

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 Marineros. 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

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 deluge*.

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 pretty girlfriend Natalie was in his bed when we got there. She was obviously surprised 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 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 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 had 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—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

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 Chrissake, 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 castle 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, clearly very drunk, 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, plowing through the crowd like a Sherman tank, 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 Ksandros. 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 Ksandros, 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 Ksandros 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," 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 Tchoupitoulas 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 deviated 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 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 leg 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 what if... At least I'm going a bit slower on the wine this evening. Sure seems to me that 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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