

**Rooftoppers** by Katherine Rundell

If she had obeyed Charles and stayed in her room all day and all night, Sophie would, she thought, have gone straightforwardly crazy. She tried to reassure herself that she was not breaking any rules. She was not opening the door to her bedroom. The thought of the rooftops kept her steady during the day. Sophie counted the hours until sunset.

By nightfall it had grown cold, and Sophie put on her two pairs of stockings under her nightdress. She hadn't packed enough warm clothes, so she pulled the pillowcases off the pillows and knotted them together to make a scarf. It felt limp and not entirely comfortable, but she thought it was preferable to nothing. Then she got into bed, and wedged her hairbrush behind her neck so she wouldn't fall asleep, and waited.

Matteo arrived as the clocks struck the half hour. He knocked on the skylight, and then stood impatiently flicking pebbles down into her room until she climbed out.

'Hello,' said Sophie. '*Bonsoir.*'

'*Oui bonsoir.*' He wore a pack on his back, and his shorts had been swapped for a pair of trousers. They looked like they had been in a fight, and lost. He said, 'You're learning French?'

'A little.' Sophie flushed. 'It's not easy.'

'Yes it is. I know dogs that speak French. I know *pigeons.*'

'That's different.'

'How? How is it different?'

'Well, I'm not a pigeon.' A thought struck her. 'How long did it take you to learn English? Do all French people speak it like you do?'

'*Je ne sais pas.* I always knew it, a little. There's a bar where the English diplomats go. It has a courtyard. I can hear them speaking from my rooftop. And I learnt to read it while I was in –'  
He stopped.

'While you were where?'

'In an orphanage.'