

Versailles

a novel

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author of *The Walking Tour*

Versailles

KATHRYN DAVIS



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BOOKS BY KATHRYN DAVIS

Labrador

The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf

Hell

The Walking Tour

Versailles


For Daphne

Architecture is merely the embellishment
with which we hide our deepest needs.

—Jean Le Rond d'Alembert

Versailles



 My soul is going on a trip. I want to talk about her. I want to talk about her. Why would anyone ever want to talk about anything else?

My soul is a girl: she is just like me. She is fourteen years old and has been promised in marriage to the French Dauphin, who also has a soul though more visible and worldly, its body already formed (so I've been told) from layers of flesh and fat. In France they piss into chamber pots made of lapis and dine on common garden slugs. In France their hands smell like vanilla and they shoot their *flèches d'amour* indiscriminately in all directions, owing to their taste for books pernicious to religion and morals.

My soul is also powerful, but like a young girl it has wishes and ideas—yes!—a soul can have ideas like a mind does. "Antonia, Antonia, you must pay attention," I can still hear Abbé Vermond implore me, waving a book

in my face when all I wanted to do was dance dance dance, as if he actually believed that to be light of heart is the same as being light of head.

We traveled in a carriage coated with glass and lined with pale blue satin, beautifully swift, magnificently sprung. The end of April and the clouds compact and quick-moving, the fields turning from pale to deeper green, and the fruit trees' veiled heads humming with bees. From Vienna to Molck, from the valley of the Danube to the Castle of Nymphenburg, whose inhabitants behaved like swine. Bells pealed all along our route and uniformed men shot off guns; little girls tossed flower petals in our path. The white horses of the Danube were here one minute, gone the next; one minute we slipped into the Black Forest's long cool shadows, the next out onto a hot sunny plain.

"The world where you must pass your life is but transitory," or so advised my papa from beyond the grave. "There is naught save eternity that is without end." In my lap I had my dear little pug, the smell of whose ears will always be sweeter to me than all the perfumes of Araby and the scent of heliotrope combined.

Twenty thousand horses stabled along the road from Vienna to Strasbourg—no sooner did one of our steeds begin to lather up and stumble than it was ground into cat meat and a new one found to take its place. Serving

women, hairdressers, dressmakers, surgeons, furriers, chaplains, apothecaries, cooks. Each night we managed to consume 150 chickens, 270 pounds of beef, 220 pounds of veal, 55 pounds of bacon, 50 pigeons, 300 eggs.

I was eager to please, though that meant something other than acquiesce to another's desire. Pleasing meant my own desire: the place where my body and soul met, like the musician's bow bearing down on the string, teasing a sound out: *ah ah ah ah ah!*

My soul thought she'd be happy, and then, one day, she'd die.

But, *die*.

What does this mean?

One day Antoinette will not exist, though her soul will continue to flourish.

And WHO IS THAT? WHAT IS THAT?

By the time we stopped for supper at the Abbey of Schuttern I had no appetite at all, even though the nuns tried tempting me with pilchards and apricots and kugelhopf; I admit I wept a little. It was the sixth of May; we'd been on the road for over two weeks. From my bedroom window I could see the Rhine, which looked wide and flat and the color of lead, and the light on it looked like the pilchards had, silver and skinny and unappetizing. I heard a door creak, the sound of footsteps. Angry

voices arguing below, fighting over the wording in the marriage contract, by which I was to be deeded away like a cottage or a plot of land to the people of France. A fork of lightning over the Rhine, and the Lorelei's long ghostly arm lifting to meet it . . .

But Mama would never let me get away with such silly thoughts—I missed her so much I thought I'd die. "You must eat everything on your plate, Antonia. No picking and choosing. Why have you not eaten all your fish? How many times must I tell you that the child who gives in to foolish fears will never amount to much as an adult. Come here, let me take a good look at you—" peering at me through a magnifying glass. "You seem so small for your age. How is your health?" Her white white hair and her white white teeth, one of which she'd had pulled while giving birth to me. Antoinette and a decayed molar, both of us rejected by my mother's body about eight o'clock in the evening, All Souls' Day, 1755.

It was getting dark; the moon was coming up over the river. At home Carlotta would be saying her prayers and Maxie sneaking cheese to his pet mouse, poor Anna lying there with her hands folded across her chest like an effigy of herself, unable to stop coughing. Joseph and Christina, Elizabeth and Karl. Amalia, Leopold, Johanna, Josepha. Mama sitting in her private apartments, sipping her warm milk and signing state papers. Her

head shorn and the walls draped in black ever since Papa's death, which she recorded in her prayer book, "Emperor Francis I, my husband, died on the 18th of August at half past nine o'clock. Our happy marriage lasted 29 years, six months and six days, 1,540 weeks, 10,781 days, 258,774 hours"—despite his numerous and humiliating infidelities.

At least I had my little pug with me, *Gott sei dank!* Tomorrow I would stop speaking German forever, but not tonight. I could see where we were headed and it was black as pitch.



GOOSEFOOT

The approach to Versailles from the east is through forests of royal hunting preserves—the Bois de Boulogne, Saint-Cloud, home to wild pigs and guinea fowl as well as the lesser forms of human life—alternating with stretches of open farmland. Here the wheat is grown that will be harvested in late summer and ground into the loaves of bread that will be viewed with “mystical respect” by the King of France himself.

The baker who bakes bread must do it properly, according to the legal standard, which states that it shall be made of the best wheat on the market or within two *deniers* of that price. And if it is found to be poorly baked or too small in size, the baker shall pay a fine of five *sols* and the bread shall be given to the poor . . .

The sky is gray. It is raining. The approach to Versailles from the east is through dense shadowy forests, the branches of the trees heavy and wet and dripping,

and behind every tree a wild animal, a cutpurse, a whore. No wolves, though—the wolves are all dead and gone, hunted out of existence by Louis XIII, quite the hungry old wolf himself.

Over the Seine and onto the Avenue de Paris, the centermost of the three tree-lined roads comprising the famous *patte-d'oie*, or goosefoot, that converges at the palace gate. Rain is beading on the gold blade at the tip of each of the gate's gold rails, beading up and then streaming down to pool darkly, muddily, on the ground. No matter how frugal the reigning monarch, there never seems to be enough money. The fountains appear broken, their basins clogged with debris, and in the gardens several statues have fallen off their pedestals and are lying on their sides in the wet grass like drunkards.

A dark morning and overcast, but on the approach to the chateau no one has lit a single lantern.


The goosefoot was the idea of Le Nôtre, the Sun King's beloved gardener; he wanted to impress on the landscape the same cross the architect traces in the soil to indicate the main axes of a building. Versailles is actually a little out of alignment. The brass meridian marker traverses the Chamber of the Pendulum Clock diagonally rather than north to south, a fact no one likes to talk about because solar symbolism is crucial to the King's sense of cosmic destiny. How happy it makes him to

watch the sun rise above his forecourt and set beneath his gardens! They extend on either side of the Grand Canal, endlessly unrolling toward the western horizon, where they at last slip through a gap between two poplars and plunge off the edge.

An unfortunate site for the seat of Bourbon power, really: a hillock of unstable sand in the middle of a swamp in a wind tunnel of a valley.

Of course subsequent French theoreticians have embraced the idea of Versailles's misalignment, perhaps in the same spirit with which they consider frog legs a culinary triumph.

It's always better to make something out of nothing — that's the French way.

 And then the bed curtains part. How many nights? A thousand and one, give or take a few?

Though instead of telling tales I scratch my husband's flea bites, the only itch he'll let me scratch, poor thing. The bed curtains part and in he comes, my very own King of France, just as he did that first night so many years ago, his little eyes blinking uncontrollably in what I took to be a colossal effort to see me in all my tender dishabille, though I now know he was merely trying to stay awake. The sound of wind, of rain pattering onto the leaves of the orange trees, and, even at so late an hour, feet racing up and down the Stairways of the Hundred Steps.

Versailles in the spring—beloved Versailles!—frogs croaking deep within the basins of her fountains, in the puddles left by the afternoon's storm. The anguished cry of a star-crossed lover, a few far-off rumbles of thunder

like dice flung across a gaming table. All the remembered sounds of my earliest acquaintance with the place, but muffled, muffled, and then, for the briefest fraction of an instant, vivid again . . .

It was my wedding night. I had just stepped out of my bridal gown embroidered with white diamonds the size of hazelnuts. The bed curtains parted and there was my new husband's face, strangely bridelike itself in its frame of white organdy and displaying the same slack-jawed expression I'd noticed earlier that evening on his grandfather's face, bored to death—as any sensible person would be—by the endless hands of cavagnole and endless trays of hors d'oeuvres, though without the old King's dark catlike eyes, his interest in female anatomy, my breasts in particular. The old King was looking straight at them as he warned his grandson not to overeat and made no effort to conceal his annoyance when Louis sagely observed that he always slept better on a full stomach.

Which is probably why he chose to bring a plum tart with him into the nuptial chamber, holding it tenderly on his palm like a pet. He took his place on the right side of the bed and, without saying a word, began to cut the tart into many tiny pieces with the same pocketknife I'd seen him use on the Host. Singing off key, a song about the hunt, *lalalalala*, and then waving the blade in my