

Northern Light

by *Leona Francombe*

Summer has faded and summer, with that rueful, backward glance of hers, has already grasped autumn's hand. New school books crack open and offices come wearily to life. Returning vacationers brood beneath soupy Belgian skies, trying to remember what summer feels like. They know they must turn their thoughts from margaritas to school schedules; from blousy oleanders and hot olive groves to their own dank, neglected gardens. The very idea of work will need emergency resuscitation. And yet a gleam remains, a flush from the south, and in truth most of us are still chasing sun around every corner and beginning to count, with stoic acceptance, how many days of honest, full-blown light we have left.

Newcomers to Belgium may be forgiven for thinking that this number is arbitrary – rather like counting the varieties of Belgian chocolate. (Every year, after all, they add more flavours, including such imponderables as Earl Grey and butterscotch schnapps, but that's another subject.) Although counting chocolates may not be an exact science, searching for light is, especially here, in this misty land. The waxing and waning of this precious commodity can be measured down to the ray.

At the summer solstice this year, the sun set in Belgium at 21.59. At the winter solstice on December 21, it is due to set at 16.38. That's a whole lot of daylight that simply packs up and heads south, and it's hard not to take it personally. Three weeks before the winter solstice, the sun (when there is any) never makes it over the roofs of our courtyard. There ensues a period of deep gloom during which, even in mid-afternoon, it's difficult to see to the back of the garden. Six weeks later, we'll be buttering our toast when suddenly a thin band of light steals over the high, tile-capped walls and lands, exhausted, on the kitchen counter. It is like news from a lost relative.

Belgium occupies roughly the same parallel as Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan and Irkutsk, Siberia, neither destination particularly noted for light and sun. But at least they have snow for illumination. Here, earth and sky complement each other in a sort of medley of shadow. Light tip-toes through like an exotic bird over the polders. The Flemish masters knew this creature well, of course. They sensed that in a single afternoon it might change from mauve to grey, from ochre to white, and they had to paint

fast just to keep up with it. Magritte even managed to catch it in his hand, many times, and throw its beacon across his twilight masterpieces.

Summer is not really a Belgian season – just a passage to another one. One day in mid-August, you'll be riding the No 3 tram out of the tunnel onto Avenue Albert and suddenly everything has changed. Light slants all around you at bizarre angles, as if you have lost your balance. The tall façades along the avenue look different, like friends who have changed their hair styles and seem like strangers, at least for a few months. Soon afterwards, clouds elbow in and the temperature drops, and once that happens, you know that autumn has stolen summer for good.

From now on, the mists will creep into the Bois de la Cambre at dawn, burned off before noon by stunning, near-horizontal beams of sunlight. There is an urgency to the way these beams fall, as if they are telling you to seize a frosty Hoegaarden and drink it on the terrace this very minute, because during the next, bad weather could claim the terrace until next spring. It's a marvellous lesson in living for the moment.

In December, the night is still king when you leave the house at 8.00, and lumens are never far from your thoughts. It's dark when you come home, too. You find yourself thinking about lumens some more, and start to feel a certain kinship with the folks in Moose Jaw and Irkutsk. You also begin to meditate on what it was, exactly, that Magritte held

in his hand, and where he managed to find it in this place. The faintest brightness brings solace: candles glimmering in the *Pain Quotidien*, and fairy lights strung across the facade of *Brasseries Georges*. The street-sweeper's smile carries a lumen or two. Then you pass the *Sablon Church* on a January evening and the stained-glass windows pierce the night with shards of colour, and their boldness and beauty fill the empty spaces of your soul right up until the pearl-grey miracle of a March dawn.

Most of our lives play out like Belgian light: stretches of hibernal darkness we brave just for a flash of joy, or a moment of burnished happiness. 'Follow the Gleam!' urged Tennyson, and who can say that he didn't mean the glint of a wet Brussels cobblestone, or the foggy glow of an autumn café?

Leona Francombe is a writer and musician living in Brussels

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