raj didn't care—his coming to America to school was just an excuse to get here, and he could go home to India if it came to that. Since his family was very wealthy, he could either do civil engineering or nothing. And as for Norman, Ram said he was so smart he never had to study for his courses anyway.

When she asked how Raj was doing in his great love for Anne, Ram said that the young lady in question still didn't know of their friend's condition. They both laughed gently. She listened for a sign in Ram's voice that he, too, might have a "condition," but nothing of the look in his eyes sounded in his words.

When the ordeal of finals week and recital was finally over, Lynne went out with Ram for a quiet evening in the Seven Seas, a nice time with real drinks, and some folk music amidst the nets and floats. Then they strolled over to La Marina to see the degenerate duo. It was a comfortable walk down Decatur Street, though a chill fog was setting in, making the dark and dilapidated street much softer in the glow of the streetlamps. It was amusing how nonchalantly she now could feel so at ease where she once thought was so dangerous and disgusting. The mists hovered over Jackson Square hiding the statue and cathedral spire.

By the iron gates into the Square, Ram reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a tiny box and handed it to her. In it Lynne found a perfect pearl pendant. She thanked him profusely, and Ram just smiled softly as he fastened it around her neck. "It is for my greatest friend here in America." But 'friend' wasn't what she saw in his eyes. Quiet, they walked the last blocks to their endearing dive.

La Marina didn't disturb her anymore. She'd never seem anything more than a screaming argument between two drunken sailors in all the times she'd been there. No one was ever rude to her, and the music was certainly addictive. They entered through the doors on Toulouse since the crowd was usually less dense at that door, and right inside there was the pretty pair, Raj and Norman, sitting at the corner of the bar, both leaning philosophically on an elbow as they talked beneath the roar of the juke box. Did the world really need two more James Deans?

Just then, at her very elbow a man lurched past and fell at her feet, though not of his own accord. Another dark figure threw himself past her onto the fallen one and roughly dragged him to his feet to hit him again. That was when Lynne screamed. The victim hurtled back through the quickly thinning crowd toward the bar and fell backwards across Norman's lap. The silly kid just sat there, helplessly looking down at the bloody-faced sailor in his lap. Then the attacker was on the guy again with a fist in the stomach while Norman stared. In a moment several men subdued the aggressor, and others carried the beaten sailor away as well, throwing them both outside onto Toulouse Street to continue their fight. When the doors closed on the shouts outside, Lynne made her way to Norman and Raj. Neither of them seemed perturbed. Norman laughed lightly when he saw her and remarked, "The natives are restless tonight."

On another night out, Lynne helped Norman learn the merengue, and they worked on the rudiments of the pachanga, a faster dance with relatively intricate footwork. From a slender young Latin woman named Lucita, Lynne learned the basics of the "*pasa doble*" and passed them on to Norman. But she was still devoted most seriously to the merengue, which was far more sensuous and intimate. Norman soon found an authority and tenderness in the dance and an

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intimate feel for the rhythms. In his brown eyes there was a distracted, almost mesmerized contentment, and more and more he aroused Lynne's maternal affections.

Unfortunately Ram wouldn't dance at all. When she asked if it offended him for her to dance with so many men, he replied, "It is good for women to dance." All the while he kept those intense eyes on her, but never did he offer any sign of affection or desire. It was downright unnatural. After so many nights of such companionship Lynne really began to think he did only consider her a friend. Still, when she danced, she was performing for him, like a harem girl. That was at least half her pleasure in the dance.

For all their dancing, Lynne never got much chance to talk with Norman in La Marina. When at his cash register in the University Center, he was usually very chatty about the day or the arrangements for the night's debauchery, but she really didn't know much about him personally. So on the last day of registration for spring term, when she was crossing campus with her bag and saw Norman sitting on the steps of the Chemistry Building, she took the opportunity to sit with him a while. Quickly it came out that he was feeling existentially bored—at which she chuckled since it was so like something Raj would say.

"During Christmas vacation," he explained, "I was in the lab analyzing rocket fuel and on the 121<sup>st</sup> analysis of the same substance—taking down millions of numbers from the fucking spectrograph—I went to sleep and fell backwards off the stool. I just lay there on the floor looking at the fluorescent lights."

Obviously it was career crisis time for the kid, and when Lynne probed a tad, it turned out to be a conflict between the artist and the scientist. Always practical, she told Norman just to choose what he likes best for a major, and he replied emphatically that he'd do just that. Then she suggested they take a walk in Audubon Park in the warm afternoon. Though it was winter, the sun was strong, and the walk was pleasant under the live oaks along the bayou. They strolled past a white gazebo across a lovely piece of lawn in the sun.

There were no people or cars on the roadway, but several ducks waddled up to investigate them, necks outstretched, quacking curiously. Norman laid his tousled blond head in Lynne's lap partly under an edge of her cape, a perfectly beautiful boy, and that motherly feeling made her nipples ache. Their conversation started slowly but soon got around to the stories of their lives. Then when she mentioned Raj, such a look of pain came into Norman's eyes, all she could do was hug his head to her breast and sigh, "Loving a man can only cause you pain."

Very softly Norman said, "So far that's true." Silent for a while looking out across the golf-course at the dark oaks, he then added, "But when I meet the right boy..." She stroked his cheek and mused about the androgynous beauty of that Hindu. She couldn't imagine actually possessing him, making love with someone so totally exotic. On the other hand, she could imagine very well possessing the other one, Ram the distant one... Suddenly Norman mumbled, "I was okay until Raj kissed me..." A sparkling tear welled up in the corner of his eye and puddled there. Lynne wiped the tear away with the corner of her scarf and told him to be strong.

Meanwhile, in the back of her mind she realized that she had just let a big cat out of the bag by thinking about Ram in bed. She did desire him, if only to satisfy her curiosity. After all, if she was going to spend the rest of her life with wonderful Robbie, she ought to know something about other men—to get it out of her system. Aware that it was a dangerous line of thought, she still couldn't stop herself from wondering.

So a couple evenings later when Lynne went out to dinner with Ram at a place on Lake Pontchartrain perched on a little pier, she tried to get her courage up. She had shrimp, and he a large baked fish of which he ate only half. Just before dessert she took his hand across the rough

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wood of the table. Ram looked at her with an inscrutable expression but didn't take his hand away. Really wondering how it sounded, she whispered that she was attracted to him.

Ram looked at her with grave concern. "But what of your fiancé?" he asked solemnly.

Embarrassed, she released his hand. His scruples were so close to the surface. "Robbie would never know," Lynne said, modestly looking away to where the fat waiter was taking an order from the next table. Ram said nothing, so she knew this was getting her nowhere. Now it was his turn to raise the question, and when he did, it would be on her terms.

After another week of mooning around about Anne, Raj finally approached her to go to a play at the university theater on a double date with Ram and Lynne. A Newcomb junior, French major, Anne was a full-figured blonde lass (Irish extraction) who seemed to enjoy Raj's suddenly stumbling conversation. As they sat in their seats before the show, it was touching the way his loquacity dwindled to rather inane questions. Anne smiled at the beautiful, bashful Indian in a way Lynne recognized as dubious, but curious. Maybe Raj really was in love.

Since they planned afterwards to go dancing at La Marina, Lynne assured Anne that it was a perfectly safe ethnic place and that she would love the music. But they were scarcely two minutes in the thundering Latin halls when Anne pointedly asked Raj to take her home—the loud music gave her a headache. But Lynne wasn't fooled. When Anne had seen a whore tantalizing a grubby little sailor on a nearby stool, she was terrified and disgusted.

Left alone in the second bar, Ram and Lynne simply shared the time. Ever since she'd broached the subject of her attraction, Ram hadn't remarked further. If he was going to make any proposals, she certainly couldn't imagine when. She leaned over against him and in the silence between two songs whispered, "Do you ever think about making love to me?"

Again Ram didn't answer immediately. It was obvious that he was blushing and trying to hide it. Eventually, though, he answered, "Frequently."

"Then why don't you do something about it?" Lynne asked brazenly.

"I would not insult you," Ram answered. "If you were not betrothed, no, engaged..."

The next record began with an explosion of drums and piano, so Lynne couldn't possibly respond. It was just as well since she didn't know what to say anyway. She was not about to beg—and she certainly wouldn't think of breaking her engagement with Robbie just to sleep with this weird, moralistic Moslem. As a matter of fact, it made her quite angry. With the next silence between records, Lynne said, "We shouldn't see each other anymore."

"You are right," Ram agreed. "I will take you home."

This response was so surprising that she followed him out of the bar, doubly enraged, and the whole way back to the apartment in the taxi she barely spoke for fury. At her door Ram took her hand and very quickly kissed it.

"It is very good to have known you, Lynne," he said quietly. "I hope you will be happy." With that he turned and walked off into the darkness.

At least Lynne had the presence of mind to call out "Goodbye" after Ram's disappearing figure. Then she leaned against the doorframe, amazed at how quickly it had all ended. Her awful rage dissipated, and she was left with a great sadness. Something of the emptiness one felt, she supposed, when you lost a roll of the dice. She stumbled upstairs to the apartment, and by the time she went inside, she knew she had narrowly escaped a very dangerous situation. What if she had really fallen for Ram? What then for Robbie? And that was the wisdom of Ram's concern, which comforting thought allowed her to cry herself quietly to sleep.

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## 2.2 - THE PRIMEVAL DEITY

(Epistle 3/1/62)

Dear Sally,

Complete and total wreckage after a perfectly mad and mind-boggling Mardi Gras! Indeed, it is Ash Wednesday afternoon, and I can barely hold my pen steady (out here in the park under a patriarchal spreading live oak by the zoo). What magnificent revelry! Well, at least by my inexperienced standards. So much to tell you about that I'm not sure where to begin.

Let's back way up. As I've described in so many of my past letters, Raj and I got a really good head start on the ritual dissipation, hardened by a couple months of late nights in our beloved and indescribably degenerate La Marina, building up our depravity muscles. Lord, Sally, I've been with Raj constantly for more than sixty days now, or should I say, nights, every one of them unfortunately chaste. (The hours don't conflict with my classes, of course, and besides, now that I've changed my major to Russian, I'm feeling quite liberated.) With my beloved Raj I've gone places in my mind I never knew existed, and I'm closer to him than anyone in the world. Of course, we still haven't spoken a word of my love, and I try to listen with a sympathetic ear to his lamentations about cruel Anne. Good riddance to bad rubbish, if I do say so myself, and I do.

I know Raj knows I love him, and I guess that's enough. Raj knows I know he loves me, and that is happiness for me beyond all measure. Gazing into his bottomless dark eyes, my spirit links with his and learns the mysteries and truths of his strange oriental mind. He is my beautiful bodhisattva, my mystical master, my glorious guru teaching me the joy of denying desire, of transcending physical passion to attain a plane of pure consciousness in which our spirits unite in an eternal flame of oneness. I certainly can feel that when we're together, but in those few hours when I'm trying to sleep in my narrow, empty dorm bed, it's his divine lips and gleaming waves of raven hair that comfort, or rather, torment me. One night Raj said that my spirit is a like a tiger stalking through the jungle. Sleeping alone, that's exactly how I feel, capable of devouring Raj completely, down to his very last long eyelash.

Enough of my love's longing and on to Carneval! Vive Mardi Gras! And all that. Our friend Ramzan avoided the festivities, explaining that it's a Christian religious holiday. But not my hedonistic little Hindoo, who has no qualms about celebrating whatever, and he got tremendously excited about the parades. We escorted Lynne, our red-haired harpsichordist, to the morning parades, Zulu and Rex and all on Canal Street and then caught the others in the afternoon on Royal—with lunch in between from a hotdog vendor with a cart on the corner of Royal and St. Louis, pit stops in bars for beer, and the often urgent call of the wild john. And every single minute being engulfed, swept along in a swarming mass of humanity. Spectacular! Naturally we took a rest break crammed into the very dark Third Circle of my precious La Marina, merengue-ing smack dab in the middle of a warm sunny afternoon.

But I forgot to say—Lynne "masqued" in a gauzy dress with long sheer pastel scarves and was gorgeous with her flaming hair. She put me in some of those baggy Russian Cossack pants and a brightly embroidered blousy white shirt, boots, cap, the whole shebang. It was borrowed from her roommate's folk dance group. Lynne said with my blond hair (which I've let grow a lot longer), I looked a perfect Sergey Yesenin, the famous Russian peasant poet who married Isadora Duncan, the famous dancer, and that was who she was supposed to be! Raj insisted on wearing a white turtleneck with dark coat which made him look, at least to my impartial eyes, like the Lord Krishna masquerading as a high-fashion model for Esquire.

Thus attired, we leapt about and screamed ourselves silly for doubloons and beads from the floats, Raj proving particularly forward about snatching the wonderful necklaces (Czech

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crystal sometimes, I'm told) right out of other people's hands. I made off with two necklaces and a golden Rex doubloon as treasured souvenirs of that time of joy with my Raj. I swear, Sally, at times he seemed to glow blue like one of his strange gods, so blindingly beautiful, but apparently no one else in the jubilant multitudes had eyes. If they did, they'd also have been transfixed.

Exhausted by the parades, we struggled valiantly through the hordes over to Bourbon Street which was even more insanely mobbed, bound for the party of a wealthy business associate of Raj's family, a middle-aged boutique supplier also named Tom (who, I immediately saw, is a deviate like me—from the way he gave me the once-over). Elegant apartment with a balcony looking right out over the Bourbon Street throng, a sea of pushing, shouting, laughing, drinking heads trying to dance. My beloved Raj looked out over the madness and grew silent, even somber. He leaned up against the delicate ironwork post at the corner with a beer. I know enough not to bother him at such times, but unwittingly poor Lynne asked him the matter.

"What do American girls really want?" Raj began, obviously beginning a diatribe. Lynne was nonplussed. Raj whipped his slender hands into animated action, and the tale poured out of him of asking Anne to spend Mardi Gras with him and being told by her to get lost. "She called me degenerate!" he groaned, and the aura of James Dean settled over him again. Meanwhile, I simply stared at the crowds, and drank my beer like a good boy. No need to speak ill of the (thank goodness!) dear departed.

After upending his beer bottle with a vengeance, Raj suddenly spoke again, "I can't ever trust a woman again!" How my heart rejoiced! Lynne laughed merrily, obviously not taking him seriously. "I offered her all she could ever want—and she refused! It is inexplicable, I say!" Lynne didn't attempt an explanation, and it was way beyond me, though enormously appreciated, how that silly cow could have possibly refused such a divine annunciation. Now behold! My lord was with me!

After another glowering, dark moment, Raj loudly remarked, as though to the entire block of revelers below, "I shall go to Chicago—and find a job!" Thunderstruck is an understatement. When I could almost breathe again, I quietly asked when. "Oh, in fifteen days or so," he answered and drooped an unlit Salem from his heavenly lip for me to light. Lynne objected that he doesn't have a green card to get a job, and he gave me a look of determined desperation. "My cousin there will arrange things for me." Each word drove into my heart like a nail, and I turned away to cry over the railing, my bitter tears dropping onto carousing heads and hats below like crystal beads from a broken necklace.

Our host Tom suddenly appeared in the French door announcing that it was time to put some spice into the party. To the bunch of us folks on the balcony he passed out packs of five-dollar bills with instructions to toss them to the crowd. If Tom wasn't awfully rich, then he was rather mad, I'd say. Raj immediately waved a bill over the crowd, evoking a few shouts from those who saw. More looked up and waved. When he dropped the fiver, it floated gently down to frantic fingers of masques shrieking and pushing each other, approaching frenzy.

Waving my pack of money, I shouted (very loudly like I learned in Hog-calling 101), "Lots more! Lots more!" Very quickly to keep the crowd satisfied, the dozen or so of us on the balcony started flinging money fast and faster, each bill causing eruptions of scrambling and riotous shouting in the storm-tossed sea of heads and hands. To spread the benefits, I made airplanes and sailed them far up and down the street, one creating havoc almost all the way to the corner of St. Louis. Fantastic how for all of us throwing the money away became a compulsion, and then when the packs were all gone, there was a just a twinge of surprise at how much money had flown through our fingers. Mardi Gras madness!

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When we'd used up rich Tom's party, I dragged my friends back to La Marina, but the place was even more densely packed than before. Impossible even to squeeze in the door. So instead, we went next door to Fong and actually managed to find a place to have some fried rice for dinner, all in dire need of solid food to stoke up for the evening. Namely, the amazing Comus parade—this Comus is a sorcerer, son of Circe of Odyssey repute—which we awaited at Royal and St. Peter, inside curve for maximum density of throws.

Sally, what a spectacle it was, those black guys dancing along by the floats with the torches, the flambeaus. The stunningly magnificent floats with costumed characters glittered in the firelight. The screaming, laughing, music. I stuck to Raj like glue in the crushing herd and managed to hang on to Lynne's hand. I helped Raj snag two silver doubloons. When the last float rolled by, I was totally exhausted and almost out of my mind with grief. Well aware that I shouldn't, indeed mustn't, I took advantage of the jostle in the crowd to put my arm around Raj and whisper, "I wish you wouldn't go." He just looked at me, eyes full of sheer misery.

As the crowd flowed and thinned, we made our way back to La Marina and were even able to get inside, though with considerable difficulty. By some miracle, in the Second Room we managed to commandeer two stools along the wall. Lynne and I stood on them and danced, carefully but quite ecstatically for many songs above the milling flood of people, while Raj leaned against the wall beneath and between us, frowning at the crowd over his beer. Soon Lynne was exhausted and asked us to see her to a taxi. When we caught one on the street and she was getting in, Raj suddenly decided he'd go home too and see how Ramzan was doing all alone.

Though I was crushed, what could I say? Even miserably depressed over Raj leaving for Chicago, or maybe because of that, I wasn't done with Mardi Gras by a long shot. So I bee-lined it back to La Marina and fortunately found that nice Mexican lady Lucita in the crazy Third Room. She was in a great Cuban dancer costume, and we danced a couple wild numbers on the floor, barely even able to move for all the people, and then graduated to the up-on-the-stool trick, which some other folks around the room took up as well. Then we left our stools for Lucita to take me to meet someone. She pointed out a striking dark guy in a fancy Mexican cowboy costume, the glittery designs and tassels, boots, colorful big sombrero, sitting right up on top the juke box. Let me tell you, Sally, my dear, he was enough to take your breath away!

Squeezing me in beside the juke box, Lucita shouted that he was her cousin from El Paso. *Se llama Lalo.* When he reached down to shake my hand, his face in the lurid jukebox glow made me gasp. Heart-stopping beauty with a high arched nose I think they call Mayan, almost slanted black, black eyes, and outrageously curved lips. And all of this wrapped up in the fancy cowboy duds, tight pants tantalizingly at eye level. Lalo invited me up on the juke box beside him, and I didn't hesitate to scramble up.

First thing he said was, "I see you dance there very sexy," and smiled at me in a way that made my mind reel. "You—me dance here," Lalo suggested, indicating that we should stand up on the juke box. I hesitated, aware that guys can't dance together except at private parties, not even in the gay bars. Stupid law. "Is Carnevale!" Lalo urged, and so for the first time ever, I danced with a guy in La Marina! Up on top of the juke box, we were even higher than the folks dancing on stools—like on stage on the Third Level of the Third Circle, dancing in the rarified air of the frenzied murals. In front of the stabbed nude, Lalo and I, Caballero and Cossack, danced up real close in a merengue which wound up in a kiss. There was applause and laughter from the surging crowd of celebrating mortals in the dark down below.

While we danced madly to a pachanga, occasionally jarring the juke box so the record skipped, I got lost in the beat of La Marina's enormous heart and Lalo's exotic beauty. He seemed

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somehow a dreamlike manifestation of Raj, another bodhisattva, a marvelous Mardi Gras visitation, a breathtaking angel bringing me the love Raj won't give me. Sally, there was no question in my mind that Lalo and I would make love that night, and we very soon departed, I in a perfect fog of bliss, Lalo exuberant in his broken English. Intimately arm in arm, the Cossack and Caballero scandalized many revelers on the streets. We walked up Iberville, stopping in the dark at Chartres for mad kisses. Lucita's place was a shotgun house (five rooms in a row with a straight shot in the front door and out the back). Lalo led me through the dark to the middle room where a pallet was laid out on the floor below the window.

Frantically stripping out of costumes, we leapt on each other, arms and legs thrashing. My searching fingers suddenly felt something truly amazing—and I'm not referring to sweet Lalo's insistent middle leg—but to his hips and thighs, the whole lower half of his body—it was covered with a thick, soft fur like an animal. Like a satyr! In the divine embrace of the god Pan himself! For my first time, I offered no objection when he turned me over, face into the pillow. The instructions David gave me long ago turned out good as gold. My whole reality became the glory of Lalo, this incredibly gorgeous, furry satyr, screwing me. The ultimate madness of Mardi Gras—ravished by the primeval deity! Then Lalo gave me a blow job the likes of which you, I'm sorry to say, Sally, as a girl, could never even remotely begin to imagine!

Waking in the late morning with a thin line of sun down the mattress, just as ravenously as in the night, my horny Pan-Lalo did it again. Then he leapt up, my mythical dark-furred satyr, and announced, "I go soon, now, bus home." That was certainly a surprise to me, but clearly a cue. Twice sodomized, I could barely stand up, much less walk. God! It was magnificent!

At the bus station for his noon departure, Lalo was dressed like a plain cowboy with jeans and boots, and a regular cowboy hat, so it was still a good pair with my bedraggled Cossack. After I saw him off on the bus, (Farewell, my delicious rutting billy-goat god!), I caught the Proletariat Chariot back to school. Not many other newly deflowered Cossack youths riding the trolley today. A quick shower and change into my regular clothes, and I came here to the park to write to you, Sally. So we have now come full circle to me sitting here on my newly deflowered bottom under the live oak on Ash Wednesday afternoon. *Après Mardi Gras, the ruin!* In one insane day my heart was broken in two and my cherry got busted! I don't know whether to cry about the former or crow about the latter. The one to be with me forever, and the other gone forever. Aaargh! Hallelujah!

Always, Tommy

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### 2.3 - THE ABANDONED ONE

The darkness in La Casa de los Marinos was imbued with the sweetish smell of hops, a periodic benefit of being across Decatur Street from the Jax Brewery, which somewhat masked the more sour smell of the old beer spilt on the worn, filthy floor. In a roaring whirlwind of Latin music, Tommy Youngblood sat cross-legged on a stool along the wall in the Third Circle. The clock over the bar stuck at ten of three was now a bit crooked. Surrounded by the swirl of the painted matador's cape, he looked at his lukewarm can of Dixie and eyed the passing crowd, each person on a search of his or her own. Finals over, all Tommy's usual cohorts had now left for their homes, and he was still here. He didn't do too badly for all the carousing in the Quarter, an A-minus average this term. Because of a C-plus in Physics, but Tommy was just glad to be done with it. He didn't really believe in electricity anyway. It was simply magic.

He couldn't face riding that old Freret Jet, those glaring lights, back the dorm. At least shithead roommate Roger was gone now too. He wanted so terribly much to make love with a guy. All these months with Raj gone away to Chicago, his love was only frustrated longing and desperation. With a sigh he leaned back against the wall and gazed up into the dimness where the fans were actually working, blades circling like lazy sharks in the shadows. Two months now, Raj had been gone, and Tommy wandered the Vieux Carré's lace-balconied streets as though lost, his silent shadow and footsteps gliding along the walls between street lamps. Or he sat in the jostling La Marina crowds, his mind a thousand miles away with his beloved Brahmin.

Tonight Tommy had a lot of fun dancing with Rose, that blonde girl he met at a party way back when with Raj. Her face was right straight out of a Botticelli painting, honey-blond hair carelessly pulled back, an incredibly earthy voluptuousness. Rose was a former debutante from Cincinnati who smoked Camels and certainly knew how to dance. Unfortunately she had to leave early—flying home tomorrow, and Tommy was all alone with images of those deep Indian eyes and the flashing of those delicate fingers. All those months with Raj, never once to have felt a caress, much less another kiss. He was desolate. The abandoned one was lost in pain of missing and wishing. His beer tasted flat, but he finished it anyway. Raj was gone.

Tommy slipped from his stool and lurched into the stream of people. Going home was actually no worse than sitting here. In the low doorway into the Second Circle where the blaring music changed, he ran right smack into that handsome German instructor from school, blonder even than he. Tommy's German class hadn't been with the guy, but he sure had noticed him occasionally in the Snack Bar. "Hi," Tommy nodded in passing.

"Hi to you, *mein Freund!*" the very German man answered, smiling broadly, pretty drunk, but handling it. "Let me buy you a drink!"

Out of the blue. This opportunity almost knocked Tommy over. Of course, he had no idea if the guy was a deviate too, but who was averse to company? Even if it led to zilch in the sack. He leaned on the bar, and Angie brought them ice-cold Dixies. The man's name was Wulf, quite friendly, and he wanted to know all about Tommy. He got the spiel about chemist turned Russian major, but there was no way to tell him the important things, like how Raj was gone. Wulf definitely was too well-oiled to be interested anyway, his fine mouth almost slack, a looker, so old, maybe in his mid-twenties. Sipping at his soothing beer, Tommy for no special reason remarked, "I was about to go home, but I couldn't bear the thought of the bus."

Wulf laughed and drained his beer in one chug. "I will pay our taxi." Suddenly they were out on quiet Toulouse, and he had magically hailed them a cab, giving an address on Napoleon Avenue. Tommy thought of saying something about his dorm, but sensing an off-chance of romance, he kept mum and enjoyed the rare comfort of riding in a car. Beside him in the dark

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back seat, Wulf looked out at the big trees and houses on St. Charles Avenue, and at the same time his hand moved gently onto Tommy's—which just so happened to be lying right there by Wulf's leg on the seat cushion. No way to say or do anything with the driver up front, so he tickled Wulf's palm. Out of the cab into the deep shadows of a live oak, they climbed up the rear steps of a big house to a very Japanese apartment. Once inside, the man kissed the boy, and in a matter of moments they were on a pallet on the reed-matted floor, romping and frisking like *sehr schmutzige Knaben*. Wulf was ultimately not very adventurous in his repertoire, but Tommy was nevertheless fairly satisfied with the enthusiastic blow job.

In the Snack Bar at lunchtime the next day, quiet between school terms, Tommy sat proudly behind his cash register, a large whisker burn on his chin for those who could recognize a wound of love. Heck of a beard on such a fair-haired guy. Only one who said anything was the Estonian kid, that incredibly tall but homely basketball player, so tall that even for Tommy who sat on the high stool in his private island of steel, the guy's belt buckle was at eye level. He said, "You fight?" Tommy assured him he was a pacifist, always ready for a little piece, but the pun apparently didn't translate well into Estonian.

In the terribly slow afternoon, he relived the delicious memory of the morning lying there on a lovely man's naked chest. Later, on a break from work, Tommy screwed up his courage and called Wulf from the phone booth outside the dorm, so no one could hear. It rang. Apprehension. Sure, they sucked each other off, not the most inspired sex, even Tommy had to admit, but the touching was great, and Tommy wanted to get Wulf into bed again for serious business. It rang some more. Sure, in the morning he'd insisted Tommy call him in the afternoon. Not as though he was being brazen. Wulf answered. Short friendly hi's. Tommy's tentative, "Can I come over and see you?" Wulf's off-handed, "Sure, Thomas, come on over." Not much else needed said.

Through the bright patches of sun and deep pools of shade, Tommy biked soundlessly, swiftly along Napoleon, an elegant avenue of last century's grandeur. Tactile zipping of bike wheels on pavement. Darting from shadow to shadow beneath huge trees. Behind that high June hedge it seemed like someone should be playing a flute. Long, twining branches glided by overhead. Amazing how first thing in the morning when he woke beside Wulf, Tommy knew immediately he didn't feel anything like love for the man. The fragrance of sleep as Wulf lay there with eyes closed, lashes curved, stubble on his chin and jaw shining in a shaft of morning sun from the tiny window. Tenderness, yes. Desire, yes. But not a hint of passion like for Raj or for his lovely Pete. He veered to swing around a parked car, knowing without question why he was going back to Wulf's bed—because Raj was gone!

Up the street he spied the mustard-colored house with white sills. On the back stairs again, the wooden steps weathered to a green hue with traces of white like the railing. Was this how an affair would be? Letting all the pieces of Wulf's world into his own? Water-peeled varnish on the door and its clouded window. Tommy's knock was light, but Wulf heard and opened. In a soft blue kimono, flashing a broad smile, he ushered the eager but uncertain boy back into his oriental lair. Such ease, such abandon Tommy felt with golden Wulf now, the first time he had ever been with someone for a second time. His adventurous fingers explored Wulf's round buttocks, but the man quickly made him stop that kind of stuff. Eventually, after a frenzy of sucking, they lay with heads on thighs.

That was when Wulf said in two days he'd be leaving for six weeks in Japan. He wanted Tommy to wait for him, but Tommy just said, "We'll see." He was actually incredibly relieved that this guy, handsome and sexy and all that, would be gone in just two days. Tommy would be free to continue his search for love. There had to be a guy to love! Third time's the charm, they

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always said. In the next two nights Wulf's hungry blow jobs were a fine way to mask the pain of Tommy's longing for Raj. He quickly came to appreciate the vast difference between making love and having sex. While he fucked Wulf in the face, Tommy searched inside for any love for the man, but all he found was a friendly affection.

On Sunday afternoon Wulf left, holding Tommy's hand for a moment as he got into the cab for the airport. Liberated, Tommy happily biked along back to school. He zipped by all the windows now no longer new, the same square after square of pavement like before. Six weeks, and how could he predict what would happen? In six weeks, all these trees and driveways would be forgotten. Avoiding a familiar pothole, Tommy was truly happy it was all over, like a vase of splendid flowers one threw away when they wilted. On sunny St. Charles Avenue there was a dry fragrance of acorns--summer. What was Chicago like in June?

Now that his time was his own again, by eleven o'clock in the evening Tommy naturally found himself in the dark embrace of La Marina once again. The rhythms drove his body through hours of furious dances with various women of the night. His celebratory carouse lasted till two-thirty, and feeling fairly lighthearted in spite of his romantic woes, he ambled up to Royal Street, heading for the three o'clock Chariot. As he approached St. Louis, suddenly a dark car flashed by, seriously speeding down this narrow Quarter street.

As Tommy watched, the black car slammed with a resounding crash broadside into a green car crossing on St. Louis—and knocked it right up against the building at the corner. The car came to rest on its rear end, propped up against the second-floor balcony. In this instant, the black car screeched around the corner and was gone. Tommy hadn't any thought of license numbers. The green car's driver, apparently unhurt, tried to open the door upwards, but he couldn't manage and hollered for help. Before Tommy could get there, a tall guy from across the street helped lift the door. The driver, a plump and balding man, was totally enraged, stamping and cursing incoherently. Tommy and the tall guy (sort of Gregory Peck-ish) assured the driver they'd hang around as witnesses when the police came, but it did no good. The guy only looked at his car surreally leaning against the wrought-iron balcony and uttered more obscenities.

Fortunately the cops came streaking up in a moment, flashing their lights painfully, and the driver finally got control of himself. After they took his report, the two mean-looking cops got the story from the tall guy, who turned out to be named Sam Gentry. Then, much as he disliked doings with the police, Tommy quickly gave all the required information and described the accident again from his perspective. Then he asked to go home now. When he headed down Royal, to his surprise, he found tall Sam in the next shop's dark entryway, apparently waiting. "Can I come home with you?" Sam asked, eyes sparkling.

Well, the dorms were just about empty, so there was no problem about Tommy bringing Sam—yet another older man!—along with him on the clattering streetcar and then up to his sixth-floor room. As a matter of fact, Tommy found it particularly appropriate since in only a couple days he'd be moving out into an apartment. After two years, it was high time he turned a trick in his own dorm room! To the joyous strains of Mahler's Fourth, Sam expertly took care of his young host's rather obvious needs and then turned him over. Once again the magnificent sensation of a man inside him, Tommy floated on the edge of ecstatic dreaming. As Sam thrust and thrust, the impaled boy fell peacefully and soundly asleep.

Vaguely Tommy was aware of early morning light, of Sam kissing his nose and saying goodbye, and he went back to sleep for several more hours. Waking again around noon, he was astounded to find he didn't have the strength even to lift an arm. His body lay there like a lump. He couldn't even muster the volume to yell for somebody—but no one was around in this empty

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dorm anyway. Too exhausted to panic, he ever so slowly edged his legs off the bed, but couldn't sit up. Again ever so slowly, he rolled and managed to slide to his knees beside the bed. With supreme effort of will—no thought of anything but what he must do in this moment—Tommy dragged his body by inches along the bed toward the chair and his green corduroy pants which, writhing in slow motion on the floor, he managed pull on. It took whole minutes to muster the energy to snap and zip. Forget shirt. Shoes out of question. In the oozing process of getting the door open, he collapsed for a brief nap lying halfway into the long hall.

Nearly an hour to crawl, or better slither, in stages down the hall to the elevator, another nap before crawling off on the first floor, and another hour's geological progress on hands and knees down the walk to deserted McAlister Drive. Prop up against a tree trunk for a nap. Wake up again, still no one anywhere in sight. A bit stronger, he could even manage to stand and walk, one slow-motion, lead-footed step at a time, across the street. Decisions! Either struggle up the walk and steps into the UC for help—or strike out diagonally across the open quadrangle to the Infirmary on the other corner. Heartened by the success with the street, Tommy took heavy steps into the sunny Quad like an advancing glacier. After a hundred feet of struggle, or a half-hour, whichever was more, he had to sit and then lie back on the grass—as though sunbathing—to catch forty winks. In the next wakeful interlude, like a cartoon character crawling in a desert, a spurt covering a hundred yards for another well-deserved snooze.

A voice called Tommy back to the smell of summery grass and the bright sunshine. He opened his eyes to the smiling, concerned face of that kid Ben he knew from Chemistry the past two years, the other whiz kid who used to work with him in the lab on that rocket fuel. Ben was asking if he was all right, and Tommy could just whisper loud enough to explain about this weird weakness. Helping him up, Ben got him into a fireman's carry, meanwhile scolding, "This is what all your debauchery gets you!" Ben had often disapproved of Tommy's carousing. "You probably got cirrhosis of the liver—or delirium tremens—or mononucleosis!"

As Ben lowered the invalid onto the steps of the Infirmary so he could go inside for help, Tommy kissed his cheek and mumbled that he was a sweet guy. Instant oblivion. He awakened in a bed in a bright room, feeling like a million dollars. He found it was forty-eight hours later, Wednesday morning. The nurses said they woke him three times to eat and drink, even took him to the john several times, but he had no recollection of any of it. The doctor, a young but already balding guy, couldn't identify the malady, but it seemed to be gone. Once again dressed in only his green pants, Tommy was signing out at the nurses' desk, and who showed up to check on him but Ben. He'd come to help his friend home to the dorm. On the way across the Quad, it dawned on Tommy that today was when he was supposed to move to his new apartment with Joel.

Just before meeting Wulf, Tommy had arranged to share an apartment with a guy he'd met this spring sunbathing on the dorm roof. A really handsome Jewish boy, Joel had very sensuous lips and a scrumptious body which suggested to Tommy some very lewd possibilities. In a sanitized version, he explained the situation to Ben and was quite grateful when the sweet fellow volunteered to help him move his stuff. He was at loose ends between terms and all that. Tommy had never paid very much attention to Ben before during their classes and working in the lab. Maybe you could call him cute, but mostly plain.

While they bundled his few clothes and things (including his one prize possession, a big antique leather-bound volume of "Don Quixote") into a box, a pillowslip, and a laundry bag, Tommy felt physically and mentally perfectly normal, if rather mystified by the mysterious collapse. A tsetse-fly? And for two days and nights to disappear! He watched Ben helping—something about the guy said he just might be gay. After calling a cab to take his stuff to the

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apartment, Tommy rested a moment with Ben on the stripped striped mattress, thinking how he was probably a virgin, and debating maybe putting the moves on him, like a hand on his leg, but decided no. No strength. They loaded the stuff on the elevator, and on the way down Tommy couldn't stand it anymore. He said, "You know, Bennie, I ought to tell you I'm gay."

"I thought maybe so," Ben replied unconcernedly, heaving the bags up on his shoulders.

Heading down the walk, Tommy asked, "Does that bother you, guy? I mean... We've spent a lot of time together..."

"No sweat, Tom-Tom," Ben laughed. "You're a great guy, no matter where you like to stick your dick!" In the midst of his laughter, Tommy felt a warm wave of love for this open-minded guy and chastised himself for earlier thoughts of nasty antics involving Ben's private parts. Resting the bags on the curb at McAlister, this same sweet Ben added, "Early on, I thought I was maybe in love with you..."

Tommy choked. "You were?" How could he have been so blind?

Ben smiled at him, beaming. "But I realized it was just lust, you know, sexual desire—you're such a sexy guy, great body, and all... And at first I mistook lust for love."

"What's wrong with lust?"

Ben patted Tommy on the shoulder. "I do like you, but what I'm looking for is love, the kind of thing that sweeps you away like a wave, the divine madness..."

"Yeah," Tommy agreed sadly, "I've had that happen..." They watched the cab pull up by them, and he added, "Then when the wave has passed..."

The new apartment was on Audubon Street, a block west of the park in the basement of a large stucco Spanish-style house. You entered at a little blue glass-paned door on the front corner under huge crepe myrtle and legustrum bush-trees. Inside, a low-ceilinged room, small window on the left, thin post out in the center, long open closet on the right, sparse furniture, a bed frame, two mattresses, an old table with a couple wooden chairs, a huge dresser with mirror. Tommy already had ideas for the place, but the kitchen was rudimentary beyond belief, and it was unfortunate that one had to cross the cellar to get to the grungy bathroom. Ben was impressed that they were getting it for only forty bucks a month, a real pad off campus.

A noise out front and Joel, a tall, athletic, handsome youth, arrived with his own boxes and bags, also excited about the big move out of the dorm. He met Ben with a handshake and was quick to arrange for the back corner for his bed, leaving Tommy the wall beneath the window. Perfectly agreeable. Next thing Joel did was pull out a long piece of fabric, actually a narrow tapestry which, he explained, was from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, strange gods weighing a soul against a feather. Up it went along the top of the open closet. Stripping off his shirt, Joel then went to the refrigerator which he had already stocked with a six-pack of Dixie. Tommy readily accepted the beer Joel offered, but Ben had to get on back to the dorm.

The bigger mattress on the springs for Joel left the little narrow one for Tommy. He dug around in the landlord's back basement full of ancient "junk" furniture, as Joel called it, though it was really interesting big stuff, horsehair sofas and such. With the top of a dining table and a couple carved white marble capitals, he made a neat platform for his little mattress with room for a shelf of books and lamp along the wall. Meanwhile, on the wall over his bed Joel hung a plaster frieze of a gamboling satyr, explaining that it was because he suffered from satyriasis. "I need it bad—and often!" Joel laughed. Tommy's imagination soared. Suddenly a wonderful memory of his own satyr Lalo tingled in his britches and with a start he remembered for the first time Sam! Sam, the accident man. He'd forgotten those last blissful moments before...

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BY RICHARD BALTHAZAR

Amazed again at the strange lapse of the Big Sleep, he rummaged some more in the back of the basement and found a tall stand completely covered in a thick layer of dust. Apparently ebony, it was an elongated elephant's head standing on its long trunk, two ivory tusks and a brass filigreed harness with enameled jewels. Washed down in the hideous bathroom, it was about the most insanely beautiful thing Tommy had ever seen. When he came through the kitchen with the stand, Joel, who was piddling with paint and something at the table, was only mildly taken by the find. Tommy placed the elephantine extravagance quite prominently in front of the main room's central post and couldn't think of anything worthy to put on its flat top. "It needs a fancy vase" Joel called from whatever it was he was doing, "full of peacock feathers!" How vulgar. Better something of elegance like a huge crystal ball. Joel had been up to making a sign. Explaining that it was from a song he'd been hearing, he tacked it up outside over the front door, in red and orange letters reading simply, "The Rising Sun."

After dinner and a few hours cashiering in the Snack Bar to make up for his sick time off, Tommy admittedly felt tired again, having been awake for less than twelve hours. For tonight feeling it best not even to think about La Marina, by mid-evening he got ready for his first night in the narrow bed on the fancy platform. Also ready to turn in, Joel undressed as Tommy lay watching. Joel stepped out of his jeans—no underwear!—his bare butt so white against his tan. Turning. Long, long, dark thing... Tommy was barely able to breathe. Joel turned off the light and got into his own bed. Dark and just a few feet away, this delicious naked boy. The words he wanted to shout rang in Tommy's brain, "Let's fuck!" But what came out was just, "Sleep tight." "You too," Joel replied dreamily. Sounds of him snuggling in. Tommy's new roommate was deplorably and disgustingly straight, but a heck of a lot more fun to look at than Roger. Tommy also took some small comfort in remembering Ben's remark about lust and love.

The next evening, Thursday, straight from work, Tommy headed for La Marina with a vengeance. It was his ceremonial return after the past several nights away, even though some of them were spent comatose. He sat under the Falstaff sign at the end of the First Room, bubbles of colored lights constantly rippling up the letters, easing himself back into the frenzy and furious Latin thunder. After a lively cumbia with Angie the angelic bar mistress, Tommy saw Ben standing there, actually having taken him up on his offer to meet for a beer. Angie quickly provided a frosty cold Dixie for the newcomer to La Marina, and Tommy gave the tour, jostled by the crowds and deafened by the bone-rattling Piano Merengue, through the Second Circle and on to the Third. And the maniacal murals. They found Ben a stool near the jukebox where he could sit with his beer while Tommy enjoyed a sensuous merengue with a small, almost oriental-eyed girl. He had danced with her before but had never learned her name. Tonight after their elegant performance, she came over to meet Ben and became Donna from the Philippines. She quickly took Ben out to teach him to dance, leaving Tommy the stool.

On his left the palpable vibration of base emanating from jukebox, that gaudily lit stage for Lalo at Mardi Gras, the Spanish songs. Everywhere the flowing, pressing crowd. It was time for Tommy to take stock of some facts. Raj was gone—the main fact. And Wulf was gone—for what that mattered. So maybe he should give some thought again to seducing Ben. Maybe he wasn't a virgin, but at least unspoiled, somewhat attractive. It was easier to get excited over someone handsome... But then, he was just thinking about sex, not love...

Donna brought the student dancer back. Her boyfriend, a thin, dark man standing nearby, had arrived, and she had to go. Tommy and Ben bellied up to the bar, and he shouted down to Bettina for two Dixies. Ben watched the reflected crowds in the mirror. Too loud to talk. If he got Ben into bed, Tommy probably could fuck him. In profile Ben had a kissable mouth, and his

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blue eyes were endearing. But Tommy returned to the thing about it just being lust. Ben leaned close to speak loudly in Tommy's ear, "This La Marina sure is a wild place!" Taking advantage of a momentary lull between records, Tommy described the Mardi Gras glory of Mexican cowboy Lalo on top the jukebox and the furry satyr he became in the night. Ben listened, meanwhile peeling the label on his beer off in one perfect piece.

Their intimate chat was interrupted by the surprise arrival of pretty Rose and some of her art-student friends, a very thin girl named Susy, a sculptress, and a round-faced Swedish fellow named Sven, a potter. Rose had only gone home for a few days between terms and had decided to come back to play with him. She'd rightly figured on finding Tommy here in La Marina. They danced a couple great numbers together, and afterwards Susy suggested they all go to this Greek sailor bar she'd discovered way down Decatur toward Canal.

The Gin Mill had a small sign with a tilting cocktail glass over its dark doorway, inside a bar running along the left, booths along the right, and in the back a larger area with a few tables and booths. Weird Greek music roaring on the juke box, rank with smoke and beer, and jammed with dusky, dark-skinned sailors at tables crowded with beer bottles. Some of the sailors were apparently dancing by themselves, strangely, slowly swaying. Ben, who was nervous enough just walking down the Wild Side waterfront street at night, didn't want to stay, and apologizing to them all, ran off to catch the trolley back to the dorm.

Tommy followed the others to the back, where the sailors at one of the tables stood and gallantly allowed Susy and Rose to sit down. Susy and Sven had met this bunch of sailors last night, and there were awkward, incomprehensible introductions, many wide smiles and Greek greetings. Many Greek toasts, lifting up glasses, and polite, almost courtly attentions to Sven and Tommy as well. Soon there was a clear licorice liquor called ouzo, and both the girls were doing some kind of Greek folk dance, each with a laughing sailor on either side, arms round shoulders, feet in unison stepping a joyous kind of jig.

Tommy was fascinated with the show, and he and Sven retreated to the corner of the bar for a good place to watch. Thus Tommy got to meet the utterly obese barmaid Jackie, at least three hundred pounds, her pleasant face almost lost in cheeks and chins. Sven confided that Jackie had a lover on every ship. "Greeks love fat women—and skinny boys," he explained offhandedly. Tommy's attention turned back to the suddenly more intriguing sailors, swarthy and mysterious. Suddenly this was a horse of an entirely different color. He could certainly take good care of the younger one over there in the booth, the one with the curls on his forehead, who even now was giving Tommy the mischievous eye. Sven leaned close again with further advice, "You better like to get fucked." Tommy was sincerely startled. Sven seemed to know what he was thinking. He tried nonchalantly to return to the subject of the interesting folk dance... Sven stopped him with a hand on the arm and, "Even if you don't, I'd like to take you home with me."

Eyes on Rose and her devoted dancing sailors, Tommy quickly mastered his surprise and tried to make the rejection as gentle as possible. Most definitely not while that pretty Greek sailor boy was smiling so suggestively. Sven took it in stride and asked Jackie for another beer. When the dance was over, the good-looking sailor on Susy's left went to the booth, spoke quite sternly to the young one, and they went out the back door together. Sven explained, "His old man's been watching you two cruising, and now he's getting it good." Tommy could well imagine the guy's dad getting upset by that. "No dad," Sven laughed, "his man-friend." Yes, a horse of an extremely different color.

Then Tommy and Sven were dragged into a line-dance along with almost everyone else, holding hands and skip-hopping along in a snaky procession to the strident Greek song. Halfway

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along in the dance, the young sailor and his patron returned and joined the line. The sailor boy wouldn't look straight at Tommy, but watched out of the corner of his pretty dark eye.

After the dance, Sven and Tommy returned to their beers on the bar and encountered a short woman with butterscotch hair, rolls of fat hanging out of her halter and over the waist of her tight green slacks. Her upper front teeth were missing—making her smile startling. Sven introduced her as Alice and gesturing about place, added, "And this is Wonderland."

"Hi there, *agape mou*," Alice greeted Tommy, leaning up close him so her breast rested on his forearm on the bar. "That's Greek for 'my dear,' and they love it when you say '*sa-ga-po*.'" Tommy was taken somewhat aback by the woman's rather direct and utilitarian approach. "Don't you worry about nothing in here, babe. The sailors won't hurt you—unless you let 'em." Jackie supplied a Falstaff for Alice which, in a fit of gallantry, Tommy paid for. "But you better watch out for Miss Kitty over there." Alice motioned to the back corner of the bar. Miss Kitty was a very bouffant creature in a flowered blouse daintily smoking a cigarette. On closer inspection, in spite of the eye makeup, it was clearly a man. Alice giggled at Tommy's amazement. "Kitty don't take kindly to cute young guys in her territory. She's been working the Mill for a good while now." Perhaps feeling Tommy's gaze, Kitty suddenly turned and looked right at him, steely black eyes. Quickly they looked away down the bar to huge Jackie laughing with a customer. "And if anybody gives you trouble, darling," Alice added, "you just holler for me or Jackie." Then she took her bottle off to a booth of sailors not yet graced by female companionship.

"She gave me the same advice last night," Sven laughed, asking with a hand motion if Tommy wanted another beer. Sure. "Of course I'm not much of a threat to Queen Kitty," Sven laughed again and leaned close to confide, "Besides turning tricks with the Greek sailors, Jackie and Alice are lovers." Tommy's lower jaw almost hit the bar. "And Jackie's the bouncer." He obviously relished the effect of his revelations on Tommy, who realized how truly inexperienced he still was at debauchery, so many months of adventure in La Marina notwithstanding.

Catching Rose and Susy after the next dance, Tommy said bye and set off for the two o'clock streetcar. On the walk past the Customs Building, like an enormous Roman temple, and up Canal Street, Tommy contemplated the remarkable newness of all these ethnic types and dances. Nice to find an Indian bar and... He mooned over Raj at the car stop, and then chuckled that tonight he'd passed up two—or maybe three—opportunities for a man. The look that Greek boy gave him ripped your clothes right off. On the trolley rattling down St. Charles, Tommy recalled with a shudder the frightening image of Miss Kitty, those hard eyes. 'She' sat there like a beast of prey, like a vampire—waiting to feed on that beautiful boy. On the blocks down quiet dark Audubon Street to his new apartment, Tommy repeatedly wove fantasies of stripping that sailor boy's pants down and bending him over...

Quietly opening the door of the Rising Sun, Tommy found Joel in the dark entertaining a guest in bed, a shadowy girl he introduced as Natalie. Neither impressed nor scandalized, Tommy shared perfunctory hellos with her, stepped out of his clothes, and lay down on his narrow bed. His second night in the House the Rising Sun—and it really did feel like home. From nearby in the darkness came a gentle moist rhythm that lulled him to sleep.

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## 2.4 - BOYFRIENDS

Back home after my freshman year at Southeastern in Hammond, it was terribly boring. At least at school there had been the restroom in the Library to find some sex, even if that got pretty boring too. Just the same few guys, mostly. Back again in Houma, back with my *très* Cajun family for the summer, there was nothing at all for a college boy, much less a Psychology major, to do for work. I wound up minding the little ones for Maman, two sisters and a brother, like a mammy. That way Maman would be free for the summer to do her charities and social functions. Thank God, Paul, seventeen now and working at the feed store, wasn't around much, because I'd have laid hands on his sexy body, brother or not, *mais oui*—a pretty one with wavy black hair like all us Bonaventures. But pretty soon I thought I'd go crazy and had a talk with Papa. He convinced Maman that her eldest son Charles, better known as 'Butch,' should go off to *la Nouvelle Orleans* and look for a good summer job.

Maman arranged for me to stay with my cousin Amy who had a modeling agency in Metairie. She was grown up, about 25, still unmarried. My first week I mostly helped her around the agency with paperwork. No jobs I'd even consider in the paper. Of course, I'd heard about the places in the Vieux Carré where you can actually meet guys, but I never wanted anyone to know I was queer—except my good friend Archie who was too, and now our girl-friend Leah. He said I should call it 'gay.' Mostly I hung around the tearoom down at the French Market. Since people seemed to think I was so cute, I had pretty good luck.

Then one night, into the john walked Archie, and I felt so humiliated for him to find me there in the public toilet. He just acted as if he'd expected it. He was down from Bunkie for the weekend—said he came to town almost every weekend, and was having coffee and beignets with some of our school buddies next door in the Café du Monde. I went there with him, a beautiful European sort of place with many mirrors, and sat with them, that is, Earl and his girl Shirley, for only a few minutes because they were going off to a party.

Arch took me away in the other direction, through Jackson Square and up St. Peter Street with all the beautiful balconies, heading for a place he knew. I was real nervous about being seen going into this gay bar, especially since it sat right there on the corner of Bourbon Street and St. Peter for all the world to see the sign with the big violin, "Dixie's Bar of Music." He asked if I preferred being seen in a public toilet and pulled me in the door.

The gay bar was a big room with lots of tables and all kinds of men and boys standing around and talking like friends. One of the older men near the door looked at me intently with an appraising glance. We took a table along the front wall and ordered drinks. Arch leaned across to me and said, "This is where gay guys go, you know, Butch." I protested that I wasn't really gay, and he said, "No, you're not. You're just queer." I was confused. "If all you want from a man is sex, you're queer," Archie explained, "but if you want love, you're gay."

"Yeah," I admitted. "I'd really like to fall in love..."

"Well, don't expect Mr. Right on the first try," Arch warned like a wise older sister. "Get ready to kiss some toads first."

Many guys were mingling in the rosy dimness of the barroom, a few looking at me shyly. One really beautiful boy over by the cigarette machine was leaning up real close talking with a tall man whose hand kept rubbing the boy's arm. I asked if Arch knew any of these guys. "Sure," he answered. "That big one at the bar is Mitch the Bitch, and over there's a couple I met at a party last night—they like threesomes." This led to his tale of the number he left the party with and details of a trick that lasted all night. It made me jealous never having been in bed with a boy, just blowing dick in the tearooms. I realized I'd already kissed my share of toads.

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BY RICHARD BALTHAZAR

At that point Mitch the Bitch came over to our table, giving me an intense look. His chatter was so funny I laughed and laughed. Soon our table was joined by two of Arch's friends from the party, both fairly homely, who also gave me thorough inspections. No one sat or stayed long, as though they were all drifting slowly from table to table. Then someone appeared in the door—a young blond guy in green corduroys—who waved to Arch and went straight to the bar. Arch whispered, "Now he's a hot one. I slow-danced with him at the party last night." I laughed out loud at two guys slow-dancing. "His name's Tommy," Arch said, ignoring me. He doesn't come in here much, hangs out in the sailor bars over on Decatur. Real tough guy."

This Tommy approached us with his beer. I didn't know what to do, but just said hi and explained that Butch was a nickname, real name's Charles. Tommy took the chair at the end of the table, very good-looking, longish blond hair a bit over his ear and big brown eyes. And he didn't give me that hungry look the others did. Delicate lips.

"Got tired of seafood and thought I'd see who might be here," Tommy said and took a pull on his bottle of Falstaff.

"You've found them," Arch remarked, indicating us. "So let's party. Your place or mine?" My heart was in my throat.

Tommy smiled right at me and said, "I found a great new place last week." I asked where. "Way down near Bienville, a real degenerate Greek place called the Gin Mill."

"Isn't that kind of rough?" Arch asked, hesitant as I knew about 'lowlife.'

"You'd love it!" Tommy exclaimed. "You can even dance with Greek sailors. They like cute boys!" He squeezed my arm. It sure sounded scary. Decatur around Jackson Square and the Market was okay, but the lower blocks people said were really dangerous.

"Well, I'm not into seafood," Archie sniffed. "But I need to go to the powder room."

Immediately Tommy pressed his knee right up against mine. He took my hand on the table, twining our fingers, and as though one else was in the place, started asking all about me. Out came everything about Southeastern and Houma, and Amy's place and all that. The heat of his knee made me want to touch him all over. And then he told me about being part Indian from Oklahoma, going to Tulane, and some other stuff I simply can't remember because I was so busy trying to figure out some way to get him into bed. Remembering the dive he mentioned, I asked if he was going there soon. "Oh, any time. Want to come along?" I must have still looked pretty scared because Tommy added, "Or we can go back to my apartment if you want."

We said goodbye to Archie at the bar with Mitch. He smiled and waved us out the door. Before I had time to worry about being seen, Tommy and I were out in the bustling Bourbon Street crowd, and to my dismay, I couldn't for the life of me remember where I'd parked my new little Volkswagen convertible—red with white top. We tried tracing back to how I got to the French Quarter, but it was no use. Tommy said we should just start walking and I'd remember—either that or we'd find it. With him in the lead, since I had no notion of where to go, we ambled up one quiet old street past all the front steps and fancy wood-trimmed doorways, across another street, back another one, and so forth in a fairly random zigzag, with a lot more time to talk about our childhoods and about our experience at our colleges. Nowhere was my buggy to be found!

In our walking I said nothing about the tearooms, of course. On the way down towards Dumaine, he told me how he was terribly in love with an East Indian guy who was straight, and even worse, gone away to Chicago. I sympathized but really felt jealous. Finally, after an hour's walk, we found my sweet little car on Conti just below Chartres. But I had absolutely no memory of leaving it there, something like a reverse *déjà vu*.

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**DEVIATE**

BY RICHARD BALTHAZAR

Driving up Canal Street with the top down in the hot night, holding hands again, I asked if Tommy had ever had a real lover. He'd been in love once before this Raj guy, he said, but it didn't work out. Another stab of jealousy, but it disappeared when I suddenly saw the flashing light of a police car behind us. We let go of each other's hand like hot potatoes, and I was ready to faint as I pulled over to the curb along the Saenger Theatre. To hold Tommy's hand, I hadn't shifted into third, so we were going very slowly up the empty street. The curious cop looked hard at me, and asked if I was all right. Okay. Just fine. He looked over at Tommy. Couldn't be better. I explained we were just talking and weren't in any hurry. "Well, don't go so slow or you'll get run over in this little bitty thing," the cop sighed and waved us on.

Tommy's apartment was on Audubon Street in the basement of a big house surrounded by overgrown bushes. I followed him through a dark jungle toward a little blue door with a lace curtain over its windowpanes. Before he even touched the doorknob, we distinctly heard a giggling moan. "Shit!" he muttered, "Joel's home! And he's screwing again."

He led me back the bushy path and out into a yard bright in the light of a full moon where enormous bushes cast dark shadows. Standing in their darkness, he remarked, "Well, it's June and moon and..." and pulled me to him in a kiss. Soon there we were in the bush shadows on cool grass, two twenty-year-old guys making out like sweethearts. I wanted to do it right there on the ground in the yard, but Tommy wouldn't. He wanted to wait to make love the right way, naked together in bed, not like two bunnies bumping under a bush. All the passionate embracing and kissing left my arms aching, lips swollen, and crotch hurting—which Tommy blamed on 'testicular pressure.' Soon the sky was dawning, and we agreed to meet again tonight at Dixie's.

My Tommy, Tommy Youngblood, stood on the curb waving in the early light as I drove off down Audubon Street. Of course, I slept very, very late so I couldn't do any work for Amy. At the end of the afternoon I popped into her office downstairs to say hi. She laughed and asked how my interview went, meaning my night. She was pretty wild herself. After Amy heated up some beans and rice with sausage for supper, we sat at the kitchen table talking about family, the usual. Then she looked me in the eye and asked, "So, Butch, what kind of love-bug bit you last night, darlin'?" When I tried to play innocent, she pointed. "With that huge hickey on your neck, cher, you sure making time with somebody."

I managed to change the subject to her own current romantic tribulation with Jack who worked at something in advertising with the Picayune. Because of something to do with his work schedule, he could only see her on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. My suggestion that she look for some more boyfriends to do the other days got me whacked with her coffee spoon. Later on in the evening (Tommy worked till eleven), when I was cleaning up for the night out, I looked in the mirror and there really was a dark spot on my neck. Once again a 'reverse *déjà vu*'. I had no recollection whatsoever of Tommy sucking on me there.

Our first 'date' was for 11:30 in Dixie's, and he came in to find me waiting nervously at our same table. He came over to me, all smiles and sparkling brown eyes, lifted my chin, and kissed me on the lips—right out there in front of everyone in the place. Then he insisted I come with him to see his favorite bars. First we went to this Latin place called La Marina which surpassed anything I'd ever imagined about dives. Dark, dirty, smelly crowds of toughs and whores. Tommy was clearly at home, but I hated it. After he danced a couple times, I asked him to take me to the Greek place, since it couldn't be this bad.

But the Gin Mill was smaller and even stranger. I had no idea Greeks would be so foreign. Tommy introduced me to several sailors at a table, their eyes almost ate me up, yet they were all polite and attentive. The place was simply so filthy—the barmaid so huge—and the

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BY RICHARD BALTHAZAR

queen called Kitty kept looking daggers at me. Again I waited till Tommy had danced a line dance with some sailors—I wasn't about to—and asked that we go. Out on the street, he said his roommate was home again tonight. With no love nest, we drove out by the lake and sat on a seawall talking, kissing, and watching the moon on the water.

We had 'dates' every night, me picking Tommy up after his work in the Snack Bar at Tulane. Once we drove up the river road and near a field found a shadowy place out of the waning moonlight to make out. Sometimes in Audubon Park under an oak along the bayou. After the second all-nighter, Amy had laid down the law that I start actively looking for a job instead of sleeping all day. So having to go home fairly early, I usually dropped Tommy off in the Quarter to go dancing in his wild sailor bars. A couple times, though I tried hard not to, because of 'testicular pressure' after dropping Tommy at La Marina, I circled back and went to the tearoom at the French Market. But this time I'd only let the guy do me.

When I got a job selling ladies' shoes in D. H. Holmes on Canal Street, I really couldn't stay out late, and the dates with my boyfriend each night were a couple hours of incredible passion. One night, the moon gone now, we parked by the lake again, and I asked Tommy to be my steady boyfriend and wear my class ring, gold with green stone like emerald. Since my hands were pretty big, it only fit his left index finger, and he held it up, simply beaming. "So I'll wear it on a chain around my neck." Like that Elvis Presley song. How happy I was!

Every day at work I'd go crazy with desire, waiting for those kisses with my Tommy. No problem with the customers. I used to work summers in a cousin's feed store. This was simply shoes instead of hay. One evening at supper Amy said she was proud of me having the good job and then suddenly asked who I was seeing out till nearly two every night. I avoided answering and only talked about the bars in the French Quarter. To frighten her I described that dive La Casa de los Marinos. More the cocktail type, Amy cautioned me to be careful about decadent bums and let the subject drop. Then one evening she announced she was going to Lafayette for the Fourth of July and spend the weekend. Four whole days of an apartment of my own!

Tom and I planned this big barbecue party with lots of friends on the Fourth, the next Wednesday, at the seawall on Pontchartrain, then to spend our 'wedding' night in Metairie in the apartment. I invited a bunch of school chums from Southeastern, mad big-eyed Leah, little Beth, of course Arch, Jerry, and several others with dates. I took Marie, one of Amy's models about my age, since she'd enjoy all the others, and I had to be busy with cooking most of time. Tommy brought a pretty, almost plump blonde girl named Rose, who looked me over with a smile that seemed to say, "So you're the one..." His roommate Joel came with Natalie, both of whom I'd heard but never seen. She was beautiful in a Cajun sort of way, though I knew she was Jewish, and you should have seen Marie's claws come out. Joel was incredibly sexy like a big cat, with long curving lips. I could well imagine him taking off his pants like Tommy once described.

All the other couples sat along the seawall or on blankets under trees drinking their beer, wine, vodka, and so on. Wild Leah and I flipped and sauced many pieces of chicken and ribs on three grills. Beth kindly kept our drinks full, a 'Cuba Libre' for me, and worked on the potato salad and bread. Folks danced to WNOE from car radios, and some made out—like Joel and Natalie down the seawall a ways. Tommy and Rose came over to help us cook, but Leah sent them to set out all the plates and stuff from the bags on the picnic tables. Turning away, Tommy gave me a secret pucker kiss. The gleam of my ring on the chain around his neck...

Leah asked, "So how'd you hook that gorgeous one, Miss Thing?" I regretfully admitted Tommy wasn't quite hooked yet, but tonight... Between flipping breasts and thighs and basting, I noticed Tommy and Rose leading a conga line around lawn. Other couples smooched and petted.

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DEVIATE

BY RICHARD BALTHAZAR

It made me mad, straight couples hugging and kissing, all over each other, but Tommy and me, *mais non*, we can only smile secretly at each other. Leah spoke up from the sizzling ribs on her grill, "Cheer up, snookie, I bet you'll get it good tonight."

Thoughts of the coming night made me dizzy, but they and Tommy's closeness in this our wedding party helped me endure the crowd's feeding frenzy. He and Rose sat with Marie and me on our blanket, and I couldn't keep my eyes off my fabulous boyfriend. Marie also found Tommy fascinating, and apparently so did Rose, which automatically made him the total center of our attention. He didn't seem to notice, eating chicken thighs and Cole slaw con gusto, talking about his summer class in European history and curious trivial facts. To my surprise Marie started in on Napoleon, which she seemed to know a lot about. Her old family Fortinbras was reputedly related to the Bonapartes.

Rose told her about a place in the Quarter called the Napoleon House—built as a refuge for the Emperor when his supporters were trying to arrange his escape from exile—but he died before they could pull it off. They served a fabulous Medoc that she loved. Rose's lips were all red from the wine, and her honey-colored hair mussed up, like a sultry actress in an Italian film. Tommy said we'd take Marie to the Napoleon House sometime, and Rose suggested we all go together this coming weekend. Giving me a wink, Tommy made for some more chocolate cake.

When darkness fell, everybody started shooting off their sputtering, bright fireworks. Little Beth, who looks like an elf with her short hair anyway, did a whirling dance around with sparklers leaving bright lines across the dark like flights of fairies. I shot off cherry bombs and Roman candles. When the firecrackers were done, everyone lay on the grass with guitars and sang songs. Thank God, the party began to break up soon after. Tommy went along in Natalie's car to take Rose back to the dorm, and then he caught a taxi to Amy's place by one o'clock.

From our first hug right inside the door, I didn't know how we got into the bedroom, our clothes came off, or we ended up in Amy's huge bed with its frilly pillows. I'd never been with anyone in bed before, and the heat of Tommy's body in my arms, the crispy blond hair on his chest as he lay on top of me... My ring on its chain kept bumping me in the chin till he took it off too. Then in a delirium of his beauty, I learned about 'really' making love. Afterwards I lay on his back helpless, a mass of bliss, *le bonheur*. In between our jobs, mine early and his late, we spent every moment the next three days in Amy's bed madly making love till we could barely stand up. By Friday we both finally admitted out loud that we were desperately in love. This led to a frantic fuck on the rug in the living room.

On Saturday night we came up for air and actually took and Marie and Rose out as promised, the four of us crammed in the VW. The Napoleon House was truly wonderful, an old cultural flavor of classical music, where we sat at a table in the larger room off a dark romantic patio. Fortunately, since Rose was an art history major and Marie also painted, the girls got along well talking all about art. After a day without Tommy in my arms, I could hardly listen.

Except when Rose lifted Tommy's right hand up for Marie to see and remarked, "Look, he's got Adam's hand from Michelangelo's Creation!" Tommy's arm and hand rose in a curve gliding out a lifted index finger. Then she made him show his "sublimely perfect" feet, almost bare in his thin Indian sandals. I hadn't noticed before that his feet were so beautifully formed. I guess I was staring at him like a lovesick puppy because Rose giggled over her glass of Medoc, "Hey, Romeo, wherefore so melancholy? Your Juliet's not going anywhere." I was wrecked, and Marie stared open-mouthed at me and then at Tommy.

He shrugged at her, tossed his bright bangs away from his eyes. "Actually, my drag name is Notre Dame de la Rue." Marie and I laughed, and then Rose lamented to her about cute guys

who preferred each other. The situation was getting out of hand. I begged Marie not to say anything to Amy, please, but she just gave me an amused smile.

Later that night in bed Tommy comforted me twice and then again in the bright Sunday morning light. The happiness was a flood sweeping us along all too swiftly through the day. I cooked us a huge breakfast of scrambled eggs and Aunt Louise's sausage, which we ate while playing footsies under the table. We bathed and regretfully dressed again since it was time to straighten up the place. Our fits of passion had left many traces in furniture pushed around and stuff thrown all over. We had it all back in shape within an hour.

Around four o'clock I drove him home and finally saw inside his apartment, a beatnik basement they called the Rising Sun. Joel was home, in shorts, lying with a book on his bed, and he thanked me for the great party at the lake. Tommy wanted to play special records for me, and Joel had no objection. He'd be off soon for work anyway—a job in the Tulane library. Tommy put a record on their stereo, a mandolin concerto by an Italian named Vivaldi. To listen, we sat cross-legged on his bed, and he showed me a huge ancient book of Don Quixote with incredible engravings. He'd found it in a junk store on Royal Street last year. The music was joyous, and Tommy was so exquisite, I could barely keep my hands off him.

When the music ended, Joel got up from his bed, again like a stupendous cat, and right before my wondering eyes dropped his shorts. His nakedness was breathtaking as he stretched and ambled toward the closet for clothes. Tommy whispered, "It's like the Medusa, the secret is not to look at it." When Joel was finally off to his job, Tommy and I jumped into his much bigger bed to make love once more.

When I got back to Metairie, Amy was home. She had a great time, but explained she was having her period and wasn't in the mood to reminisce. Instead, she grilled me about what I did during the several days she was away. Very innocently I described the party at the lake and the night out at the Napoleon House with Marie and this other couple. Since she was feeling so bad, I volunteered to fix some supper, and we ate reading the Sunday paper.

Amy was surprised I wasn't going out partying. I said I needed my rest before work. She turned on the television and curled up in her big chair. I lay on the sofa with a book Tommy loaned me called "Giovanni's Room" by James Baldwin. Long after Amy went to bed, I lay there entranced by this book about a man loving a man and finished it about three o'clock, in tears.

When I got home the next day, there was a note that Amy went to eat with a friend, back sometime. Using the opportunity, I changed into grubby shorts and pulled the Bug around back for a wash and wax. Of course the phone started ringing upstairs. Three steps at a time. It was Tommy on his dinner break in the Snack Bar.

"A guy I know," he said excitedly, "went the other night to Cosimo's, that jazz bar over on Barracks and Burgundy, and saw Raj." My heart split right down the middle. "So I went there last night, and he was sitting at a table in the back listening to the cool jazz." I calmly managed to ask how Raj liked Chicago. "Hated it. But the funny thing," Tommy laughed on the other end of the phone, "when I asked why he hadn't called me, Raj said, 'I knew you'd find me.' Isn't that wild?" Jealousy choked me. "We'll go there tonight so you can meet him." My silence must have tipped him off. "Oh, Butch, don't be jealous. I love Raj, but I'm in love with you." All the same, back at the car again, I cried while buffing the wax on the bright red doors.

Right around dark when I'd calmed down some and was watching the Monday night comedies on television, Amy came home. She sat on the sofa, fanning herself with a magazine from the table. I casually asked who her dinner date was, and just as casually, she answered, "Marie." My blood ran cold. Amy looked straight at me, tenderly. She came over and perched

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the arm of the big chair and played with my hair. "Butch, I asked Marie—and this was all I asked—if she thought you might be gay. She just nodded." Amy stroked my tense shoulders affectionately. "So are you gay, cher?"

In horror, I too nodded and started crying. Amy hugged my head to her side and patted my cheek. "No need to cry, darlin'. You can go to a doctor..." I leaped up from the chair in shock and frantically begged her not to tell anybody—and not to worry about me. I told her all about my wonderful boyfriend Tommy who makes me so happy. "You may be happy, Butch cher," Amy admitted, "but you're sick. You need help."

The idiocy of it! I stomped into my bedroom, changed into going out clothes, and did exactly that, driving all over the city in my shiny clean car. By ten I was already in Dixie's with a gin and tonic to calm my nerves. Another drink sent to me by a tall guy at the bar definitely took the edge off. When the guy came over, name of Frank, I soon was pouring out all my troubles with Amy and with Tommy and his Indian. Frank listened with concern but soon saw someone he had to speak to. When Tommy showed up at eleven-thirty, I was fairly tipsy.

Without further ado, we set off for Cosimo's, zigzagging up over to that far corner of the French Quarter. On the way I told Tommy about Amy and my fears about her telling my folks, and he told me to think about it. He ushered me into the little bar on the corner. Cosimo's was a quiet place, hardly anyone there, except this very dark handsome man at a back table. Raj shook my hand firmly with a "Good evening" and locked eyes with me. To soft and soothing jazz, we talked. Raj asked all about my school and where I was from. Then with flashing fingers and glittering eyes, he talked about the nightlife in Chicago in the black people's bars.

Soon Tommy told him about Amy and asked Raj for advice for me. He poured more beer into his glass, sipped, and said simply, "You must not let other people define your life. You may see yourself reflected in them, but you are the only one who knows your real identity." When Raj went off to the restroom, Tommy remarked about how eastern wisdom was so much wiser than our awful western prejudice and ignorance. Raj bought us another drink to celebrate his return. Watching Tommy watch him, I understood my jealousy was pointless. There something between them no one else could ever share, but not passion. We left there and went for a ride to a dark place under the trees near the museum in City Park for Tommy to comfort my worries.

After work the next evening, Tuesday, Amy was waiting with an early supper of pork chops, mashed potatoes, and gravy. She needed to get me fed before her date to the movies, but she was being extra nice for some reason. What the reason was I found out during the fresh vanilla pudding, my favorite. She said she'd called Aunt Eunice, that's Maman, today... I sat frozen, spoon halfway to mouth. Amy had only told her that Butch's nerves were acting up, and maybe he needed to see a psychiatrist. Relieved, I dropped my spoon back into the pudding dish. Fascinated by the new fads such as going to 'shrink,' Maman had quickly agreed to have the bills sent to her. I thanked Amy profusely for not ratting on me. She fed me the spoon of pudding and added that I could take sick leave at Holmes for my appointment tomorrow at three with Dr. Morris. This led to a huge fight in which I insisted on my perfect health and sanity, and she denied it. It ended with her saying, "Well, Butch, I don't know enough to argue. Dr. Morris is trained in things like this. Either you go or I tell Aunt Eunice. So, we got a deal, cher?"

At the usual time I picked Tommy up at the Snack Bar. We sat in the car out on dark McAlister Drive, and I told him about Dr. Morris. Tommy kissed me and said, "Butch, just remember what Raj told you..." But Amy was blackmailing me, threatening to tell Maman. He asked me why that mattered so much. Amazed at his attitude, I demanded to know if he'd told

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his folks. "No," he said, "they live on some other planet called Harahan and really have no need to know. If it ever gets to be an issue, I'll tell them. All they can do is like it or lump it."

He explained that all his friends knew of his predilection for boys, like Rose and even Joel, whom he told when inviting him to the party on the Fourth. We kissed again, after which Tommy said, "Let's go over to my place." I thought he meant Joel wasn't home, but he was there, again in bed, again in shorts only. Tommy got me to help him gather up a bottle of wine, glasses, cheese and crackers, a candle, and a bowl of cherries. Without explaining, he then trooped us back out the door, over his shoulder tossing to Joel, "Don't wait up."

Through the near midnight darkness Tommy led me down the drive and across to the bushes into the even darker back corner of the yard. Behind and beneath the bushes at the base of the high fence, he'd rigged up a tent of poles and two dark green bedspreads. Motioning me to crawl in the flap, Tommy said, "If we have to do it in the bushes, let's do it right." Inside it was like the playhouses of my childhood, only more comfortable with a floor padded with a rug, and more romantic with the wine and candlelight. Eventually satisfied with the food and drink, we put it all in a corner and made fantastic, if quiet, love.

Too soon it was time for my red VW to roll off down Audubon. From the moment I closed the car door I was gripped with fear of this Dr. Morris. My nerves didn't let me sleep for the few hours left till work, which was madness as the hours ground on toward the afternoon. The doctor's office was in a big old house on Carrollton Avenue, very elegant with the tall palms along streetcar tracks. A hard rain started just as I rounded the corner to park, so I sat in the car for the worst to pass, long minutes of dread and doubt.

Amy was there waiting on the porch as I raced up the broad steps out of the rain, feeling like mounting the gallows. A well-dressed secretary ushered me through a big sliding door into a high-ceilinged room full of antiques and a huge marble fireplace. Looking around the room, I decided to sit on the comfortable chaise longue, quite like Maman's. Almost immediately a tall, plain, middle-aged man came in, smiled, and thrust his hand out me. "Hello, Charles, I'm Dr. Morris. I gather you think you're a homosexual."

The next two hours were a truly horrible experience. The doctor started in on how I might think I was homosexual, but that was all just a simple mistake in my mind. I had to admit I was making a mistake. Surely I knew that homosexuality was a mental illness, a totally perverted, pathological behavior, letting a man put his cock in your mouth. And putting one's penis in another man's anus? Wasn't that sick? That was insanity. People who did such things were deviates. They were deviating from the true path to heaven and onto the road to hell. In serious medical tones he started talking more about mental illnesses and listed the serious hazards of homosexual sex, gross diseases, nervous breakdowns, neuroses, schizophrenia, and Lord knows what else. Easy to imagine getting venereal diseases in my tearoom activities, of course, but I protested that my boyfriend didn't have any of those.

Without seeming really interested, Dr. Morris asked me about Tommy and then called my boyfriend a flaming faggot, a disgusting queer. Then like testing my reactions, he graphically described women's breasts and cunts and the mechanics of straight sex. Again and again he harped on the same things until I was ready to scream and run out of the room. Out of the blue, he gravely stated that I could never be cured if I continued to associate with deviates. He demanded I stop seeing Tommy. I angrily refused. He went to the door and called Amy in from the waiting room. She too insisted I get rid of my boyfriend—or else she'd tell Maman. I cried and refused, but they wouldn't hear a word. They simply couldn't, mustn't tell Maman.

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When they finally let me out of that awful house, I walked out onto the wet, fresh-smelling sidewalk feeling beaten into the ground, crushed, doomed, and defeated. All I could think of was seeing my Tommy as soon as possible—ignoring the awful thing I was supposed to say to him. No one was at the apartment. Before leaving, I crossed the soaked yard and checked behind the dripping bushes. The blankets were drenched, collapsed on the padding where last night... I drove over to Tulane where Tommy was at work in the cafeteria.

His register stood out in the middle so people from both serving lines could come to him if they wanted. On an old manual cash register he was working a flood of customers and their trays on either side. I went through the line for some dinner, and when he saw me approaching, his brown eyes gleamed. Only seconds for us together as he totaled in his head, added tax to \$2.77, and rang it up on the machine. Was I okay? My change in a sweep of his hand over the register drawer like a magician. We'd talk when he was off. He turned to the tray on the right.

At a table over by the huge windows onto the quadrangle, I ate my meatloaf and peas with no appetite. How could this be happening? Watching Tommy's back across the room, I was overwhelmed with love and desire for him. Maybe we could still see each secretly. But if I couldn't go out at night... Amy's rules for more hideous appointments with Dr. Morris... By the time Tommy had checked out and sat with me at his dinner, I was a total nervous wreck.

He ate with many grunts and noises while I described the horrid session with Dr. Morris, and when I got to the part about us not seeing each other anymore, he carefully swallowed his Salisbury steak. In a low voice, but not a whisper, he said, "And so you'll just disappear out of my life?" I begged him to understand it would kill Maman if Amy told her. "That I seriously doubt," Tommy sighed and put his fork back down on the plate. "Butch, remember, don't let..." I protested weakly that I had no choice. "Oh, yes, you do, Butch, cher—your Maman or me." He lifted the chain up over his head and took off my ring. Handing it to me, his big brown eyes were full of tears, and I started crying as I put it back on my fat finger. Like simply tasting it, Tommy ate some sweet potatoes and a crumb of cornbread. In misery, I stood up, mumbling that I'd better go. He raised his hand to me, motionless. My own frozen wave.

I walked away from beautiful Tommy straight into eight nightmare months of analysis, at the end of which Maman knew about me anyway, and I myself had been firmly convinced I was gay, a whole-hearted deviate, a perfect faggot, and a consummate queer. By then, though, Tommy was... But that's another story.

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## 2.5 - NOVEMBER SOMETEENTH

It's peaceful here in the Napoleon House, this warm evening of November Someteenth. The French doors are still open wide onto St. Louis Street where occasional cars roll soundlessly by. The light is golden honey. Tommy once wrote a poem calling it amber. Now that I'm writing whatever this is—a letter to the future Rose?—a brief diary?—I'll call the light honey. Various French Quarter characters sit at dark wood tables in the night breeze with beer and wine, some with chessboards. In the other room, which we call the Music Room because there's always classical music playing—Mozart right now—are more tables, more people, and paintings. Out here on the patio I sit in the shadows at a table on uneven cobbles, huge elephant-ear leaves crowding round me as I sip a superb Medoc and light another Camel. Also must tie up my hair somehow to keep it out of my face while I write. This wonderful place is my refuge, instead of Napoleon's. Just like it was for us, Tommy and me, to rest and recuperate from the maniacal din of La Marina. Now it's my peaceful haven after these past months of insanity. There's a small patch of sky, no stars of course, up above the roofs. I feel totally aimless, free but stupefied, now that it's over. I've ordered another glass of wine because there's no reason not to.

So here I sit, junior in Art History at prestigious Sophie Newcomb College, moping like a silly high school girl over a guy who's never even kissed me. Not once, not one real kiss since we met way back last spring. The first few months I was still going with Ken, that huge egotist, and we'd see beautiful blond Tommy with his equally exquisite Indian friend Raj all the time in La Casa de los Marinos. Then as now he always wore green corduroy jeans and those Indian sandals made out of water buffalo hide with the loop for the big toe. Oh, and don't forget his classically perfect feet! In those sandals Tommy taught me to merengue, which is in my opinion truly the dance of love! When we danced in the fantastic Third Room...

That sweet old waiter just brought me my fresh glass of wine. He politely didn't even look at what I'm writing.

Right from the first I found Tommy's sculptured face and broad shoulders attractive, and even his name, Youngblood, was exciting. Frequently I found ways to be in La Marina, and he was always happy to have me for another dance partner. My friends who took me into that wild sailor bar knew what I was up to and were amused by my subtly seductive wiles. It was clear that Tommy was in love with Raj, but it was obviously far more than sex, of which, according to Tommy, there was none. He told me early on that he's gay but had no actual boyfriend. Small wonder he's in love with that magnificent Brahmin—like a bodhisattva—I halfway expect his face to shine sky-blue like Krishna. When Raj went off to Chicago, Tommy was devastated.

Taking advantage of the situation, I stuck close to him. Soon it was obvious that by dancing together almost every night we were essentially "seeing" each other. Sometimes I'd meet him at the Snack Bar when he got off work, and we'd take the Freret Jet to the Quarter. Much later he'd come back and help me sneak into the dorm, easily accomplished by climbing the balcony railing. And we had amazingly open, warm, honest, and funny discussions, the kind I've never been able to have with straight guys, who are always so focused on one thing only. Our La Marina nights were such fun I didn't let myself think about the romance that wasn't there.

Then it was time to go home for the summer. Knowing how dull Cincinnati would be after the Quarter and the sailor bars, I convinced the folks to let me come back for summer school. While I was home, they lined up a horrid society party. The pomp and pretentiousness were so gross I purposely ate the flower garnishing my salad. William, my old debutante acquaintance, escorted me. After the men I'd been seeing in New Orleans, he was just a jerk in a

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tuxedo. The sappy music was lifeless, the dances ridiculous. I longed for a Latin rhythm. So I escaped back to New Orleans several days early.

Break to light a cigarette and numbly stare through the doorway, across the black and white diamond-patterned floor of the front room and out onto St. Louis where a man and woman passed on the dark sidewalk. Strings playing in the Music Room. What a delicate harmony. Bach? It's comforting, this peace and quiet, this music, after the madness, *après le déluge*.

Once back in town I went out to La Marina with my friend Susy, who's in Sculpture, and her friend Sven, a ceramic artist. Certain to find Tommy there, I did. He was with some Tulane guy named Ben, a Chemistry major, who looked very dubious about the whole scene. Tommy and I joyously danced a couple times together, which definitely cleared my head of the fumes of Cincinnati high society. Then Susy took us down Decatur to this incredible Greek sailor joint she'd just found called the Gin Mill. It's so perfectly decadent, just like in the movie "Never on Sunday," and Ben got scared off. I was particularly amazed by Giant Jackie the barmaid who simply has to be the fattest woman I've ever seen, and of course I felt fairly strange around the whores and shady types. The darkly Mediterranean sailors were fascinating, both for me and for Tommy. He stood around watching them teach me to dance some of their folk dances. And I love the ouzo, a clear licorice! I got Tommy to join in a big line dance of almost everyone in the place, but for some reason he seemed distant and very soon decided to go home. During the next week I met him a couple times after work to go out, and once I went earlier with Susy and Sven and their new friend Felicia, a painter from Florida, to the Mill. Later I met Tommy in La Marina for dancing till dawn. We certainly knew how to revel! Let's have another glass of Medoc!

So... On Saturday night I signed out of the dorm and spent the night at Tommy's new apartment. At four-thirty in the morning, he gallantly gave me his bed, slept on a folding cot, and had coffee ready when I awoke. His roommate Joel, whom I had never yet seen, was just stirring also, and so he brought us both steaming cups to our beds. Tommy wore his eternal green pants, shirtless, and was perfectly adorable. I could sense Joel was stark nude under his sheet, and there was an electricity of sex in his glances. Tommy sat on his narrow bed beside me and stroked my arm tenderly, as though a furry pet.

A couple days later, much to his amusement—ah, here's my Medoc!—Tommy told me Joel was very impressed that he'd gotten me into bed. Then there was a night when I expected to see him at La Marina, but he never showed up. Not there or at the Mill. At his register in the Snack Bar the next evening, he blithely explained he'd "met someone." Such a look of calf-like bliss in his dark eyes. My very first impulse was to throw my tray at him, but I controlled myself. Apparently a cute Cajun boy called, if you can believe this, Butch. Quickly I claimed I couldn't wait to meet him. This meant I wouldn't see Tommy that night either. In fact, most nights the following couple weeks, his boyfriend picked him up after work, and then I'd finally see Tommy some hours later in La Marina to dance and carouse.

Whatever he and his mystery boyfriend were doing, it certainly filled him with energy that swept me through hours of merengues and cumbias. Often we staggered down the broken sidewalks past the fire station (firemen sitting by the door making rude comments) and deserted warehouses to the Gin Mill. By now we'd gotten a reputation there amongst the whores and sailors as "the lovers," which seemed to please Tommy very much, but he never made a move to make it a reality—even though every weekend I slept in his bed.

Once Joel's his pretty girlfriend Natalie was in his bed when we got there. She was obviously surprise when I came back from the crude bathroom in my nightgown and got into Tommy's bed—alone. Over my head above his bed hangs the picture I painted this past spring of

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him and Raj on barstools leaning close in talk in the shadows of La Marina. Very chiaroscuro and atmospheric. Is anything more beautiful than that which can't be? Tommy and Raj. Tommy and Rose. Damn! I just started to cry, and my napkin's all crumpled up.

A trip to the ladies' room helped a lot. Now a smoke... At last I met my rival Butch on the Fourth of July when Tommy took me to their party on the lakefront. He explained that it was their nuptial night—they hadn't "consummated" their affair yet! Suddenly I understood Tommy's wild energy with me in the bars. Butch was really a cute Cajun with black curls and an exquisite nose. He was with a pretty model named Marie. Butch and Tommy did a good job of playing it straight. After Tommy took me to the dorm, he went back to Butch. Next day at his work, he told me they actually did the deed. We didn't see each other again until the next Saturday evening when we brought Butch and Marie here to the Napoleon House. I guess after two nights without Tommy to dance with I was feeling like a bitch and on purpose wrecked Butch right in front of Marie, who'd had no inkling what was going on. But now she did. When I saw Tommy on Monday next at work, he was tremendously excited by his great news. His Raj was back from Chicago! That was all I needed. What I need right now is another trip to the john.

So... At least all that dancing kept the pounds off. If I'm going to live a quieter life, I sure better find some other exercise. So... The next few nights Tommy not only made a pilgrimage to Cosimo's to see Raj, which I didn't mind, but also spent more time "parking" with Butch, which burned me. However, hallelujah! They broke up on that next Wednesday.

That night, while Tommy moped around the Third Circle not even wanting to dance, I celebrated with a couple shots of tequila and danced with the Latin guys that are always waiting in line, none as good a dancer as Tommy by any means. Once between times at the bar with him, maybe I somewhat insensitively remarked he'd surely find another boyfriend soon enough. His response was, "Since Raj is back, I'll be okay. Who needs boyfriends?"

I wanted to pop him one in the mouth. Instead, I was grateful that he took my presence for granted, my friendship a welcome given in his life, and being taken for granted like that is a heck of lot better than not being taken at all. Later on when we'd been carousing for a while in the Gin Mill with Sven and Felicia and a table full of Greek sailors and beers, Tommy said he was off to Cosimo's to see Raj. I was curious why Raj wouldn't come back to La Marina or to this Greek joint, and Tommy said his spiritual master wasn't "ready" yet.

The next weeks we'd meet most nights at the Snack Bar at eleven, often with Felicia too, and head for the Quarter. It was amazing how, having just spent six hours behind a cash register, Tommy could be so full of energy, but our first hour there he declared would have to be "study hall." In the Mill we'd get a booth and beers, and the three of us read our course assignments in the midst of raucous sailors and foreign songs. I made it all the way through the "Iliad" and "Paradise Lost." Felicia read a big book about Italian artists, and Tommy had some European history things. When study hall was over, he'd jump up and do one of those solo sailor dances to, as he said, ritually open the Holy Carouse. And every night to Cosimo's for you know what.

Finally fed up with Raj's reclusiveness, Felicia and I arranged with Tommy that we'd all get together to see a new movie called "Walk on the Wild Side"—what Tommy called Decatur Street all this year—and then come to the Gin Mill. It worked like a charm. The movie was really powerful. I love how it starts with the cat stalking along what has to be our Decatur Street! Like Tommy prowling this wild side of sailor bars like the tiger Raj says he is.

Afterwards while we partied with the whores and sailors, Felicia let me know that she found Raj quite attractive. So who didn't? Tommy and I soon observed that the attraction was apparently mutual. Raj worked his snake-charmer finger gestures on her. Tommy sadly raised an

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eyebrow at me and launched into a solo dance of eloquence and profundity to his favorite song, "Thessaloniki mou." I made Raj and Felicia watch—as did most of the sailors in the place, some clucking in approval and shouting, "Opa!" That means like "Bravo!"

At the end of the song, the Greeks in the next booth jumped up, surrounding Tommy and with many Greek praises (and pats on his body), and toasting him with ouzo, which he drank with a vengeance. Raj was duly impressed, but I really doubt he really understood the anguish he'd just seen danced. I, on the other hand, understand it all too well. It was also my dance of impossible love, and remembering now makes me cry again.

Another Camel is in order. The smoke drifts among the huge leaves, reminding me for some reason of "Streetcar Named Desire." I recall all those wonderful clattering rides on the St. Charles streetcar to and from the Holy Carouse, me dancing barefoot in La Marina, Tommy in his mystical buffalo sandals, and then stumbling drunkenly, joyously down Decatur to the Mill. Why do I torment myself? It's over. I've made up my mind.

So... Now I've asked the dear old man for another and been to see dear old Florence in the Music Room. She's feeling chipper this evening. I always love talking with her, seventy-something, student of the famous Isadora Duncan. But I've just noticed the wine's making me wobbly. I'd better nurse this one. For Christ sake, nearly every Friday and Saturday night all this past summer I stayed over at Tommy's. He could have had his way with me whenever, but never once the slightest sign he ever thought about making love with me. I wasn't a male! Meanwhile, besides with Natalie, Joel made intimate acquaintance with at least two more cute Jewish girls who were equally surprised to see me come in late at night and get into Tommy's bed, etc.

In the weeks after the loss of Butch Tommy wasn't interested in finding a boyfriend again, and I sincerely hoped he'd be willing to settle for a girlfriend. All he cared about was getting into the next cute guy's pants... I wasn't a girlfriend but a sister to him. Which reminds me perversely of a curious experience one night in the Gin Mill. Alice, a sweet whore we've known for months, the good-natured fat one with no taste in clothes whatsoever, took me aside and started in on how she thinks Tommy and I just are the most beautiful couple. Oh, she knows about Tommy, but we're still a beautiful couple. As a matter of fact, she said, she was in love with me herself. Her hand softly cupped my right breast, and I thought I'd faint. I managed to thank her for her affections and explain that I'm not really interested in women, just Tommy. Afterwards the enormous barmaid Jackie apologized to me for Alice's proposition. She said that they really liked us kids and didn't want anything bad to happen to us. Her concern was touching, and as a matter of fact turned out to be a good thing.

Before I start that adventure, I think I'll get up and walk around a bit. At least to the bathroom. Wow! I was rubber knees there for a minute. A perfectly giddy feeling as I asked the waiter for a glass of cold water. Good thing I don't have to stand up to write, and these notebook pages keep pouring out. Oh, yes, the other 'good thing.'

One night we went to see Fellini's "La Dolce Vita," Felicia and Raj, Sven and Susy, and Tommy and yours truly. Tommy had seen it twice and called it a manifesto of debauchery to which he aspired. I watched for the young fellow in a baggy sweater with a candelabrum leading a procession of revelers into a ruined castello that Tommy said he identified with symbolically. Socialist Raj was outraged by the corruption and immorality of western civilization, and Felicia was weirded out by the large dead fish-thing at the end. Myself, I identified with Nadia doing that strip tease under her fur coat at the degenerate party, and Marcello totally turned me on.

At any rate the crowd of us trooped into the Gin Mill after the movie and this strange queen called Kitty with cold eyes and a ridiculous bouffant was clearly very drunk and lurched

off his stool screaming something about not enough room and rushing at Tommy with a knife. Everybody screamed. Tommy instantly pushed me and Raj away to each side and crouched, ready to dodge. A bunch of sailors grabbed Kitty before he could get to Tommy, and in a split second, like a Sherman tank through the crowd, Jackie picked Kitty up like a rag doll, and threw him out onto Decatur Street with orders to get out and stay out. Felicia clung to Raj, and I rushed to Tommy who was unperturbed, explaining, "She's jealous about Ksanders. Let's have a beer."

The sailors who rescued him insisted we join them. While Raj and Felicia engaged the sailors in a disjointed and fragmented conversation, I asked Tommy what was all this about Ksanders, whom I knew from last week's ship, a toothsome youth with not a shred of innocence in his green eyes. It seems one night when I went home early with Susy, Tommy took that sailor boy home and "gave Joel something to listen to in the dark." Needless to say, I wasn't thrilled at the news but understood Ksanders was just another next cute guy.

Our boisterous hosts soon had us all dancing merrily in their lines, even Raj and Felicia. Sometimes I felt just like Melina Mercouri. Later some of the sailors escorted Tommy and me up Decatur to La Marina, just in case Kitty might be lying in ambush. Perhaps I should pay another visit to the ladies room and try a splash of cool water on my face. Always a relief, but I wish my lips wouldn't get so damned stained. Another smoke. The darkness here under the elephant ears seems timeless, or maybe I'm drunker than I thought. Hey, I walked okay just now.

Actually it's liberating to know it's over. I can think of other things, do other things, go other places. But the fact is, my body remembers the merengues and wants to dance. Just the next block around the corner on Toulouse... No, I've made up my mind, and Tommy made his choice. He only thinks of girls as friends and dancing partners, but let there be even a halfway cute guy around, and he's like a bird dog. Everly Brothers. Hey, bird dog... Out of the blue I've suddenly been joined by that interesting Tulane guy Ben, and I begged a moment to complete this thought in my "letter"...

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It's earlier this evening. I'm sober, and at the same table with my first glass of Medoc. Perhaps I'm becoming one of those mysterious, glamorous characters, like Florence, like Ingrid Bergman, with my smoke drifting through the shadows and looming leaves. Last night kind Ben helped me, a sodden drunk, back to the dorm. I cried a lot on the bus ride. Actually Ben had come looking for me after hearing through the grapevine that Tommy and I broke up. Ever since we met back then in La Marina, whenever Ben and I saw each other around campus, he was very friendly but shy. It's so sweet that he came looking for me to make sure I was alright.

Now with a clearer mind, perhaps I can continue this purported letter. I just want to write down what I'm feeling. Now that I've broken away from Tommy these past months I spent with him in our disreputable dives will always be special, but painful, memories. But I won't go back to that exhausting debauch, the four or maybe five hours sleep each night. One wonders how Tommy stays so good in school and works all the time on top. He thrives on the carouse. My God, Medoc keeps getting drier all the time. Maybe a little glass of soda on the side.

Settle in for the story of the Greek ship, back in early September, I believe. Tommy and I'd befriended a new shipload of Greek sailors, always a new ship in port, and danced and drank with them for a couple evenings. Several were quite handsome, and one particularly so they called Pteros. (Tommy told me the nickname meant "bird," and referring to his penis.) We insisted on calling him Eros to the delight of his friends. Tommy lost his mind over Eros-Pteros, the lovebird, who had curly brown hair and a face off of an ancient Greek statue. My favorite was a taller, thin sailor named Nikos, very graceful in the dance.

The third night the crew invited us and others, Alice and another prostitute named Janie, and a cute gay boy named Pat whom Tommy had introduced to the Greek sailor "trade," to a going away party on their ship. We piled into cabs with the sailors and whores. Tommy squeezed in beside Eros and left me to Nikos, who barely spoke any English. At the Jackson Street Wharf, so quiet and empty in the late night, almost spooky, we climbed a gangplank onto this huge ship. I mean, now how many Cincinnati debutantes get to parties on Greek ships?

In a room off the main deck, something like a lounge, the sailors broke out warm bottles of champagne and paper cups. Since it was such a hot night, most of them took off their shirts, and Tommy and Pat followed suit, so to speak. All the bare chests and black hair, Tommy the only blond with curly chest hair... Greek music helped the warm champagne go down. Nikos was soon all over me, and Eros was equally focused on Tommy.

A powerful sexual charge was building in the air, like a thunderstorm. Alice, Janie, and Pat all had sailor-suitors of their own and were dancing or necking on several worn leather sofas. While they played, of all things, Frank Sinatra songs, Tommy and I danced with our sailors. Nikos quickly grasped my behind and kissed me deeply. Abandoning myself to the delicious sensation of Nikos holding me, kissing me, a man desiring me, still I peeked at Tommy and Eros moving their hips together, about to burst into flame.

There was a brief chaos when Alice stumbled across the room splashing champagne on everybody and drunkenly singing some Greek ditty. Nikos helped me dry off and sat me on a sofa in the corner. I noticed Eros and Tommy going out onto the deck. Nikos offered me a cup of champagne and sat close up. After a sip, he kissed me again and a moment later was on top of me, his hands in my clothes, rough on my breasts and up between my legs, his finger into me. I fought against him, shouting, "Okhi" (Greek for "no"). With a puzzled look Nikos immediately let go of me and got very apologetic. I pulled my skirt down, got up, and marched out the door onto the deck wondering what on earth I was doing there on a Greek ship late at night.

It was dark out on the deck with strange, ghostly lights from the wharf casting blacker shadows. I walked around the cabin looking for Tommy and then saw him out on the front part of the deck, the bow? In that weird light it was obvious what they were doing. Eros had him bent over a huge coil of rope, both with their pants down. Backing into the shadows I couldn't take my eyes off them fucking—until Alice came up and made me come back to the party. In a state of total shock and confusion I drank more warm champagne. Nikos politely insisted I dance with him, but all I could think of was Tommy out there and that pretty Eros... While we were doing a line dance with the other sailors, Eros came back, but without Tommy. When I asked where he was, another sailor named Alexis insisted I dance with him.

A few minutes later Tommy burst into the room, his blond hair flying, trying to fasten his pants, and shouting, "Abandon ship! They're leaving for Port Arthur in five minutes! We've got to get off!" Everyone started shouting drunkenly. Janie ran around looking for young Pat who turned up in the bunkroom with several sailors. All us Mill-folk ran scrambling like rats for the gangplank while the sailors leaned over the rail laughing and waving goodbye. Somehow we got a cab on Tchopitoulas Street which the five of us squeezed into and went back to the Gin Mill. Collapsing in a booth with a beer for a nightcap, Tommy claimed getting banged by three sailors, and Pat claimed five in the bunkroom. I was speechless with embarrassment, frustration, and jealousy. Being deviates was one thing, but how could they be such sluts?

Waking up the next day, I simply couldn't believe the ship party had really happened. Like something out of an incredibly decadent, depraved foreign film. Tommy was feeling a bit sore from his workout, but, as he put it, happy as a pig in hot mud. Again I wondered what in the

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DEVIATE

BY RICHARD BALTHAZAR

world I thought I was doing, carousing every night with Tommy, nearly getting fucked by a Greek sailor, forgetting what I used to think was moral. But I wanted Tommy so much I could only stay near him while he looked for the next cute guy. Time for a visit to the head.

It's actually a touch cool this evening, November in New Orleans, of course, and I've brought along a shawl. With it draped around my shoulders and my hair a bit over one eye, I feel like luscious Sophia Loren waiting for Marcello... A sultry sip of red wine. What a joke. More like Marcello has run off with Tony Perkins. Christ!

It's uncanny how much that Terry looks like him. At the start of the fall term this tall guy showed up with his quite fat girlfriend Sharon. They marched up to Tommy in the cafeteria, introduced themselves, and said they'd heard he could tell them about nightlife in the French Quarter. Naturally he took them to La Marina. I stood on the sidelines with Sharon for two weeks while those two guys tried to have an affair. I say try because even though they frequently make love, I gather, they can't figure out how to like each other. The more they fought, the more Tommy danced with me, so I had no complaints.

The other night we went to the Beaux Artes ball, the annual fancy costume bash thrown by the Architecture department, as Pygmalion and Galatea. Let me tell you, we were gorgeous! Pastel ancient Grecian costumes with much legs and ivy leaves in our hair. The theme in our case was perverted since it was I, the statue, who was in love with the sculptor. Tommy was gorgeous in his skimpy tunic, and my gauzy drapes made me feel almost nude. While the ten-person Chinese dragon was the hit of the ball, we were hands down the most beautiful. At the party Tommy spent some time with an intense black-haired guy with eyes so blue, dressed up like a horse. Afterwards, with a sad smile he said this was Pete, his very first love, whom he rarely saw anymore. Why do boys seem to have such a hard time sticking together?

Anyhow, after the ball we paraded down Royal Street in our costumes drawing many stares from the crowds. A stop here in the Napoleon House to meet Raj and Felicia, who are now quite together, in the Music Room. Several tourists took flash pictures of us as pieces of New Orleans scenery. Then it was past La Marina to cause a sensation in the swirling crowds, and then to the Mill, as Tommy said, to appear like an Olympian epiphany to our Greek friends. All the sailors in the joint went wild over us, shouting and dancing. Fortunately Terry brought our regular clothes, so we ran into the restrooms to change. Time for more of this rare wine I'm sipping so slowly. The waiter looked over, I touched my glass, and he understood.

I just couldn't keep it up. My decision to stop the debauch was my own. I simply asked Tommy to join me. To try and live a sane, calm life with normal evenings out at movies, dinner. We were over there in the Music Room when I asked Tommy. He sat there across the table, his fingers tapping on the rim of his glass like on a piano to the Beethoven playing. He watched his fingers, his beautiful brown eyes inconsolable, and said, "Rose... I can't." After that there was simply nothing to talk about. In a minute he slowly stood up from the table and said he should be getting on back to La Marina. Neither one of us said the word. Just sad smiles. No kiss. Passing by outside the window on Chartres, he waved to me. Like that it was all over. Without shouts or tears. I started crying only after the wave. We were just two people casually going their separate ways. Of course we never really were lovers. Tommy went back to his desperate seeking in the dives. But that's none of my business anymore, I suppose. I've taken my walk on the wild side.

Ah, we were so perfect together, so like each other, both sensitive to beauty and art, full of *joi de vivre*... It's very hard not to look back and wonder what if... What if I'd made a move one of those nights in his bed? I bet Tommy's never been with a girl, and to have been his first... How maudlin, sitting here crushing out another cigarette in the full ashtray and moaning about

**DIVINE DEBAUCH**

**DEVIATE**

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what if... At least I'm going a bit slower on the wine this evening. Sure seems to me this thing I'm writing is now done. When you descend to the maudlin, you're through. Tomorrow I start the sane, calm life, if I can remember how to do it. Maybe a Saturday night fling to come here for a drink. Early to bed, early to rise. I expect my grades might well benefit. Meet some nice guy who'd never in a million years dream of getting fucked by a Greek sailor—or three of them! A man who would—

Why, here comes Ben again... Once more I begged to finish a line or two. He's come earlier tonight so I'm not as drunk. Must close this "letter" now to be sociable with the sweet guy.  
(Floridly) Love, Rose

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