

SEEKING ATLANTIS

For the past two weeks, Igor has been training to become a bus driver, a profession notable for its excellent benefits and high turnover rates. The prospect of a paying job should help uplift our spirits, which have reached a low point after discovering that takeout from Hunan Dragon no longer falls within our budget. From his first class Igor comes home in a chipper mood, buoyed by the knowledge that he has passed his criminal background check and learned, in the first hour alone, how to detect a forced whisper at five feet. I am proud of him, I guess; I like his display of courage in embracing the unknown for five hours straight, and the way he tucks his pencil behind his ear and leaves it there until I remind him to take it out. But I don't understand why, on the second day of class, he slaps his cheeks with aftershave before leaving the house, or

his distractedness at dinner that evening, when the only subject that seems to interest him is language endangerment in the South Pacific.

Eventually I do understand. Because the world is continually in flux, Igor feels it would be best if we started seeing other people.

“Nothing is permanent,” he tells me, staring into the eye of a fried egg that I made him for breakfast, the same breakfast that I make for him every day. “In five minutes we won’t be the same people we are at this moment, and in ten minutes we may have lost ourselves entirely.”

Igor is attracted to another woman. Her name is Ilana. Ilana is a linguist specializing in language endangerment, a discipline that Igor professes to care deeply about, especially after consuming large quantities of alcohol while lying in the dark.

“If I stop talking about my eyes, will you reconsider?” I ask. Igor’s proposal is poorly timed; a new treatment for *D. folliculorum* could be found any day now, the colony of microscopic mites amassed at the roots of my lashes forced to retreat and lay down their arms. The image is imperfect, for the discomfort is hard to describe. Nevertheless, I do enjoy dwelling on it.

Igor tentatively takes a bite of egg. “That is a bond I cannot ask you to break,” he says. He spits something white and hard onto his plate—a small piece of shell. Mornings have been less than kind to my condition, blurring my vision at inopportune moments and always in the kitchen; evenings are outright cruel.

“Blepharitis knows no bonds,” I reply, knowing the pun will escape Igor, as all puns do. “In fact, some of the mites staged a mutiny last night and migrated into my ear.

That tickling sensation I told you about? In my right ear the whole night, while you were dreaming about Ilana's fieldwork methods. I have to call Dr. Sanders."

"I'd like to accompany Ilana to Papua New Guinea," Igor says.

I wait for my eyes to well up, but the mites have made a mockery of my tear ducts. "Papua New Guinea?" I repeat, uttering those three words for the very first time.

"It's mostly wanderlust," admits Igor, his leg bouncing up and down. "And a little nostalgia for my grandmother's Yiddish. The Arapesh people are excellent yam growers, but their ancestral tongue is disappearing, and Ilana wants to figure out why."

While Igor is in class, I putter around the house to prepare for his arrival five hours from now. The rooms feel empty as I pass through them, each room a reminder of an encounter I have had with Igor that should serve as a bulwark against external threats. I pick up a pot that we once dared each other to watch until it came to a boil, and fill it with water. It would be so easy to put the pot on the stove and make a pasta, to serve Igor a hot meal and let the steam from it soothe my burning eyes. Instead, I leave the vessel in the sink and go into the living room to crouch behind the radiator, where a die from a board game Igor and I never once played recently turned up, prompting us to spend the whole evening racing soap box derby cars around a cardboard track. The die is still there, because Igor is a poor loser and likes to fling things when he fulminates. I am tempted to put it in my pocket for safekeeping, but I know that if I do, I will lose it within an hour, and I am too superstitious to take such a risk.

In the evening, Igor makes no mention of the chives I have chopped onto his baked potato. “Tomorrow is the last class before the driving training begins,” he says, inserting the food into his mouth absentmindedly, an insult to poor yam growers the world over. “And I still have so much to learn.”

I take his statement at face value, because Igor’s statements have never been suspect before. There’s a lot to be said for starting a relationship in a small town, where any good reason to end things resides at least two towns to the north. Compared to the people we come into daily contact with, Igor and I appear perfect to each other, even if objectively we are an enigma, like a pile of napkins placed in a puddle.

“How can tomorrow be your last class?” I ask. “You’ve only had two.”

“It’s scandalous,” agrees Igor. “In three days, twelve hours of instruction. That’s the average workday of an Arapesh farmer, at the end of which he will only have produced enough food to feed his immediate family.”

“Are you learning anything about driving a bus?”

“Some. But Ilana passed me a petition to sign right when we were reviewing the colors of a traffic light. It was hard to concentrate.”

“Ilana,” I repeat.

If Igor blushes—as he should—my blepharitic eyes do not register the color change.

“She’s probably the only PhD ever to take this class,” he says, suddenly full of himself in a way that makes me want to take back the slice of tomato I have just slid onto his plate. “And the only linguist, for sure. She needs to drive a bus for her fieldwork.”

I close my eyes. It is enough for me to imagine Ilana's feet planted in a pair of Carolina farm boots to appreciate the threat she represents. I am sure that in a university lecture hall she would not appear a threat at all, but just another slack-jawed academic projecting platitudes from a podium, and I wonder whether Igor might shelve his bus driving ambitions and apply to graduate school.

"I spoke to Dr. Sanders today," I say, for there are things happening in my life too. "She said that thanks to my frequent visits, she has started to pay closer attention to her patients' eyelashes, and that nearly all of them have blepharitis to some degree or another."

"Hmm," says Igor.

"She said that sometimes we see things that aren't there, and sometimes we don't see things that are staring us right in the face."

"Uh huh."

"She asked me how often we wash our sheets."

"Not very."

"I told her once a week. And that we own several sets of pillowcases."

"Really?"

A lump lodges itself in my throat then, encapsulating the multitude of little ways that I have failed in my life with Igor. I could make a list of them, or I could recall the week that Igor and I first met and I sent him flowers, which he placed in a beautiful crystal vase on the floor in the darkest corner of his living room.

“Why don’t we, Igor?” I ask, wishing that for once we could be like everyone else, upholding the minimum standards of hygiene while concealing the rot within us from public view. “Why don’t we own several sets of pillowcases?”

Igor extracts three green strands from his dinner and deposits them at the side of his plate. “I’m sure some parts of the world don’t use pillows at all,” he says, drifting closer to Papua New Guinea with every word. “I’ll have to ask Ila—

“There’s no need for that,” I interrupt. “I’m just going to wash our sheets more often and start with the tea tree oil. If my eyes are able to breathe again, that will be good for both of us. Maybe we can even take a vacation somewhere, if we find a cheap rental car and learn how to make a campfire. How does that sound? Would a vacation get your mind off of Ilana?”

I say her name with deliberation to show that I am not afraid, and because it is a beautiful name. But Igor is even less afraid than me. He shrugs. “As my grandmother used to say, *‘Lomir makhn a tikn.’*”

“And what does that mean?”

“A drink might help,” he translates. “But she mainly used alcohol to clean the toilet seat. I think the saying might be in reference to soup.”

I back up. “Might help forget, or remember?”

“That’s a hard one, isn’t it.” Igor shakes his head, but his brow isn’t in the least bit furrowed. “A conundrum, you might say.”

We lie in the dark, a bottle of schnapps between us, for the rest of the evening.

The next stage of Igor's class has him sitting behind the wheel of a bus with a veteran driver named Jeb. After the first day, Igor returns with a cloud over his head.

"What's wrong?" I ask, as he plunks himself down into a chair that he has forgotten needs fixing.

"This class," Igor announces. "Jeb says that mirage puddles are formed when the collective fumes from all the McDonald's in town converge. It's a difficult image to digest."

I ease him out of the chair and into another one, only slightly less broken. "Why only from McDonald's? What about all the other crappy restaurants in town?"

"I need to go to Papua New Guinea," Igor says.

Our pillowcases have been laundered, our sheets shaken out. And yet.

"You're still thinking about her?" Ilana's name is bereft of beauty now; there is no reason in the world to invoke it.

"And the Arapesh yam growers," Igor qualifies. "But mostly her."

Were his judgment not impaired by those five hours with Jeb, the temptation to infantilize Igor's feelings would be very great indeed. I could inform Igor that he looks overworked, point out his poor grooming and mismatched socks. Instead, I clap my hands to wake us both up from the deep sleep we surely must be in. "Hey, I know!" I exclaim with the eagerness of a child, for Igor has grown on me over time, and I am not ready to give him up. "Let's watch that stupid video you brought home yesterday! Or better yet, go back to the store and get a different one!"

Igor opts for the former, and within a few minutes we have settled into a movie with Margaret Mead about garden sharing in Samoa. My eyes are closed, as I can no

longer look at a screen without the potent sensation that my pupils have been set on fire, but snuggling with Igor under the covers gives me the courage to speak that sitting in a broken chair would not supply. “I have a confession to make,” I say, and burrow in deeper.

“What?”

“I’m not even sure I know where Papua New Guinea is. I’ve always thought of it as some mythical place, like Atlantis or El Dorado. In reality, it’s probably full of mosquitoes.”

Igor squirms. I reach over and squeeze his kneecap.

“Mead has observed that in Samoa, love is available for the asking,” he says, seeing things on the screen that I’m pretty sure are not there.

I open my eyes just enough to make out a row of coconut palms blowing in the wind, and to press the mute button on the remote. “But with me, you don’t need to ask,” I remind him.

Igor stops squirming. “I guess I also have a confession to make,” he says.

“Really?”

“Ilana didn’t ask me to accompany her on the trip.”

“She didn’t?”

“She asked if I wanted to attend a seminar she’s giving on the partitioning of nouns in the Arapesh lexicon.”

“A seminar? Where? When?”

“Tomorrow, at the university,” Igor says. “I’d have to miss a day of class.”

“Oh, go,” I urge this sweet man. “Do what you must.”

As darkness falls and the mites emerge from my meibomian glands for their nightly bacchanalia, Igor rolls on top of me, and we lie together like two specimens of a new species preparing for peer review. Even though we are firm believers in finishing what we start, I turn off Margaret Mead, because I already know that love is a lot like a garden: if the conditions are lacking, it will not grow. I don't need a video to teach me that.

Afterward, in a state of half-sleep, I conjure Ilana in her boots again, cross-legged, in the center of a circle along with a dozen other seminar participants. Igor is one of them, and I observe him sitting stock-still as the people in the circle start to fidget, slowly at first, and then at an accelerated pace, like atoms portending the release of a large amount of energy. The image is imperfect, for the *D. folliculorum* are at it again, communicating in a language I cannot understand, or perhaps laying the cornerstone in my eyes for a new Atlantis. In the morning, after seeing Igor off, I will call Dr. Sanders. She believes that a cure can be found for anything.