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**The Pine Islands**

**Novel**

(Original German title: Die Kieferninseln. Roman)

168 pages, Clothbound

Expected publication date: 11 September 2017

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Sample translation by Alexander Booth

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Tokyo

That night he dreamt that his wife was cheating on him. Gilbert Silvester woke in a rage, next to him Mathilda's black hair lay spread out across the pillow, the tentacles of an evil, pitch-black jellyfish. The thick strands moved gently in time with her breath, and crawled toward him. He quietly got up and went into the bathroom where for some time he just stared silently into the mirror. He left the house without eating breakfast. Coming out of the office in the evening, he still felt dazed, almost numb. Over the course of the day the dream had not faded nor lessened in intensity enough for him to be able to apply the silly expression "dreams are nothing but bubbles". On the contrary, the feeling had grown steadily stronger, more convincing even. An unmistakable warning from his subconscious to his naïve, clueless ego.

He walked into the hallway, dropped his briefcase theatrically and confronted his wife. She denied everything. Which only proved how justified his suspicion really was. Mathilda seemed different. Unusually argumentative. Angry. Ashamed. She accused him of having slipped out in the morning without saying goodbye. I. Was. Worried. How. Could. You. Never-ending accusations. A flimsy manoeuvre. As if it was suddenly all his fault. She went too far. He wouldn't let her do that to him.

Later he no longer knew if he had yelled at her (probably), hit her (possibly), or spit at her (well then), maybe a little bit of saliva had sprayed out of his mouth, as angry as he was. In any event, he'd snatched up a few things, grabbed his credit cards and his passport and left. As she didn't come after him or call, he just kept on going down the sidewalk, somewhat slowly at first and then more quickly, in the direction of the next underground station. He

disappeared into the earth like a sleepwalker, one might say in retrospect, crossed the city, and only got out once he reached the airport.

He spent the night in Terminal B uncomfortably sprawled out across two metal shell chairs. He checked his smartphone repeatedly. Mathilda hadn't left a single message. His plane was leaving the next morning, the earliest intercontinental flight he could book at such short notice.

In the Airbus on the way to Tokyo he drank green tea, watched two samurai movies on the screen set into the back of the seat in front of him, and convinced himself the whole time that not only had he done everything right, but that his action had been inevitable, continued to be inevitable, and in the future would remain inevitable in both his personal opinion and that of the rest of the world.

He'd always held back. Never stood up for his rights. Had paved the way. For whomever. Her boss, the school director, an ill-tempered, macho guy. Or some good-looking, recently come-of-age young man she was ostensibly supervising, a trainee teacher. Or one of her overbearing female colleagues. He couldn't do a thing about a woman. With a man, time could conceivably be on his side. He would simply watch the whole thing develop, wait it out till she came to her senses. Sooner or later the excitement of forbidden fruit goes away. But against another woman he was absolutely powerless. Unfortunately, in this regard his dream hadn't been too clear. Nonetheless, all in all, the dream had been clear enough. Very clear. As if he had sensed it all. And, fundamentally, he had sensed it. For a long time. Hadn't she been in a remarkably good mood over the last few weeks? Almost too happy? And markedly friendly to him? A diplomatic kind of friendliness that grew more and more unbearable from day to day, would have grown more and more unbearable if he'd known what had been behind it all. And that's how she'd managed to lull him into a false sense of security. And he'd let himself be lulled, a clear failure on his part. He hadn't paid enough attention; because his suspiciousness wasn't endless, he'd let himself be deceived.

With an enchanting smile the Japanese stewardess, her long black hair pinned up in a Geisha-like bun, poured him more tea. Naturally the smile wasn't meant for him personally, but his whole body was moved by it as if he'd been covered with a bucket of soothing balm. He sipped his tea and observed how she kept on smiling her way down the aisle, that she gave it to every single passenger, immutable, a mask-like grace which fulfilled its purpose with unsettling efficiency.

He'd always been afraid of being too boring for Mathilda. Purely from the outside,

their relationship seemed to be strong. But in the long run he couldn't offer her much, no social diversification, no intellectual excitement, no depth of character.

He was an unspectacular researcher, private lecturer. It hadn't been enough for a professorship; he didn't have the right familial background, didn't know how to establish any useful contacts, had no idea how to play up to people, couldn't sell himself. He understood far too late that, first and foremost, the university had to do with exercising power in a hierarchical system and that everything else came in second or even third place. This is where he'd made a mistake, a whole host of mistakes. He'd criticised his doctoral supervisor. Always knew better at the wrong moment. Had been intimidated and held back at precisely those times he should have shown off.

As a thick cloud cover passed below him, the past years drifted through his memory: an impressive grey mass of humiliations and flops. When he was young he thought he was of superior intelligence, enough to stand out from the crowd of all those square, conformist high achievers and pierce through the matters of the world with philosophical acumen. Now he once again found himself in precarious straits, scraping by from one project to the other, and professionally isolated from his former friends whose marks were worse than his had ever been and who had never uttered an original idea in their lives. Friends, to be perfectly clear, who were technically more incompetent than he was. However, what they did have, and he did not, was a certain cleverness in how they behaved, which, in the end, was the only thing that mattered as far as careers were concerned.

While the others were settling into comfy lives with their own homes, families, and routines, he saw himself forced to engage in idiotic and low-paid jobs imposed on him by people he fundamentally despised. For years he'd lived in the fear of buckling under it all so that he was unable to put together a single clear thought anymore. Eventually his fear had faded and given way to a general sense of apathy. He did what was asked of him, turned his keen mind to the dumbest of assignments, and in the meantime could also give the appearance—if, sadly, years, decades too late—that he was okay with it all, that he was not against anything, but in favour.

The Japanese stewardess came by with a steaming basket. She handed him a hot towel from a pair of long-handled metal tongs. He mechanically wiped his hands, wrung the towel around his wrists, let the prickly heat penetrate. 'What a great relief this custom is,' he thought, but such a strange flight, everyone doing their best to keep him comfortable, he passed the towel across his forehead, a mother's hand on feverish skin, astonishingly pleasant, but it had

already begun to cool, then he spread it over his face, for just a few seconds, until it was nothing but a cold, wet towel.

His current project had turned him into an expert on beard styles. Though there could hardly be a more dubious subject, it had nonetheless secured him a fixed income for a number of years. And over time he'd even managed to find a certain pleasure in that unmentionable topic in line with the regular way the world worked that the more one immerses oneself in a total system the more one's interest in its particulars grows. At driving school he became enthusiastic about road rules, at dance school steps; there was no witchcraft involved in identifying with something.

Gilbert Silvester, beard researcher as part of a third-party project sponsored by the North Rhine-Westphalia film industry as well as a, though to a lesser degree, feminist organisation from Düsseldorf and the Jewish community of the city of Cologne.

The project examined the effect of the representation of beards in film. It had to do with aspects of cultural studies and gender theory, religious iconography, and questions as to the possibility of philosophical expressivity in the medium of the image.

As always it had to do with a research project for which the results were already fixed. He took care of the legwork as it were, collected details, simultaneously demonstrated the importance of the material as well as its vastness, confirmed the general applicability of its conclusions of a cultural theoretical nature and thus served the manipulation of viewers worldwide.

Mornings he'd go to the library, turn off his mobile, and sink into reproductions of the Italian masters, mosaics, and medieval illustrated books. Images of beard-ware were ubiquitous, and by then he'd already been asking himself for a long time just how it could be that such fundamental questions had not already been researched. His primary focus was "Beard styles and the image of God", a topic that, depending on the day, he found either enormously rich, electrifying even, or completely absurd and profoundly depressing.