

ONE OF US  
(film synopsis)

ROSE SCANLON, 17, a spirited, beautiful, New Orleans debutante, has every reason to expect the best that 1941 New Orleans has to offer. Even though America is shaking off the Depression and about to enter WWII, Rose moves in the insular circles of upper class New Orleans society--a world of French Catholic piety, aristocratic manners and worn opulence. She has a steady beau, a strong and loving family, friends, parties, clothes. Over and above this she has a driving ambition to become a doctor, and the intelligence and means to see her dreams through. In all her relationships--with her mother, FLORRIE, her best friend, MAGGIE, a flamboyant Cajun, and her boyfriend, BJ, Rose is singularly sure of herself. Irreverent and confident, Rose fights with her mother over clothes and D.H. Lawrence, yet the two have a deep bond. Yes, Rose has big plans--her degree from Tulane, the wedding at the Cathedral, and even the gown she will wear for it. She has every reason to expect her life to unfold graciously and bountifully. The last thing she expects is to be diagnosed with a debilitating illness, and for that illness to be leprosy.

Although it is the twentieth century, the stigma of leprosy-- the received belief that it is sexually transmitted, that it is punishment for sin--has not faded since Biblical times. The diagnosis plunges both mother and daughter into confusion and fear. Suddenly, they are isolated from the world they called their own, and estranged from each other. Florrie wants to throw Rose the only lifeline she can--her strong spiritual beliefs. Rose, angry at the first thing she has encountered in her life which she cannot control, rejects her mother's beliefs, finding herself furious with a God she no longer believes in.

Rose is spirited away to the Louisiana Leper Home in Carville, Louisiana. There is no alternative; the law is ironclad. Carville, as it is called, is sequestered on swampy mosquito-infested land sixty miles northwest of New Orleans--but it might as well be in China. To enter Carville means to leave one's old life, absolutely. Not only does the patient leave behind family, friend, and civil rights, but she must also discard her name at the gate, in order to protect those left behind from the stigma.

At the Carville gate, Florrie Scanlon places her Rose into the care of one of the Daughters of Charity, SISTER MARY FRANCES, a tall, brisk nun. In stunned acquiescence, Rose follows SMF into the compound, turning to watch as her mother recedes into the distance. Yet she recovers some of her old fight in the nun's office, only to find a steely adversary. When told that accepting her fate will make life easier, Rose appears to comply, but secretly believes that she will soon be cured. Taking the name of AGNES, after the martyr, she enters into her Carville days refusing to associate with the crippled, the poor, the gin-drinking women or the working-class men. She clings to the belief that her boyfriend will wait for her, that she and her friends will soon pick up where they left off: going to movies, eating beignets in the French Quarter, trying new hairstyles and fashions. This fantasy begins to fade, however, when during her first year, letters from her mother indicate that her friends are moving on without her. SMF challenges her to put aside her girlish dreams and pick up the life she has. The nun puts Rose/Agnes to work in the infirmary, training her, hoping to keep her stimulated. SMF

loves Rose/Agnes, grieves for her loss, but also knows that to pine for the life she had will only lead to bitterness.

In her work at the infirmary, Rose comes in contact with young Dr. Jack, who is working with the experimental new sulphone drugs. He is handsome, engaging, generally flirtatious, and all of Rose/Agnes' longings come to focus on him. She tries to impress him with her medical knowledge, and she takes his attentions more seriously than they are meant to be taken. SMF intervenes, and gently tries to help Rose over the infatuation. Rose/Agnes vents all her fury at SMF, only to have SMF reveal her own experience with heartbreak.

Although discouraged from entertaining romantic thoughts about Dr. Jack, Rose/Agnes is pursued in turn by BIG RED, a former stevedore and seasoned resident of Carville. Although dating of any kind is strictly forbidden, secret liaisons are rampant at Carville. Disappointed by Dr. Jack's indifference to her, assaulted by the reality of her life in Carville, Rose/Agnes finally succumbs to Red's earthiness and warmth. Her fall from innocence does not go unnoticed by MARTHA, a bitter neurotic woman who resides in the same house with Rose/Agnes. Martha begins a campaign of intimidation, insinuating Rose's sinfulness and damnation. Rose, already confused by the strong feelings she is experiencing with Red, the conflict with her upbringing, and anxiety about pregnancy, becomes terrified by Martha's rants.

Ironically, the new sulphone drugs don't seem to help Rose/Agnes, but work wonderfully on Red. Because of this, after passing rigorous tests, he is "allowed to go home," a development he greets ambivalently. After years of confinement, he isn't sure of his ability to operate in the outside world. His wife has long ago left him, and he is afraid of future employers learning the truth, and of having to endure the shame of his condition. But he yearns to see his son, to spend some time with him, and so despite Rose's entreaties, he leaves.

Red's departure causes Rose to collapse. Her fragilely constructed world has disintegrated, and once more, she is left without love. She enters the hospital with a flare-up so severe that the nerve endings in her hands are damaged and she loses all feeling in them. She gives into despair, for with the loss of feeling in her hands, she will no longer be able to work as SMF's assistant. She begins to believe that she is being punished, that Martha was right. She tries to OD on pain medicine, but her hands betray her. She refuses physical therapy and withdraws into depression. However, SHIRLEY, a gentle Mexican woman who has befriended Rose/Agnes, helps her heal both spiritually and physically, using ancient curandismo. Rose/Agnes learns not only to protect herself from Martha, but to deal with her own demons.

Rose/Agnes' beloved adversary, SMF, also helps her with a tough-love proposition: Agnes can use her knowledge to teach the growing number of children at Carville. At first, Rose/Agnes resists her, but then realizes that she cannot go backwards and can only go forwards. She accepts the position as teacher. She is awkward and reluctant at first--she has little patience and finds the children difficult and unruly. However, she eventually grows into the role, and comes finally, to achieve some serenity. She has grown into a woman who, while entertaining few illusions, can look at the world without bitterness, and can give of herself.