FLANDERS LITERATURE

All Things Light

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We took the train to Iseo one chilly November day in 1928, or *anno vii* according to the new calendar, Mussolini's seventh year in power. Berio had just turned sixteen, and I was probably fourteen, although nobody knew for sure and it didn't really matter anyway. We would be spending the winter near Lake Iseo, because it attracted tourists all year round. Uncle Lorenzo was hoping to keep the circus open during the quiet months.

The train wheels thundered rhythmically over the rails, the locomotive huffed and puffed. It had been raining for days on end. I looked outside, enchanted. The clouds drifted. Alongside the tracks, a mountain river that had burst its banks was all aswirl, churning up roots and dragging soil, rocks and shrubs in its wake. Everything was in turmoil.

'Beastly weather,' Berio grumbled. He jumped to his feet and made his way through the overcrowded compartment with an air as if he had some important business to take care of somewhere. It earned him some irritable looks. After a few minutes he returned.

Mama was asleep. She had pulled the hood of the magician's cape over her head. On her lap she had the cage with Rabbit. The creature was on its guard, its little nose twitching as busily as Berio's restless legs.

When the train rumbled across a tall bridge, a ray of light fell through a crack in the cloud cover, illuminating a lake like a lantern.

'Wake up,' Berio said, and he prodded mama. 'We're nearly there.' He took the Bakelite comb from his back pocket and ran it through his hair with two, three rapid sweeps.

Lake Iseo was bigger than I'd anticipated, and more beautiful than I'd hoped. On one side mountains rose up and along the other bank endless rows of olive trees and vineyards stretched across rolling hills.

The train accelerated as we made our descent, and the brakes screeched with ear-splitting noise. Berio and I jostled for position at the window. All excited, we pointed things out to each other: the castle on the edge of town, the bobbing boats, the island off the shore. We rode through a chestnut wood, and beyond it lay marshland. A skein of honking geese flew alongside us.

We steamed past the backs of houses, old façades with shuttered windows and small balconies with washing lines. The train crawled into the station; it was directed to a siding and came hissing and groaning to a halt. For a few seconds everything was quiet and then the circus animals all began to cry, whinny and stamp their feet at once. The station master came out of a whitewashed little building. His fat body wobbled as he walked up to Uncle Lorenzo with a smile and

outstretched hands. Hot on his heels came three Blackshirts, who had shiny batons dangling from their belts.

We unloaded the train with jacks, hoists, winches and manpower. Our elephant Elsa helped us with the heaviest circus wagons. Her furrowed hide hung loosely around her frame. No sooner had we started work or there was another downpour. The rain beat down on us. Elsa spread her ears wide, trumpeted gloomily and very nearly sat on top of a wagon.

'Come on, girl,' Dasha said, and offered Elsa an apple. Elsa uncurled her trunk, ate the apple and searched Dasha's hand for more. Dasha was Russian and she performed on horseback. She was elegant, but she had a tough Cossack's heart beating inside her chest. The only one who could make her cry was her husband Ioann, the lion tamer. Her voice was rather hoarse, yet she could sing wonderfully well. I enjoyed listening to her, but in that voice and behind those incomprehensible Russian words you could also sense sadness. Dasha missed the steppe, and she missed a child.

The apple pulled Elsa across the line. She lowered her head and pressed it against a cage wagon. It didn't take much effort, as her weight was enough to get the wagon moving. As it rolled off the flatbed car, we jumped aside with a warning yell.

The freight yard was filling up. The children of Iseo had come to goggle at us. When they caught sight of Eze, who's from Senegal, they shouted: 'Guarda, a monkey!' Eze pretended not to hear. He walked over to the locomotive. He had a chat with the driver and briefly patted the side of the steaming contraption.

I went to help out with the horses. In one fluid wave the Lipizzaners got out, led by the thoroughbred Nadhir. They were almost all equally tall, slender and white, and if they had any spots Mattia would paint them with white chalk prior to the show. Next up, Mattia and I fetched the hardy, chestnut-coloured Haflingers, and hitched them to the shafts of the wagons. Through wide-open nostrils they sucked in fresh air, their strong tails sweeping.

When I returned to the Lipizzaners a girl was standing next to Nadhir. She had hair short like a boy, wore high-waisted trousers and a coat with a little fur collar that revealed a glimpse of her neck. A camera hung over her shoulder. She was caressing Nadhir's silky coat, touching him very tenderly. Nadhir's eyes were half-closed and he submitted calmly to her touch.

Suddenly, the roaring of our lion Amour rolled through the station. The girl looked up in shock and spotted me. I felt caught out and smiled. She smiled back and two dimples appeared in her cheeks.

'He's still in mourning,' I said. She looked puzzled, so I explained: 'Amour, our lion. His female died of pneumonia a couple of weeks ago. He didn't eat or drink for three whole days.'

'That's so sad,' she said.

I followed a raindrop down her neck until it disappeared behind the collar. I didn't know what else to say. My heart was still. With a shy little tug of her head, like a nod, she walked off. When she passed me, her arm gently brushed against mine. I lifted my hand and put it on that spot.

It was only then that I heard the rain whooshing again. Chains were rattling and men were shouting instructions.

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Evening was falling by the time we were ready to leave. Uncle Lorenzo drove in front at a walking pace. The fact that he had a car commanded respect, even though it was a third-hand Fiat with a dented bumper. We followed him in convoy. Me driving the Haflingers while mama tidied up the living wagon, as some of the cupboards had opened during the bumpy train ride and all kinds of things had ended up on the floor.

Our orchestra was playing a fast polka. Ioann made Amour and Ishim the tiger roar, the Fiammingho girls did cartwheels, Elsa swunging her powerful trunk and her trumpeting made the windows rattle.

Iseo had narrow cobbled streets and the setts were gleaming with the rain. In a square we saw hooded carriages and horses stamping their feet, the animals' heads stuck deep inside feedbags. Street vendors, illuminated by shop windows, were selling warm chestnuts and almond biscuits. There was a cinema too. Uncle Lorenzo didn't like cinemas because they poached his customers.

A placard on a kiosk called for war. Posters announced a parade: the Leader was said to be coming to Iseo to officially open the new post office.

'A parade,' Berio pointed out, and he perked up a bit. 'We're going.'

Some of the announcements had been covered in graffiti. Someone had sloshed white paint over a hammer and sickle, but the red still shimmered through.

Women leaned out of windows and appeared in the doorways of their houses. They wore colourful shawls and their red, swollen workers' hands hung by their side. They eyed us suspiciously. We waved and tried to smile, but we were cold and soaking wet. The bright colours of our wagons were caked with mud.

We came to a halt outside a grand building. Flags were flying. They bore the fascists' emblem: a bundle of arrows with an axe through it. You saw it everywhere: on toys, calendars, coins and stamps. Vito, the clown, had explained its meaning to us: the Italian people were as closely tied to fascism as those arrows, and if you made trouble you could expect a beating.

A man came out. He wore the black shirt of the militia, a sash and a couple of medals on his chest. His face reminded me of a bulldog, it was just as snub-nosed and bossy. Beside him walked a man in civilian clothes. He wore a floppy trilby on his head. I could tell right away that he was important, because his hands were full of paperwork. When he gave the Roman salute, Uncle Lorenzo extended his right arm and saluted as well. Trilby turned to the man with the bulldog face and said something. Bulldog nodded and sat down in Uncle Lorenzo's car. He would be showing us the terrain allocated to us. The wagons rattled on the way down.

'We're nearly there,' I said to the horses. Their ears pricked up. 'You'll get your food soon. And I'll rub you dry.'

A wind got up, ruffling the mobiles on the awning of our wagon. I'd made them out of wire and other junk, such as pieces of glass, bottle caps and strips of foil. I kept looking at them, until we hit a pothole. A shock went through the vehicle, the axles creaked and I heard something break inside. Mama shouted: 'Take it easy, will you?'

I quickly turned my eyes back to the road.

'Dreamer,' Berio said, and nudged me with his shoulder.

Dogs were running alongside our wagon and leapt up at us, with their hair on end and teeth bared. Berio picked up the stick lying at our feet and lashed out at them. They recoiled, growling. We always kept that stick within reach. And for a real emergency we had the Mauser, we knew where mama kept it. Since the fascists had come to power there weren't quite so many murderers and highwaymen anymore, but according to Mattia, who does horse dressage, it was only because all the rotten bastards had joined the Party.

Our terrain was large and soggy, adjoining the lake that gleamed silvery in the twilight. At its northern end stood a shed, which had a large door with peeling paint. Some of the windows were broken. We parked haphazardly, because we were too tired to do it properly. When we'd come to a standstill mama pulled a curtain aside and glanced outside. She opened the back doors. The beech and chestnut covered mountain sides and the dark lake left her cold. She didn't care where the circus set up. To mama the landscape was like a paper décor, which was changed in between scenes. All that mattered was the arena she performed in, and the cocoon of the living wagon. Those two were always the same.

Using both hands, she pulled her frizzy hair back and tied a ribbon round it. Hoop earrings the size of fists appeared. She produced a lamp from her mouth and lit it. She wrapped herself in a shawl and put the mat in front of the steps.

This was our home, for the duration of our stay.

We gathered at the entrance to the shed. In the past it had stored boats in winter, but it hadn't been used for quite some time. The animals would be sheltered from the elements here.

Ioann tugged at the ends of his moustache. 'We need more straw,' he muttered.

'The field is so muddy,' the Contessa complained, and pursed her lips.

'We're exposed to the wind here. I wonder whether the tent will hold,' Vito noted.

Isidora Fiammingho twisted round a pole as if her spine were made of elastic. She was the eldest of seven children, all girls, except Charlie, who happened to be a boy. When they all performed he wore the same glittery costume as his sisters, and he had long hair. For convenience sake everybody pretended that he was a girl too.

Isidora touched the back of her head with the tip of her foot. Then she gracefully unfurled herself again and threw a furtive glance at Berio.

'Did you see that just now, over by the fascist house?' Gianni asked. He raised the bottle of grappa to his lips. He gulped some down and passed the bottle round.

'He gave the salute, our esteemed director,' Mattia bitterly said.

All socialists had died by now or had changed their mind, except Mattia, who was still as red as Vito the clown's nose. He invariably wore a bright red vest. We all knew that he kept a portrait of Lenin in his bedside cabinet. He had cut it out of an illegal newspaper and glued it onto a piece of cardboard, so it wouldn't tear. Mattia had grown up on a farm. He and his father and brothers had worked hard and everything had been fine. But then overnight the value of the lira had plummeted – by the Leader's decree. Mattia's father had been unable to pay off his debts and the fascists had come to seize the animals. Afterwards Mattia's father had hung himself in the empty stable. Mattia had revenged himself on the bailiff. He'd lifted the man from his bed in the middle of the night, let his fists do the talking and then done some time in jail.

Vito nodded. 'A circus shouldn't get involved in politics,' he said. He often agreed with Mattia. He was a dwarf and he knew how it felt to be a minority.

'Oh, come off it man,' Francesco said.

The sword swallower pulled on his cigarette; he blew the smoke out in rings. 'Thanks to the Party we'll have a reasonably comfortable winter.'

'We need a permit to travel,' Ioann came to his support. 'We'll need one if we want to go to Rome in the spring. Where were you going to spend the winter without a permit from the fascists? In a forest? Jesus.'

There came Uncle Lorenzo with Bulldog. Uncle looked pleased. He was thinking of the tourists and could hear the cash tills ringing. It took more than mud and a bit of wind to discourage him. Berio took a running jump, leapt onto a crossbeam and pulled himself up. After a backward somersault he landed neatly on the floor and smiled at me.

We sauntered along the shore. Berio and I were almost equally tall, but I had a slighter build. On

the trapeze he was the catcher and I the flyer. During performances I got the most attention, but Berio really did all the hard work. I threw shapes in the air and extended my arms to him, trusting him to catch me. I wasn't supposed to grab hold of him. Going at my speed, I'd break his wrists.

The rain was hammering dimples in the water, the tap-tap-tap sounded like chit-chat. Eze joined us. In a show of camaraderie he wrapped his arms round our shoulders. Years ago, Eze had arrived with a shipment of forty lions. The animals were intended for a large circus, but there hadn't been any room for the stowaway Eze. He'd lived on the streets for a while. One day he'd been taking a close look at our Burrell steam engine, which provides our circus with electricity, when suddenly the drive belt snapped. The belt had whizzed past him, ripping off part of his ear in the process.

Eze operated the lights, serviced the steam engine that had nearly killed him, and I could always count on him when I'd knocked something together that didn't work as planned.

Berio picked up a pebble and threw it across the water. It bounced five times. Eze did the same; it bounced six times. Then Berio shoved Eze, causing Eze to bump into me.

'Watch out,' Eze said, and he in turn shoved Berio. Berio looked to me for support and I grabbed hold of Eze. And so the three of us rocked back and forth. Our feet slipped in the mud, we growled, grimaced and panted, and Berio curled up his upper lip and bared his teeth.

After some time we grew tired of it and we let go of one another.

While Eze and Berio continued to skip stones, I traipsed round the terrain on my own, as far as the aspen trees. Nearby was a jetty where dinghies were moored. Then I walked in the other direction. Every now and then I bent down to pick something up: a cork, rope, a tin, two bright white feathers. Before long, my coat pockets were bulging.

The field narrowed and gave way to a eucalyptus wood. The wood ended at a steep, overhanging rock face, with a narrow path squeezed in between. At the back of the wood, half-hidden by overgrown reeds and sheltered by the rock face, stood a small hut. It was locked, but the padlock had rusted through. When I entered, a stale, foul smell hit me in the face. I held my breath and struck a match. I opened a wooden chest with iron fittings. My heart leapt with joy. It was full of discarded fishing gear, broken nets, boxes with used fishhooks, rusty reels, a large roll of iron wire and broken rods.

This would see me through the winter, all right.