

A Story

by Rebecca Saalfrank

They'd meet after the nuclear war. With the ruins of the city still smoking all around, he'd somehow find her crouching in a cellar, shivering, sobbing, all alone. He'd limp painfully over to her and gently wrap his only blanket around her shoulders. Then, through her tears, she'd look up at him. . .

No, that's stupid, I thought. My pencil scratched little Freudian circles on the legal pad across my lap. The dorm basement is a lonely cinder block labyrinth, and I sat right in the middle, in the room with the blood-red chairs. Sometimes, a flat, bodiless voice echoed out at me from the labyrinth, swelling into an eerie, gibbering crescendo and then dying away again. The hard red nap of the chair bit into my legs. Somewhere, invisible fingers played an ivory keyboard, and the muffled tune drifted around me—a yearning, three-beat dirge that pulsated in and out like waves on the seashore. The stifling heat pressed down and made me want to gasp for breath.

Write! I ordered myself. But nothing came out. Inside, thousands of isolated images whipped together and churned in a red, indecipherable mass. I watched in curiosity as a small bird tore into the room, a fury of little feathers. Its wings beat the hot air as it wheeled around. Then it streaked toward the black pane of a darkened door and burst in an explosion of feathers against the glass.

I could put them in an aviary, I thought. Or the jungle. With a thousand monkeys chittering in the trees all around. . . Or, better yet, an alien jungle: they'd crash-land the shuttle, but the third crew member with them would die in the impact. She'd try to scratch out a shallow grave in the rocky soil with her fingers, but her ears would be bleeding badly. And when she'd pass out, he'd limp out painfully from the shuttle and gently pick her up. . .

No, *Mademoiselle* says a story must be real. But what's real? Peter behind the stacks, I thought. Each Tuesday during mid-class break, we separated to two different ends of the library. He stood alone behind the magazines and watched me, and I jabbered absently with my girlfriend as I looked right back. The next week, I would watch from behind the stacks as he strolled about, chattering with his friend. When each class finished and we both returned home, I could watch him from across the library again.

But that's no story, I thought—nothing happens. I decided to give my character red hair and name him Peter. One Tuesday, they'd accidentally meet each other behind the stacks. She'd look at Peter and Peter would look at her, and they would both suddenly read each other's minds. They'd feel. . . I need a metaphor here, I thought. A raging fire consuming them both in a moment. An arrow piercing them through the heart. Or fireworks and the revelation they were meant for each other. But all cliches, I thought. Be real: what's a good

metaphor? Love is—I thought for a moment—love is that sweet pressure inside your chest when your heart swells like a bird. . .

Somewhere along the line I drifted off without realizing it. In my dream, I crept across a rickety, rotten plank across a huge tank of fish and then woke to finish my story. Then I woke with a start. The same three-beat dirge cut a muffled undercurrent through the thick, stifling air. Across the room, an unfamiliar figure wearing a grotesque monkey mask stared at me. Thin brown latex wrinkles quivered as the man giggled and drunkenly lurched through a mock monkey dance. He threw an obscene gesture at me and fell to the red carpet. I daydreamed about Peter throwing me a sick gesture and then falling down on the floor before me. Write! I ordered myself, but still nothing came out. *Mademoiselle* says a **good** writer must be objective about her story.

They'd meet in the cafeteria. He'd start silently choking on his food, and she would be the only one to notice anything wrong. . . The legal pad on my lap filled with little circles, and the hard red nap of my chair bit harder into me. I closed my eyes. Echoing murmurs from the labyrinth rose and fell and danced with the lonely piano dirge in the heat. The heavy musical air pressed down on my chest. Inside, my heart swelled and burst like a bird in a shower of feathers as I searched for some end to the story.