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In Love and War

Written by Alex Preston

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In Love and War

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For Ary

‘We live most intensely when we are falling, a truth that wrings the heart!’

J. M. COETZEE, *The Master of Petersburg*

‘That scene, like the one before it, is perfectly believable and totally made up.’

LAURENT BINET, *HHhH*

PART ONE

Croydon Aerodrome

23 APRIL 1937

1

'*Florence*.' The pilot turns in his seat and winks, as if the flight is a secret, or a first. Esmond repeats the word in his mind and releases a shiver. He is the only passenger – the biplane belongs to Grandi, the ambassador, and sits at a steep angle to the ground, forcing him into a tilt. Out of the window is the long body of Croydon Aerodrome and, in front of it, his family. Except for his sister Anna's white organdie they are uniformed in black, as though for a funeral.

The plane pulses towards the main runway. Esmond presses a hand, and then his face, to the throbbing glass, and sees his father raise his good arm. For a moment he thinks it's a wave, then his mother raises hers, a steely thrust up and forward, and he realises they are saluting and sinks back into his seat.

'I apologise for the position in which you find yourself.' The pilot leans over a tasselled shoulder, his smile Italian, his moustache so thin it might be inked on.

'That's all right,' Esmond says. 'I feel like I'm in an H. G. Wells.'

The pilot laughs. 'A ship to the stars.'

At the runway's mouth, the noise from the engines drops. The pilot raises the window beside him, checks the dials on the dashboard and straightens his cap. '*Andiamo*,' he says. Esmond looks between the tapering wings towards his father. Sir Lionel's face is ripe and red above the black tunic, chest barrelled. His empty sleeve is pinned alongside campaign ribbons, the '14–15 Star, the Victory Medal. He catches Esmond's eye and smiles with unconvinced detachment, like a man inspecting the menu in a failing French restaurant.

Lady Ursula is taller than her husband, her own black shirt worn with gabardine slacks. Her hair lifts in a spring gust as she stands there, saluting, hard-set in face powder. She glances down at Rudyard, his brother, crouched with a Jack Russell, and says something sharp, then back at the plane.

'Your sister is a little beautiful,' the pilot says.

Esmond laughs. 'Yes, just a little.'

'A handsome family.' A green light winks on the control tower. 'You are ready?'

The plane gives a breathy roar and bounds down the runway, throwing Esmond into his seat. He has to crane his neck to keep his eyes on Rudyard, who is up and waving, Anna pale beside him, arms lifted. His parents hold their salutes, as if posing for posthumous statues.

A schoolboyish whoop. He is no longer canted back but upright, weightless. He looks down at his family – four faces turned towards him – and feels knots of love and duty stretch and give. As the plane rises, he sees the white fragment of his sister between wisps of cloud and feels an ache at the thought of leaving her with her illness, with their parents. He turns towards the yellow smear above London, the vastness of the sky stretching away to the south, and again, a low whoop.

He fingers the collar of his black tunic – his father had insisted he travel in full British Union get-up – and undoes his seatbelt. It is warmer in the plane than he'd imagined. He taps out and lights a cigarette from a soft black packet bearing the Party's lightning fork. The engines seem quieter up here in the wide air, and he can hear the wind against the fuselage, the beat of first one propeller, then the other, until they level out and the sound becomes a continuous, soothing hum. 'You'll enjoy the *Dragon Rapide*,' Mosley had said. 'Flying and Fascism have a long history, and a long future together.' Sunlight slants into the cabin, thickened by

his smoke. A buffeting gust and the plane gives a lurch, and he feels the delicious precariousness beneath him, and realises he hasn't thought of Philip, or Cambridge, for an hour or more.

Anna had pressed something into his hand in the aerodrome. A folded sheet of paper, smudged with fingerprints. It sits on the seat beside him now with *The Wireless Operator's Handbook*. He picks up the paper and unfolds a portrait of himself in gouache, *Anna Lowndes* looped at the bottom. His blond hair is side-parted above wide, long-lashed eyes. His lips are turned down mournfully, cheeks flushed. It is a good likeness, he thinks, if a little tragic, and big-eared. She has drawn a man – given him something to grow into.

A bump and the plane banks to the left. 'Lympne,' the pilot shouts, nodding down to the airfield below. They circle the control tower once and a green light flashes greeting. A waggle of the wings and they are over a cricket ground, dunes, a gaudy litter of bathing huts, strung out in pink, yellow and turquoise along the promenade. The Channel turns in shelves from teal to the deepest blue, and he realises England has gone. He presses his fist to his mouth and stares ahead, over the pilot's shoulder, to Europe.

2

They come in over Boulogne, flat and watery below, then onwards above dense woodland, farmhouses moored in bright fields, steep-roofed chateaux. Esmond had hoped to see Paris, but they pass to the east, and soon the countryside is obscured by a blanket of cloud so dense the earth might have vanished completely. He remembers cricket at West Down and Winchester, deep in the outfield, looking up at the clouds and building great cities of endless light. Now, airborne – and what a beautiful

word that is, he thinks – he can dream downwards, spreading his mind across the turning whiteness, smoking cigarette after cigarette, letting his eyes stray to Anna's picture, or his trunk and box of books, stacked beside the lavatory behind him.

He makes an effort to hold the past week in his mind. Cambridge, only seven days earlier, a rap at the door as he and Philip, flushed from bathing, jousted lazily in bed. Without sufficient pause for the repositioning of limbs or the snatching of clothes, Blacker, Master of Emmanuel College, appeared in herringbone, finger extended.

'Vile boys!' Blacker had enjoyed the part, quivering with authentic rage, though his eyes lingered over Esmond's thighs, glimpses of Philip's flesh and hair behind the sheets. 'Keller, pack your bags – it's back to Vienna for you. And you, Lowndes, your father has dealt with people like you before.' In the silence on the way to his digs, Esmond had looked around at the college buildings, the lawns, the oblivious students, and felt his world emptying beneath him.

There is a break in the cloud below, and peering down along rails of sunlight, he sees cathedral spires, the shimmering whip of a river – the Rhone? – and geometrical terraces of vineyards. Blacker, he recalls, had marched him to the station and they'd stood unspeaking on the platform as the train came steaming to a halt. An awkward handshake and Esmond was up into the carriage, and he'd felt as he did climbing the ladder to the aeroplane – stepping from one life into another.

He'd changed trains in London, city of Philip, of literary gatherings and ersatz South African sherry, parties at the Coleherne in Earl's Court where men played piano in just a bow-tie. His father was alone on the platform at Shrewsbury, his breath pluming fast in the night air, his hand scrunching a tweed cap. 'Esmond,' he'd said, and the word seemed to confirm all the

bad he'd ever thought of him. He'd limped towards the Humber, Esmond following. In the car, he'd said, 'Sandhurst, then. You start in May.' The thought of himself as a soldier – laughable. He'd lolled back, looking out into the misty darkness, and winced that he'd had the chance to escape and blown it. He saw before him a deep dwindling, the long march of Party rallies and angry speeches, or, if he stayed in the army, colonial wars and booklessness and gin and death.

The Alps rear up from the plain like thunderclouds. It is four o'clock and, as they come into the huddle of the mountains, he sees night clustered in the ravines and crevasses below. They wheel like a cliff-bird over pines and crags, above icy cataracts falling into blackness. 'Monte Blanc,' the pilot says, confusingly, pointing at the great brooding fortress of ice and rock that lowers over them to the east, high as they are.

'The everlasting universe of things, flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,' Esmond whispers. He's brought his Shelley with him, one of the few books to survive his mother's libricidal purge. He glances back at the box, tied with string, and thinks ahead to dusty bookshops, libraries, reading the Inferno in the city of Dante's birth.

The engines change pitch and he looks up to see a ridge of rock, a great grey wave coming towards them. The plane lifts, and he feels a little stab of panic. A sublime way to die, he thinks, but still. They crest the ridge, clearing the jagged rocks by a few hundred feet, and the pilot turns, beaming. 'Italia.'

3

The mountains fall as they'd risen, and soon give onto rolling farmland, lakes like spilt mercury, red-roofed towns. 'Your new

home,' the pilot shouts. Esmond sees the aeroplane's shadow, which really is like a dragon, harrying the path of a river. He lights a cigarette and presses his cheek against the glass.

'Could I have one?' the pilot calls back, not turning this time. 'Please?'

Esmond looks at the pack in his hand and thinks about throwing it, then pulls himself up, off-kilter until he's in the seat behind the cockpit. He leans over and places a cigarette between the pilot's lips.

'Why do you come to Italy? You are a politician, yes?'

'Not precisely,' Esmond says, lighting a fag for himself. 'My father's Lionel Lowndes, of the British Union.'

'With Mosley. I read the *English Mail*. For your language, you understand.'

'That's right.'

'So you're a Fascist, like your new hosts.'

'I suppose so. I'm setting up a wireless station for the British Union, a commercial enterprise.' The last direct from the mouth of Mosley, who'd kneaded Esmond's shoulder each time he'd said it.

'Bravo,' the pilot says.

'It's the first time for me. Away like this.'

'In Florence, you are lucky. A city of artists, politicians and Englishmen. You are all three, I think.'

'Perhaps.'

Esmond picks up *The Wireless Operator's Handbook* and begins to read about sine waves and resonators, capacitors and inductors. He is half-nodding in the warm cabin when the pilot's voice comes, as if through the doors of a dream. 'Storm over Florence,' he says, showing Esmond his frown. 'Hard landing.'

Esmond shrugs, having given himself up to fate. The dark

clouds paint the whole depth of the sky ahead. Forks of lightning jag downwards, burning themselves out on his eyes. They steer into the clouds and it is as if night has fallen. Rain thrashes the windows, obscuring even the wings, and the aeroplane bobs and yaws, plywood shuddering in the wind, engines muffled. The pilot sends them first one way, then another, trying to cut a path through the storm. Esmond puts his hands behind his head, leans back in his seat and, surprising himself even as it happens, he falls asleep.

He dreams of a Juliet balcony, looking over terracotta roofs towards a dome. His enemy is beside him, torturer's hands folded over the rail. Esmond takes a handful of the coarse black twill of his enemy's shirt, pulls him over the balcony and into the air. In a slow moment, he lets go of the shirt and sees his father and Mosley swinging him between them as a child, his father's good arm full of strength, Mosley's fingers dry and certain. *Here we go, bend a bow, shoot a pigeon and off we go!* They lift him squealing, stomachless into the sunshine. Again he feels he is rising, still rising, into the pale evening. Then he begins to fall, and he hears his enemy's screams, and sees the ground rushing up to meet them. He scents death, impossible in dreams, and opens his eyes, very wide.

'Difficult!' The pilot shouts, stubbing his cigarette on the inside of the window.

They are coming in fast over the runway, yawing horribly, and the screaming is the baying of the wind. A distant green light through the swirling rain, then they drop, bounce once on the ground, are airborne again and careening through the night. The wheels hit the tarmac once more, a blast of rubber, and Esmond's box of books launches into the air and bursts against the cabin roof. He is beaned by a copy of Hamsun's *Hunger*. The back wheel falls to earth with a clunk and Esmond lands hard in

his seat, Kipling and Henry James in theirs. The plane comes to a skidding halt, the pilot's shoulders heaving. Esmond sits there for a while, breathing the fusty air of the cabin, the sharp tang of fuel.

'Florence?' he says.

The pilot nods. '*Firenze*.'