

松島

The Pine Islands

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Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine.

Matsuo Bashō

東京

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 swamplands 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



showed him the piece of paper with the address on it. The journey went by in complete silence, which Gilbert found agreeable. The car glided along the road like a cross between a wedding cake and a Princess Barbie carriage, its seats covered with white crocheted lace. There were no traffic jams or red lights, no other cars, no outside world. After they pulled up the driver handed him his luggage while enthusiastically bowing. A glass door slid aside noiselessly.

His room, a white box, was practically empty. It comprised a white bed with a white bedspread, and there were two white cubes on the floor that were evidently supposed to be furniture. Very modest, very modern. He stood in the middle of the room for a while with absolutely no idea what he was doing there. Then he lay on the bed and fell straight to sleep.



Dreams of what remained from the day. Tea nations, samurai. The swordfighter dresses himself in silken garments for a crucial battle and he pays the tea master a visit. He strides over the polished stepping stones towards the tea hut hidden behind a bamboo screen in the tiny garden, he has to stoop in order to get through the much too small door, almost crawling before the tea master. The tea master says few words, whisks the tea to a



froth, passes it to the guest, and the guest has the chance, before his not improbable death, to look upon the flower arrangements, and the scroll painting with its precious calligraphy, he has the chance to lose himself in the room where the erratic shadows of the plants tumble in, where a breathtaking silence prevails.

The next morning he girds himself and heads into battle. He wields mystical powers; not only does his sword move as if of its own volition, but he can also fly, while others are only able to jump at best. These abilities have earned him the reputation of being an invincible sword master, but the opposing side outnumbers them, and his party are defeated. Filled with sorrow, he soars over the battlefield, sees all of the unnaturally twisted bodies that he cannot save, leaves them behind and rises higher, until he can see the sea shimmering in the distance. Japan from above, the countless islands, thickly forested mountains, a sumptuous green lapped at by this stirring, solemn blue, he flies over the gruesome beauty of this country one final time before taking his short sword and, as tradition demands, slitting open his stomach.



Gilbert Silvester had seen the Japanese islands from above during the incoming flight, in the light of the setting sun, and in truth this sight had momentarily overwhelmed



him. Now he awoke in a bare hotel room he didn't recognise. Where did both of these knee-high cubes – that seemed to be of absolutely no use whatsoever – come from? Were they in case of a brief fainting spell in a fitness studio? Or maybe an ice cube advert, which, to his own surprise, he had somehow fallen into? Had he recently been shooting TV advertisements somewhere in the depths of his unconscious? He stepped towards the floor-length window, pulled across the ice-white curtain, and looked at the towering glass façade of Tokyo. How had he ended up in this city without the slightest effort? What did he want to do here? The mirrored glass of the building opposite sent flashes of light into his eyes, he had to blink intensely; reflective blue glass floor after floor, dismissive, cool. What should he do here? He was, he suddenly put it to himself, very far from everything that had ever been familiar to him. He had taken himself off into the unknown, into this most unfamiliar of environments, and the eerie feeling he was experiencing stemmed from the fact that this environment didn't seem eerie in the slightest, simply functional, somewhat pretentious and somewhat sterile. He showered, put on a fresh shirt, and took the lift twenty-four floors down.



It was early evening, the air was still warm, the first



lights were coming on in the open-plan offices. Gilbert ambled along the busy streets and allowed himself to be compelled over huge crossings at intersections with the Japanese workforce clocking off for the day. He would have liked to have bought himself something to eat, but he felt too porous to make a decision, indeed, he felt veritably transparent, and this transparency had nothing to do with lightness, but was rather a manifestation of his weakness. His ability to take up space, to displace air in order to replace it with his body, seemed strangely impaired. Making his way around the city was difficult, and he sensed that it was the hectic commotion of the end of the working day that was propelling him forwards step by step, as if he was parasitically feeding on the energy radiating from the people around him, while he himself had no impetus, he didn't know where to turn, and willingly allowed himself to be carried along.



Mathilda hadn't contacted him. He had checked his emails and messages one last time in front of the lift at the hotel. His withdrawal from the conference had been regretfully acknowledged. No word from Mathilda. He had to assume that this development, which had come as rather unexpected for him, was in all respects favourable to her, and she now had free rein to pursue her own plans. She was a very busy woman, and time and time again there had been days on which, overwhelmed by commit-

ments, she was far too busy to have any time for him.

She taught music and mathematics at a high school and trained new teachers. She served as an eminent authority on teaching methodologies, and as a communications wizard and all-round secret weapon; she was, especially when weighed up against his own remuneration, very well paid and highly sought after.

But even in the case of some kind of unanticipated adversity it must be possible for her to find a free minute to make contact with him. He decided to hold his ground and wait. After everything that had happened it was clearly up to her to make the first move. Quite possibly she hadn't dared approach him now that he knew about her indiscretion and she could be certain of his wrath. Well, the onus was on her to convince him to forgive her. Just the fact that she hadn't got in contact at all was an outrageous affront. He was absolutely not going to run after her, he wasn't going to grovel, he didn't want the humiliation to go so far that he would give in, so to speak, and turn the other cheek. He did regret, however, that under these circumstances she didn't know that he had taken it upon himself to make this journey, Gilbert Silvester, alone in Tokyo, further from home than he had ever been before. There was no one else he could have told. Mathilda would have delighted in the sight of the Japanese islands from such a high altitude just as much as he had.



The crowds surged towards the underground stations and bus stops. He turned down a side street filled with small bars. It was essentially a ravine densely surrounded by high-rises, and yet oblique beams of evening sun were still managing to reach it. He sat down in a sushi bar at a counter with a view out the window and watched people rushing by. Businessmen, secretaries, schoolchildren, a few housewives. All in all, beardless people. Smooth black hair, smooth faces, smooth rehearsed smiles. A young man sauntered past, he had a full beard and white aikido trousers, his head of hair drawn up into a samurai topknot, but you could tell even from a distance that this beard's wearer was European. There are many theories circulating on the subject of the Japanese beard. The dreariest was biological: some Asiatic peoples are missing a gene or whatever is responsible for beard growth, so that they can only grow patchy beards, if at all, which, in their sparseness, don't function as a status symbol and are preferably shaved off. According to another theory, these beardless men in their prime have simply grown accustomed to fitting in, because companies demand a neat appearance from their employees, which under no circumstances includes beards. Hence, one would never catch a so-called 'salaryman' in Japan fully dedicated to



his professional life with even a hint of a beard. The third theory has to do with the overall obsession with cleanliness that the Japanese have. A man on the street with a beard has evidently not conformed to the conventions of bathing that day and is basically unclean; a horror in the land of purism. The crucial question on beard styles and the image of God wasn't related to these theories even remotely. While Gilbert Silvester had so far taken a rather Eurocentric approach to his investigation, a whole new field of research had now opened up to him by being here. This could, he told himself, even give his trip a sense of purpose. He had spent a long time with Michelangelo's depiction of God in the Sistine Chapel. God, carried on a cloud of the finest putti, God, lying there reaching out his hand to Adam with such a casual gesture, and giving him, with the tiniest, electrified touch of his completely limp finger, the breath of life; God has a full beard. As Michelangelo famously loved men, the cultural impact of the Sistine Chapel on gay culture was not insignificant for Gilbert's study. Going completely against the narcissism cliché that gay men encountered in the consciousness of the intolerant public, he proposed that the gay man didn't identify with God in the slightest, but rather with the youthful, muscular, but nevertheless exceptionally passive Adam. According to Gilbert's reasoning, this Adam, made in the form of the Greek statues of athletes



devoid of any body hair, significantly contributed to the present-day fashion for full-body waxing. God, on the other hand, was the one breaking the Freudian touch taboo, the eroticising force, the wholly other, the great Other, and he hadn't prevented the artist creating him, in the best Renaissance manner, in his own likeness, especially as far as his beard was concerned. Naturally it would be a fruitful undertaking to make a comparative study of this godly beard of the European tradition with a Japanese variety.

The smooth-cheeked Japanese men streamed past the window, and Gilbert suddenly felt comforted. Had he not found a purpose? A reason to be here? He ate his sushi, even though he didn't especially like raw fish, and seaweed even less. But he liked the sticky sushi rice, and he found it reassuring that sushi was a relatively self-explanatory dish. It being his first meal in Japan, he had no interest in taking part in any big experiments and spooning something or other out of an earthenware pot in which unidentified ingredients had been unified into a cloudy soup. He ate the bitesize pieces of rolled rice without the layer of fish, ate the rice wrapped in seaweed, then ordered some sake and ate a piece of salmon. It was only then that he noticed how hungry he was. He ate everything, leaving only the thumb-sized squid tentacle.





He walked beneath multi-level motorways, admired the jarring electric advertisements and the meticulous cleanliness of the streets. He simultaneously paid close attention not to stray too far from his hotel. He was good at orientating himself and didn't get lost easily, but the city gave him little confidence. The passers-by gave off an air of perfection, absolute self-restraint, an antiseptic quality. There were none of those grubby corners where underdone feelings could accumulate, places filled with carelessly tossed rubbish, where one tends to come across unkempt people, places with disconcerting auras that you want to steer clear of.

Here, Gilbert was in the heart of the crowds, but no one came too close to him. At home people gesticulated in the street, took out their bad tempers on others, and even when they didn't say anything, you could sense how the moods of strangers would overlay your own, how it would immediately contaminate a route through the city. Here, on the other hand, the people seemed like they were made of plastic. It made him a little uneasy. He kept going, tried to keep to the rhythm of the other footsteps, but made sure to pay attention to the way he





had carved out. Finally, he recognised the train station he had arrived at. Neo-baroque, red brick, with a domed roof over its entrance. He didn't really know what he was doing here twice on the same day. He longed to be back at the hotel, he longed to be gone. Was it homesickness, or wanderlust? He longed to be gone, just as far away as possible. He already found himself, however, relative to where his home was, at the other end of the world, and it would hardly bring relief to add a few extra kilometres to the distance he had already covered. He entered the station, a hall of confidentiality which whispered to him all the things he already knew here: the ticket machines, the barriers and the ticket inspectors, he had seen it all today already. He bought a ticket from the machine and took the escalator up to the platform.



Meanwhile, it had become completely dark. The passengers stepped in and out of cones of light on the platform, the night an impenetrable wall behind them. Gilbert lingered on the platform and watched the trains come in. The Shinkansen pulled in elegantly. The aerodynamically formed locomotive tapered off to a beaky point, giving the train the appearance of a snakelike dragon. Silvery water dragon, iridescent and smooth. Then a train came in that had stunning barbels painted on it, yellow and red, like flames. Gilbert would have liked to have taken notes, but his leather satchel containing his

writing things was back at the hotel. Flowing out from behind the next train's headlight, where the outer shell of the bodywork thickened to the upper lip of the dragon, a magenta line ran across all of the carriages, whiskers in the airstream, ancient, endlessly long beard hair, nestled close to the body in flight.

Exhilarated, Gilbert took a step closer to the train, and while the cleaning service stormed through the carriages, collecting rubbish and vacuuming the seats, he dared to give the magenta line a little pat. The passengers climbed on board, the train pulled away, and Gilbert looked after it for a long time. Then he looked for a deserted section of the platform, leant against a billboard and called Mathilda.

– Gilbert here, he said formally.

– Where are you?

– I'm in Tokyo.

– What did you say?

– I said: Tokyo.

– That is a very bad joke.

Feeling sorry for herself. Extortion tactics.

– No one's trying to make a joke.

– Why are you tormenting me? What have I done to you?

She actually managed to say it and then wail. Her! She had managed in the space of a few words to go from

the role of the culprit to that of the victim. He heard her gulping down the telephone, he thought he could hear tears hitting some surface or other, he hated, as he always had, the irrational female strategy of conducting a conversation while simultaneously not conducting one, or at least abruptly taking it in a completely different direction than the one that could reasonably be expected.

– You haven't tried to call me even once, he said coolly.

– I spent the whole day calling you non-stop. I couldn't get through to you.

– I was on a plane, he said even more coolly.

– But not for over ten hours.

– Like I said, it was a long-haul flight, he said.

He heard her hiss something that sounded a lot like 'Why do you keep lying to me, you vile man', but he hadn't quite caught it, and didn't want to conjure up accusations for something she hadn't said for the sake of fairness. Before he could ask her to repeat the sentence, she had hung up.

He called her back straight away, but she didn't pick up.

On the one hand it was a relief, because the conversation hadn't gone favourably enough for his taste. On the other hand, he began to worry. She seemed confused. She couldn't understand what was happening. She hadn't at



any point understood that he was in Tokyo. Where did she think he would be? Did she expect him to have made it to the moon? Where else would he be if not there, where he was? He resented not only having to justify his physical location, but also being forced to prove it. He was standing somewhere on the ground, she couldn't have cared less where exactly. She hadn't asked even once how he was.

He dialled her number again, their shared telephone number, which was now no longer his, entered it wrong, started over, then gave up.



He slowly walked along the platform, away from those waiting to catch a train, went right to the end of the platform where nobody else was. The markings people lined up behind before boarding ended here, and a fence began that shielded the passengers from the tracks. Gilbert stood in the shadow of a pillar, he found it comforting. He waited like that for a while, nestled closely to the pillar, he waited for the next train, for the next day, waited for the velvety night, which was held back at an unattainable distance by the lights of the train station.



The commuters ebbed away. A young man with a gym bag over his shoulder walked along the platform towards him. He walked past Gilbert without noticing him, walked



slowly, as if pulled by an invisible cord, until he reached the furthest end of the platform and put down his bag with excessive care in front of the fence. He plucked the bag into shape and tried to smooth out the creases, which he kept doing without success. Gilbert watched as the bag caved in and was smoothed down again anew. This corresponded exactly with his own situation: he gave endless effort, but this effort was not recognised.

The young man fussed around the bag and then finally seemed to reach a fragile but satisfactory state for the moment. He took a step back to admire his work, and it was only then that Gilbert realised what it was about the man that had irked him. He had a small goatee beard: trendy, neat. Gilbert Silvester decided to speak to him.



On the face of it, the matter of beards was quite straightforward. God had a full beard, Satan had a goatee. The latter could, iconographically speaking, be seamlessly traced back to the ancient depictions of the goat-bearded, goat-hooved and goat-tailed Pan, and even today visual media, especially feature films, fall back on the beard when they need to flag up an undeniably morally reprehensible character. And the younger generation, once they hit puberty, naturally liked to flirt with the bad guy image. Give themselves a mark of toughness in opposition to the

rebuke that they're sissies. A younger generation with no prospects can't help but style themselves in a way that suggests that they are a force to be reckoned with.

The young man turned away from his bag and made a move to climb the fence. Before he could swing his leg over, Gilbert walked up to him. The man, startled, slid down from the fence, vaguely straightened up and bowed deeply and awkwardly many times. Gilbert formulated the politest possible sentence he could muster in English that started with the empty phrase that he didn't want to bother him. No, he wasn't bothering him at all, murmured the young man from below, while bringing his forehead nearer to the ground, he wasn't bothering him in the slightest. What was bothering him (and at this point he apologised profusely), what had stopped him and made him lose his nerve, was this light that the stations had recently been fitted with, blue LED light, which had been attributed with a mood-lifting effect, a positive, friendly light, installed specially for people like him. He had believed, however, that it would be possible to resist it and carry out his resolution. He was sorry. He had failed.

The young man spoke extremely bad English. Gilbert looked indignantly at the jiggling little beard bobbing up

and down. Downward-pointing triangles, according to research, enter the human brain as a threat warning. This paltry lint wasn't far enough along to make a clear-cut triangle. Gilbert thought it would be better to hold off on broaching the subject for now.

He finally settled on saying something appreciative: he had watched him, the way he had tenderly handled his bag. He must be very conscientious. He certainly serves the state and society to the best of his abilities. He, Gilbert, wanted to express his thanks in the name of all foreigners, because this country, Japan, was in excellent condition. Clean, odourless, attractive to tourists.

Gilbert had read somewhere that it was beneficial to start a conversation with a suicidal person to distract them from their thoughts. It seemed to work especially well in Japan, where it was simply out of the question for a young man not to reply to an enquiry by an older man, even if he didn't understand a word of it.

The goatee quivered as the young man picked up his bag and followed Gilbert to the exit.