

# Rain in Paris

*A novel by Roman Senchin*

'Monsieur! Monsieur! Ta-ra-ra-ra ...' A soft voice, speaking gibberish, lulling rather than waking him, and then suddenly switching to his native tongue:

'Hey, get up! We're here.'

Someone prodding his shoulder.

With enormous difficulty, Topkin opened his eyes. Pain danced in and around them, in his temples, the back of his neck. He looked around and tried to work out where he was, what was up with him, why someone was bothering him.

'Any minute now they'll call the police. Not really what you need, eh?'

Above him the grinning, wide face of a woman getting on for sixty. Beside it, a narrow, young, anxious face: a stewardess.

Ah, yes. He was in an aeroplane. They had already arrived.

'Everything's fine, thank you.' Topkin's voice bubbled through phlegm caught in his throat; he had been drinking whisky.

He had drunk a lot and had hardly anything to eat—a piece of chocolate, a few slices of cheese. It was a long time since he had so indulged himself, and now suddenly he had let himself off the leash. Off the leash indeed: he had upped and flown to Paris.

'Upped and flown ...' No, not really. He had spent a long time preparing, had saved up, had gone through the business of making up his mind. He had been dreaming about it, moreover, pretty much his whole life.

One of his earliest recollections: out for a walk with his parents in the local park. His dad is wearing an eye-catching uniform with gold stripes, and pushing a buggy containing his (Topkin's) sister Tanya. Walking beside his dad is his mum, in a slim, dark blue dress, shoes clicking on the asphalt. Topkin, at this time three or four years old, is running on ahead and admiring his parents and the tall buggy. He does not know that this is admiration; he simply feels good.

The beginning of summer, or the end of spring. New leaves on the poplars, a delicate shade of green. A song, fresh like the spring and also delicate, floating on the air:

*'Aux Champs-Élysées, Aux Champs-Élysées ...'*

Topkin—back then simply young Andrey—has not yet learned about the loudspeakers hung from poles in the park, and is sure that the song is springing direct from nature herself, this wonderful melody with its beautiful words, beautiful even though he cannot understand them.

‘Mum, what’s this song about?’

‘It’s about the most beautiful city in the world,’ says Mum. She looks up, as if somewhere in the sky there will be a ghostly reflection of the city, and she is trying to see it.

‘What’s the city called?’

‘Paris, son. It’s called Paris.’

Andrey quietly repeats this difficult new word: ‘Parith. Parith.’ The word is on the very point of taking root in his consciousness, in that specific brain cell already set aside for the concept ‘the best city in the world,’ when bewilderment flares up, the kind of powerful bewilderment that only children who have started to find out about the world can experience: ‘So our Kyzy ... isn’t the best?’

Dad smiles, but rather strangely; one half of his face smiles, while the other half seems to grimace.

‘The best,’ he says, answering for Mum, ‘but in a different way. Let’s keep going. Let’s find the rollercoasters.’

They sit Andrey in a red rocket, and off he flies. Up, up, almost to the tops of the poplars, then back down towards the earth. This is his first ride on this rollercoaster. Up until now, his parents have only let him go on the horses, and all they do is circle slowly round, rocking gently. This is a rocket, though. Almost the real thing. While he is on his way up, Andrey stops breathing, and hunches down into the leather seat. He smells its strong smell, feels how it has been softened by the heat. He starts to think that he has left his parents forever, he will never return to them, never again set foot on the grass ...

His ten seconds up in the sky expanded into a journey across the whole universe. The bushy tops of the poplars became planets, the scattered clouds—dangerous nebulae, the sky—the abyss, the distant Sayan Mountains—the edge of the known universe. When the rocket was on its way down, and Andrey caught sight of his parents and the buggy, his feeling was one of surprise rather than joy. His parents waved to him, but all he could do in return was stretch his lips wide, afraid to take his hands off the metal handrail.

After that, young Andrey Topkin ate candy floss for the first time in his life. He smeared it all over himself, and Mum spent a long time wiping it off at the fountain in the park’s central square. Then they went for a ride in a boat along the Yenisei, leaving the buggy at the jetty. Dad rowed so mightily that the boat raced along like a speedboat, while Mum hugged one-year-old Tanya tightly to herself. Then they sat in a summery restaurant and ate shashlik, and although, of course, it was now other songs that came pouring out of the loudspeakers, this memory, his first real memory, this altogether good memory—perfect, even—was forever tinted by the song, ‘*Aux Champs-Élysées ...*’

Now, forty years later, he was about to clap eyes on the best city in the world, and the best avenue in the best city—the Champs-Élysées. The Elysian Fields.

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He was making his way down a long walkway, set up between the aeroplane and the airport, a light bag hanging from his shoulder. He wanted a drink of water, a smoke—anything, in fact, that would take the pain from his head and eyes and offer him an infusion of new strength and good cheer. Overdoing it had not really worked, but what other options had he been left with on the long journey here? Long, that is, not so much in terms of distance, as of energy expended, frazzled emotions.

He had seen in the New Year—the year which was just coming to an end—on his own. For the first time in his life. On 31 December he had slept before lunch, forcing himself to lie in bed with his eyes closed. A stream of recollections had made their way into his head, for the most part bitter: of things lost, things done wrong, of defeats acknowledged as such only after the passage of time, when it's too late to take anything back or do anything differently. For a long time, they had seemed like victories.

Topkin chased these memories off, trying instead to reach into his past for something light and warm. He had plenty of good memories, but as they fetched up alongside the bitter recollections, things that had once been light appeared neither light nor warm; everything seemed to be sullied and cold. Topkin had a physical sensation of different-coloured brain cells fighting with one another. The black were winning. He had to call up reserves—units of light from somewhere deep in his heart—and throw them into battle. For a few minutes, they managed to squeeze out the blackness, extending the bright living space inside his head, but very quickly the black became stronger again, a wave of bitterness that flooded the light cells.

Thoroughly wearied of all this, Topkin forced his eyes wide open and stared at the ceiling. Instead of reminiscing, he started to make plans for the coming year. He would do things in a manner that left him with bright memories never to be clouded, like some of his recollections of childhood. What might he think of that would do the trick?

The previous August, he had turned forty. He had resolved to mark this significant date, although he knew that it was not a great idea to celebrate one's fortieth: it was a bad omen.

'Oh, fiddlesticks.' He recalls how he had waved the thought away. 'Think: I might not see fifty. And even if I do, I'm hardly going to want to mark it with music and dancing.'

He had booked a table for thirty at a club called the Three-Headed Dragon, and got down to the business of ringing round: any classmates who were still in town, friends from his youth, and those few folk to whom he was close. As tends to happen, his closest friends were people he had come across later on, at all the jobs he had tried out by the time he was forty. There were also lots of women of various ages—young women, older women, and young women turning into older women (not to mention into old biddies), but he did not include them on his guest list; his wife would undoubtedly not have understood.

Yes, that previous August he had still had a wife. Alina. A wife, though ... He remembered being taken aback to hear young men saying, 'Wives turn up, eventually. Wives will never become extinct.' At the age of seventeen, he had decided that this was exceedingly cynical, vile, even. Smitten with one of his classmates and unable to see any woman but her as his wife, he had stopped mixing with anyone who talked like that. Later, however, as he made his way through life, he had come to see the truth in these words. Nor had Alina been his first wife: there had been two before her. There had been weddings, exchanges of rings, Mendelssohn's March, official documents properly signed and stamped. And in between, how many women who could have become his wife? Dozens.

Alina was far away now. She was hardly his wife any more; she had written to him to say that she was filing for divorce. Let her. His son, though, was also no longer with him, also as good as lost, and that pressed on him like a stone. Only his surname and patronymic now showed that six-year-old Danil Andreyevich Topkin, currently residing in Bobrov, Voronezh Oblast, was the son of Andrey Topkin. If Andrey wanted to see him, he had to travel for God only knew how long, making a whole string of changes. Longer than the journey to Paris.

In September of the previous year, Alina and Danny had gone away. A year ago. Since then, Topkin had not seen his son.

He would have said that he did not believe in omens ... but anxiety had set in even while he was phoning round the people he wanted to see at his birthday bash. Many were not in town: it was the holiday season. Some, it turned out, had moved away while he and they had been out of touch. One of his classmates had died, and it hurt Topkin that he had not been informed, that he had not been invited to the funeral to lend a hand, to pay his respects, to bid farewell. The town, after all, was not big, barely more than 100,000 inhabitants, and among these, the remaining Russians numbered at most ... Put it this way: there were not many left. Far fewer than there had been in the 80s, and these remnants lived in silos, every family unit separately. As if they were hiding.

Topkin managed to corral about fifteen guests, and was obliged to phone the Three-Headed Dragon to ask for his reservation to be scaled down. 'Make it for seventeen or so,' he said. 'Salads, wine, vodka, a hot main ...'

A second problem had arisen just before the celebration itself. The club's security guards approached Topkin and said, 'You know our rule: Tuvans are not welcome. They have their own places where they can go.'

It was true. By an unspoken but strict rule, the club was considered to be Russian. The proprietors were Russian, the security guards were Russian, the cooking was Russian, the waitresses were Russian. On certain days a mild striptease (a fleeting moment of toplessness) took place. The main thing, though, was that these places had an atmosphere all of their own. You could not say that it was purely 'Russian', but it was different from the atmosphere that prevailed in the rest of the clubs, restaurants and joints in the town, such as the Khan Club, the Bayan Goal, the Yurt, or the Chodura.

The Three-Headed Dragon was housed in the huge former warehouse of a former brewery. The brewery had never brewed any beer as such, though it had produced the very tasty soft drinks

‘Pinocchio’ and ‘Duchess’. Today, the factory building itself stood derelict, its windows knocked out, its ceilings fallen in, while in the old warehouse, dances were held, festivals celebrated, and food and drink consumed by the town’s remaining Russians, both those who were young and those who wanted to stay young.

Topkin tried to persuade them to admit his Tuvan guests, to make an exception. ‘They’re Russian Tuvans,’ he assured them.

‘Everyone was Russian here thirty years ago,’ sneered the elderly guard. ‘So what ...?’

At this point, Igor Valeyev had appeared. He had been to the same school as Topkin, a couple of years ahead. He was now a lieutenant colonel in the FSB, and had also been invited to the birthday party. Topkin relayed to him a summary of the affair, and Igor—whom the security guards already knew—did not need much time or many words to persuade them, although it was obvious that the business brought him no pleasure.

‘You won’t be happy when the last place has gone to a Tolbay.’

The feast was jolly enough to start with, but gradually the toasts and conversations became more and more serious, and then openly glum. Not many of those round the table could see a secure future for themselves in Kyzyl. Most of them, even though they were in decent, paying jobs, were counting the days until they retired. The pension age in the republic had been brought in line with the regions of the Far North, and was fifty for women and fifty-five for men. Others, such as Igor Valeyev, were waiting until they had done long service so that they could go off to somewhere around Krasnoyarsk, or Novosibirsk, or Kuban. They had prepared places for themselves—built houses, bought flats. By contrast, Topkin, to use his wife’s phrase, had ‘not budged’, though his own place was waiting for him: her parents in Voronezh Oblast.

They had relocated there two years previously, and since then Alina had repeatedly started conversations about moving.

‘What is there for us here? No prospects. It would be fine if you were actually somebody. A double glazing specialist, though ... You’re not going to be putting windows in until you’re an old man.’

Topkin had at first promised to think about it, while making the case that he could not simply up and sell the flat (‘I still haven’t settled with my first wife over her share of it,’) in order to charge off to who knew where.

‘What’s with the “who knows where”?’ Alina had thrown up her hands. ‘My parents have a beautiful house. But if you don’t want to live with them, we’ll buy our own place.’

‘And what will I do there, in your Bobrov? I’ve had a look on the net. Population 20,000, an oil pressing mill. Am I going to work in an oil mill?’

‘My parents have a farm. You could work there ...’

Topkin sneered. ‘I’m not a serf.’

For a while, Alina seemed to have forgotten about moving. Then she went back to trying to persuade him with renewed force.

‘If you don’t want to go to Bobrov, let’s go to Voronezh. They’re running a programme there just now, helping young Tuvan families. They’ll buy up our two-room flat for a good price. Practically Moscow prices, I’ve heard. We’ll give your ex her share of the proceeds, and buy something equivalent there. Three rooms, even—my parents have promised to help.’

‘I’ll think about it, Alina.’

Topkin had gone on prevaricating. Without screaming and yelling, but resolutely. He could not explain to himself why he would not agree. Logically, they needed to move. For their son’s sake if nothing else. He was about to start school, but all the good teachers had made tracks, and any zealots who were left were getting old; no-one was going to be lured here from beyond the Sayans, even with an offer of millions. Anyway, how long can a person live in siege conditions? You step out in the evenings expecting everyone you meet to slash you with a knife or a bradawl or simply to flatten you with their fist. You lock the door to your flat and go off somewhere with no confidence that when you come back the door will still be in one piece—even if it’s made of steel—and that the flat won’t be picked clean right down to the last rug. You approach the shop assistant trying to guess whether she’ll deign to sell you a slice of sausage or cheese, or pointedly make out that she does not understand Russian, and then when your back is turned ...

Kyzyl was not even his—Topkin’s—home town. He had been born not far from Blagoveshchensk, where his dad had been stationed at the time. It was with Kyzyl, though, that his first experiences of being part of a huge world were connected. Here he had fallen in love for the first time. His friends were still here—not many of them, perhaps, but all the same. The ones who had gone away just seemed to have disappeared, to have died somewhere in this huge country.

There was another reason why Topkin could not agree to leave. Back in ’93, when his own parents and sister had decided to go, he had stayed.

He remembered that moment; he could still see every detail of it clearly. The papers for the sale of the flat had all been formalised, the removals van with their things had been sent off, and Dad, fixing Andrey with a serious, almost threatening look, had asked:

‘No regrets?’

‘No regrets.’ Topkin—back then nineteen-year-old Andrey—had not even tried to put on a show of doubt.

Yes, he had been hard back then; back then he had been a happy newly-wed. His parents and Olga’s (Olga being his first wife) had jointly bought them this very two-room flat in a relatively new five-storey house in a decent district. Andrey was studying at the teacher training college, while his father-in-law, a wizard car mechanic, had fixed him up some paid extra work—filling out the paperwork on damaged cars. Topkin did not personally attend the accidents, but in his free time he typed up handwritten descriptions of dents, smashed lights, and broken bumpers. He started on an old typewriter, switching to a computer when they appeared a little later on.

His parents had gone away. Far away, to one of the other edges of the disintegrating Union. The place they chose had very quickly become a country in its own right. Estonia. Mum and Dad were of Estonian origin, born into Russian families that had lived there since the eighteenth century. This had led to their being granted citizenship. It had not been given easily, but it had been given. By birthright.

They had settled on a little patch of Russian land on the shores of Lake Chudskoye, in the village of Paradise, close to the town of Mustvee (often known as Blackwater). At first they had telephoned or written (back then, writing on paper was still acceptable) to complain, even hinting that they were sorry. Then they would go off into raptures, and invite Andrey and Olga over; later they went back to complaining, albeit with a new note of nostalgia. These days, though, they talked on the phone and by Skype regularly, peacefully, not even wholly in Russian. Twenty years had gone by, during which Topkin had been to visit them four times. He had been bored there, and yawned repeatedly, screwing his face up at their somewhat alien life. He felt no pull to go there again.

He could not explain, even to himself, why he had been bored and pulled a face. Nor did he try. He was not by nature a hard or stubborn man, but he had simply at some point decided that his native land was here, in this little town ringed by mountains. That his river was the Yenisei, his trees the fat, gnarled poplars. That his summer was this one, with its furnace heat, and his winter also this one, with its burning frosts. He had decided quietly, deep inside himself, and he could not imagine that it might be otherwise.

Alina could, though, and after a long argument with Andrey, and two trial visits, she had ended up going off forever to the uncharted land of Bobrov. Taking their son with her. This had happened a month after the feast at the Three-Headed Dragon.

Andrey had phoned, urging her to return. He was sure she would return. Alina had not, however, returned. On the contrary, she had delivered an ultimatum: he was either to sell the flat and make haste to join them, or she would file for divorce.

Surprisingly, these words did not scare him. They did not upset him, did not drive him to take some kind of action. He became calm. He realised that even if he were to give in and meet all her demands, their old life together had gone. There would be no more moments of happiness, no more deep conversations, no more open smiles, no more of that friendship which makes a family a real family. Nothing would wash away the bitter, rotten taste of this ultimatum. Nor was he afraid that he might never again see Danny. His son. That was strange, and he berated himself, he felt a sense of self-loathing, but none of that caused any fear to appear.

For those months when his son was not with him, Topkin had pined, missing him. He repeatedly picked up the toys that had been left behind and turned them over in his hands, remembering the funny words his son had said altogether not long ago when he was altogether small. 'Sopping' instead of 'shopping'. 'Diddle' instead of 'giggle'. Once, Andrey had told him to be careful or he'd 'bash his bonce', and thereafter he had said 'bashky' for his head, which was not so funny, since 'bashky' meant 'teacher' in Tuvan. Teachers were more often than not called 'bashky'.

Yes, Topkin pined, waiting for Danny to come back, imagining how he would sweep him up and toss him into the air, but when he heard Alina's 'I shall file for divorce', his pining was not joined by fear. Divorce might build a wall between him and his son ... a new Dad might appear ... yet he, counter-intuitively, felt an inner calm. Perhaps it was because he could not comprehend or imagine that his son would no more be running around this flat and swinging on the swing in the yard of this house.

'I'll think about it,' he had said to his wife.

'God, you've been saying "I'll think about it" for four years,' his wife had shrieked, an ugly note in her voice. 'Since before your parents went. I'm sick of it!'

'Listen,' Topkin had started to say, injecting into the conversation (to his ears, at any rate), a note of reasonable persuasion. 'We met here, in Kyzyl. We fell in love with each other here. We were married at the registry office on Kochetova Street. Our son was born here. He was born a healthy, strong young lad. Why on earth do we have to go swanning off somewhere else?'

Alina had heard him out without interrupting, and then, when he had finished, had screeched in the same shrewish, ugly voice, 'There's no "life" there! Just waiting for someone to stick a knife in you!'

'Who do you actually know who's been stabbed?'

'I don't want to remember all that bad stuff! Everything here suits me. Russian land ...'

'It's Russian here too.'

'What?' Surprise overcame Alina's rancour, or whatever it was that had forced her to shriek. 'How is it Russian?'

'Kyzyl was built by Russians. They called it Belotsarsk. You told me all about it yourself. You went on and on ...'

'O, Lord, you remember! Who knows all the places the Russians have built? Grozny was built by Russians, and where is it now? Shed a tear for Russian America, why don't you ...'

'You can say that about anywhere. Voronezh. Your Bobrov. I read somewhere that there are people from Grozny right there, throwing their weight around. So,' and he made his voice warm, smiling, 'just come back, Alina. We'll sort all this out—'

'I'm not coming back.' Her voice sounded dry, metallic.

The split with his first wife, Olga, had driven Andrey out of his mind with fear and grief. He had begged her not to go, had vowed to reform, to do everything to make it good for her. It had not helped. She had gone, leaving him. From that time on, his partings with women had been, if not easy (although some had been easy enough), then at least without fear and grief, without the feeling of a chasm opening beneath his feet. It was as if he had spent all that energy on Olga.

Hearing Alina's 'I'm not coming back,' he answered evenly, 'You know best. You're free to choose.'

'Really?' His wife's laugh was hysterical. Then, sounding like a promise: 'Go-o-o-ood.'

This conversation had taken place in the run-up to New Year, and been especially stormy. Both Alina and Andrey had repeated things they had said many times before, but this time there was something final about it all. Their family had openly fallen apart. It had died.

Topkin had not made a dash for the vodka. He had not picked up the phone to call any of the young ladies in his acquaintance in a bid to find comfort and entertainment. Instead, he had finished his last shift at work, stocked up on food, and shut himself in his flat. Friends phoned him to ask how he was planning to see in 2014. 'I've decided to stay at home,' he said. 'Going to take it easy.'

He had lain there on the wide ottoman, watching the TV. He followed up news of the protests in Kiev with a bit of light entertainment on the TNT and STS channels, and when he tired of that, he watched his favourite films online, one after another. His eyes were watching, but his brain was trying to work out what next. It was while he was watching *Frantic*, with Harrison Ford and its beautiful views of Paris, that he conceived the notion of going to Paris. A package tour. A week, maybe, or five days, that sort of thing. Yes, five days. Why not? It wouldn't even cost that much.

Ten months later, this idea had come to fruition.

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Occupied with his thoughts, Topkin lost the little stream of passengers from his plane. He started to charge about in a panic, but almost at once spotted a sign with an arrow and the word 'Sortie'.

'Exit,' he translated to himself in a whisper, and began to walk in the direction indicated by the arrow.

A frosted glass double door swung open before him, and he found himself in a crowd of people meeting and greeting. Many of them were holding bits of cardboard or paper. He spotted the name of his own travel agency and flight. An attractive, slim young lady was holding up a piece of card.

Topkin turned away and quickly chewed a piece of Eclipse chewing gum to smother the smell of alcohol. He went up to her.

'Do you happen to be waiting for me?'

'Maybe.' Her face remained serious. 'What's your surname?'

'Topkin. Andrey. As in "topsoil", although linguists are not certain the two words are connected.'

The young lady pulled herself away from her list and gave Topkin an interested look.

'Are you French?' he asked. He wanted to chat, crack a joke, do something to lift his mood.

‘No. Russian.’

‘Really? There’s something French in the way you speak.’

‘I’ve been living here since I was ten. My parents brought me here. Now I work with Russian tourists.’ The woman found his surname. ‘Yes, you’re one of mine. First one through. You don’t have any luggage?’

‘Of course not. Why would I bring my junk to Paris? A pack of cigarettes and a return ticket. “For the plane with the silver wing,” sang Topkin, “that flies away, leaving only its shadow on earth.”’

‘You need to wait a while.’

‘Sorry?’

‘You need to wait while the others collect their luggage.’

‘Oh, right. Can I step outside?’ Topkin wanted to smoke more than he wanted to chat and admire her pretty face, particularly as she had steadfastly remained serious.

‘OK. But don’t stray too far.’

Topkin stopped by the nearest bin with a cigarette disposal slot, and fished out a packet. The taxi drivers were doing exactly what they did in Abakan or Moscow: obstructing the road and inviting the new arrivals to jump into their cars. Anyone who agreed to a ride found their bags and suitcases grabbed and carried off into the rainy murk, through which twinkled dots of light.

It was indeed already dusk, and while they sorted themselves out and made their way to wherever they were going, it would become proper night. No chance of an evening stroll. It was raining as well as dark. He should have brought an umbrella. He had one of those handy telescopic ones ... still at home.