

Life and Death in Siberia

Anna dashes up the steps to the lobby of my hotel in Yakutsk. She's a tiny, twinkling woman, frustrated by the three sets of insulating doors which allow her entry in their own good time.

This is Siberia, after all; where humanity exists against the odds.

Once she bursts in we need no introduction: I'm the only western woman around expecting a guide. We ricochet back out through the doors into the early morning traffic and a minibus that's seen better days.

Anna chatters away and I maintain the uncomprehending grin I've been deploying since I got to Russia (which worked well in combination with rudimentary sign language plus Google Translate, until my smartphone's operating system permanently adopted the Cyrillic alphabet). But suddenly, as I am doing up my seatbelt, I realise Anna has just uttered something intelligible.

"Parlez-vous français?"

Aargh! I do speak French, *bien sûr*, though now Anna's sitting several seats away and I've missed the opportunity to tell her so. The possibility of having a conversation with someone is beyond exciting, so as we rattle around the dusty streets picking up other passengers, I stare at the back of Anna's head, reignite my linguistic synapses, and start mining my brain for relevant vocab.

When the driver stops on the edge of town to refuel, everyone piles out. I tell Anna that I have remembered that I do *parler français* after all, and, despite some questionable grammar on both sides, conversation flows enthusiastically.

Then Anna pauses, an air of tristesse on her face. She stares into the distance, beyond the boundary of the petrol station, towards some nondescript buildings.

"See that place, there," she says, in French.

"Yes."

"That is where my husband is." She looks truly mournful. "He was killed."

Now in full Gallic mode, I give a shocked gasp and clutch my hands to my bosom in sympathy and horror. Annoyingly, further interrogation is interrupted by the return of the driver, keen to resume his race through the forests along the unpaved road. As we fly over the potholes I am almost severed at the hips by my seatbelt, and spend most of the time contemplating the demises of me (imminent) versus that of Anna's late husband (unexplained).

Frankly - this journey aside - I had found Yakutsk delightful, but perhaps I am misguided.

We're in Siberia, after all; where life is cheap.

It's certainly challenging to think of many uplifting stories from the region over the last few hundred years. Political exiles tramping eastward in appalling conditions. Escaped convicts hijacking travellers for their papers. A vast and desolate country with wolves, bears and thawing mammoths. Penal colonies, gulags and prisons. Minus fifty-degree winters. Roads and buildings collapsing on unstable permafrost. And if it were none of these that had done for Monsieur Anna, there was always the chance that a chunk of Russian rocket had landed on his head. Radioactive jetsam from the higher reaches of our atmosphere. The place is littered with it.

The driver eventually pulls over in the middle of nowhere. On either side the deserted sandy road extends straight to the horizon. An eagle soars lazily in the bright blue sky. It's beautiful, yet slightly terrifying.

Cigarettes are lit, legs stretched. The prospect of being left behind here by the bus renders me weak-kneed with panic, so I refrain from relieving myself in the forest, and instead tackle a rather bruised apple that's been knocking around in my rucksack for a week.

Anna stands next to me, unpacking her lunch. I bat away the mosquitos and decide to address the tragic subject of her deceased spouse. What really happened to him near that garage on the outskirts of Yakutsk?

"So, Anna," I say, with my most compassionate expression. "Your husband. He is dead...?"

"Him?" She looks at me in astonishment. "No, no, we are divorced." She holds out a foil package. "Chicken?"

Quoi?!

My French might be rusty, but I hadn't realised it was that bad. I mutter away to myself, trying to work out where I'd gone wrong. See that place over there, she'd said, that's where my husband is.

Then, "*Il a been tué*": he was killed.

I take that final sentence word by word: "*Il*" (he), "*a*" (has), "*been*"

Oh.

Last time I checked, "*been*" featured in the English lexicon, not the French. It was highly unlikely that Anna had spontaneously gone Franglais. Unlike me.

I repeat her sentence to myself in various accents, weighing up the options.

Surely it couldn't be that all Anna had said, as she gestured at some unremarkable houses, was that her husband lived there?

"Il habitait".

Oh.

I'm ashamed to admit that I almost preferred him killed.

He was her ex after all. And this is Siberia.

Anything can happen.