

松島

The Pine Islands

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Tokyo

He'd dreamt that his wife had been cheating on him. Gilbert Silvester woke up distraught. Mathilda's black hair lay spread out on the pillow next to him, tentacles of a malevolent pitch-black jellyfish. Thick strands of it gently stirred in time with her breathing, creeping towards him. He quietly got out of bed and went into the bathroom, where he stared aghast into the mirror. He left the house without eating breakfast. When he finished work that evening he still felt dumbfounded, almost numb. The dream hadn't dissipated over the course of the day and hadn't faded sufficiently for the inane expression 'dreams are but shadows' to be applicable. On the contrary, the night's impressions had become steadily stronger, more conclusive. An unmistakable warning from his unconscious to his naïve, unsuspecting ego.

He walked into the hallway, dropped his briefcase theatrically, and confronted his wife. She denied everything. This only confirmed his suspicions. Mathilda

seemed different. Unusually fervent. Agitated. Ashamed. She accused him of slipping out early in the morning without saying goodbye. I. Was. Worried. How. Could. You. Endless accusations. A flimsy deflection tactic. As if the blame suddenly lay with him. She had gone too far. He wouldn't allow it.

He couldn't recall later on whether he had shouted at her (probably), struck her (surely not) or spat at her (well, really, a little spittle may very well have sprayed from his mouth while he was talking animatedly at her), he had at any rate gathered a few things together, taken his credit cards and his passport and left, walking along the pavement past the house, and when she didn't come after him and didn't call out his name, he carried on, somewhat slower at first and then faster, till he reached the next underground station, and disappeared down the steps, one might say in hindsight, as if sleepwalking. He travelled through the city and didn't get out until he reached the airport.

He spent the night in Terminal B, uncomfortably sprawled across two metal chairs. He kept checking his smartphone. Mathilda hadn't sent him any messages. His flight was leaving the next morning, the earliest intercontinental flight he could book at short notice.

In the plane en route to Tokyo he drank green tea, watched two samurai films and repeatedly reassured

himself that he had not only done everything right, but that his actions had indeed been inevitable, were still inevitable, and would carry on being inevitable, not only according to his personal opinion, but according to world opinion.

He'd retreat. He wouldn't insist on his rights. He'd make way, for whomever it was. Her boss, the head teacher, a grouchy macho kind of guy. The handsome adolescent who she was allegedly mentoring, a trainee teacher. Or one of those pushy women she teaches with. He was no match for a woman. With a man, time would potentially be on his side. He could wait and see how things developed, ride out the storm until she changed her mind. It stands to reason that the allure of what was forbidden would fade sooner or later. But up against another woman he didn't stand a chance. Unfortunately, the dream hadn't been completely clear on this point. Overall, however, the dream had been clear enough. Very clear. As if he had suspected it. He had essentially suspected it. For quite a while actually. Hadn't she been in a remarkably good mood for the last few weeks? Downright cheerful? And markedly friendly towards him? A diplomatic kind of friendliness that had grown more and more unbearable as time went on, which would have become even more unbearable if he had known what was hiding behind it sooner. But this was how she

had managed to lull him into a false sense of security for so long. And he had allowed himself to be lulled, a clear failure on his part. He'd dropped his guard, allowed himself to be disappointed, because his suspicion hadn't been limitless.

The Japanese stewardess, long black hair put up in a knot, presented him tea with a dazzling smile. Of course, her smile wasn't for him personally, but it soothed his entire body, as if someone had poured a bucket of balm over him. He sipped his tea and saw that she maintained this smile as she made her way through the cabin, that she bestowed it on each and every one of the passengers, immutable, a masklike grace that fulfilled its purpose with unsettling efficiency.

He'd always feared that he was too boring for Mathilda. From the outside, their relationship seemed in good order. But he couldn't offer her much in the long run, no dynamic social life, no astounding her with his wit, no depth of character.

He was a humble researcher, an associate lecturer. He hadn't made it to professor because he lacked the proper family background; he didn't know how to make useful contacts, he didn't know how to schmooze, he couldn't sell himself. He'd realised far too late that the world of

the university was primarily about exercising power in a hierarchical system, and that the matter at hand was only of secondary or tertiary importance. This was where he had made an error, a myriad of errors. He'd criticised his doctoral supervisor. He'd always known better at the most inappropriate moment. Then, intimidated, held back just when he should have been bragging.

As a thick blanket of cloud passed by beneath him, the years drifted by in his memory, a gloomy grey mass of indignities and failures. As a young man he had believed that he was of superior intelligence, that he stood out from the crowd of stuffy, well-adjusted overachievers and that he would cut through the affairs of the world with philosophical ingenuity. Now he found himself once more in precarious circumstances, making his way from one project to the next, and saw himself professionally left in the dust by former friends who had all got vastly worse marks than he had and who had never expressed a single innovative idea between them. Friends who, to be blunt, were technically less competent than he was. But unlike him they possessed that certain clever demeanour, the kind that was the only valuable thing when it came to careers.

While they were settling down in their own homes with their families and routines, he saw himself forced into carrying out idiotic and meagrely remunerated work

imposed on him by people he categorically despised. For years he had lived in fear of this kind of work so overcoming him that he could no longer think clearly. Then the fear had subsided and had given way to a feeling of general apathy. He carried out what was asked of him, turned his keen senses to the foolhardiest of tasks and in the meantime, alas years or decades too late, became able to give the impression that he was fine with everything, that he wasn't against it, but for it.

The Japanese stewardess came by with a basket, steam rising from it. She passed him a hot, rolled-up flannel with a pair of long metal tongs. He mechanically wiped his hands with it, wrung the flannel around his wrists, let the stinging heat penetrate his pulse, this custom is such a respite, he thought, a peculiar flight where everyone was doing their utmost to keep him calm, he ran the flannel over his forehead, a motherly hand during a fever, incredibly pleasant, but it had already started to cool, he lay it over his face, only a couple of seconds, until it was nothing more than a cold, damp cloth.

His current work had made him an expert in beard styles. Though unrivalled in the dubiousness stakes, it had at

least secured him a steady income over the years. And over time he had succeeded in finding enjoyment in this ineffable subject, which was incidentally the way it always went – that the interest in the individual parts grew the more one was immersed in the whole system. At the driving school he had enthused over the highway code, at the dance school over step sequences; it wasn't rocket science or witchcraft to have the ability to identify with something.

Gilbert Silvester, beard researcher in the context of a third-party project sponsored primarily by the North Rhine-Westphalian film industry, and secondarily by a feminist organisation in Düsseldorf and the Jewish community in Cologne.

The project examined the impact of the representation of beards in film. It incorporated aspects of cultural studies and gender theory, religious iconography and queried the possibility of philosophical expressivity via the medium of the image.

As always it was a research project where the results had already been established. He carried out the legwork, amassed the minutiae, confirmed through the richness of the material its significance, attested to the general applicability of its cultural theoretical conclusions, and revealed finally and not without flourish the surprising conclusions, which in reality were not only not all that

surprising but had in fact been present in Gilbert's mind from the very beginning, and ultimately had vanishingly little impact on the film industry's immense power to manipulate viewers around the world.

He went to the library in the mornings, would turn off his mobile phone and sink into reproductions of the Italian masters, into mosaics and book illustrations from the middle ages. Depictions of beards were ubiquitous, and he had long wondered how it could be that such a fundamental issue hadn't been researched a long time ago. *Beard fashions and the image of God* was his thematic focal point, which, depending on the day, he either found enormously fruitful, electrifying even, or completely absurd and deeply depressing.

As the last bastion of his personal resistance he had held on to certain nostalgic habits from his schooldays. Notes handwritten only with a fountain pen and ink, in black notebooks bound with thread. A leather satchel darkened over the course of decades, never a nylon rucksack. A shirt and jacket at all times. These had helped him make an impression as a student and maintain his position as the most sensitive of intellectuals. Now these idiosyncrasies were simply further manifestations of his downfall. He clung on to words that had long fallen out of usage

and on to implements of a past age, there was something antiquated about him. Indeed, he had tried to offset it with postmodern ties and neon-coloured pocket squares. To no avail. He was regarded at the university as a reactionary aesthete. Cigarette smoke brought on headaches. He didn't care for football, and he didn't eat meat.

He wiped his palms again, spread out the white terry-cloth square on his fold-down table and left it like that.

Beneath him the blanket of cloud tore open and allowed a glimpse of Siberia. The mighty Ob River with its many streams nobly snaked its way through the swamp-lands and forests. On the screen the dummy aeroplane fitfully moved a little away from Tomsk in the direction of Krasnoyarsk and further on towards Irkutsk.

European Russia, Siberia, Mongolia, China, Japan – a flight path that only passed over tea-drinking nations. Until now, Gilbert Silvester had categorically dismissed countries with above-average tea consumption. He travelled in coffee-drinking countries, France, Italy, he enjoyed ordering a *café au lait* after a museum visit in Paris or requesting a *café crème* in Zurich, he liked Viennese coffee houses and the entire cultural tradition tied to it. A tradition of visibility, of being present, of clarity. In coffee countries things are overt. In tea countries

everything is played out under a shroud of mysticism. In coffee countries one is able to buy things, revel in selective luxury even with the most modest financial resources, in tea countries one can only acquire the same with the power of the imagination. He would never have willingly travelled to Russia, a country that urges its people to imagine the basic needs of everyday life into existence, even just a cup of ordinary ground coffee. With the fall of the wall East Germany, to its delight, changed from a tea to a coffee state.

But he, Gilbert Silvester, had been forced by his own wife to travel to an avowed nation of tea. He was even willing to consider this Japan – with its gruellingly lengthy, exceptionally detailed, indeed devastatingly pretentious tea culture – as the most extreme level of tea country, and so all the more excruciating for him, all the more sadistic of Mathilda to think it was reasonable to make him do this. But he was not going to hold back any longer, he was going there, out of pure freedom, out of spite.

He took his smartphone out of his breast pocket and checked for messages. Then he realised that he must have put it on flight mode and that messages were unlikely to arrive for the time being. He opened his mailbox anyway, and, in spite of this, he was disappointed not to find

anything. He didn't feel well. He was a little nauseous, from the air, from the tea on an empty stomach. He hadn't eaten in over thirty hours to be exact. A sign of regret from Mathilda's side would have been normal. A polite enquiry, a minimal attempt at contact. But he had received nothing. Had Mathilda lost her mind? Why was she no longer familiar with the fundamental constants of interpersonal relations? Why had she let it get to the point where he saw himself obliged to go on an international escapade, right over Siberia? He felt the green tea lying heavily in his stomach and sloshing with every jolt of the aircraft.

He didn't know a great deal about Japan – it wasn't exactly the land of his dreams. During the samurai era, the country had banished its unpopular intellectuals to remote islands or forced them to carry out seppuku, a gory form of suicide. The way things were going, he was travelling to the right place.

He played another samurai film but didn't watch it. He spent the remaining flight time in an arduous semi-conscious state. He only vaguely comprehended his surroundings, blanking out the other passengers. Everything seemed indistinct to him, as if cloaked in thick fog, only this fog was bearing down on him and he had to use all his strength not to be smothered by it. He tensed his shoulders, his neck, he was Atlas slowly petrifying.

He couldn't manage even a minute of sleep.

After landing he retrieved his messages, but no one had contacted him. Term hadn't started yet, he wouldn't be neglecting any appointments in the coming weeks, and no one from the university would miss him. Lectures didn't begin again until the end of October. Until then, he only had to present a lecture at a conference in Munich. He had cancelled his attendance even before his luggage arrived on the carousel.

He exchanged some money and bought a travel guide and a couple of Japanese classics in English translation from a newsagent. The works of Bashō, *The Tale of Genji*, *The Pillow Book*. He had always assumed that, like him, everyone knew the Japanese classics off by heart, but standing in front of the shelf with the pocket books he now had to admit that he himself had at most watched only a couple of Japanese films during his lifetime and had never been able so much as to recite a haiku.

He stowed the books in his leather satchel and took the airport shuttle, the Narita Express, into the centre of Tokyo. From Tokyo Central Station he took a taxi to his hotel. It was all so easy. He had travelled halfway around the world as if on autopilot, no obstacles, no delays, no problems. The taxi driver wore white gloves and a uniform with a peaked cap and shiny buttons. He couldn't speak English but nodded knowledgeably when Gilbert