

It had become my habit to examine the state of my bedclothes while dressing in the morning. The condition of my sheets told me much more than I could remember of my nocturnal activity, for I hadn't recalled a dream in over five years. I learned that my sleep held very little relation to my waking life; I often went to bed in a sullen mood—why would I consider sleep in any other?—and woke up unchanged, but my sheets were never so predictable. Some mornings they were still starched and uncreased as if I'd hovered above them the entire night, while on other mornings they were crumpled into a damp ball in the center of my mattress, a configuration which could only have come from something chewing on them for hours. While buttoning my shirt, I would fish around in the folds with my foot and uncover strange articles: unknown keys, tickets to performances I'd never heard of, and foreign coins.

On the morning of my visit to Mr. Selmare's, my sheets formed a long furrow down the center of the bed, and the covers were piled up by my pillow in the shape of a dead sea lion—or, rather, simply a sea lion, for in my opinion sea lions reliably look dead. In the crevice between the bed and the wall I found a torn note, which I reluctantly read, knowing by experience that it wouldn't be optimistic.

*Dear Mr. Cormill,*

*The payment you made with enviable timeliness nonetheless lacked sufficient quantity. Should your circumstances hinder the precipitation of the remainder, and assuming your opinion of jail to be suitably negative, please meet me at Ralfo's Family Foods to discuss alternate options. Flight, though suggestive of romance, is ill-advised.*

*Sincerely,*

*Peter Ralfo Sr.*

I am not Mr. Cormill, and at that time I knew nothing of the man. My name is Pinson Charfo. I'm tall enough to be considered good-looking, and my hair has been quite intimate with a number of my female acquaintances. I don't have very much money, but I would never skimp on a bill because I have enough foresight to steal

what I can't afford. My opinion of Mr. Cormill was therefore pretty low indeed, though, I confess, I was a little envious of his timeliness. I pocketed the note and decided to visit this Ralfo in the afternoon in order to discover how it came to be in my possession, but first I had to turn my mind to other things.

I'd scheduled myself to visit Mr. Selmare in his photograph shop on the city square, and on my way I had to plan ahead for our conversation. Mr. Selmare was something of a hermit, not due to any philosophical persuasion but, rather, to the combination of a dedication to his business and an absolute lack of customers. His shop was a tidy collection of densely packed shelves, each carefully labeled to indicate the nature of the prints it held. Mr. Selmare lived in the back room, which was also the darkroom. I suspected the fumes had a significant influence on the man: his skin was entirely white and his hair the darkest shade of brown. He moved, birdlike, between stationary poses in a way the eye couldn't quite capture. I had to pick my words carefully with Mr. Selmare because he was a dangerous conversationalist, and that morning I wanted to buy a number of disreputable prints from him.

I considered starting with "Hello, Mr. Selmare," but

there was something wrong with it. I tried it out loud and found that I couldn't say "Selmare" very clearly without a lot of practice. I decided to stay clear of his name: "Hello, I would like to buy a number of your disreputable prints." That sounded pretty good. "Which ones?" he would ask. I planned to reply, "The salty ones, sir!" but, after some thought, revised it to, "Do you have any where the subjects are on an airplane wing?" I didn't expect Mr. Selmare to have prints like that, which was fine because I didn't want anything to do with morally questionable photographs in which the subjects were on an airplane wing, but it seemed assertive enough. The truth was that I didn't want anything to do with any disreputable prints in the first place, but I'd promised my pupil's father, in confidence, that I could find him some.

Sarah Beeley, who lived in the apartment below mine, was just returning home as I went out into the street. I saluted her and she reciprocated with her delicate hand. I can't remember if it was I who had invented the salute and she who copied it, or the other way around, but it was a civilian salute, with a lazy tenderness unsuited to discipline. Sarah had, at different times, been one of the girls quite familiar with my hair;

the gesture was very indicative of our relationship. She was pretty and with a family name so ugly that she was literally aching to get married. I often wondered at my chances. The trouble was my work, and perhaps also my existential terror.

“Pin, wait a minute,” she said before I went past her. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

I faced her and smiled; it was easy for me to grin when I had something to do afterward.

“Sure. What is it?”

“I want you to go to a party with me.” She was looking away to one side, her eyes slightly lowered. “Tomthy’s costume party. You weren’t going to go, were you?”

“No, I wasn’t, for my usual reasons.”

“Will you go with me?”

“Of course,” I replied. “But you should know that I’ll likely make a scene.”

“You won’t make a scene. People love you.”

Sarah took hold of a button on my coat. She worked it in and out of the buttonhole for a time while I uncomfortably looked at her eyebrows instead of her eyes. I’d once looked too closely at her cheeks and found more hair there than I’d wanted to, and then I’d started to notice more hair on other girls’ cheeks. There was some-

thing very beautiful about Sarah's eyes, and I didn't want to accidentally notice anything weird about them that I would also start to see in others' eyes.

"Regardless, I'm just warning you," I said.

"It's in my nature to blow that off," she said.

"Sarah, have you ever noticed how people don't take care to examine their food? They might find a hair in it occasionally, but it's just chance. I'm not saying I take more care, but at least I acknowledge that I *could* take more care if I cared enough to stop myself from eating misplaced objects."

"Misplaced objects? I know that one-fifth of cashews have a worm inside, though that might only apply in a different country," she replied dreamily.

"I once bit into a sandwich and found a knife inside. The lady at the counter must have misplaced her bread knife inside my sandwich."

I'd told Sarah that anecdote once before, but because she knew that I knew that she knew that I'd told her that story already, it had a special charm this time. We both smiled.

"The point," I continued, "is that I counted eight misplaced objects in the punch last time we went to Tommy's."

“But you didn’t make a scene about it.”

“I didn’t make a scene about that, no. I didn’t tell anyone, and I kept drinking it, a lot of it. But I did make a scene when I encouraged Patrice to slap me.”

“You didn’t deserve that.”

Sarah finally released my button and looked away again. This time she stared out into the street, her eyes going back and forth as they followed the passing cars.

She said, “Patrice is a bitch,” and, after a pause, “I wanted to be a diver.”

A long silence later, Sarah turned back to me and told me that the party was in a few nights and that she wanted me to go as a wizard. I asked her what she had meant about being a diver—because Patrice hadn’t gone to the party as a diver—and she told me that she had wanted to be a diver professionally. I asked how that was relevant, and she told me that I could go as a shaman if I wanted, instead. I asked if I could go as a deer hunter and she said that I couldn’t. We parted ways then and I looked back to watch her climb the stairs. Was the name Charfo any better than Beeley? “Sarah Charfo,” I thought. Probably better, but it really was a matter of opinion.