Contents

Title
Other Books
Copyright
Dedication
The Archduchess
Madame la Dauphine
The Little Queen
Madame Deficit
The Austrian Woman
The Widow Capet
Marie Antoinette
An Intimate History
(From Teen Queen to Madame Guillotine)

Melanie Clegg
By the same author

The Secret Diary of a Princess
Blood Sisters
Before the Storm
Minette
From Whitechapel
Copyright 2015 Melanie Clegg
All rights reserved.
For my wonderful blog readers, with all my love.
The Archduchess  
1755-1770

‘Born to obey.’

In later life and like most other children, the young Archduchess Maria Antonia would love to hear the story of her own birth, which had interrupted the work of her mother Empress Maria Theresa, who was busily and
with her usual tireless single-mindedness working away at her mountain of official papers and dispatch boxes on All Souls Day, 2 November 1755, when the pains of labour finally began to overwhelm her. Keen as always to use her precious time as productively as possible, the resourceful Empress called for her dentist and asked him to pull out a painful tooth, reasoning that
she would not notice this additional torment against the pangs of childbirth.

The baby, an unusually tiny girl, was born at around half past eight in the evening and after an inspection by her proud parents, Maria Theresa and her husband, the Emperor Francis, and the attending physicians, was whisked away to the soft and muted world of the royal nurseries at the Hofburg Palace, which
currently housed four older siblings (the last of the Empress’ children, the Archduke Maximilian, would be born a year later), while her mother returned once again to her papers and carried on working. Thirty eight years old and in the prime of life, the Empress Maria Theresa had already given birth to fourteen children, of whom eleven were still living. This new
baby was her eighth surviving daughter and although her arrival was undoubtedly pleasing to both her parents, it was not exactly extraordinarily exciting either, although the Empress, who loved gambling, may have experienced an extra little fillip at having won a bet against one of her courtiers, Count Dietrichstein, who had wagered that the forthcoming
baby would be a boy.

However, commonplace though the arrival of yet another imperial baby might have seemed, it was still an occasion that required proper and formal celebration and the new baby was duly baptised a day later in the presence of her proud father at the Church of the Augustine Friars in Vienna, where she was given the names Maria Antonia Josepha
Johanna. The prefix Maria was a Hapsburg custom, designed to show their reverence for the Virgin Mary, but was never normally used - instead the daughters of Maria Theresa were referred to within the family by their second names, in this instance, Antonia.

While Maria Theresa recovered from the birth and immediately returned to her work, her new daughter was
being tended to by a troop of nursemaids in the royal nurseries. Later on she would be under the charge of a governess, who would oversee her education, but for now she was primarily cared for by her wet nurse Constance Weber, a magistrate’s wife who had been specially selected as much for her beauty, ‘pure principles’ and good character (it being rather
improperly believed that the appearance and personality of a wet nurse could be imbued along with her milk, which was probably fair enough if one was so unwise as to hire an alcoholic or opium eater for the job) as for the quality of the nourishment that she was expected to provide. Frau Weber moved into the Hofburg with her own baby son Joseph, who was just three months older than her
royal charge and, as was the usual arrangement, shared her milk between the two with Joseph becoming known as the little Archduchess’ ‘frère de lait’, her milk brother, a bond that would last throughout their lives.

However, although Maria Theresa had no direct part in the upbringing of her daughters, she still kept a close eye on the royal nurseries and personally
supervised the appointment of staff and the programme of education. The sixteenth century vogue for scholarly princesses as exemplified by the likes of Elizabeth I and Lady Jane Grey was long since over and by the time Maria Antonia was born it wasn’t considered important for the imperial Archduchesses to have more than basic literacy and a smattering of Italian and
French. The more courtly skills of dancing, music, conversation and singing were considered of far more importance for a group of girls who were being carefully groomed for insertion into the most exalted courts in Europe, where women were expected, without exception, to be pleasing to both the eye and ear and would rarely be called upon to participate in
anything more onerous than the most basic social chit chat.

However, although the Empress’ ambitions for her daughters were extremely grand, their upbringing was rather less so, albeit in the splendid surroundings of the imperial palaces: the stately Hofburg, a massive 2,600 roomed edifice in the centre of Vienna where Maria Antonia was born and the
family usually spent their winters; the charming, airy summer palace of Laxenburg and the beautiful and enormous Schönbrunn on the outskirts of Vienna, with its gorgeous gardens and wonderful menagerie of rare and domestic animals, which was a source of great delight to the imperial children. As was the custom, the imperial household moved between their different residences
depending on the time of year but seemed most particularly happy when they were spending time at Laxenburg, which was by far the least formal and most laid back of all the royal palaces, where the royal children had a beautiful series of playrooms, the walls and ceilings painted with charming rustic scenes and fanciful trompe l’oeil birds and flowers. It was here that Maria Theresa and her
French husband Francis could mostly fully indulge their taste for an almost bourgeois informality and what the Empress would refer to as ‘gemütlich’ or rather ‘cosiness’, a taste that they would pass on to their youngest daughter, Maria Antonia.

Of course it was nothing new for a royal family to have a favourite country hideaway where they would
take only the most select band of courtiers, who at Laxenburg were all required to follow a strict dress code of red coats for the gentlemen and red gowns for the ladies, and frolic in a world of bucolic make believe interspersed with vigorous hunting excursions into the surrounding countryside. For time immemorial, monarchs have done their best to escape from the pressures of royal
life by creating private little bolt holes for themselves of admittedly varying degrees of magnificence and privacy. After all, Versailles had started life as a hunting lodge before being transformed into a bulging great monstrosity and cathedral to excess, and by the late eighteenth century, within its walls and behind its splendid state rooms there existed secret little warrens of rooms where the royal family,
who couldn’t even have dinner without being stared at by multitudes of reverent strangers, could retreat to their more private occupations and hobbies. However, the tone at the imperial court was far more informal than that at Versailles, although they were still capable of putting on a proper and extraordinarily lavish show of almost byzantine
magnificence when the occasion called for it. Overall though the Viennese court was gossipy, fun loving and low key, with the imperial family themselves leading the way in the enjoyment of simple pleasures like sleigh rides in the snow at Schönbrunn, picnics on the banks of the Danube river, exchanging gifts at Christmas and dressing up in capes and masks for the famous
Viennese carnival. As a young woman, Maria Theresa was almost as light hearted and pleasure seeking as her daughters but things changed dramatically after the premature death of her beloved husband Francis at the celebrations for the wedding of his son Archduke Leopold to the Infanta Maria Luisa of Spain in August 1765. Consumed by grief, she cut off her lovely fair hair,
eschewed the grand dresses and jewels in which she had taken so much delight in favour of heavy mourning, no longer danced at balls or appeared at the theatre and became even more austere and formidable than ever.

If Maria Theresa’s love of simple living away from court, numerous offspring and exclusive and certainly excessive delight in her husband were reminiscent of
her distant relative Queen Victoria, then so too was her all consuming manner of mourning him as she gave herself wholeheartedly up to grief, noting despondently in her prayer book that her ‘happy married life lasted 29 years, 6 months and 6 days; this is 335 months, 1540 weeks, 10781 days and 258744 hours.’ That her beloved Francis had not been an entirely perfect husband
and had indeed been something of a womaniser, who conducted liaisons with much younger women at court, was now discreetly swept under the carpet and forgotten.

Obviously, the unexpected death of Emperor Francis was to have sad repercussions for all of his children, particularly his eldest son Joseph who now found himself Emperor and in the
unhappy position of acting as a rather superfluous co-ruler with his domineering mother at the age of just twenty three, but the nine year old Maria Antonia was especially distraught as she had long been her father’s pet and was said to be his favourite child and most particular mignonne. In later years she would tell her friends about the last time she saw her handsome, cheerful father
when he set out with his gentlemen to travel to Innsbruck for her brother’s wedding but then suddenly turned back to embrace her one last time, almost as if, she would later recall, he had somehow known that he would never see her again and had had a premonition of the terrible sorrow that would be her lot in life.

The imperial family’s love of simple middle class living
is perhaps perfectly illustrated by the family portrait painted by Maria Antonia’s elder sister Maria Christina, which depicts the family on St Nicholas Day in 1762. The Emperor is shown at his ease before the fire, looking positively rakish in his dressing gown, slippers and night cap and with a clear stubble on his chin, while his devoted wife, the Empress stands behind his chair in the
simple blue dress of a well-to-do Austrian *hausfrau*, looking pleased as punch as she smiles out of the painting, her hands resting on the back of his chair as she serves him his morning cup of hot chocolate. Only four of the imperial children are depicted in the painting, the rest presumably getting up to mischief elsewhere: eight-year-old Ferdinand is shown crying as his pretty elder sister Maria ...
Christina, who at first glance looks more like a fresh faced and charmingly dressed young governess than an Archduchess of Austria, presents him with his Krampus gift of birch rods arranged as a switch in his shoe, obviously a punishment for acts of naughtiness, while the youngest imperial child, six year old Archduke Maximilian, who has clearly been much better behaved
than his elder brother rather smugly tucks into a delicious looking pile of iced heart shaped gingerbread biscuits on the carpet. Most charming of all though is the diminutive figure of the seven year old Maria Antonia, who peeps out from behind her mother’s skirts and proudly holds up her splendidly dressed new doll to the viewer, clearly thrilled with her latest acquisition.
However, as with the later Victorian court, this near obsession with appearing as middle class and ‘ordinary’ as possible had a darker flip side in that it also fostered a certain restrictive, stiff lipped and often depressingly narrow minded bourgeois attitude towards morality and duty, that would all too often cast a cloud over the lives of Maria Theresa’s children and in particular her daughters,
who were raised to have an equal fear of God and their mother, considering both as omniscient and terrifying as the other. As might be expected at the imperial court, there was always a heavy emphasis on religious observation with daily Mass and devotions and a strict adherence to the timetables of the church, which included fasting for Lent and being marked with a cross on the
forehead on Ash Wednesday. However after Francis’ death, the court became increasingly gloomy which would have a marked effect on the moods of the young Archduchesses, who now became even more terrified of drawing their mother’s censorious eye, always so quick to find fault and sharply comment upon it, upon themselves. However, at the same time they were desperate for her affection
and there can be no doubt at all that for all her scolding and nit picking, Maria Theresa loved her children deeply.

At the time of Maria Antonia’s birth in 1755, there were already seven surviving Archduchesses, the eldest of whom, Maria Anna, was at seventeen, old enough to be her youngest sister’s mother and would probably have already been married off had
she not unfortunately been physically delicate since birth and prone to debilitating bouts of ill health, which rendered her sadly quite ineligible in an age when European princelings were looking about for robust wives who could hopefully provide them with lots of children. Maria Anna was bright as a button though and a great favourite with her father, who shared her taste.
for science, archaeology and politics - all of which were considered unusual interests for young women at that time. It’s likely though that foibles that might well have been discouraged in one of her more marriageable younger sisters were tacitly tolerated in Maria Anna.

Although Maria Anna was their mother’s eldest surviving child, it was her next daughter, Maria
Christina, the talented artist of the family who went by the nickname ‘Mimi’, who was Maria Theresa’s undoubted favourite, probably initially because she had the good sense to be born on her mother’s birthday but then later because she was apparently the most talented and intelligent of the royal daughters. The obvious favouritism shown by the Empress for Mimi was to be a
source of contention amongst all the sisters, who competed for their fearsome mother’s approval and attention. Although all of the imperial Archduchesses were made very aware that their ultimate duty was to marry well for the sake of Austrian interests, it was Mimi alone who was permitted the very great privilege of following in their mother’s footsteps and marrying for love when she
rejected the Duke of Chablais, the suitor that her parents had chosen for her and instead begged to be allowed to marry her cousin Prince Albert of Saxony, who was virtually penniless and an altogether less eligible match for an imperial Archduchess and the favourite daughter of the Empress. However, this favouritism would inevitably win the day for Mimi, when the Empress perceived that
allowing her daughter to marry a penniless prince would mean being able to keep her always close at hand rather than having to sacrifice her to a grand foreign match, which would in all probability mean never seeing her again. Prince Albert was therefore further ennobled with the Duchy of Teschen, while Mimi was presented with an enormous dowry, which enabled the young
couple to live in high style at the imperial court after their marriage.

Even this unusual favour might have been overlooked by the others had not Mimi been a telltale who delighted in reporting her younger siblings’ misdeeds to their mother and sowing discord between them all, with the aim, of course, of enhancing her own position of most favoured child. Maria
Antonia, who was thirteen years Mimi’s junior, came to loathe her eldest sister whose bossy, high handed ways and intellectual snobbishness left her with a permanent suspicious dread of what would later be termed ‘bluestockings’. For the rest of her life, Maria Antonia would eschew the company of intellectually sophisticated women, such as the cultivated and delightfully louche
salonières of Paris, in favour of what she regarded as more straightforward and much less challenging companions, who shared her own interests and when Mimi herself later visited France, Maria Antonia, now Queen of France and no longer the despised little sister, took great pleasure in snubbing her.

Mimi was also often at loggerheads with her brother
Joseph, who was heir to the throne and would become Emperor after the death of his father, although he was forced to take a back seat to his mother, who retained a firm grip on affairs of state and had no great wish to delegate to her son. Resenting the fact that Mimi was clearly his mother’s favourite was one thing but when his own adored first wife, Isabella of Parma, a granddaughter of
Louis XV, began to also show a marked preference for his sister’s company, writing her passionate letters and spending all of her time with her, he clearly decided that enough was enough and the two never really got on again.

The third surviving daughter was Maria Elisabeth, a charming and lively little blonde, who was considered to be by far the most lovely of the
Archduchesses, despite some stiff competition, particularly from Mimi, Maria Amalia and Maria Josepha. Known within the family as Leisl, she looked like butter wouldn’t melt in her pretty mouth but wasn’t nearly as nice as she looked. Deprived of what she considered to be her rightful Queen Bee status among the siblings by the continued presence of Mimi after her marriage, she was disliked by
the younger girls thanks to her sharp put downs and tendency to flirt with whatever handsome young men happened to be about the place - a habit that gave her watchful mother quite a few misgivings too as she worried that Maria Elisabeth’s flirtations would eventually lead to a scandal that might damage her all important marital prospects, particularly with the trio of Bourbon
princelings: Ferdinand of Parma, Ferdinand of Naples and, most grand of all, the Dauphin of France, whom she had currently set her sights on as the most eligible and potentially useful prospective sons-in-law in the wake of the Seven Years War, which came to an end in 1763.

Charming, intelligent and frivolous, the Archduchess Maria Amalia was the fourth surviving daughter of Maria
Theresa and one of Maria Antonia’s favourite sisters, probably because she could be relied upon not to tell tales back to their mother and also liked to indulge her younger siblings rather than put them at odds with each other, unlike her elder sisters. Of a slightly satirical turn of mind, Maria Amalia had little patience with her mother’s behaviour and unlike the other daughters, was less
desperate for approval which meant that they were frequently at loggerheads, particularly when Maria Amalia became of marriageable age and declared that she didn’t see why she shouldn’t be allowed to choose her own husband as her elder sister Mimi had done. Of all the sisters, she was the most sociable and most popular in Viennese society.
After Maria Amalia there came Maria Johanna and then Maria Josepha, two little sweet natured princesses born just over a year apart and as alike as two peas in a pod. The two girls were as close as twins and raised virtually together, sharing rooms and lessons until Maria Johanna, the elder of the pair, tragically died of smallpox at the age of just twelve. Maria Antonia, who had survived a mild bout
of smallpox at the age of two and was consequently immune from that point onwards, was seven years old at the time and her elder sister’s illness and horrible death would have a profound effect on her. It was even more distressing for Maria Josepha however, an already shy and quiet girl who became even more withdrawn after Maria Johanna’s death and, not unsurprisingly,
developed a terrible and morbid fear of smallpox.

Of all her sisters, however, it was the mischievous, delightfully pretty and strong willed Maria Carolina, known within the family as ‘Charlotte’, who was just three years older, who would always remain closest to Maria Antonia’s heart and would be her ally, best friend and most trusted confidante during her childhood in
Austria. As the two youngest Archduchesses, Maria Carolina and Maria Antonia were so close in age, they were brought up together as Maria Johanna and Maria Josepha were, sharing rooms and lessons and paired off together during court entertainments, when the talented imperial children would sometimes dance and sing for the entertainment of the other guests.
However, although the two smallest Archduchesses were outwardly a most delightful pair of girls, all big blue eyes, pretty pink pouts and fair ringlets, they were apparently a pair of terrors, who led their nurses and governesses a merry dance and were frequently reprimanded by their mother, who would often exasperatedly complain that of all her daughters, Maria Carolina was the one
who had most inherited her own bold spirit thanks to her propensity for playing practical jokes on the ladies of the court, behaving pertly and being generally full of mischief and mutiny. It’s likely that the more strong willed Maria Carolina was very much the ring leader in all of this, but the fact that Maria Antonia would retain a playful, teasing streak for most of the rest of her life.
suggests that she very much entered into the spirit of things and was not exactly an innocent bystander in her sister’s pranks. In the end, however, the Empress made good on her threats to separate the two and in 1768 they were indeed eventually divided and made to take their lessons alone.

Their chief governess during childhood was Countess Brandeis, a kind
hearted and eager to please woman who never quite managed to strike a proper balance between indulging her flighty young charges and instilling them with a reasonable level of education. Keen that her daughters should fit into whatever grand spheres that marriage placed them within, Maria Theresa insisted upon a broad education that encompassed literacy, languages (primarily
Italian, taught by the famed librettist Metastasio, and French, although some Latin was optimistically attempted too), mathematics, history and Geography, none of which were taught to a very vigorous level, it being considered enough that the girls should at least know a smattering of information - enough to render them not entirely ignorant and able to keep up their end during
social conversations. There was also an extremely heavy
emphasis on filial duty, obedience and moral
decorum, with Maria Theresa herself declaring that her
daughters were ‘born to obey’ and ensuring that they were
brought up to place their allegiance to Austria above all else, which would
naturally cause them to walk a tricky tightrope when their
inevitable marriages made
them rulers of various other countries, with different and occasionally conflicting interests.

To this end, the Empress insisted upon maintaining a daily correspondence with her children’s tutors and governesses, making sure that she was kept informed of everything that happened, however insignificant it might seem. Possibly it would have suited her better to take
complete charge of their upbringings herself but as her state affairs and enormous work load made this impossible, she did the next best thing and kept as close an eye as possible on their development, even occasionally summoning them into her presence to discuss their progress with, naturally, particular emphasis on their various failings. Maria Antonia must have
absolutely dreaded these conversations with her formidable mother for she was never left in any doubt that her unimpressive intellectual abilities were an enormous disappointment to the exacting Maria Theresa.

It’s not that Maria Antonia was stupid though, in fact far from it and as we will see, with a proper tutor she showed herself capable of making astonishing progress
in quite a rapid amount of time. However, her natural inclination tended more towards laziness than application and the good hearted, undemanding Countess Brandeis proved herself quite unable to inspire her charge to do any better, probably because she was so keen to please and valued the liking of her pupils above their educational attainments. From an early
age Maria Antonia struggled with both her reading and writing, finding the former tedious and the latter just too much like hard work so that her exercises were a mess of blotches, crossings out, misspellings and sloppy letter formation. In the end, the Countess, by now fearful of the Empress’ censure decided it might be better to do the exercises herself in pencil and get her pupil to trace over the
words in ink - a most unsatisfactory way of going about things but definitely the easiest on both governess and pupil, even if it meant that the latter never really quite improved, while the former must have quaked in her shoes at the thought of the dread Empress finding out about her subterfuge.

Her lack of interest in reading could not be so easily rectified or hidden however
and was once again down to laziness as well as a worrying inability to pay proper attention or concentrate for more than short periods of time. As Countess Brandeis and eventually the court of France were soon to realise, the young Archduchess Maria Antonia had an absolute horror of ever feeling the slightest bit bored and would as a result strenuously avoid anything that forced her to
concentrate or was of no interest - something of a flaw in a young girl who might well one day become a head of state and be expected to sit through long state events or make polite conversation about subjects that were of no immediate relevance to her. In not forcing her young charge to apply herself more or at least attempt to instil some discipline and application, Countess
Brandeis, for all her good natured intentions, was in fact doing the young Maria Antonia a grave disservice.

Lessons took up only a small part of the day though (although probably more than enough as far as Maria Antonia was concerned) and the rest of the time was employed with all the delights that the royal palaces could offer to a cheerful and energetic group of young
Although the elder children were significantly older than their youngest siblings they still, for the most part, all got along together reasonably well and later on Maria Antonia would reminisce happily about afternoons spent skating and sledding with her older brothers and sisters at Schönbrunn and Laxenburg, interspersed no doubt with enthusiastic snowball fights.
and cups of hot chocolate and soft warm gingerbread. Riding and hunting were also favourite occupations - the latter being considered an essential part of court life for both men and women because of its unique opportunities for relatively informal access to the monarch. Many an otherwise obscure nobleman had risen to dazzling favour simply because of his prowess in the hunting field,
while displaying superior horsemanship was a well tried and tested way for ladies of the court to catch the King’s eye as well.

Music was also extremely important at the imperial court as both Maria Theresa and Francis passed on their love of music to their children, all of whom learned to play an instrument and took singing lessons, which was particularly important in
the case of the girls in an age when women were expected to be entertaining adornments who must always be ready to be called upon to please and divert their companions with an impromptu musical interlude. In time the royal children were able to form a small orchestra and would play both at private family gatherings and to a much bigger audience at court events. Maria Antonia made
her first public debut at not quite four, singing French couplets at a court gala to celebrate her father’s name day in October 1759, followed by her brother Ferdinand enthusiastically playing the kettle drums, Joseph performing with his cello and Maria Elisabeth and Maria Christina showcasing pieces on the piano. Although her academic progress was rather less than stellar, music
was something that Maria Antonia could readily excel at and she would show particular aptitude with the harp, which she was taught by Joseph Hinner, and singing as well as being able to sight read music. One of her most charming portraits from this period shows her playing her spinet in a lovely court dress of sky blue silk, trimmed with pearls, lace and fur. One of the mischievously
smiling Archduchess’ hands is hovering over the keys as the other turns the pages of her music.

There was music everywhere at the imperial court during the childhood of Maria Antonia and her siblings as her family were great patrons to musicians, with some of them even becoming teachers to the royal children, in particular Gluck, whom she would later
promote and honour with her patronage in Paris. It is her legendary encounter with the young Mozart however that is perhaps most well known, although it is not known if the story of the child prodigy composer tripping over then spontaneously proposing to the pretty Archduchess Maria Antonia after she impulsively ran forward to help him up off the floor is apocryphal or based in fact. It certainly
wouldn’t have been out of character for either of them to have behaved thus so may well be true.

Where there is music there must naturally also be dancing and it was in this most essential of courtly arts that Maria Antonia, who naturally managed to hit just the right balance of grace and enthusiasm, was held to particularly dazzle. It’s likely in fact that her exquisite
dancing and polished deportment went a long way towards excusing her lack of ability in other arenas as the ability to strike an impressive pose on the dance floor was considered of tremendous and indeed paramount importance at the time. Certainly the young Maria Antonia would frequently be called upon to take the starring role in performances with her siblings, enchanting everyone
at court with her precocious poise. It’s little wonder therefore that she takes a prominent position, her arms elegantly extended and small feet placed just so, in the lovely Meytens painting of some of the imperial children dancing together in the Gluck operetta *Il Parnasso Confusio*, which was composed and performed in honour of her brother Joseph’s second marriage to
Josepha of Bavaria, which took place in January 1765 when she was just nine years old. Certainly Maria Antonia herself was fond enough of this painting to ask for it to be sent to her in France and it took pride of place in her Petit Trianon, acting as an endearing reminder of what she was pleased to recall as a most happy and carefree childhood.

The physical well being of
the entire imperial family was under the care of Dr Gerhard van Swieten, a educationalist and physician who was to become something of a lifestyle guru to Maria Theresa and was especially closely involved in helping to plan and supervise the upbringing of the imperial children. An enlightened man who would also be responsible for improving health care for all classes of
society and took a great interest in the science of medicine, Van Swieten took an almost Rousseau like line when it came to his young charges, recommending plenty of fresh air and outdoor exercise to build their strength and health, as well as a nourishing and simple but healthy diet of noodle soups, eggs, fresh vegetables, fruit, fish and very little in the way of rich red meats, possibly
influenced by the Habsburg tendency to become alarmingly overweight as a result of over indulgence. His optimistic attempts to put Maria Theresa, whose own mother had ballooned to such tremendous proportions in later life that she eventually completely lost the use of her legs, on a diet were unsuccessful but he had better luck with her children, with Maria Antonia in particular
retaining abstemious eating habits throughout her life.

At Schönbrunn, Maria Theresa constructed two new wings to house her growing family, with the rambunctious pack of Archdukes being housed in the new right wing, which became a bevy of dogs and rampaging adolescent boys squabbling, playing pranks, duelling in the gardens and wrestling in the galleries, while their sisters
lived rather more decorously in the left wing in a cosy and comforting feminine fug of hot chocolate, rosewater and floral scent, although one wonders how harmonious their apartments actually were with eight young women of such varying temperaments and with their own natural bonds and rivalries, living so close together. At the age of five, each of the girls graduated from the royal
nursery and was presented a charming suite of five rooms, which followed the formal pattern of their parents’ apartments - with an outer audience chamber where guests could be formally received and the rooms becoming increasingly more private as they approached the inner sanctum of the bedchamber with its closets.

Just as her apartment at Versailles would become a
colourful and beautiful riot of flowers, drawings, precious little objects and dogs, so too were her rooms at Schönbrunn, which she filled with the things that she loved best. Picking flowers in the gardens was a favourite pastime of the youngest Archduchesses and the vases in their rooms would have overflowed with the sweet scented fruits of their labours, especially in the summer.
Encouraged like other girls of high station to always have some embroidery to hand to keep herself occupied, there would have been cushions and other small pieces worked by her own hand and those of her sisters, as well as sketches and paintings. Maria Theresa took great delight in her daughters’ artwork and even had one of the rooms at Schönbrunn entirely decorated with examples of
their prowess, with prime position, naturally, being given to the work of the talented Mimi.

Like all of the family, Maria Antonia was fond of animals and her particular favourite was an extremely pampered little pug named Mops, with whom she would romp in the gardens along with her sisters and friends. Fully aware that her children would find it of benefit to be
able to mix with people from all stations, Maria Theresa encouraged them to make friends with young people from outside their family circle, including the children of their wet nurses, whom they were brought up to regard as foster siblings, with Maria Antonia in particular becoming very close to her **lait frère** Joseph Weber and his family. Other friends were, as might be expected,
drawn from amongst the children of nobles and officials at their mother’s court, with both Maria Carolina and Maria Antonia becoming especially friendly with the Princesses Frederica (who would go on to become mother to the famous royal beauties Frederica and Luisa of Mecklenburg-Strelitz), Louise and Charlotte of Hesse-Darmstadt, the three eldest daughters of the Prince
of Hesse-Darmstadt, who were distant cousins of the imperial Archduchesses. Maria Antonia would refer to the pretty and extremely pleasant bevy of Hesse-Darmstadt girls as her ‘dear princesses’ and would become particularly fond of Princess Charlotte Wilhelmine, the middle daughter, to the point that she even at one point paid her the signal honour of picking up
her pen in order to labour through a heartfelt letter to the princess, in which she concluded that, ‘I can’t convey to you the depth of my feeling for you’. Based on this, it seems likely that her charming cousin was the first in a series of close and warm female friendships with which Maria Antonia would find comfort, acceptance and succour throughout her life and the Hesse-Darmstadt
princesses would remain close friends until the very end with Maria Antonia treasuring their letters and portraits and excitedly enjoying their company whenever one of them happened to visit Paris.

Although by our modern standards we may consider Maria Antonia to have been pampered, perhaps even a little spoilt by the grandeur of the surroundings that she
grew up in and the comforts of her every day life, it’s likely that she herself would have been surprised by this as she would always in later life contrast the relative informality and happiness of her childhood in Vienna with the etiquette obsessed discomforts of life at Versailles and the signal lack of affectionate gesture within the French royal family, which had left her husband,
destined to be one of the greatest Kings in Europe a wreck of insecurities and shambling awkwardness while she herself shimmered with the confidence and vitality that came from being raised in the heart of a loving and supportive family where a Germanic frankness rather than French obfuscation was the order of the day. In her view, growing up amidst the splendours of the French
court had ruined her husband whereas the relative simplicity of her own upbringing had been much more successful, even if it had not adequately prepared her for life at Versailles, and therefore was to be emulated when it came to their own children.

Unfortunately, despite the grand celebrations that marked the occasion, the second marriage of Maria
Antonia’s handsome eldest brother Joseph, who was always an object of great awe and admiration to his youngest sisters, was no more happy than his first to Isabella of Parma, which had ended with her death at the age of just twenty one in November 1763. The unfortunate Isabella had sadly possessed a rather morose, morbid and undoubtedly depressive personality, which was quite
at odds with the lively good humour of the imperial family and cast a veil of gloom over all their gatherings thanks no doubt to her habit of regaling her husband and his family with such alarming statements as, ‘Death speaks to me in a distinct voice that rouses in my soul a sweet satisfaction,’ which sounds more like the bad poetry of a modern day goth teenager than the
utterances of a pampered eighteenth century princess and serves as a reminder perhaps that adolescents in the past were just as likely to be drawn to the gothic and macabre as they are nowadays and indeed probably had much more scope for their ghoulish introspections. She also, more worryingly from a dynastic point of view, developed a horror of the sexual act,
which devastated her adoring husband, who then had to watch as his wife shunned him in favour of his own sister, Mimi.

The young couple still managed to do their duty though and produced a single living child, Maria Theresa, a lively little thing who was named for her doting grandmother (who had with her usual domineering highhandedness declared that all
the first born daughters of her offspring should be named after herself), before Isabella expired of smallpox a year later after giving birth to a stillborn daughter whom she insisted should be named Maria Christina in honour of her favourite sister-in-law. Mimi for her part then chose this moment to show her grieving brother the amorous and extraordinarily passionate letters that his dead wife had
written to her over the years, thinking that they might alleviate his terrible grief by proving that Isabella had not been worthy of it. Instead, not entirely unexpectedly, they just made matters worse.

Devoted to the memory of his first wife, the heartbroken and completely bereft Joseph had initially resisted all thoughts of remarriage but then had been forced to capitulate to his mother’s
demands that he do his duty and provide himself with a male heir. Deciding that he couldn’t possibly love anyone as much as he had loved Isabella and thwarted in his original plan to marry her younger sister Maria Luisa, who was already betrothed to the heir of the King of Spain, he declared that one princess was as good as another, refused to take any part in the hunt for a second wife and
left the decision to his parents, who duly selected a second cousin of impeccable lineage for the task. Docile, good natured but rather boring, Maria Josepha was not an unattractive young woman but from the very first she failed to appeal to Joseph, who professed himself horrified by her ‘charmless’ figure, pimpled face and bad teeth. However, Joseph was no Henry VIII and so he
made the best of things, leading what he referred to as a ‘bachelor’ life and avoiding his wife’s company as much as possible. So unhappy was the marriage that Joseph’s irreverent and outspoken little sister Maria Carolina declared that if she had the ‘great misfortune to be Joseph’s wife, I would run away and hang myself from one of the trees at Schönbrunn’. To the surprise of absolutely no one
at all, there were to be no children from this union. A much more congenial sister-in-law was the delightful and gregarious Infanta Maria Luisa of Spain, who married Maria Antonia’s elder brother Archduke Leopold in 1765 and whose wedding celebrations in Innsbruck were cut so dramatically and tragically short by the death of her new father-in-law Emperor
Francis. Sadly for everyone however, the newly weds, who had become Grand Duke and Duchess of Tuscany upon Francis’ death, moved to Florence immediately after their wedding and returned to Vienna only once in the spring of 1770, shortly before Maria Antonia’s wedding, which meant that the two sisters-in-law, Maria Luisa and Maria Antonia had very little time to get to know each
other before the latter left Austria forever.

By 1767, the question of the youngest girls’ marriages became of even more pressing moment as Maria Theresa worked hard to fix the rapidly crumbling friendship that had sprung up between Austria and France in the wake of the alliance formed by their common enemies England and Prussia during the Seven Years War.
and which had been sealed with the Treaty of Versailles in 1756. However, Austria and France were not natural allies and in the face of Louis XV’s increasing apathy, Maria Theresa desperately tried to bring about an alliance in the time honoured fashion of a marriage between one of her daughters and Louis’ heir, his grandson Louis Auguste. At the same time, she was keen to further
reinforce the friendship between Austria and the Bourbons by marrying two other daughters to Ferdinand of Naples and Ferdinand of Parma, both of whom were great great grandsons of Louis XIV, while the latter had the additional benefit of also being grandson of Louis XV.

At first it was proposed that Maria Amalia should marry Ferdinand of Naples
and Maria Carolina should marry Louis Auguste of France, which seemed ideal as his grandfather, Louis XV was her godfather, while their elder sister Maria Elisabeth, the loveliest of them all, could marry the widowed French king. However, Ferdinand’s father Charles III of Spain had objected to the first of these matches on the grounds that Maria Amalia, at five years his senior, was too
old for his son. It was therefore arranged that he would instead marry her younger sister, the delightfully pretty sixteen year old Archduchess Maria Josepha, who was her brother Joseph’s favourite sister, while Maria Amalia instead was eventually betrothed to Ferdinand of Parma, who was also five years younger than her but, on the advice of his grandfather Louis XV, who
took the pragmatic view that one princess was much like another when it came down to it, declared that he wasn’t about to be fussy about which Archduchess he married.

Nevertheless, it seemed that Maria Amalia, the social butterfly of the family, had other ideas. Encouraged by her sister Mimi’s love match with Prince Albert of Saxony, she had fallen helplessly in love with yet another
handsome young cousin Prince Charles of Zweibrücken, who was, as far as the smitten Maria Amalia was concerned, the embodiment of a Teutonic hero with blond hair, steely blue eyes and chiselled good looks. Upon being informed of her upcoming marriage to the Duke of Parma, she declared that she would be doing no such thing and would instead be marrying
the Prince of Zweibrücken, arguing that it was not really such a bad match as the handsome Charles was heir of his childless cousin, the Elector of Bavaria. However, as far as Maria Theresa was concerned, a chancy heir was in no way competition for a prestigious Bourbon prnceling who was already in possession of his inheritance and so she insisted that Maria Amalia renounce Charles and
do her duty by marrying Ferdinand.

It seems odd perhaps that Maria Amalia, who was as strong willed in her own way as her sister Mimi, should have bowed her head and given in to her mother’s demands, instead of defying her and perhaps making off with her handsome prince in the dead of night. However, princesses in real life rarely behave like the ones in
romantic novels and having been brought up since childhood to worship at the altar of filial duty and to regard the word of her mother as tantamount to the word of God himself, there really was no question of Maria Amalia seriously disobeying Maria Theresa in a matter of such seriousness, however much she may have secretly wished to do so. There were threats and tears and shouting of
course, Maria Amalia being one of the more emotive and demonstrative of the Archduchesses, but it was all so much hot air and everyone knew it.

However, not for nothing is 1767 commonly referred to as Maria Theresa’s ‘annus horribilis’, for just as she was able to congratulate herself on having pulled off a frankly incredible coup in this triple alliance between her family
and the Bourbons, disaster struck in the form of yet another outbreak of smallpox, that most dreaded of eighteenth century diseases, which had already claimed the lives of her daughter-in-law Isabella, her daughter Maria Johanna and her favourite son Charles Joseph in January 1761. This time the disease killed Maria Theresa’s poor unloved daughter-in-law Maria
Josepha and left her daughter Maria Elisabeth permanently disfigured as the result of its ravages, which removed all possibility of marriage with the fastidious Louis XV, whose taste for pretty young women was well known throughout Europe.

Potentially most disastrously of all though was the fact that Maria Theresa herself was struck down by the disease and indeed came
so close to death that the Last Sacrament was given and her family went into a panic, unable to comprehend the possibility that they might actually be about to lose her. Luckily though, the indomitable Empress pulled through and made a full recovery, to the tremendous relief of everyone, although it’s possible that her eldest son Joseph was not a little disappointed to see his
chance to take full and complete charge come to an end, pleased though he must have been to see his mother, whom he revered as much as he was frustrated by her, recover.

Plans for the marriages carried on as before, with Maria Josepha due to leave Vienna in October 1767 to make the journey to Naples. However, shortly before her departure her mother insisted
that she spend a night praying and keeping vigil in the imperial crypt of the Capuchin church in Vienna where her sister-in-law Maria Josepha had recently been interred alongside other members of the imperial family. To an impressionable young girl, already terrified of disease and death, this must have been an appalling ordeal and it was probably of no surprise to anyone when
she collapsed and had to be carried back inside the palace afterwards. Sadly, her collapse was found to have far more sinister reasons than simple adolescent squeamishness but instead proved to be the first symptoms of smallpox, perhaps caught from noxious gases seeping from Maria Josepha’s improperly closed tomb but more likely, judging by the inoculation period of
the disease, caught before she had even descended the steps to the crypt.

The unfortunate Maria Josepha died on 15 October, the very day that she had been scheduled to leave Vienna for Naples. Instead, as Leopold Mozart, who was in Vienna for the wedding celebrations, gloomily noted, ‘the Princess Bride has become the bride of a heavenly bridegroom’.
Elsewhere, the news of Maria Josepha’s sad and untimely death was greeted with dismay as the Kings of Spain and France were as keen as Maria Theresa to see this union between Austria and Naples sealed for good. Her prospective bridegroom on the other hand amused himself by dressing one of his friends in a dress and putting sweets on his face to represent smallpox spots.
before parading him through Caserta palace, telling everyone that it was the Austrian Archduchess’ funeral procession. However, he raised no objection when he was informed that he was still to be married, only this time to Maria Josepha’s younger sister, Maria Carolina, who had been hastily offered as a replacement, inheriting her sister’s spectacular bridal
trousseau as compensation for having to permanently forgo the grand match with the Dauphin of France that she had been cheerfully anticipating.

Like her elder sister Maria Amalia, Maria Carolina loudly and forcefully protested at being so summarily packed off to Naples but in the end she too was forced to give in and obey, although not at all
meekly. Maria Carolina was married to Ferdinand of Naples in a lavish proxy wedding on 7 April 1768 at the church of the Augustine Friars in Vienna, with one brother, Joseph walking her up the aisle and another, Ferdinand standing in for her absent groom. She left for Naples the same afternoon, taking public leave of her family in front of the entire court but then stopping her
coach as it pulled away from Schönbrunn in order to jump down and embrace her beloved Maria Antonia, who was distraught, one last time. During her long journey to Naples, the devastated and apprehensive Maria Carolina wrote to her former governess, Countess Lerchenfeld, to ask that she should ‘write to me everything that you know about my sister Antonia,
down to the tiniest detail, what she says and does and even what she thinks... Beg her to love me, for I am so passionately concerned for her.’ Later on, after her disappointing wedding night, she would write more ominously that, ‘I pity Antoinette, who still has all of this to face. When my sister has to confront this situation, I shall shed many tears.’

Maria Amalia’s wedding
took place just over a year later on 27 June 1769, again in the church of the Augustine Friars and following the same procedure as Maria Carolina’s nuptials, with Joseph walking her down the aisle and Ferdinand standing in for the absent Duke of Parma. A few days later she departed Vienna for her new life in Italy, dropping a dutiful curtsey to the mother who had destroyed her
happiness and forced her against her will into a marriage that she despised, before she left. They would never see each other again and their already shaky relationship was damaged beyond repair by the situation. Her disappointed suitor, Charles of Zweibrücken, would later, in an ironic twist of fate, marry Maria Amalia of Saxony, a first cousin of the Dauphin
Louis Auguste, who had been promoted by his mother Maria Josepha of Saxony as a prospective bride for the French heir. With Maria Carolina and Maria Amalia now safely married off, albeit resentfully, attention now turned to the most glittering prize of all - the Dauphin Louis Auguste of France. Although his parents had been implacable enemies of the Austrian
alliance and would have preferred their son to be married to a German princess like his mother, they were both dead by 1767, leaving the way clear for negotiations between Louis XV and Maria Theresa to move on in earnest. At first, as we have seen, it was Maria Carolina, Louis’ goddaughter who was first mentioned as a prospective bride for the Dauphin but when she was
betrothed to the King of Naples in 1767 attention turned to her hitherto unmentioned and unthought of younger sister, Maria Antonia, who was just over a year younger than the French prince. This French match was extremely close to Maria Theresa’s heart and she must have wondered just how hard it would be to persuade the French King to agree to it, considering that he himself
had made a rather less than dazzling match to a Polish princess and then married his own son to a relatively obscure princess of Saxony. Surely a match with imperial Austria was far more impressive than both of these alliances?

For his part, although he was open to the idea of a match between his heir and the Archduchess Maria Antonia and more than awake
to the extraordinary grandeur of such a marriage, Louis XV was also painfully aware of both his own sharply declining popularity in France and the similar antipathy directed towards their Austrian allies, who were regarded with great suspicion and hostility by the French populace. In short, he wasn’t sure if he was up to the job of further antagonising them with what was bound to be an
extremely unpopular marriage. However, he listened to Maria Theresa’s approaches and allowed his Ambassador in Vienna, the Marquis de Durfort to politely admire the thirteen year old princess before he duly despatched not altogether glowing reports of the girl, whom he deemed extremely pretty but childish and rather badly educated, back to Versailles.
Eager to advance the marriage as much as possible, Maria Theresa now took a close look at the education of her youngest daughter. She had already had reason to bemoan Maria Antonia’s lack of aptitude and concentration in the past but had taken no real measures to rectify this. Now, however, the grooming of Maria Antonia to become a worthy morsel for French delectation became of
paramount importance to the Empress and she bent her considerable energies to this end, overseeing every detail and overlooking nothing in her quest to transform her daughter into a French Dauphine both in appearance and actuality.

The first thing to receive attention was Maria Antonia’s previously desultory education, which even by the lax standards of
the time was clearly in no way suitable for a future Queen of France. Upon investigation, Maria Theresa discovered that not only was her daughter’s native German execrable but her French was appalling too and would require a great deal of work to get it up to scratch. At first, two actors, Messieurs Aufresne and Sainville, were employed to get the young Archduchess up to speed but
when Versailles, appalled that a prospective Dauphine was learning her French from a pair of common thespians, intervened, another, more worthy tutor was engaged for the unenviable task of ironing out all the problems with Maria Antonia’s education. Charming, urbane and erudite, the Abbé de Vermond was a perfect choice to act as the Archduchess’ new tutor as he
had the knack of teaching without really seeming to at all and also managed to quickly earn his young pupil’s admiration and trust thanks to his gentle methods and conversational manner of introducing subjects to her attention so that lessons were more like informal little chats than lectures. When he first took charge of her education in late 1768, the thirteen year old Maria Antonia spoke
terrible French and was almost illiterate when it came to reading and writing both French and German, while her general knowledge about history and geography was poor to nonexistent. However, by the time she left Vienna in May 1770, matters were much improved to the extent that she now spoke fluent French and could read and write properly and was able to converse with relative
confidence about the histories of both Austria and France, although there were still great gaps in her knowledge that might never be adequately filled.

While the Abbé de Vermond was taking charge of Maria Antonia’s education, the ladies were scrutinising her dress and appearance. Up to this point, her every day clothing had been relatively simple dresses of light cotton
in the hottest part of summer, especially in the laid back surroundings of Laxenburg, and silk and velvet for the rest of the year, with her grandest dresses, trimmed with cascades of lace and sweet little ribbon bows being reserved for the grandest court ceremonies and galas. Versailles, however, was a completely different kettle of fish and a much grander wardrobe would be required.
if Maria Antonia was to impress the fussy French with her toilette. Thus a steady stream of fashion dolls, known as Pandoras, began to make their way from the finest dressmakers in Paris to the palaces of Vienna, where their exquisite dresses would be replicated for the Archduchess. A particular problem was caused by her corsetry which, entirely understandably, the young
girl was totally unwilling to wear tightly laced or even at all and some persuasion was required to get her to wear a restrictive whalebone corset in the French style, thus creating a suitably elegantly slender silhouette for her new lavish dresses.

Maria Antonia’s hair was also a problem as, although, it was very thick and a lovely strawberry blonde colour, it had been totally neglected
and was often allowed to hang loose about her shoulders, drawn back from her face by a simple black hairband and only worn up when she was likely to be seen by company or attending a court gala, when it would be pinned up, powdered and decorated with diamonds and a few discreetly placed roses and feathers. Once again, such informality was considered totally
inappropriate by Versailles standards and so Maria Theresa appealed to the Duc de Choiseul, Louis XV’s minister, who was the chief supporter of the union between their two nations. Choiseul’s intimidating sister Béatrix, the Duchesse de Gramont came to the rescue and despatched her own hairdresser, Larsenneur to the Hofburg, where he modified the simple chignon style
favoured by the late Madame de Pompadour, raising it slightly so that it would disguise the Archduchess’ high and rather bulging forehead and uneven hairline and accentuate her youth and charm.

Rather less pleasantly, the Archduchess’ crooked teeth were also deemed to require correction and in 1768, a pioneering French dentist by the name of Pierre Laveran
arrived in Vienna bearing what probably appeared at first sight to be a terrifying torture device but turned out in fact to be an eighteenth century precursor of the modern dental brace, which had been invented by Pierre Fauchard. Poor Maria Antonia was forced to wear this device every day for three long months until her teeth were judged to be straight enough to pass
muster. We can only imagine how much she complained about the indignity of this.

Of course, Maria Antonia’s transformation was not just sartorial - there were also hours of dancing and etiquette lessons with the great dancer Noverre to be endured as he taught her all of the latest and most popular dances at the French royal court as well as how to move and behave in society.
Already, thankfully, naturally very graceful the Archduchess now had to learn how to move in the Versailles style, which involved a sort of mannered refinement and a peculiar way of walking, where the feet moved very fast beneath the heavy court dresses, giving the impression that the ladies were floating on air rather than walking along on anything so commonplace as
feet. It was much harder work than it sounds thanks to the intense and extremely strict French obsession with etiquette and precedence, but it’s still likely that her time with Noverre was far more pleasurable than her brief but painful sessions with the royal dentist, Laveran.

Decked out in the very finest Parisian style, her hair exquisitely dressed, her smile glittering and perfect and her
manners that delightful mixture of grace and graciousness that would be expected from a Dauphine of France, Maria Antonia was then paraded like a prime piece of livestock in front of the French Ambassador, while her mother lost no opportunity to point her out amongst the dancers, pressing the unfortunate Ambassador to admire her daughter’s graceful carriage and
winsome appearance and losing no opportunity to comment on her suitability as a future Queen of France. To all intents and purposes, Maria Antonia now looked, moved and behaved like a French woman and could even sound a bit like one too, although she never quite lost all traces of her German accent, but would the exacting French agree? The favourable reports of
both the beleaguered Monsieur de Durfort and the Abbé de Vermond, who was by now completely captivated by his graceful but indolent pupil, made a great impression on Louis XV and his advisors, who thought that the great efforts that had gone into schooling Maria Antonia for a French marriage did not at all count against her, proving as they did her malleability and quickness to
learn and adapt to circumstances. Versailles, as they were fond of reminding themselves, was very different to Vienna and it would make life exceedingly uncomfortable for everyone should the princess prove herself unwilling to accept this.

In the summer of 1769, the French court were finally able to get a glimpse of this paragon for themselves when
a lovely portrait of the Archduchess Maria Antonia arrived at Versailles for the inspection of her prospective family. Painted over five arduous sittings by the French royal artist Ducreux who had been despatched along with Madame de Gramont’s hairdresser from Versailles for this very purpose, the portrait depicts the princess as enchantingly pretty with a Dresden shepherdess fairness
that is accentuated by the sky blue of her pretty gown and matching neck ribbon. Clearly Louis XV agreed with the general consensus that the Archduchess of Austria was utterly adorable for he now speedily agreed that Durfort, no doubt enormously relieved to have finally sealed this most awkward deal, should make a formal application to Maria Theresa for her thirteen and a
half year old daughter’s hand, which he duly did on 6 June 1769.

Maria Theresa was utterly elated to have her dearest heart’s desire delivered to her at last and excitedly assured her daughter, who was bewildered, frightened and exhilarated in equal measures by the delight that her long expected betrothal was causing, that ‘if one is to consider only the greatness of
your position, you are the happiest of your sisters and all princesses.’ Whether Maria Antonia would agree once she embarked on her new life far away in France was an altogether different matter.

The royal wedding was scheduled for the following May and from that point on, Maria Theresa kept an even closer watch over her daughter, who was both
excited and apprehensive about her rapidly approaching nuptials. Meanwhile, the preparations for the forthcoming marriage were gathering pace as both sides hammered out the terms that would make up one of the most important marriage contracts of the period, which would hopefully cement the peace between France and Austria forever.

Perhaps feeling that she did
not properly know her youngest daughter who had suddenly been propelled into the limelight, one of Maria Theresa's first actions after the betrothal was to take Maria Antonia with her on a private pilgrimage to the basilica at Mariazell in northern Styria, where mother and daughter could take communion and pray together at a shrine devoted to the Virgin Mary. Then as now, a
road trip was considered an excellent way of getting to know someone better and Maria Theresa would have been watching her daughter closely during their time together, assessing her character and beginning to dispense advice about her future life. For her part, Maria Antonia was no doubt delighted to be spending so much unprecedented time alone with her mother, whom
she had always idolised as much as feared. She had previously informed Mimi of her childish jealousy that her eldest sister saw so much of their mother and now, to her delight, she had her all to herself.

When they returned to Vienna in the autumn of 1769 it was to find preparations for the royal wedding gathering pace and while Maria Theresa turned her attention to the
tiresome details of dowries, jointures, titles, contracts and precedence, Maria Antonia in her turn was enveloped in the excitement of choosing her enormous trousseau, which was costing her mother 400,000 livres and being provided by the best dressmakers in Paris. Even more delightfully, she spent hours day dreaming about her fiancé, about whom she knew very little other than that he
was tall, had blue eyes and was extremely fond of books. The latter point being probably of very little recommendation to a girl who never so much as touched a book unless she absolutely had to, but the other details probably gave her plenty to moon about as wedding fever gripped the imperial court over the winter of 1769.

Just as the public obsessed about every detail of Lady
Diana Spencer’s life before the royal wedding in July 1981 so too did the Austrians and French clamour for images and information about the Archduchess Maria Antonia, whose wedding was already being lauded as the precursor of a period of the greatest peace and prosperity for both their nations. Prints and medals depicting either Maria Antonia on her own or alongside her fiancé Louis
Auguste were issued in their thousands, while everyone who had ever had even the slightest bit of contact with the Archduchess could no doubt dine out on their reminiscences for weeks on end. When it was announced that the little Archduchess would be attending a masked ball in December 1769, almost four thousand people turned up in the ballroom, desperate to catch a glimpse of her as she
did the rounds of the room on her mother’s arm, bowing gracefully to the other dignitaries and occasionally dancing with one of her brothers.

Maria Antonia handled being suddenly thrust into the spotlight with enormous aplomb and received multitudes of compliments for her confident poise and charming manners, even when being stared at and
jostled by hundreds of people. After a childhood spent on the very fringes of the imperial family, she particularly enjoyed this opportunity to spend more time with her mother and be treated as an equal by her siblings, who had never really paid all that much attention to her until now. Although her lessons with Abbé de Vermond continued, she was now also expected to take
more part in the social life of the court and attended the twice weekly card parties in her mother’s splendidly furnished apartments, where her brothers taught her how to play cards and gamble, an essential skill at the royal courts where everyone was expected to join the candlelit card tables in the evening and indulge in a little good-humoured gambling for relatively small stakes. In
time the monotony of adult court life would really wear Maria Antonia down but at first it was extraordinarily thrilling to be allowed to stay up late with her family and the other courtiers, to make small stakes on the turn of a card with money out of her own special velvet gambling purse and to be praised and flirted with by all the gentlemen and probably a few of the ladies as well.
Of course, it wouldn’t be a Habsburg celebration without some sort of terrible tragedy occurring and this duly came to pass in January 1770 when Maria Antonia’s beloved little niece Maria Theresa, who was the only child of her brother Joseph and his wife Isabella of Parma, died. The little girl was just seven years old and as the youngest royal child at the imperial court was the pampered pet of her
grandmother, father and the various aunts and uncles still living at home. Joseph was completely devastated by her death as he had regarded her as his last bond with her beloved mother, while for her part Maria Antonia too was very much distressed as she had loved to play with her niece in her rooms.

Shortly after the little girl’s extremely sad funeral, another more intimate but
equally momentous event occurred when Maria Antonia woke up on 7 February with the ominous cramps that signified the beginning of her first period. An important occasion in any girl’s life, this was of even more enormous significance when that girl was destined to become Queen of France and Maria Theresa lost no time in communicating the happy news to Louis XV in
Versailles, keen to assure him that her daughter enjoyed normal fertility and would presumably have no trouble providing his grandson with a whole bevy of children.

Although nowadays the subject of menstruation is considered a private affair that might perhaps be discussed only with a close group of friends, the periods of a Dauphine of France were very much public property.
and talked about avidly by everyone from her family to the courtiers and then down to the ordinary people of Paris. Living in such close quarters at Versailles, surrounded at all times by attendants and servants and having barely a moment to themselves, the basic bodily functions of the royal family were considered fair game and open to open scrutiny. It was a situation that Maria
Antonia in particular would never quite reconcile herself to and she was no doubt not a little mortified by the gleeful chatter about her menses, although she never failed to duly inform her mother of the arrival of ‘Générale Krottendorf’, as the ladies of her family referred to their periods, in her letters home to Vienna after her marriage. Not much is known about the unfortunate Générale who
lent her name in such a way, but it must be assumed that she was not, after the first visit at least, considered the most welcome of guests. When the lady died at the end of 1779, Maria Theresa would write to her daughter, who was hoping to become pregnant, that ‘the Générale Krottendorf has just died. I hope that she will stop visiting you…’

Maria Antonia was due to
leave Vienna on the morning of 21 April and the rest of the month passed in a whirl of glorious celebrations and last minute preparations for her departure. Much like any other wedding there were all the usual last minute hitches, panics and small triumphs, all massively amplified by the international significance of the whole event. Maria Theresa, now faced with the prospect of seeing her
youngest daughter, to whom she had become extremely close in recent months, leave for good now became rather flustered by the prospect and decided to move the girl into her own rooms for the last few weeks of her time at home so that she could spend as much time as possible with her before she left.

This signal honour, which had been accorded to none of her sisters, must have been
both an incredible treat and an awful torture for poor Maria Antonia, who was thrilled to be so close to her mother and to have the comfort of her reassuring presence at such an emotional time, but also exhausted by the Empress’ punishing routine which she was now expected to share - up at 4am every morning and then late to bed in a room with all the windows open, as was Maria
Theresa’s custom. There were also lengthy and often mortifying lectures to be endured about queenship, behaviour, religion and, most embarrassingly of all to a young girl of just fourteen, married life, with the Empress drawing on the example of her own happy and fruitful marriage with Francis to embellish her advice and homilies, wilfully forgetting of course that she
had only permitted one of her own daughters to marry for love as she had done and had in contrast condemned all of the rest to loveless marriages of state, which were in no way comparable to the close and intimate relationship that she had enjoyed with her own husband.

To Maria Antonia, shivering in her little bed in the gloom of her mother’s opulent bedchamber, which
had been hung with black velvet since the death of her husband, in the Hofburg palace, listening to Maria Theresa’s voice rambling on about the delights of the marriage bed, it must have been hideously awkward. However, it was fortunate for her that she didn’t know just yet quite how inappropriate and sadly inadequate her mother’s well meaning advice about sex and marital
relations actually were. Alongside this, Maria Antonia also began to have weekly private audiences with her eldest brother Joseph, who did his best to instil some political understanding in his flighty little sister. As Maria Antonia had always rather hero worshipped Joseph, she actually enjoyed these meetings enormously, especially as he had followed
Abbé de Vermond’s lead and arranged them as cosy little chats rather than more intimidating lessons, hoping by this measure to at least vaguely capture her capricious interest. It’s doubtful that Maria Antonia proved herself a satisfactory pupil to Joseph but she took away enough information to make him feel at least relatively confident that she wouldn’t show herself up at
Versailles and could be relied upon to work for Austrian interests after her marriage. The days before Maria Antonia’s departure were marked with a series of splendid court entertainments, including a gala hosted by her mother on 16 April when she was finally presented with two portraits of her fiancé Louis Auguste. Delighted to finally set eyes on her future husband, she asked to have
one placed by her bed where she could see it at all times and immediately fastened the other, a miniature surrounded with diamonds, to the front of her dress. Although the French prince was not quite the handsome prince of her daydreams and most fervent imaginings, he did at least look kind, which counted for a great deal more if the not so veiled hints of marital disappointment and discord in
the letters of her sisters Maria Amalia and Maria Carolina were anything to go by. If she no longer sighed over the prince then at least she could look at his likeness and feel reasonably reassured that she was not being sent to some sort of monster.

The next day, Maria Antonia formally renounced all of her rights to both her mother’s imperial lands and also the territories formerly
owned by her father in Lorraine. After which her brother hosted an enormous supper party for 1,500 guests at the Belvedere palace, where Maria Antonia took the place of honour during the feast and then led the dancing at the masked ball afterwards, which was attended by a further six hundred people, the very crème de la crème of Viennese society. The ball went on until seven in the
morning with the guests fuelled by a sumptuous supper and copious amounts of alcohol as well as lemonade, hot chocolate and coffee. The Archduchess Maria Antonia, thrilled and excited by all of this attention, danced until three in the morning when she was finally whisked away to her bed in her mother’s room in the Hofburg.

The following evening
there was another enormous party, this time hosted by the French Ambassador at the Liechtenstein Palace, where again the Archduchess danced alongside several hundred guests until well past midnight, after enjoying a splendid firework display accompanied by Turkish music. It was Maria Antonia’s last night as an unmarried Archduchess of Austria and as she looked
around at the other guests, people that she had known her whole life, she must have felt a tinge of sadness at the prospect of leaving them all behind, while they in turn were sorry to be losing such an enchanting addition to the Austrian court.

The proxy wedding of Maria Antonia and the absent Dauphin Louis Auguste, so hotly anticipated by everyone, finally took place
at six o clock on the evening of 19 April, with the Archduke Ferdinand yet again standing in as bridegroom for one of his sisters. This time, however, it was not Joseph but the Empress herself who led the blushing bride, dressed in a gorgeously opulent gown of silver brocade and lace, up the aisle of the church of the Augustine Friars, where her mother and sisters had been
married before her and she herself had been baptised at just a day old, and past the entire imperial court to where the Papal Nuncio, Monsignor Visconti was waiting to officiate.

After the wedding ceremony, Maria Antonia, now officially Dauphine of France and henceforth to be known by the French form of her name: Marie Antoinette, was escorted back to the
Hofburg for a splendid wedding banquet, where once again she took the position of honour although sadly with her brothers rather than her groom at her side. Did she wonder how the Dauphin Louis August was feeling far away in Versailles, knowing that he was now officially a husband to a girl that he had never met? Probably not - at just fourteen and every bit as silly, selfish and shallow as
any other girl of her age, Marie Antoinette (ironically perhaps for someone who has been the subject of so many novels written in the first person) was almost certainly not given to such moments of introspection and if her mind did indeed wander to the as yet unknown boy sitting in his grand apartments at Versailles, she probably didn’t dwell on him all that much.
Marie Antoinette departed Schönbrunn forever early in the morning of 21 April and like her sisters was expected to say her last farewell to her mother, whom she knew that she might never see again, in front of the entire court, who had gathered together before the great palace to see her off. The departures of her sisters Maria Amalia and Maria Carolina had been hideous occasions, punctuated by a
great deal of indecorous sobbing and fuss. To the relief of everyone, however, Marie Antoinette behaved extremely well and did her best to hide her nervous dread as she embraced each of her family in turn before falling to her knees before her mother for a final blessing. It was an emotional moment for them both and Maria Theresa could barely restrain her tears as she hugged her daughter
one last time, saying, ‘Farewell, my dearest child, a great distance will separate us’ and extolling her to ‘do so much good to the French people that they will say that I have sent them an angel.’ Her mother’s weeping set Marie Antoinette off as well and they clung together sobbing until finally the Archduke Ferdinand picked his sister up and deposited her in the luxurious and
beautifully decorated carriage, more like a gorgeous jewellery box than a vehicle, that had been sent from France to collect her. As the carriage made its way down the avenue at Schönbrunn, the golden flowers decorating its roof waving gracefully with each bounce of its suspension, the little Dauphine was seen to be hanging half out of the open window, sobbing and waving
to her family before finally her head popped back inside and she was gone for good.

No detail of Marie Antoinette’s journey to France had been overlooked, with special attention even being paid to the furnishings of the bedchambers that she would inhabiting at her stops along the way. In keeping with her newly exalted station it was decreed that all furnishings, including her
commode and bidet should be covered with imperial red and gold and that her curtains should be made from gorgeous crimson taffeta. Such magnificence was not at all to Marie Antoinette’s taste, which tended more towards light pastels and the pretty muted hues of sugared almonds and spring flowers, but for this most important journey, it was accepted that proper attention must be paid
to her status.

Also of great importance was the procession that was to accompany the Dauphine to the French border and which would amount to a travelling court in its own right, designed both to ensure that the princess had every conceivable comfort during her long journey and also reinforce an impression of Austrian might and magnificence. To this end,
fifty seven coaches were put into service to carry all of the ladies in waiting, officials, courtiers, doctors, cooks and dressmakers considered necessary for such a great undertaking and twenty thousand horses were commissioned to ensure that journey stages went as smoothly as possible. To further ensure the smoothness of the journey, orders were given in October 1769 to
completely repair all of the roads that Marie Antoinette was to travel over so that not a single bump would disturb the tranquility of her voyage as she played cards, played with her little dog Mops, who was accompanying her to the border and gossiped with her friends, which included Princess Louise of Hesse-Darmstadt.

The first stage of Marie Antoinette’s journey was a
short one and involved an overnight stay at the monastery at Melk, where she was reunited with her brother, Joseph, who did his best to cheer her up while at the same time reminding her that she ought to be grateful for the position that she had, thanks to a series of tragedies and disasters, found herself in. For her part, Marie Antoinette was exhausted and emotionally wrung out after
the ordeal of having to say goodbye to her mother and was observed to look morose and bored at the obligatory after dinner entertainment: an opera performed by the monastery’s pupils.

Her journey to the French border continued the next day and would take two and a half weeks to accomplish, with the journey, which was spent cooped up in the confined splendour of the carriage,
seeming like an interminable torture to a young girl used to spending her days rushing about the gardens of Schönbrunn, practising her dancing for hours on end or playing with her dog in the splendid, echoing galleries. Her chief companion during the journey was the Princesse de Paar, one of her mother’s dearest friends, who was entrusted with the care of the Dauphine until she was
handed over to the French. However, this much older lady was no substitute for the mother that Marie Antoinette had left behind in Vienna, whose parting gift had been a small gold watch, which the Archduchess kept on her person at all times.

The long arduous journey, which was the most that Marie Antoinette had hitherto and would ever see of her own native country, was
enlivened with several stops along the way so that the Dauphine and her party could stretch their legs and enjoy a night in proper beds and also be splendidly feted by the inhabitants of the various towns that they passed through. It was also an opportunity for Marie Antoinette to meet with relations from both sides of her family, such as her mother’s cousin the Elector
of Bavaria, who treated her to a sumptuous couple of days at the exquisite Nymphenburg Palace, where she was housed in the Amalienburg Pavilion and her father’s sister Princess Charlotte of Lorraine, the Abbess of Mons, who had almost been married to her cousin Louis XV before he was married off to Marie Leszcynska instead.
night on German soil was spent at Schüttern Abbey on the edge of the Black Forest on 6 May. A few days earlier, she had had the great joy of receiving a letter from her mother, which had been written by the Empress after her departure from Schönbrunn and followed her across Germany until it finally made it into her hands. Already desperately homesick and feeling terribly
apprehensive about what lay ahead, Marie Antoinette treasured this last link with her formidable mother and as she traced the bold handwriting and read her words, she must have felt a little bit comforted by this last reminder of Maria Theresa’s love and care for her even if naturally the letter itself was really nothing more than a list of advice and instructions, entitled ‘Regulation to Read
Every Month’ and reminding the little Dauphine, already trembling at the thought of what the next few days would bring that ‘All eyes will be fixed upon you.’
Madame la Dauphine
1770-1774

‘The only real happiness in this world is a successful marriage.’

All of the grand celebrations and tense discussions about precedence had centred on this one moment, when Marie Antoinette would formally
take leave of her own country and step across the border to France to begin her new life as Dauphine and wife of the future King. A highly important ceremonial event, it had been the focus of many fraught hours of negotiation as both sides deliberated the proper etiquette for such a momentous occasion, keen that there should be no loss of dignity on either side and that proper honour should be paid
to both Austria and France.

Whereas an ordinary bride would probably find herself being carried over the threshold of her new home by an enthusiastic bridegroom, the arrival of a new Dauphine required rather more ceremony and although both her mother and Louis XV had been extremely caught up in discussions about how best to preserve their own dignity, they seem to have mostly
disregarded that of Marie Antoinette, the fourteen year old pawn in their machinations, who was now required to literally strip herself of every link to her homeland before being permitted to step across to France.

The grand handover took place on an island in the middle of the Rhine and was the exact same spot where the Dauphin Louis Auguste’s
mother Maria Josepha of Saxony had been ceremoniously handed over to the French over twenty years earlier. The building used on that auspicious occasion had unfortunately tumbled down during the intervening years and so a new wooden pavilion was constructed in its place. Designed to look like a French château, it was furnished with five rooms - the two Austrian chambers
where Marie Antoinette would enter, the grande salle de rémise in the centre where the official handover would take place and then two French chambers on the other side where she would finally emerge as the fully fledged Dauphine of France. This charming edifice was hastily furnished with suitably splendid furniture and tapestries, one of which shocked observant onlookers
by depicting the rather inauspicious marriage of Jason and Medea, which ended in a mess of recrimination and infanticide. It’s very unlikely however that Marie Antoinette, who never opened a book unless she could help it and had endured an extremely patchy Classical education, would have recognised the story on the tapestry even if she hadn’t been entirely preoccupied
with the distressing necessity of saying goodbye to the friends that had accompanied her from Vienna and, worst of all, being parted from her beloved Mops, although they at least would be reunited later on after her arrival at Versailles.

Before it was time to say goodbye, however, Marie Antoinette was required to be formally stripped of everything that linked her to
her former life in Austria, specifically her clothes and accessories. It didn’t matter that everything she wore had been made for her by the finest Parisian dressmakers, it still had to come off and everything from her silk gown to her hated corset to her fine cotton shift was removed, leaving the Dauphine shivering and naked in the middle of the room while sounds of thunder
and approaching rain emanated ominously from the Black Forest. She was then quickly dressed again in a splendid new cloth of gold dress, part of the expensive trousseau that her mother had ordered for her from Paris while her hair was powdered and face and cheeks painted with the heavy cosmetics worn at the French court, an entirely unnecessary garnish for a fresh faced
young girl whose complexion was universally praised as ‘literally blending lilies and roses’. However, at Versailles all the ladies wore a thick layer of white paint on their faces and sported comical little circles of pink rouge high on their cheeks (reminiscent of the television character Aunt Sally from Wurzel Gummidge) and so Marie Antoinette, who had been warned by her mother to
fit in with her new court, duly followed suit.

Marie Antoinette’s original ‘Austrian’ outfit was destined to be parcelled out between her ladies in waiting, who saw gaining possession of the Dauphine’s hand me down clothes as one of the juiciest perquisites of their job. One can’t help but hope that someone had the sense to forewarn the unfortunate girl about this so that she wore
her least favourite and most cumbersome and uncomfortable gown for the occasion and therefore suffered no qualms when she later saw it being worn about Versailles by one of her own ladies.

Fully transformed into a proper *femme Francaise*, the little Dauphine, who was suffering from a cold caught during her long journey which had often involved
rather inadequate accommodation, was then escorted into the central salle de rémise where she was now expected to say her goodbyes to her Austrian companions before stepping across to the other side of a long table covered with red velvet, which represented the border between France and Austria. Here, she was introduced to her new French attendants, most of whom had also been
in the household of Queen Marie Leszczynska of France and had therefore been without an official court function since her death in June 1768. Chief amongst them was the Comtesse de Noailles, who was to be Marie Antoinette’s Mistress of the Household and a figure of great importance during her early years at Versailles. Madame de Noailles was a quintessentially stiffly
upright, etiquette fixated and glacially snobbish denizen of Versailles, a pretentious, hatchet faced woman utterly obsessed with her own precedence and thanks to her arrogant and condescending manner in no way suited to attract the affection and confidences of a candid and warm hearted young girl like Marie Antoinette. However, to the latter, now forcibly separated from the last
friendly faces of home, shivering with cold and still feeling pinpricks of humiliation as a result of being stripped of her clothes in front of a crowd of witnesses, the much older Madame de Noailles, who must have seemed about the same age as her mother Maria Theresa (she was actually twelve years younger), must have seemed like an oasis of comfort in the midst of so
much misery.

Emotionally overwhelmed by the situation that she had found herself in, exhausted by all the long weeks of travelling and desperate for a scrap of human kindness, Marie Antoinette burst into tears, threw herself at Madame de Noailles and gave her a spontaneous hug, no doubt hoping that here was the substitute mother that she had doubtless been hoping to
find in France. Instead there was a gasp of dismay, and probably some stifled giggles too, from the onlookers as the haughty Comtesse stiffly disengaged herself from the young Dauphine, leaving her in no doubt that she had committed a terrible faux pas. Nowadays it would be something of an honour to be hugged so publicly by royalty but the Comtesse made it clear that she was horrified by
such a social solecism, which had the effect of making the already unhappy Marie Antoinette feel even more awkward and miserable. Nonetheless, she managed to make a graceful apology: ‘Forgive me, Madame, for the tears that I have just shed for my family and my homeland. From this day forward, I shall never again forget that I am a Frenchwoman.’
waiting, which must have presented a bewildering array of faces to the nervous Marie Antoinette as she turned away from the unsmiling Madame de Noailles, there was the witty Duchesse de Villars as well as the Duchesse de Cossé and the Comtesse de Tonnerre. Another lady in waiting was the twenty two year old Marie-Jeanne de Talleyrand-Périgord, Comtesse de Mailly-
Haucourt, whose mother had been one of Marie Leszczynska’s favourite ladies in waiting. Madame de Mailly-Haucourt was extremely popular at Versailles where, like most of the extensive Talleyrand clan she was known for her wit, merry nature and kind heart and she soon became very friendly with the young Marie Antoinette, who was badly in need of friendly faces during
her first puzzling weeks at Versailles. It’s likely that if the unfortunate Marie Antoinette had instead hugged the sweet natured and kindly Madame de Mailly-Haucourt then she might have received a warmer and far more sympathetic response.

Lurking in the background, there was also the pale and very pretty twenty six year old Marie-Paule-Angelique d’Albert de Luynes,
Duchesse de Picquigny (later Duchesse de Chaulnes), another former lady in waiting of the dead Queen who had been transferred to the service of the new Dauphine. Quiet, refined and rather shy, Madame de Picquigny was an object of interest and some mild ridicule at Versailles thanks to it being well known that her marriage to Monsieur le Duc, an austere and rather
remote young man who had once been betrothed to the daughter of Madame de Pompadour and whose mother was famously promiscuous, had never been consummated, a fact signalled by her habit of never wearing anything other than virginal white.

The all important introductions over, it was time to clamber back on board her splendid coach, this
time with the thin lipped and clearly disapproving Madame de Noailles and the Duchesse de Villars for company rather than the cheerful and comforting Princesse de Paar, and make the journey to Strasbourg for her first official welcome to France. Marie Antoinette stared apprehensively out of her rain splattered carriage windows at the countryside, her mother’s watch, which she
had somehow managed to keep out of the hands of the ladies as they removed all of her Austrian possessions, hidden about her person. The only relief must have been the fact that it was against etiquette for anyone to address a member of the royal family unless they had already been spoken to and so she didn’t have to talk to Madame de Noailles, simmering silently beside her,
unless she absolutely wanted to.

By the time they arrived in Strasbourg, a charming border town which must have seemed reassuring Germanic to Marie Antoinette’s eyes, equanimity was clearly restored and she was seen to chat quite affably with her ladies as she settled back to enjoy her first few days in France. In Strasbourg, the smiling Dauphine was
greeted by cheers, shouts of welcome and crowds of children dressed up as shepherds and shepherdesses or in the picturesque local costume, who showered her with flowers, which we are told she received and held as ‘the goddess Flora herself might have done’. The Franco-Austrian alliance may have been the cause of some suspicious eye brow raising closer to Paris but here on the
border, where for centuries the people had regularly found themselves caught in the middle of conflict between the two great nations, it was greeted with tremendous joy.

The cheers and acclamations only increased when Marie Antoinette, blinking back tears of happiness, stopped the orator as he began to make a speech of welcome in German,
saying, ‘Don’t speak to me in German. From now on I want to hear no language but French.’ Unschooled, awkward and often gauche though she may well have been, it seemed that the little princess had a hitherto unsuspected ability to say just the right thing when the occasion called for it.

That evening, Strasbourg’s magnificent cathedral, built from local sandstone which
took on a glorious rose pink hue at sunset, was lit up and the great and good of the city filed silently past the new Dauphine as for the first time she took part in the ‘Le Grand Couvert’, which involved dining in solitary splendour in front of a crowd of gawking onlookers. Never a hearty eater at the best of times and prone to going pink about the ears when stared at, Marie Antoinette nonetheless
handled this very well and pleased everyone with her graceful manners and appearance of not appearing not notice that she was being watched like an animal at the zoo. Eating in public would always be a torture to her though and she would never manage to emulate the famous aplomb of her father-in-law Louis XV, who liked to perform tricks like smoothly using his knife to
swipe the top off his boiled egg to please the crowds that had gathered to watch him eat.

After what must have been an unsatisfactory supper, there was a performance at the theatre to sit through, followed by a ball, where she was introduced to all the local nobility and danced until past midnight before falling into her bed in the splendid episcopal palace of Cardinal
de Rohan, where beneath her windows there was a floating garden created by a flotilla of illuminated boats, all heaped with sweet smelling flowers. In the morning she went to Mass in the cathedral, yawning behind her hand as the Cardinal’s handsome and extremely ambitious nephew Prince Louis de Rohan gave a speech welcoming the Dauphine and fulsomely praising her mother, whom he
described as ‘the admiration of Europe’.

After this it was time to say goodbye to Strasbourg and hop back in the gorgeous carriage, which was more window than wall so that she might be better seen by the populace, for the journey to the city of Nancy, where her father Emperor Francis had been born in 1708. Marie Antoinette had been especially looking forward to
this leg of her trip as it was a unique opportunity to see for herself the lands of the Lorraine family, which her father had been so loath to give up as a condition of his marriage to her mother. Although Marie Antoinette had been raised to take pride in her Austrian background, she had also been encouraged to feel a connection to her Lorraine roots as well and visiting Nancy, where she
was to lodge in the ducal palace where her father had been born, would no doubt have been of great comfort to her at this time.

This visit to Nancy also served as a reminder of Marie Antoinette’s own French heritage as her grandmother, Francis’ mother, had been Élisabeth d’Orléans, the only daughter of Philippe d’Orléans and had been born at the Château de
Saint Cloud, which Marie Antoinette would later own. It’s not really surprising, due to the vast and complex web of intermarriage that characterised European royalty at the time, that Marie Antoinette and her new husband Louis Auguste were actually cousins due to both being descended from Philippe, known to history as ‘Monsieur’, the controversial younger brother and only
sibling of Louis XIV. Philippe was a complex character, famed for his liking for pretty young men and passion for fashion and the more byzantine complexities of court etiquette as well as his bravery in battle.

Perhaps fittingly, Louis Auguste was the great great great-grandson of Philippe and his flighty, pretty, delicate first wife, the Princess Henrietta Anne of
England, who was youngest daughter of the troubled Charles I, with whom Louis Auguste would alas, turn out to have more than one thing in common. Marie Antoinette, on the other hand, was the great grand-daughter of Monsieur and his second wife, the sensible, plain talking Protestant princess Elizabeth Charlotte (known as Liselotte), who was the grand-daughter of Elizabeth
of Bohemia, daughter of James I and so, like Philippe’s unfortunate first wife Henrietta, yet another sprig from the Stuart family tree.

That there was a dash of that unlucky Stuart blood in both Louis Auguste and Marie Antoinette is perhaps no surprise as they shared James I and Anne of Denmark as common ancestors as well as James’
enigmatic mother Mary, Queen of Scots, who had also briefly been Queen of France. Louis Auguste, who loved his history and was a big fan of Hume’s *History of England*, was fascinated by his Stuart, Tudor and Plantagenet ancestors and while Marie Antoinette had no interest in the past, she might still have been just a little bit intrigued by the glamorous and romantic personages of Mary
Stuart and her granddaughter, the Winter Queen of Bohemia.

It was her more immediate ancestors, however, that Marie Antoinette was interested in as she met her father’s relatives in Nancy, earning herself a sharp reprimand from Madame de Noailles, whom she was by now beginning to heartily detest, for showing them too much familiarity.
Lighthearted, carefree and informal in a way that must have brought to mind her own similarly pleasant father, she very much enjoyed spending time with them in surroundings that would have instantly recalled to mind Francis’ stories about his own youth and time as Duke of Lorraine.

Spared the hideous ordeal of keeping vigil alongside her Habsburg ancestors in the
imperial crypt of the Capuchin church in Vienna, Marie Antoinette took pleasure in praying at the tombs of her Lorraine ancestors in the church of the Cordeliers, which served as a necropolis for the Dukes of Lorraine and included the tomb of her grandmother Elisabeth Charlotte d’Orléans as well as the wonderful Ligier Richier recumbent effigy of Philippa of
Guelders, formidable great grandmother of Mary Queen of Scots. Her father Francis had been laid to rest in the imperial crypt in Vienna, there to await the eventual entombment of her mother beside him, but Marie Antoinette would felt his comforting presence everywhere around her in Nancy and it must have been a tremendous wrench to have to leave and continue with her
journey west towards Compiègne, where she was to have her first meeting with Louis XV and, more importantly, her new husband Louis Auguste.

What must Marie Antoinette have felt as her glorious carriage drew ever closer to the appointed meeting place in the heart of the royal hunting forest near the château of Compiègne? Her new ladies in waiting had
been acquainted with the Dauphin for many years, some of them had even known him all his life - did she ask them what he was really like and did they raise their eyebrows and shake their heads at each other behind her head? To Maria Theresa, the personality of the French prince had been of as little importance as the identity of the precise Archduchess to be sent to
marry him had been to his grandfather, Louis XV and Marie Antoinette, raised to put her absolute trust in the superior judgement of her mother, had probably not wondered too much about it either. However, as her carriage sped through the muddy forest tracks and her ladies fussed about her, primping her in preparation for this all important meeting, the new Dauphine must have
felt extremely apprehensive about the boy who was currently just as nervously waiting for her in the forest clearing.

When the carriage pulled up, the Duc de Choiseul, Chief Minister of France, who had been the chief architect of her marriage, was waiting to greet her. ‘I shall never forget that you are responsible for my good fortune,’ Marie Antoinette
told him with a charming smile.

‘Madame, the good fortune is that of France,’ the gallant Duc replied with a graceful bow before leading her to where the royal party were descending from their carriage. The meeting had been originally envisaged as an intimate family affair, but word had naturally sped and so there were many witnesses to the touching scene that
followed as the Dauphine, impatient to meet her new family left the Duc de Choiseul standing and ran lightly forward before sinking into an exquisite and extremely well schooled curtsey before the King, a still handsome man with the bold black eyes of his Medici ancestors and the Roman nose and refined manners of his dread great grandfather Louis XIV, from whom he
had inherited the throne at the age of just five.

King Louis was a complex man. Orphaned in infancy, he was exceedingly reserved and, although charmingly urbane and never anything less than beautifully polite on the surface, actually quite hard to get to know as his exquisite but now sadly departed mistress Madame de Pompadour had often had cause to bemoan. He was
completely obsessed with maintaining his privacy, to this end building up a series of warren like rooms beneath the eaves of Versailles where he could retreat and be perfectly alone with his latest mistress and closest friends. His passions were private but it was well known that besides hunting, which was his first and foremost love in life, he was fascinated by astronomy, loved to read and
had amassed an enormous collection of several thousand books in his private library. He also enjoyed writing and kept up an enormous correspondence with several members of his scattered family, in particular his grandson and protegé the Duke of Parma, who was the husband of Marie Antoinette’s sister Maria Amalia. Another passion, perhaps surprisingly, was
cookery, which prompted him at the age of sixteen to take lessons from a chef in a specially constructed kitchen at Versailles, where he learned to make perfect omelettes while wearing one of his twelve specially commissioned aprons, each one embroidered with the double V of Versailles.

Always a discerning connoisseur of female beauty, the sixty year old Louis XV
was completely charmed by his grandson’s young wife, who had the pink and white complexion, huge blue eyes and bouncing strawberry blonde hair of a nymph in one of his favourite Boucher paintings and was not really all that dissimilar in type to the young girls, not much older than she was, who populated his private brothel in the town of Versailles. Knowing this, there was no
doubt a great deal of discreet nudging and winking going on from the courtiers as they watched the wily old King greet his new granddaughter, kiss her rouged cheeks and look her over in the French style: swiftly, from head to toe and back again before he gracefully motioned for his grandson, her husband, to step forward and be introduced for the first time.

If the fifteen year old
Dauphin bore little resemblance to the miniature portrait that Marie Antoinette had received with such excitement only a month earlier, she gave no sign as she politely curtseyed and replied to his mumbled greeting then offered her cheek for an unenthusiastic kiss, while the Dauphin’s libertine grandfather no doubt watched in sad resignation and perhaps wished that it
was he who was to be the bridegroom instead. Although not a monstrous spectacle by any means, Louis Auguste was a rather lumpen, overweight boy with heavy dark eyebrows, his grandfather’s prominent Bourbon nose and a shy and awkward manner. Phlegmatic by nature and schooled since early childhood to hide his emotions, he also gave no sign of his feelings about his
new wife, which left Marie Antoinette, used to flowery praise and admiration wherever she went, feeling doubtful and somewhat bewildered.

Louis Auguste was the fourth child and second surviving son of Louis XV’s eldest son, the Dauphin Louis of France and his second wife Maria Josepha of Saxony, who was affectionately known as ‘Pépa’. The royal
couple had been considered unusual at Versailles for their domestic harmony and frank and open adoration of each other in a court where it was considered bad form to be openly affectionate towards one’s spouse. The Dauphin was a complicated character: he wrote to a friend that his soul was ‘always gay’ and indeed there was a liveliness and cheerfulness about him that made his company much
sought after. However, he had also inherited the morbid nature of his parents Louis XV and his devout Polish wife Marie Leszczynska and was obsessed with death and dying, much as his cousin Isabella of Parma had been during her time in Vienna. His mother kept the skull of the delightful courtesan Ninon de Lenclos on her desk, garlanded with flowers and grinning toothily upon a
velvet cushion. She called it ‘Ma chère mignonne’.

It is recorded that in the early days of their marriage, the young Saxony princess Maria Josepha had been horrified to witness her new husband and his sisters spending evenings dressed in black and walking slowly around a dim candlelit room murmuring, ‘I am dead, I am dead, I am dead’ in a continuation of a favourite
game from childhood. It all seemed a bit weird and unacceptably morbid to a young princess who adored dancing, laughter, being outdoors, having fun and celebrating life.

It didn’t help matters that the young Dauphin had been married once before, to the pretty Infanta Maria Teresa Rafaela of Spain, who was four years his senior. The court had giggled behind their
spangled and painted fans at the young bride’s unfashionable red hair, but the Dauphin had fallen immediately and violently in love with her and was thrilled when she became pregnant. ‘I can hardly believe that I am so soon to be a father!’ he wrote to a friend, his delight echoing that of every young father throughout the centuries.

Maria Teresa gave birth to
a daughter Marie-Thérèse in July 1746 and died four days later. Her young husband, just sixteen years old at this time, was genuinely devastated with courtiers likening his grief to that of ‘an inconsolable child’, which in many ways he was. The little princess, his only link with his deceased love, was to live for just two years and would die in April 1748 after being given an emetic in an attempt
to alleviate the pain of teething.

No one knew quite what to expect when the Dauphin was married again, this time to Maria Josepha, and she must have been quite perturbed when on their wedding night he collapsed in tears into her arms and sobbed about his dead wife, which must have been somewhat awkward to say the least. The marriage seemed doomed to failure.
until the Dauphin caught smallpox and his little wife insisted on nursing him back to health herself. It is said that she took such great care of him that a short sighted doctor, unused to the court, said to the Dauphin, ‘You have an excellent little nurse there. Never get rid of her.’ The Dauphin made a full recovery and filled with gratitude, he fell in love at last with his wife.
The young couple enjoyed a blissful life together, almost a second honeymoon in fact, and were to be seen at their devotions together in the Versailles chapel every morning, before taking the air together on the terrace by the Orangerie. They shared exactly the same tastes for music, reading and gardening and loved to spend their time together. The Dauphin was a talented musician and played
the violin, organ and spinet as well as singing in a very fine baritone. In common with his father’s mistress Madame de Pompadour (known as ‘Pom Pom’ by her lover’s children) he was also a talented actor, capable of reducing an audience to fits of uncontrollable laughter with his comedic roles.

Their lives were not just devoted to pleasure however. Both were keen
philanthropists, who loved to assist the needy and were generous givers to charity. They gave instructions to their children’s tutors that the princes and princesses should be taken to the houses of the needy so that they could see for themselves how the poor lived. ‘They must learn to weep. A prince who has never shed any tears cannot be good,’ the Dauphin explained. He was also very
fond of taking his sons to view the baptismal register of the parish of Versailles, where their names were written alongside those of more humble infants. ‘Look, my children, look at your names written after the name of a pauper. The only thing that can establish any difference between you is virtue,’ he would say. One can imagine the effect of all this on his second son, the
young Louis Auguste.

When Louis Auguste was born in the Dauphine’s bedchamber on the ground floor of Versailles in the boiling hot summer of 1754, the royal nursery at the palace was already home to Marie Zéphyrine, who was born in August 1750 and Louis Joseph, who was born in September 1751. Another son, Xavier, had recently died in February 1754 at the age of
six months. Typically, Maria Josepha was determined not to make a fuss when she went into labour at around four in the morning and, believing she simply had colic, had got up and spent the next few hours alone before waking her husband who in his turn alerted the servants. Their new son was born at quarter to seven and immediately passed into the care of Madame de Marsan, who was
already governess to his elder brother the Duc de Bourgogne and a most imposing presence at court where she was one of the few granted the rare distinction of being allowed to sit in an actual chair in the presence of royalty and also use an oval silver chamber pot instead of the usual round one. Lucky lady.

The baby’s grandfather was away hunting at his
nearby estate at Choisy when the news arrived that his daughter in law had delivered a child and immediately rushed back to Versailles to inspect the baby. There had been some concerns about the healthiness of the Dauphine’s progeny as her three earlier babies had all apparently inherited her own rather sickly constitution, however this new boy delighted everyone by being gloriously
plump, healthy and loud. According to court protocol, he was immediately baptised, presented with a tiny blue watered silk sash of the Order of the Holy Spirit and given the title of Duc de Berry which was always used instead of a Christian name – it was the custom at the time for royal sons to only be known by their titles (which could be recycled if they died in infancy) until they were
officially christened with actual names later on.

The first six years of Louis Auguste’s childhood passed as normal, all under the strict but loving care of Madame de Marsan who adored all of her royal charges. There was the usual discussion, fuss and official recording of such usual infant events as weaning, teething, learning to walk and small childhood illnesses, of which Louis
Auguste remained mercifully virtually untouched. However, at Versailles where everyone still shuddered to remember the terrible weeks when the King’s family was all but wiped out by smallpox leaving him orphaned and without siblings, any sign of illness was regarded with suspicion and dread so that the royal children must have felt ridiculously fussed over at times.
However, during these early years of Louis Auguste’s life, the succession must have seemed not just secure but also in exceptionally good hands – his father was the very picture of health and his elder brother, the Duc de Bourgogne was considered by all to be a very promising child indeed. Bourgogne actually sounds completely annoying but there is no
doubt that he was an extremely precocious little boy – we are told that at the age of seven he presented Louis XV, who shared his passion for mathematics and science, with a book of geometry problems that he himself had worked out. Unfortunately, at the age of nine, Bourgogne became ill with tuberculosis of the bones, which would later return to haunt the sons of his
brother and Marie Antoinette. It soon became clear that he would not survive and so it was decided that his younger brother, who was then aged six, should leave the nursery a year early and begin the lessons and training that would make him ready to take his place as heir. Up until this point, Louis Auguste had, as was traditional, still worn dresses and had been cosseted and
fussed over by Madame de Marsan. Now, however, he was expected to dress like a miniature adult, live with his brother in their own splendid apartment and be raised under the care of his new governor the Duc de la Vauguyon, who was opposed to the alliance with Austria and brought him up to be instinctively suspicious of anything Austrian, particularly its reportedly lovely bevy of
Archduchesses.

Poor Louis Auguste was completely miserable as he was now also expected to spend all of his time with that miniature egotist Bourgogne, whose already sharp nature had not sweetened one whit during the rapid onset of his illness. Quite the reverse in fact – he had become even more difficult and imperious and also quite terrifyingly pious, which can’t have been
much fun to be around. Not entirely unexpectedly, Louis Auguste became ill too at this point but managed to recover. However, his brother died shortly afterwards in March 1761, casting the entire court into mourning. Difficult, haughty and often irritationally precocious though the boy had been, there is no doubt that his family and much of the court saw in him the last great hope for the future of
the Bourbon dynasty, regarding him as a prospective king in the mould of the great Louis XIV.

For his younger brother Louis Auguste, the sudden rise to prominence as heir to the throne of France was devastating and confusing. Whereas Bourgogne had been flattered, admired, encouraged and adored from the moment of his birth, Louis Auguste had been
regarded very much as ‘the spare’ and had received no such adulation, although his parents were affectionate towards him. Furthermore, he had been raised to consider himself in all ways inferior to his elder brother so when he suddenly took centre stage, he didn’t know how to act and certainly didn’t have the carefully fostered and promoted high opinion of himself that Bourgogne had.
This awkwardness and lack of confidence would remain with Louis Auguste for the rest of his life, balanced by what were considered to be his less than princely attributes of a warm heart, sensitivity and, eventually, uxoriousness as Marie Antoinette, his new bride, casting him covert glances from beneath her eyelashes in the sunlit clearing at Compiègne, would soon
discover for herself. Also present that afternoon were Louis XV’s three unmarried daughters, who remained with him at Versailles and inhabited enormous, splendidly decorated apartments there. Familiar to us as charming, winsomely smiling young princesses in the flattering portraits of Nattier, the three maiden princesses were by now in their thirties and not nearly so
delightful to look at as they had been in their fresh faced youth. There had originally been eight princesses born to Louis and his Polish wife Marie Leszczynska, only one of whom, Louise-Élisabeth, had escaped into marriage (becoming the mother of Isabella of Parma and Ferdinand, the husband of Marie Antoinette’s sister Maria Amalia), while the rest remained at Versailles to
adorn their father’s court, attend to their mother and cause trouble for the royal mistresses, whom they loathed and regarded as jumped up rivals for their adored father’s affections. For his part, the King was carelessly fond of his unattractive trio of daughters and would make a point of visiting them every day to make hot chocolate with his own hand and enjoy some
court gossip, of which they always seemed to have an enormous store.

After the death of his beloved mother Maria Josepha, the orphaned Louis Auguste had turned to his aunts for comfort and was by 1770 in the habit of regarding them as substitute mothers, always willing to listen sympathetically to his troubles and offer advice. However, they had been
avowed opponents of his match with an Austrian Archduchess, seeing this as a chance to make trouble for his grandfather’s mistress Madame de Pompadour who had been very much in favour of it, and had done much to poison the vulnerable boy’s mind against the dangers of such a match and, most worryingly of all, the very person of his putative bride who, they spitefully
suggested, could never be anything other than an avowed enemy of France and an agent of Austrian interests.

The eldest of the trio of sisters, Madame Adélaïde, who had been considered rather lovely in her youth but had rapidly lost her looks thereafter, was their undisputed leader, both by dint of her seniority and also due to respect of her strong willed, bold and extremely
formidable personality. It was said of Adélaïde that as a child of eleven, at the height of the war between France and England, she had been caught sneaking out of Versailles with her pin money, declaring that, ‘I am going to make all of the English lords sleep with me, which they will be honoured to do, and then bring back their heads to my Papa.’ Intelligent, energetic and
forceful, she very much ruled the roost at Versailles and resented any other woman who challenged her dominance within the family. The other two daughters, plump and pretty Madame Victoire and nervously blinking and rather plain Madame Sophie, described by Horace Walpole as ‘clumsy, plump, old wenches’, were much less intimidating than their
daunting elder sister but although they seemed more inclined to treat the new Dauphine kindly, they followed the domineering Adélaïde in everything and so remained aloof. The three women were known by their father as, respectively, Rag, Piggy and Grub - extremely unflattering nursery nicknames that had unfortunately stuck.

A fourth princess, Madame
Louise, had recently retired to a convent with the avowed intent of praying for her father’s lost and blackened soul and Marie Antoinette would pay her a visit a few days later on her way to Versailles. Now though she cheerfully clambered into the royal coach between the King and her silent, grumpy looking young husband and they made their way to the lovely château of Compiègne,
one of the royal family’s favourite summer residences, to meet the princes of the blood, headed by the Duc d’Orléans and his son the Duc de Chartres, who was seven years older than his cousin Louis Auguste. Marie Antoinette was also introduced to the new Duchesse de Chartres, Louise Marie Adélaïde de Bourbon, eldest daughter of the Duc de Penthièvre and herself a great
granddaughter of Louis XIV and Athénaïs de Montespan. The premature death of Louise Marie’s only brother, the dissolute Prince de Lamballe, had left her in possession of an immense fortune and sole heiress to one of the most enormous and fabulous fortunes in all France, if not all Europe, bringing her lucky husband a dowry of 6 million livres (which made Marie
Antoinette’s dowry look positively measly) and an annual income of 240,000 livres, which later doubled to almost half a million livres a year. No wonder then that the ambitious and extremely intelligent Duc d’Orléans, originally so hesitant to marry his eldest son to what was after all an illegitimate branch of the royal family, had changed his mind after the death of the Prince de
Lamballe and hastened to secure this jewel for their family. For her part, the sixteen year old new Duchesse was madly in love with her husband even if he had allegedly already returned to the fun and dissolute frolics of his bachelor life.

With them there was Princess Maria Teresa of Savoy-Carignan, the widow of the Duchesse de Chartres’
dead brother, the Prince de Lamballe. The twenty year old half German and half Italian Princesse de Lamballe must have been a figure of some romantic interest to the young Marie Antoinette as she was just six years older, had already experienced personal tragedy and was also extremely pretty with soft blue eyes and very long auburn hair, of which she was extraordinarily proud. Sweet
natured and not all that bright, the Princesse de Lamballe and the Dauphine instantly hit it off, drawn together by a mutual enjoyment of fashion and normal youthful frivolity.

The next day the royal party travelled to the small pleasure château of La Muette, a glorified hunting lodge in the Bois de Boulogne, a stone’s throw away from the centre of the
French capital. However, it was unlikely that anyone present would have been so tactless as to remind the King of this fact. Once so popular that he was hailed by his people as Louis *le bien-amé*, the best beloved, he was now so universally loathed that he had not dared to show his face in his own capital for several years and discouraging his family from also going there.
At La Muette, Marie Antoinette was introduced to the younger members of the royal family, first of all Louis Auguste’s two younger brothers, the Comte de Provence and Comte d’Artois. Provence, the elder, was almost exactly the same age as his new sister in law (he was fifteen days younger) and even more chubby than the Dauphin but had none of his good nature or shyness
and was instead intelligent and rather spiteful, although he was bright enough to mostly hide it with an amiable, amusing chatterbox veneer. Artois, the younger brother, was twelve and, unlike his elders, had inherited all the bold charm and good looks of their suave grandfather and was already said to be something of a hit with the ladies. Naturally, he and Marie Antoinette got on
like a house on fire.

Marie Antoinette was charmed by La Muette, which was built along the same small but *bijou* lines as the Petit Trianon, and it was to remain one of her favourite summer residences, where she could escape the crowds of courtiers while at the same time enjoy the close proximity to Paris. After retiring to her rooms to freshen up and change into a
new pretty dress, Marie Antoinette rejoined the others for a private supper party attended by her new family and a few of their most favoured attendants, most of whom Marie Antoinette had already met. However, when she entered the room it was to a tense atmosphere, quite at odds with the mood of cheerful celebration that had predominated over the past few days. This uneasy feeling
only increased when Marie Antoinette glanced up the table to where the King was sitting and noticed him deep in conversation with a beautiful blonde that she had not been introduced to. Seeing that the King was roaring with laughter at something that this lady was whispering in the royal ear, she asked the Comtesse de Noailles, who was rigid with disapproval, who she was.
'That is the Comtesse du Barry,' was the bland reply, no doubt uttered in a tone intended to deter any further enquiry.

'She is very pretty,' the Dauphine observed. 'What is her function at court?'

'To amuse the King,' Madame de Noailles’ mischievous nephew, the Duc d’Ayen said with a wink at his dumbstruck aunt.

Marie Antoinette, too
innocent to properly understand his meaning, laughed. ‘Then I should like to be her rival,’ she remarked.

Born Jeanne Bécu in Vaucouleurs in August 1743, the future Madame du Barry was the illegitimate daughter of a gorgeous seamstress and a friar – a shocking beginning to what was to be a scandalous life. Jeanne, dragged up by her mother then fortuitously sent to a
convent school by a wealthy benefactor, was to grow up to be exceedingly beauteous with a lovely face, tumbling blonde hair and meltingly seductive violet eyes. Sadly, her prospects were not at all promising and after an initial attempt to attain at least some vague semblance of respectability by training as a milliner, the young Jeanne found herself working in a casino, which was actually
little better than a brothel.

She was ‘rescued’ from this life by a noted roué, the spurious Comte du Barry who installed her as his mistress then launched her on a career as a high class courtesan to gentlemen of the court, which suited her just fine as she had been blessed with a budding taste for expensive luxuries. She did very well for herself until 1768 when she came to the attention of another aged
rousé, Louis XV who, always prone to depression, had been in a protracted state of bored gloom ever since the death of his exquisite mistress Madame de Pompadour. He’d ignored all of his courtiers’ attempts to divert his attention with various beautiful and well born ladies of the court and had instead consoled himself with the less demanding charms of servant girls and the young women
who were housed in his private brothel in Versailles. He was instantly smitten by the young Jeanne, however, and it wasn’t long before her lover’s brother, the Comte du Barry, was forced to marry her in order to make her position more respectable and enable her to have the title that was so necessary for an entrée to Versailles life. After this there was no stopping her and
to the horror of everyone, the King even installed her in apartments in the palace. No one in Versailles had any illusions about the origins of the latest favourite though, lovely thought she was. They’d all sneered at the middle class origins of the exquisitely refined Madame de Pompadour, so their feelings about having the undeniably low born and rather vulgar Madame du
Barry prancing around in their midst, dressed up in pink silk and exquisite lace and covered in the flashy diamonds that she adored so much, were more than their aristocratic sensibilities could bear. That a trollop like Jeanne du Barry should be invited to such a prestigious event as the intimate supper party designed to welcome the new Dauphine to the royal family was considered to be
an insupportable insult, most especially to Marie Antoinette herself, who luckily for the moment remained innocent of all of this - but not for much longer.

The 16 May 1770 dawned bright and beautiful - perfect weather for a royal wedding day. The King, Dauphin and their attendants left just after dawn to make the three hour carriage journey back to Versailles, leaving Marie
Antoinette to follow them a few hours later. Extremely excited to be finally getting her first glimpse of the most magnificent and famous palace in all Europe, the one that had served as the model for all others ever since its inception just over a century earlier, she beamed with delight at the immense crowds that had gathered on the road from Paris to watch her pass. Although their
initial suspicion about this unpopular Austrian match would never quite disappear, there had been enough glowing reports of the little Dauphine’s prettiness and charm to make the Parisians quite take her to their hearts, incapable as always of resisting the appeal of an attractive young woman.

Another huge crowd awaited the Dauphine at Versailles where, although
admission was strictly by ticket only for the day, well over six thousand people had turned up to swell the ranks of the court and see as much as they could of the royal wedding day. Everyone was dolled up in their finest clothes while the ladies of the court, many of whom had been up since 6am to get ready, had been laced into their finest court dresses with their wide panniered skirts.
and long trains getting in everyone’s way as they all craned for a first thrilling glimpse of the bride.

For Marie Antoinette her first sight of Versailles, which would be her chief residence for the next nineteen years, was awe inspiring and emotional as her carriage drove through the imposing gilt covered gates and deposited her in the courtyard. As the Dauphine
looked up at the splendid gleaming facade of the palace she would have seen dozens of courtiers crammed into all of the windows, all staring down curiously at this small girl who would one day, God willing, be their Queen.

Without further ado, Marie Antoinette was swept off to the Dauphine’s apartments on the ground floor of the palace, where she was to be temporarily housed until the
much grander Queen’s apartments on the first floor, which were currently being renovated, were ready for her. The Dauphine’s apartments, which incorporated two antechambers, a cabinet, two sitting rooms, an oratory, a large bedchamber and a bathroom, had not been inhabited since the death of Maria Josepha of Saxony in 1767 and were gloomy, sparsely decorated and rather
lacking in privacy, giving out as they did straight on to the gardens. However, they had the bonus of being directly next door to the rooms inhabited by Louis Auguste, which meant that they could see each other easily, should they wish to do so.

Waiting in her bedchamber, where incidentally her new husband had been born, were her wedding presents from the
King, arranged on the pale blue silk cushioned drawers of a three foot high and six foot wide crimson velvet coffer which had been specially designed by the architect Belanger. Chief amongst the gifts was a beautiful diamond *parure* set from the King as well as a diamond encrusted fan and other ornaments, including a diamond bracelet set with a miniature portrait of the King.
which she immediately snatched up and put on her wrist, prompting an onlooker to say that ‘she loses no occasion of seeking to please him.’ More importantly though, Marie Antoinette was also presented with the jewels traditionally owned by the Dauphine of France, which had last belonged to her husband’s mother Maria Josepha of Saxony. Valued at over 2 million livres, they
included a wealth of pearls, diamonds and other fabulous jewels and must have made Marie Antoinette’s eyes widen with amazement as she stared at them. As there was currently no Queen of France, she was also given a beautiful pearl necklace that had once belonged to Anne of Austria, the mother of Louis XIV, and which had been handed down to each successive consort. Also waiting for Marie
Antoinette were her ladies in waiting, headed as always by Madame de Noailles, and also her shy little sisters-in-law Clotilde and Élisabeth. Clotilde, the elder was just ten years old and, like her elder brothers, so chubby that she was known, rather unkindly, at court as ‘Gros Madame’, which being extremely good natured, she just laughed off. Later on her future husband, the King of
Sardinia, would say that he adored her generous figure as it just meant that ‘there is more of her to love’. The other sister Élisabeth, was just six and still in the nursery. She was a delightful and occasionally rather naughty child who hero worshipped her eldest brother Louis Auguste.

The Princesses’ governess Madame de Marsan, whom Marie Antoinette had been
warned about as an arch schemer and who she was to take one of her quick and unyielding dislikes to, was quick to push her favourite pupil, Madame Clotilde, forward but Marie Antoinette, always fond of small children, instead immediately knelt in front of the smallest princess, Élisabeth and gave her a quick hug before she was led away by her ladies to prepare for the wedding.
Sadly, Marie Antoinette’s wedding dress vanished during the chaos of the French Revolution, but enough contemporary descriptions exist for us to know that it was a gorgeous confection of cloth of silver, white brocade and fine lace, encrusted with diamonds and pearls. The still extant wedding dress of another royal bride Hedwig Elizabeth Charlotte Holstein-Gottorp
when she married her cousin, the future King Charles XIII of Sweden in July 1774, just over four years after Marie Antoinette’s wedding day at Versailles, gives some sort of clue as to how it may have looked though. Hedwig’s romantic silver tissue gown was made for her in Paris, just as Marie Antoinette’s had been, and was designed to accentuate her dainty 19” waist, while maintaining all
the hallmarks of a royal wedding dress of this period - the low neckline, exposed shoulders and frothy lace sleeves above enormously wide panniers. However, in the case of Marie Antoinette, either she had grown since the dress was made or the measurements were wrong for it turned out that her dress was a tad on the small side for the petite Dauphine, which resulted in a bit of a
fuss as the ladies hastened to hide the resulting overly wide lacing, which left much of her chemise rather scandalously exposed at the back.

However, what is a wedding day without a hitch or two and Marie Antoinette was sufficiently over awed by her surroundings and eager to please her new family not to make much complaint about the fact that her dress didn’t quite fit properly. With
perfect dignity and her head held proudly erect, she mounted the stairs past hoards of staring courtiers to the King’s apartments where the procession to the chapel was due to begin. This was to be Marie Antoinette’s first glimpse of the Hall of Mirrors and other famously splendid state rooms of the palace, a wonderland of crystal, gilt, marble and fabulous paintings and sculptures. Having grown
up in Schönbrunn, she was not a complete stranger to such magnificence, but had still never seen anything quite so ornate as Versailles in all its wedding day splendour, crammed to bursting with courtiers decked out in dazzling jewels and fabulous silk dresses and with sunlight streaming through the tall windows on to the highly polished parquet floors.

The royal chapel at
Versailles is perhaps one of the most beautiful rooms in the whole palace, a gorgeously light and airy space, tastefully decorated with gilt embellishments and a wonderful painted ceiling that evokes thoughts of Heaven itself to the fortunate worshippers gathered below. As Marie Antoinette gracefully knelt beside the Dauphin, himself resplendent in cloth of gold encrusted
with diamonds, before the high altar, she was seen to look serene but prettily moved as the Archbishop of Rheims, Grand Almoner of France, performed the ceremony and then led the nuptial Mass afterwards. In contrast, her new husband was seen to visible tremble as he placed her ring, which had been selected from a choice of several presented to her upon her arrival at
Compiègne, on her finger and then go quite pink about the ears as he said his vows.

The deed was done, however and there was nothing more to do but sign the marriage contract, which Louis Auguste did with neat aplomb after his grandfather, while Marie Antoinette blotted her own clumsily sloping signature, before enjoying the celebrations, which kicked off at six in the
evening and then went on for nine whole days of parties, concerts, balls and firework displays. For Marie Antoinette the celebrations began with a royal card game, for which she sat beside the King at a green baize covered table placed in the Hall of Mirrors. As with le grand couvert, courtiers and other suitably dressed members of the public were at liberty to silently file past as the royal
family played an excruciatingly dull game of *cavagnole* while blithely pretending not to notice that they were being stared at by the thousands of people on the other side of the gilt balustrade. In Austria, royal weddings were somewhat riotous affairs marked with massive public balls, wine flowing in the streets, parties and all manner of light hearted and joyous fun, here
at Versailles, however, they were altogether more sedate and much less enjoyable.

After this endurance test there was the wedding banquet, which took place in Gabriel’s newly completed theatre, where supper was served to the royal family on a table placed on the stage, while the rest of the court crammed themselves into the stalls, galleries and boxes to watch. This must have been
an exceedingly unnerving occasion for Marie Antoinette as she sat with the King on one side and her new brother-in-law Artois on the other, while her husband Louis Auguste was opposite her on the other side of the enormous white linen covered table. Also in attendance were the Duc and Duchesse of Chartres and the Princess de Lamballe, who was at the other end of the table,
opposite her father-in-law the Duc de Penthièvre. Madame du Barry was not in evidence, although she was in one of the boxes overlooking the stage, enjoying the spectacle and perhaps also some choice dishes sent up to her by her adoring royal lover. Everyone else at the table was already known to Marie Antoinette and she must have taken some comfort from that while doing her best to ignore the
stares of the courtiers who were watching them eat as though they were literally performing on the stage.

The banquet went on for several excruciating hours and as the heavens broke outside and the revellers outside in the gardens were forced to take shelter from the rain, the numbers of spectators in the theatre also increased. Marie Antoinette ate very little of the
wonderful food placed before her but across the table the Dauphin was seen to be enjoying himself perhaps a little too much, heaping his plate high with delicacies until finally his grandfather leaned towards him and whispered, ‘Go easy, my boy.’

The Dauphin looked surprised, perhaps even pausing with a fork of food halfway between plate and
‘Why?’ he asked, as his brother Provence giggled beside him. ‘I always sleep better after a good meal.’

When the banquet finally came to an end, the royal family, many of whom were more than a little inebriated by the fine wines and splendid gourmet foods with which they had been treated, got up to escort the newly married couple, who had barely spoken more than
perhaps half a dozen words to each other since their wedding, to Marie Antoinette’s bedchamber. The Archbishop of Rheims sprinkled holy water on the bed sheets before the couple retreated to their own sides of the bed and were ceremoniously helped into their nightclothes in front of an intimidatingly large crowd of spectators, with the King handing his visibly terrified
grandson his nightshirt, while the Duchesse de Chartres, who was the highest status lady present helped the blushing Marie Antoinette into her lace edged and embroidered nightgown.

The young couple were then helped into the bed and sat there stiffly side by side as the heavy brocade bed curtains were closed for a moment then opened again to symbolise the consummation
that everyone optimistically hoped would ensue after the King and courtiers gravely said goodnight and departed. The King paused for a moment in the doorway and gave the little Dauphine a sad last look, no doubt fully aware that his shy and ungainly fifteen year old grandson, whom he had described ‘as not a man like others’ would almost certainly not be making any
attempt to consummate his marriage. However, although he was saddened and rather perplexed by the boy’s apparent lack of interest in his bride, his letters reveal that he was at least still relatively sanguine that he would in time grow to appreciate Marie Antoinette’s undoubted charms. After all, how could he not?

The Dauphin had already departed by the time Marie
Antoinette was woken up the next morning to face her first formal *levée* at Versailles. The *levée* was an old tradition whereby the foremost members of the royal family, specifically the King and Queen formally got up in the presence of their households. It was considered a tremendous honour to take actual part in this, either by holding a basin or handing over an item of clothing, as
Marie Antoinette would eventually find to her cost when on one occasion she was left naked and shivering by the side of her bed as first the Duchesse d’Orléans and then the Comtesse de Provence arrived one after the other, delaying the moment when the highest ranked woman present could hand her a shift with which to cover herself, while all the while Marie Antoinette
muttered furiously about how utterly preposterous the whole affair was. On the morning after her wedding however, Marie Antoinette was still too bewildered and intrigued by Versailles to raise much complaint as she was chivvied out of bed and then dressed in front of her ladies while the maids stripped the bedsheets, raising their eyebrows discreetly to signify to everyone present
that they were perfectly clean and that there had therefore presumably been no consummation.

It didn’t take long for rumours about the Dauphin’s lack of amorous performance to spread through the gossip crazed court and for the next few days no one could talk about anything else as the silent, embarrassed looking young prince squired his enchanting young bride.
through a series of opulent court events designed to celebrate their marriage. There were more concerts, plays and banquets to be endured as well as a splendid state ball in the new theatre, where Marie Antoinette and the Dauphin led a stately minuet in front of the entire court before the Dauphin glumly departed to the dais beside his grandfather and his bride gave herself up to the
enjoyment of dancing with his amusing cousin the Duc de Chartres, who was rather bored by her childish conversation but still very much admired her glowing good looks.

While the courtiers danced the night away in the splendid surroundings of the new theatre, over 200,000 people were enjoying a fabulous bal champêtre in the palace gardens, which were thrown
entirely open to the public and filled with the all manner of revelry, such as orchestras playing in the lantern illuminated groves, dancing on the lawns; decorated gondolas wafting slowly across the great canal; jugglers, acrobats, troupes of actors and fire breathers on the splendid parterres and then finally a wonderful firework display, which Marie Antoinette watched
from a window in the Hall of Mirrors, no doubt desperately longing to be either outside enjoying the fun or up on the palace roof where her lively brothers-in-law had gone with the other young courtiers to get a better view of the display.

The celebrations were due to conclude with a huge public fireworks display in Paris at the end of May which Marie Antoinette, to her
tremendous joy, was permitted to attend in the company of her husband’s three aunts while the Dauphin, for whatever reason, preferred to remain behind in his apartments. Other than her brief overnight stay at La Muette, Marie Antoinette had not caught a single glimpse of the famously gay and beautiful French capital and she was thrilled to be finally going
there. However, before her carriage had even arrived at the grand Place Louis XV they were greeted by the screams and cries of the terrified crowd as dozens of people confused by the darkness fell into the open trenches of the Rue Royale, which was still under construction, there to be crushed and suffocated as the crowd continued to surge overhead and carriages still
tried to force their way through. The result was wholesale panic and the disappointed and terrified Marie Antoinette was obliged to turn around and return to Versailles.

Horrified and deeply distressed by what she had witnessed, the Dauphine was greeted at Versailles by her young husband who, hitherto so silent and morose by her side, now astonished her by
listening sympathetically to her account of what happened. The next morning he sent his entire monthly allowance to the Minister of Police with a note saying simply, ‘This is all I have to dispose of. Use it as best you can. Help those who need it most.’ Deeply touched by his concern and generosity, Marie Antoinette immediately followed suit with her own allowance.
which had the effect of making both instantly lauded by the Parisians as angels of benevolence, which both pleased and piqued the King, whose own donation had received no such commendation, in equal measure.

Horrible though the tragedy in Paris undoubtedly was, it had the effect of drawing the young Marie Antoinette and her husband,
who still remembered his governor Vauguyon’s lectures about the untrustworthiness of Austria, a little further together. Their tastes might be very different, with Marie Antoinette being of a far more lively and sociable bent than her shy and retiring husband, who loved books and history and the long evenings at the theatre that she found so tedious, but here at least, in their shared
compassion, kind heartedness and instinctive philanthropy, they found some common ground and were able to begin building a friendship if not a romance. Just a few weeks after their wedding things had progressed enough for Marie Antoinette to be able to write to her mother that her husband had ‘changed very much for the better. He is very friendly towards me and beginning to
confide in me. Also the King could not be kinder and is full of attentions. I love him dearly, but it is pathetic to see how weak he is with Madame du Barry, who is the silliest and most impertinent creature imaginable.’

Their shared hostility towards Madame du Barry, fanned by Louis Auguste’s troublemaking trio of aunts who absolutely loathed this parvenu upstart, also had the
affect of bringing the young couple further together as the Dauphin was pleased to discover that beneath his new wife’s frivolous exterior she was as morally fastidious as he was himself and equally inclined to look upon the activities of his grandfather’s low born mistress with a censorious eye. However, while Marie Antoinette showed her displeasure with a heavy silence and refusal to
even so much as look at Jeanne du Barry when they found themselves in the same place, the Dauphin had to at least maintain the appearance of civility for the sake of good relations with his grandfather, especially as she was fond of presiding over the intimate little suppers that the King hosted after his hunting parties which the Dauphin, himself an ardent devotee of the hunt, would
usually attend.

Thrown together in marriage at such a tender age, Marie Antoinette and Louis Auguste were barely beginning to know themselves before they were expected to get to know each other as well and it is little wonder that they were at first rather standoffish with each other. Although Marie Antoinette gave the appearance of being a light
hearted social butterfly, she was at heart also rather shy and, like her new husband, much preferred the company of a few like minded and well chosen intimates to a great crowd of people. They also shared a taste for the simple life, fostered in the case of Marie Antoinette by her cheerful, informal Austrian upbringing, while Louis Auguste looked to the quiet, affectionate, comfortable life
enjoyed by his own parents as his model of how a marriage should be. These were things that they were able to find out about each other over the following few years though, as their tentative friendship deepened and a mutual respect and regard flourished between them.

Emboldened both by her success with his grandfather, who thought she was delightful and petted her in a
manner that recalled to mind the way that Louis XIV had lavished attention on his own charming mother Marie Adélaïde de Savoie when she first arrived at Versailles as a girl of ten, and the increased friendliness of the Dauphin, Marie Antoinette began to treat him with the same careless, breezy affection as she treated everyone else, spontaneously hugging him when he visited her rooms
and chattering away about her day. She also kept in mind her mother’s advice that: ‘a woman should be in all things obedient to her husband and have no other thought but to please him and carry out his wishes. The only real happiness in this world is a successful marriage. I know what I am talking about. All depends on the woman, if she is willing, loving and amusing.’ Unwilling and
bewildered at first, the Dauphin, so starved of affection since the death of his mother, soon came to appreciate her efforts and in time even returned her affection - at first with a punctilious gravity that soon gave way to genuine warmth and then, on his part at least, actual love.

In the bedchamber, however, things remained much the same as they had
done on that very first night and although the Dauphin soon proved himself willing to hug his wife and even on occasion kiss her cheek in front of the court, there was very little of that sort of thing going on in the all important marriage bed, where every night the shy young couple would bid each other a civil good night then chastely go to sleep beside each other. Although it was
commonplace for young courtiers of the Dauphin’s age to have been introduced to amorous adventures by one of the experienced older ladies of the court or a pretty and, one hopes, disease free young courtesan, Louis Auguste had shown no taste for such affairs and was almost certainly still a virgin at the time of his marriage. However, even if he was not inclined towards sex, he was
still very much aware of his duty as heir to the throne of France and the lack of consummation almost certainly weighed as much on his mind as it did on Marie Antoinette’s.

They were both very young though and although both King Louis and Maria Theresa were impatient for the deal to be sealed and matters to advance between them, it was also accepted
that there was still plenty of time for a sexual relationship to develop naturally once the couple had got to know each other a bit better. Besides all this, Louis XV was still only sixty years old and to all intents and purposes in the very prime of life - there was plenty of time to go before his grandson and his little Austrian wife would be expected to take up the mantle of real authority or
were under real pressure to produce an heir.

Quite apart from getting acquainted with her new husband, there was also the equally peculiar and often confusing Versailles to get used to - enormous, splendid and falling apart at the seams, it was an extraordinary and rather ridiculous mausoleum, completely over the top, built on a massive scale and always full to the rafters of
people, many of whom really had no business being there at all. It had swelled and become bloated in size since its heyday a century earlier and was now home to almost four thousand people, only the most privileged and favoured of whom were accorded anything so fancy as a small and exceedingly cramped suite of rooms, while everyone else had to make do with squalid little
chambers beneath the eaves. Not that anyone cared - to be accepted and housed at Versailles was still considered to be the most immense honour and if the uninsulated rooms were freezing cold in the winter and intolerably hot in the summer then no one was going to be so ungrateful as to complain about this.

During the day the palace’s residents were also joined by
dozens of merchants and hawkers who set up their stalls on the staircases, along the corridors and out in the gardens, selling their goods to both the courtiers and the hundreds of visitors who crammed into the palace every day, much as they do now, to stare about themselves at all the magnificence and perhaps even catch a glimpse of royalty passing by on their
As Marie Antoinette, always accompanied by two ladies of waiting, made her way from her rooms to the chapel for Mass or out to the gardens to walk her badly trained and completely spoilt little dogs, she did so past a vast crowd of people, held back by the palace guards but still permitted to stare at her and even call out comments.
as she went by. Her every gesture, word and look were observed and discussed at great length, particularly those that were considered to confer favour on other courtiers. Louis XIV had made himself the sun that all the court must revolve around and although the prestige of the royal family had been somewhat tarnished since the glory days of the great Sun King, they were still the
central focus of the court with everyone clamouring for whatever scraps of attention and favour they could get from the royal hands.

Also hoping for scraps from the royal hands were the palace dogs, which roamed the galleries and splendid rooms in snarling, barking packs. Most of the royal family had pet dogs (while Louis XV, contrary as always, had an enormous and
extremely unpopular and bad tempered white Siamese cat), ranging from the pampered and badly trained little spaniels of the aunts to the bigger hounds kept for hunting and there were also the pets of the courtiers which ran underfoot everywhere in the palace, howling, barking, snapping at ankles and begging for morsels of food. Their presence also added to the revolting smells and
odours that assailed visitors and residents alike throughout the palace, where latrines were short in supply and people taken short would often retreat into corners or out into the gardens to relieve themselves so that the ladies of the court had to take a care not to trail their expensive and elaborately trimmed gowns in the effluvia that covered the floors and alleyways.
High up in her beautiful new rooms, which had finally been finished not too long after her wedding, Marie Antoinette was cut off from most of the noise, dirt and squalor that assailed much of Versailles but still she would have been able to hear the distant shouts of the vendors as they plied their trade on the staircases, the barking of dozens of dogs, the ringing of the chapel bells and the
endless chatter of the courtiers as they went about their business, their aristocratic high heeled shoes, the soles traditionally painted red in a style since emulated by Christian Louboutin, clip clopping on the polished floors.

Although Marie Antoinette had been warmly welcomed to the French court by the royal family, she still felt isolated and lonely in her new
life. Used to being at the heart of a large and boisterous young family, life seemed to her to have a very different flavour at Versailles, where everyone seemed to be in thrall to an excessively constraining system of etiquette that had been laid down over a century before. As Dauphine, Marie Antoinette now found herself at the very centre of this system, heading up as she did
an enormous household of her own, most of which had been inherited from the deceased Queen and former Dauphine. Besides her *dame d’honneur*, Madame de Noailles, there was also a Mistress of the Robes and twelve chief ladies in waiting, the *dames pour accompagner Madame la Dauphine*, all of whom were exceedingly highly born and well connected. Below these ladies
there were *femmes de chambre*, who were less well born but would have had to have been no less well connected to have been able to secure such sought after positions at court and beneath them there were the Dauphine’s maids, known as the *femmes rouges* in reference to the red dresses that they wore as uniform, and whose duty it was to perform the most menial
tasks in Marie Antoinette’s rooms, such as bringing her daily outfits, looking after her clothes and making her bed. Besides all of these ladies, there were also pageboys, valets, equerries, cooks, surgeons and general lackeys; all of whom devoted their lives to making the existence of this one pampered individual run as smoothly as possible.

Shortly after her marriage,
Marie Antoinette wrote a description of her daily routine in a letter to her mother. Although the Dauphine remains typically chipper and upbeat about what sounds like the relentless boredom and loneliness of her life, it also reveals a great deal about her growing closeness with her husband whom, she is at pains to tell her mother, she sees a great deal of during the
day and the amount of influence that his aunts were beginning to hold over her.

‘I get up between nine and ten o’clock, and having dressed say my morning prayers, then have breakfast and go to visit my aunts, where I usually find the King. This lasts until about ten thirty. At eleven I have my hair dressed. After which everyone is allowed to come in - that is, everyone who has
the right of entry. I put on my rouge and wash my hands in front of them all. Then the gentlemen go away, while the ladies stay and I put on my formal dress. Mass is at midday, and if the King is at Versailles I go with the King and my husband. If he is not there then I go alone with the Dauphin. After Mass, the two of us dine alone, but anyone who cares to can come and watch us. As we both eat very
quickly we have finished by half past one, and I go back with the Dauphin to his apartments, but if he is busy I go back to my own where I read or write or work, for I am embroidering a waistcoat for the King, which is not making much progress, but by the Grace of God I hope to get it finished in a few years. At three o clock I go again to my aunts, where I usually find the King. At four, the Abbé
(Vermond, who continued in her household in France) comes to see me and at five there is the music master, who stays until six when I either return to my aunts or go for a walk. I must tell you that my husband almost always comes with me to visit the aunts. At seven we sit down to cards, but if it’s fine then I go again for a walk. At nine we have supper and if the King is not there the aunts
come and have supper with us. Otherwise we go to them where after supper we wait for the King, who usually appears at about a quarter to eleven. But while waiting I put myself on a comfortable sofa and sleep until he arrives. When he is not there we go to bed at eleven.’

It’s also interesting that she mentions reading as one of her activities when the Dauphin is ‘too busy’ to
spend time with her in the afternoon - perhaps the efforts of Abbé de Vermond, who had travelled to Versailles in her wake to take up the position of Reader in her household there and was thought to have a very malign and unwelcome influence over the young Dauphine, had finally paid off or maybe she was hoping to please her bookish husband, perhaps by asking him to choose some
books for her? Alternatively, this could just be an attempt to pull the wool over her mother’s eyes by pretending to be spending her time in a more worthy occupation than just lazing on a sofa while chatting about fashion and hair feathers with the Princesse de Lamballe, who was by now her best friend at court.

Besides the devoted Abbé, Marie Antoinette also saw a
great deal of the Austrian diplomat Mercy d’Argenteau, a highly educated, urbane man, utterly devoted to Maria Theresa, who was to become something of a father figure to her daughter over the next few years. It was Mercy’s job to advise the young Dauphine and help her avoid the pitfalls of life at Versailles, which often involved acting as a mouthpiece of her mother, who sent him a constant
stream of commands and advice to be passed on to the unfortunate girl. He also acted as a sort of unofficial spy, delicately using his diplomatic skills to pump the unsuspecting Marie Antoinette for intimate information about her relationship with the Dauphin and other members of his family before secretly passing it all on to her mother who then terrified the Dauphine by
It was also Mercy’s duty to facilitate the correspondence between mother and daughter which flourished during this most interesting time. Before her departure from Vienna, Marie Antoinette had been ordered to write home once a month to give her mother a full and up to date report of
all her activities, including an update about her irregular menstrual cycle and the ongoing efforts to make the Dauphin fancy her a bit more. To these sadly blotched, misspelt and crossed out missives, Mercy would then attach his own secret reports giving a bit more context to the Dauphine’s letters and adding little titbits from his own close observations of Marie Antoinette and her
It was Mercy’s shrewd opinion that the aunts, outwardly so benign and welcoming of this newcomer to the royal circle, exerted far too much influence over Marie Antoinette and were in danger of effectively estranging her from the King by encouraging her to snub Madame du Barry. Marie Antoinette may have been blissfully unaware of the
aunts’ true feelings towards her, but it had not escaped Mercy’s attention that they had been bitterly opposed to the Austrian marriage from the outset and had taken to privately referring to their new niece-in-law by the mocking soubriquet of ‘L’Autrichienne’. They were, moreover, busily spreading rumours about her while all the while smiling and welcoming her to their
apartments several times a day and commissioning portraits of her to hang there, including the famously delightful Krantziger one of her dressed ‘à l’Amazone’ in her red masculine cut riding habit and tricorne hat, which delighted her mother when a copy was sent to Vienna in 1771. However, as the Dauphin remained so fond of his aunts there was nothing to be done but hope that his
affection for his pretty young wife would eventually supersede the one that he still retained for this triumvirate of unpleasant, embittered women, whose chief remaining pleasure in life seemed to be making trouble for everyone else and were, besides, motivated by a terrible personal jealousy of Marie Antoinette herself who was already such a favourite with their adored father.
However, for now they accepted that she was their best chance to oust the hated Madame du Barry and so encouraged her visits to their rooms, while at the same time filling her pretty little ears with poison about their father’s mistress, sparing no detail while regaling the rather prim girl, Mama’s perfect daughter who was more like the Empress than either might have cared to
admit, with stories about Madame du Barry’s scandalous past. For her part, Madame du Barry had initially made friendly overtures towards the Dauphine but upon being so soundly snubbed had instead taken to loudly making fun of her with her catty friends and even nicknamed her ‘Carrots’ in reference to her strawberry blonde hair. The Dauphine’s careless manner of dress was
also picked apart by the fashion obsessed Du Barry who mocked Marie Antoinette to the King as a dowdy little prude. There is even a story that the Dauphine, while passing beneath the favourite’s windows at Versailles, was splattered with ordure from a chamber pot that one of her maids was emptying out of the window (not an unusual incident, sadly) and had gone
to the King to complain that it had been done deliberately. Louis, bored and fed up with being caught between bickering women, refused to get involved.

It was true, however, that after her marriage, Marie Antoinette had fallen back into her lax youthful habits of not really paying too much attention to her appearance, no doubt encouraged in this by the aunts, who never got
dressed unless they could help it and would hide their state of lazy déshabillé beneath voluminous silk mantles when their father came to visit. There was an ongoing battle with the Comtesse de Noailles about her unwillingness to wear a restrictive corset beneath her dresses and she barely had the patience to sit still for long enough to have her hair done.
Naturally, thanks to Mercy, it didn’t take long for all of this to come to the ears of her mother, who immediately fired off a letter to her rebellious daughter. ‘I beg you not to neglect your appearance. It is very wrong to do so at your age, and even worse when you are in your position… Which is why I keep pestering you on the subject, to warn you against letting yourself go and ending
up like the French royal family, who have no idea how to present themselves or to set the tone, or even to amuse themselves in an honest way… It is possible to be virtuous and at the same time to be gay and sociable.’

All of this was small fry, however, when placed alongside the fact that the aunts were maliciously encouraging Marie Antoinette to be as rude as possible to
Madame du Barry at a time when that lady’s ascendancy over her royal lover was increasing by the day. In vain did Mercy berate Marie Antoinette, informing her that her own position at court was not yet so secure that she could afford to completely alienate the King’s mistress and through her, the King himself. He reminded her that with each passing month that her marriage remained
unconsummated, her position at court became increasingly invidious as the enemies of the already unpopular Franco-Austrian alliance plotted to get rid of the unsatisfactory Dauphine, whose marriage could still be summarily dissolved and whose position was further weakened by the dismissal from position of Chief Minister of the Duc de Choiseul, who had been the chief architect of her marriage
and his replacement with the Duc d’Aiguillon, who was no friend to Austria and furthermore belonged to the cotérie of Madame du Barry.

However, Marie Antoinette, used all her life to admiration and flattery had not yet properly learned that behind honeyed words and empty smiles there often lay far darker thoughts and purposes and so could not quite believe that she had
actual enemies at the French court, who would be more than happy to see her ignominiously packed off back to Vienna where she had come from. She had no idea of the nasty rumours and gossip that were already circulating about her, many of them emanating from the gilded apartments of the aunts that she trusted so much, and she refused to believe that the King himself was not entirely
pleased with how his grandson’s marriage was progressing.

Maria Theresa was exasperated by her daughter’s intransigence and wrote her furious letters, demanding that she show more favour to Madame du Barry as the current stand off was in serious danger of hurting relations between Austria and France. ‘What is all this fuss and bother... of addressing as
much as a word to people whom you have been advised to speak to, the inability to say good morning, or make a compliment or exchange some other triviality. All these tiresome caprices for no other reason than that you have allowed yourself to become so enslaved by your aunts that you have forgotten both reason and a sense of duty... What excuse have you got to behave in this way -
none whatsoever! You are only required to know Madame du Barry as a lady who has an entrée at court and who is admitted to the society of the King of whom you are the first subject. It is the King to whom you owe obedience and submission, as an example to the court and to see that his orders are carried out. No one has asked you to become intimate or to indulge in any kind of
familiarity, all that is required is an impartial word, a certain regard not for the lady herself but for your grandfather, your master and your benefactor, whom you have let down on the first occasion when you could have obliged him and shown him your attachment.’

Astounded and ashamed by such heated missives, Marie Antoinette promised Mercy that she would do her best to
oblige the King in this matter and let it be known that she would address a word to the Comtesse after the evening card game at Compiègne, where they were staying that summer. However, just as Madame du Barry drew near, pleasantly smiling as she anticipated this mark of rare favour from the silly little snobbish Dauphine, Madame Adélaïde, the eldest and most troublemaking of the aunts,
who was keen to scupper this reconciliation, stepped in front of her and whispered to Marie Antoinette that they were late and it was time to retire and wait for the King in her apartments. Flustered, Marie Antoinette did as she was told and ran off in Madame Adélaïde’s wake leaving the royal favourite chagrined and mortified while the rest of the court hid their malicious smiles behind their
painted and bejewelled fans. The King was absolutely furious when the sorry tale reached his ears and even the meek Dauphin, who had no liking for Madame du Barry either but knew better than to shout it from the rooftops, upbraided his aunt for her interference in this matter, motivated chiefly by concern for his wife. Although the King did not personally chastise Marie Antoinette for
her behaviour, he let his displeasure be known and there was another round of furious letters from Maria Theresa and lectures by Mercy, who did his best to point out just how malign the influence of the aunts actually was. In the event it took quite a few more months before Marie Antoinette, provoked to stubborn defiance, agreed to try again and this time the aunts did not interfere as the
Dauphine turned to Madame du Barry on New Year’s Day 1772 and lightly remarked that ‘There are a great many people at Versailles today.’ Everyone was delighted, especially the King, but Marie Antoinette would later bitterly inform Mercy that: ‘I have spoken to her once, but I am determined to leave things there. That woman will never again hear the sound of my voice.’
Basking in the King’s renewed favour, Marie Antoinette began to have more fun at Versailles. She started to throw weekly balls in her apartments where the men came in full court clothes and the women wore white and even the Comtesse de Noailles unbent enough to throw her some parties in order to make her more acquainted with the young people of the court. To Marie
Antoinette’s great delight, the Dauphin insisted upon taking dancing lessons so that he wouldn’t show her up at these parties and instead of shyly retreating into the corner would now happily partner her in the occasional quadrille.

As well as dancing, Marie Antoinette also took up riding. Naturally she had learned the rudiments of horse riding in Vienna but
had been discouraged from taking a greater interest by her mother who believed that excessive horse riding was injurious to reproductive health and that long hours spent in the saddle were ruinous to the complexion. She was enraged to hear that King Louis had been encouraging her daughter to learn to ride properly on donkeys and then, dressed in a charming riding habit that
showed off her slender figure, to follow the royal hunts, although even she had to concede that taking an interest in the Dauphin’s most beloved pastime was probably a good idea under the circumstances. Marie Antoinette delighted in these occasions and would often provide a sumptuous picnic for her husband and his friends which they would take informally beneath the
trees of the royal hunting forests.

As Mercy had predicted, the toxic influence of the aunts began to lessen as Marie Antoinette began to increasingly dominate her husband and wean him away from them. The widening of their immediate family circle also contributed to this though as Louis Auguste’s sisters left the nursery and his brothers got wives of their
own, which meant that there were more young people on hand to socialise with and the prospect of spending yet another dull evening listening to Madame Adélaïde’s ill natured gossip became far less enticing than time spent with people of their own age.

As her young sisters in law Clotilde and Élisabeth grew up, Marie Antoinette did everything she could to make life more fun for them both,
showering them with concerts, parties, picnics and visits to the neighbouring estates of favoured aristocrats and making sure that their circle included young people of their own ages. All three girls adored gardening and would spend hours in the grounds of Versailles watching the gardeners at work and planning their own future gardens.

Marie Antoinette was
especially fond of her youngest sister-in-law Élisabeth and they became quite good friends over the years, despite the large age difference between them. Both girls were clearly drawn to each other by sharing the same fun loving, tomboyish nature as well as a mutual feeling that they were somewhat out of place in the huge sprawling palace, where neither was loved as much as
they wished to be, although the young princess was absolutely devoted to her brothers Louis Auguste and the handsome, rakish Artois.

Rouget de l’Isle, later to be writer of the *Marseillaise*, encountered the two princesses shortly after Marie Antoinette became Queen and recalled that ‘I was fifteen years of age and... on holiday with a lady who was a relation of mine, who had her
lodgings at Versailles. All of a sudden, I heard the door of her apartment in which I was, being struck in a certain manner, and my relation, very much upset, said to me: ‘Ah, Dieu, my child, hide quickly, here’s the Queen!’ And at the same time she pushed me into the next room, quickly pulling the curtains over me. And indeed, Marie Antoinette and Madame Élisabeth came in, and soon,
freed from the yoke of etiquette, they began to jump, to run and to chase one another.’

While Marie Antoinette was busy getting acquainted with the Dauphin and rigid etiquette of life at the French court, arrangements were in full swing for the marriage of her eldest brother-in-law, Louis Stanislas, Comte de Provence to the Princess Maria Giuseppina of Savoy, a
cousin of the Princesse de Lamballe, which was to eventually take place at Versailles in May 1771, almost exactly a year after her own wedding. Naturally, as the second son, Provence’s wedding was not quite so grand as that of the Dauphin’s and nor was the wife chosen for him nearly as prestigious, but still Marie Antoinette was delighted to have another young woman of about her
own age (Maria Giuseppina, known in France as Marie Joséphine, was two years older than both her husband and Marie Antoinette) join the royal circle, even if her mother and Mercy, who worried that Marie Joséphine might both supplant their protégée in Louis XV’s affections and, worse still, produce an heir, had serious reservations about the match. They need not have
worried though - the Savoyard princess turned out to be not nearly so pretty as Marie Antoinette, with a nose that Louis XV described to his nephew, the Duke of Parma as ‘villainous’. She was also, even by the rather lax standards of eighteenth century France, rather lazy when it came to personal hygiene to the point that a discreet word was dropped in her father’s ear by the French
ambassador, asking him to have a word with his daughter about cleaning her teeth more often, having more baths and attending to her unkempt hair. Beside the exquisite Marie Antoinette, who was also something of a natural scruff at this time but was at least scrupulously clean and always scrubbed up well when it was expected of her, Marie Joséphine had no chance and yet the girls
managed to become friends of a sort, drawn together by homesickness and a certain wry amusement at the absurd goings on within the family circle that they had found themselves within while Marie Antoinette, so desultory when it came to her own lessons, was rather envious of Marie Joséphine’s intelligence and wit and even demanded a new library, which Madame de Noailles
feared would remain sadly untouched, when the new Comtesse, who was a voracious reader, was presented with one upon her arrival at Versailles. However, Marie Antoinette needed to bear in mind that the Comtesse de Provence, outwardly so friendly, was far better versed in the hypocritical arts of courtly dissimulation than she was and had, after all, been busily
entertaining the despised Madame du Barry to supper in her apartments while at the same time agreeing with Marie Antoinette that she was the worst woman in the world.

When it came to the production of an heir, there was no need for concern either. The Comte de Provence, who was still just fifteen, was almost certainly impotent at this time, possibly...
because he was already well on the road to obesity thanks to a lack of exercise and an over fondness for the rich meals served at his grandfather’s court but also perhaps because of a lymph gland disorder that may also have affected his elder brother and sister Clotilde. However, whereas Louis Auguste scuttled about the court, red faced and mortified by the amused chatter about
his lack of sexual ardour, Provence, an entirely different kettle of fish, brazened it out with impressive indifference and went about the place boasting of his prowess and claiming to be bedding his plain little wife several times a night and in all sorts of ingenious ways. It was all lies of course but his bravado was certainly impressive.

As for Marie Antoinette
and Louis Auguste, although they were now exceedingly fond of each other and took a great delight in each other’s company even if she never quite got to grips with Louis Auguste’s peculiar interests, which included lock making in his own personal forge and reading history books, matters had still not really progressed all that much in the bedchamber, although the Dauphin’s willingness to at
least try and have sex with his wife had naturally increased along with his affection for her. They were sadly hampered however by a mutual lack of experience and also much clumsy embarrassment, which meant that the Dauphin would fumble around a bit, perhaps even get on top of Marie Antoinette, but then quickly give up and retreat, mortified, to his own side of the bed.
before anything actually happened. He promised several times, often before the court moved to the smaller palaces of Marly, Choissy or Compiègne for the summer, that he would complete the deed but each time whatever plans he may have had were always scuppered either by illness or his own excessive fatigue upon returning from the hunt. It’s probable that the timid Louis Auguste was
horribly intimidated by the thought of performing such an intimate act at Versailles or Fontainebleau, where everyone knew everything almost as soon as it had happened and so preferred to attempt it at the less populated and more informal royal residences, where he had always felt more at ease and where life in general was far more laid back.

Towards the end of 1772,
King Louis, usually so sanguine about the whole situation, decided to take matters in hand and asked his tactful and kindly physician Dr Lassonne to examine the young couple and discover what was hindering the Dauphin from doing his duty. As with Maria Theresa, it was inconceivable to Louis that his grandson, who was after all a Bourbon, should be so backward when it came to
sex, however he was reassured by Lassonne’s reports that there was nothing physically wrong with the young couple but rather that their issues were all down to inexperience and the Dauphin’s ‘surprising nonchalance and laziness’ in bed, in that he made no real efforts to arouse his wife and gave up the attempt to penetrate her far too quickly, put off by the painful
sensation.

However, gently encouraged by Lassonne, the prince began to put more effort into his nighttime endeavours and soon, in May 1773, Marie Antoinette was able to report to her mother that her husband was ‘a little more forward than usual’, a delicate way of saying that he had started paying her more attention in bed. Just a couple of months later, in July,
Marie Antoinette was able to excitedly report to her mother that ‘my affairs have taken a very good turn... and that I consider my marriage to be consummated; even if not to the degree that I am pregnant.’ A few days later the young couple went together to King Louis and the Dauphin proudly introduced Marie Antoinette to his grandfather as his ‘wife’ in fact as well as name.
The King was absolutely delighted and the happy news quickly spread through the court, temporarily ending all rumours that Marie Antoinette would be packed off back to Vienna and replaced with a different princess, although naturally the talk would soon begin again when the Dauphine failed to become pregnant.

On one occasion, shortly before the marriage of Louis
Auguste’s youngest brother, Marie Antoinette tried to tell him how upset she would be if her new sister-in-law, the Comtesse d’Artois, became pregnant before she did. ‘But do you love me?’ her husband asked. ‘You must know that I do,’ Marie Antoinette replied rather sadly. ‘I love you sincerely and respect you still more.’ The Dauphin then kissed her and promised to renew his efforts, but sadly it
was still in vain and the new sister-in-law would indeed have a child before her.

It had been intended for a long time that Louis Charles, Comte d’Artois should be married to the exquisite Louise-Adélaïde de Condé, daughter of the Prince de Condé, who had recently come to court after leaving the exclusive Parisian convent school Panthémont and become a close friend of
both Marie Antoinette and her sister-in-law Élisabeth. Artois was certainly all in favour of the match as he had long been madly in love with Louise-Adélaïde and it had had the approval of his grandfather as well, as after all her father was a prince of the blood and yet another descendant of Louis XIV and Athénaïs de Montespan. However, after Provence’s marriage to the Princess of
Savoy it was decided that to further cement the union Artois should marry Marie Josephine’s younger sister Maria Teresa and forget all about the lovely Louise-Adélaïde, who had been nicknamed ‘Hebé-Bourbon’ in tribute to her extreme beauty. They were both heartbroken by this, as was Marie Antoinette, who would have dearly loved to have had Louise-Adélaïde as a sister-
in-law, but Artois like his brothers had no choice but to give in and was duly married to Maria Teresa of Savoy in November 1773 with Marie Antoinette performing the office of handing the blushing little bride her nightgown on the wedding night at Versailles.

Although still no great beauty, Maria Teresa, known in France as Marie Thérèse, was still considered far more
attractive than her elder sister and was therefore more of a rival to Marie Antoinette. This rivalry was further compounded by the fact that Artois, unlike his two elder brothers, was already an experienced ladies man and had no problems consummating his marriage straight away to the smug delight of his sharp faced little bride who knew all about the problems that the
other two couples were having. She and her sister formed quite a formidable little unit at court and although they were outwardly friendly to Marie Antoinette were as fond as the aunts of gossiping about her behind her back and causing trouble for her whenever they could, assisted by the Comte de Provence, who secretly loathed his elder brother and his wife, even if he pretended
to be friendly to their faces. On one occasion though his carefully maintained mask slipped when the Dauphin, always clumsy, accidentally broke one of Provence’s most treasured pieces of Meissen china and, enraged, the Comte had lunged at his elder brother and knocked him to the ground. What had at first looked like one of the usual play fights that the brothers liked to indulge in, soon
became far more serious and in the end Marie Antoinette, who received some scratches for her trouble, was forced to intervene and pull them apart.

However, all the rivalries and issues aside, the married grandchildren of the King and their friends formed their own merry little *cotérie* at Versailles and were often to be seen enjoying picnics together in the park, playing
cards and billiards, which Marie Antoinette was extremely good at and became something of a passion with her, or simply enjoying each other’s company in their enormous and exquisitely decorated apartments in the palace. The Comte de Provence and the two Savoyard Princesses may have had malicious tongues and a sly eyed tendency to look askance at the fun of the
others but the rest of the group, particularly the Comte d’Artois and Marie Antoinette, wanted nothing more than to enjoy life to the full and enjoy the delights of being rich, rather foolish and young at one of the most dazzling courts in the world. In this they were encouraged by their grandfather Louis XV who made no attempt to involve his grandsons in politics and did not even try
to prepare his heir the Dauphin for his future responsibilities. Instead he encouraged the young people to spend money like water, have fun and generally be an idle, silly lot. Possibly he was afraid of ending up like his Hanoverian cousins across the Channel, living at cross purposes with his ambitious heirs, but his apparent lack of interest in giving Louis Auguste any
guidance when it came to his future Kingship was certainly a tremendous oversight. He was exceedingly fond of his bevy of granddaughters-in-law though and in 1773 commissioned a beautiful pair of paintings of Marie Antoinette and the Comtesse de Provence from Drouais. The fashion for classical conceits in portraiture was definitely on the wane by the mid 1770s but for once we
are treated to Marie Antoinette posing as Hebé, the messenger of the Gods, graceful in champagne coloured silk and holding a Grecian ewer and a goblet while Marie Joséphine looks equally becoming as the goddess Diana, dressed in blue silk with a leopard pelt draped across her shoulders.

Another favourite pastime was to indulge in secret amateur theatricals with
Marie Antoinette and her small circle putting on small plays which they performed on a quiet mezzanine behind the scenes at Versailles. Here, it was the sharp tongued and malicious Provence who excelled as he had a prodigious memory and was actually quite a talented actor. Marie Antoinette was rather less talented but made up for this with great enthusiasm while her husband, still so
shy and awkward, refused to act at all but instead learned the plays and acted as an enthusiastic audience (reserving his loudest cheers and applause for his wife) and prompt for the others, particularly Artois who was as lazy and un-bookish as his sister-in-law Marie Antoinette and so never bothered to learn his lines properly.

The atmosphere of this
little circle, outwardly so friendly but secretly so riddled with rivalry and deceit is very well conveyed by a letter written home to her parents by Marie Joséphine, the Comtesse d’Artois, describing her frantic preparations for the annual summer time departure to Compiègne. ‘I don’t know why I haven’t gone crazy. I’m surrounded by caskets, papers, books on
the floor; my casket is ready; now it’s been knocked over. I must start all over again. I get angry, they laugh, they grab the paper from me... I’m in a little corner, surrounded by baggage. Madame la Dauphine is knocking everything over, the Comte de Provence is singing, the Comte d’Artois is telling a story that he’s already started telling ten times and he’s shouting at the top of his
voice and laughing loudly, and on top of everything, Monsieur le Dauphin is reading a tragedy out loud. I think he thinks we’re deaf. There are also two birds singing and three dogs making a deafening racket, one is mine, two are Madame la Dauphine’s.’ A normal cheerful family party of boisterous, mischievous teenagers then, all determined to make themselves heard and
share their enthusiasms with the others. Used as she was to being part of an enormous happy family herself, Marie Antoinette thoroughly enjoyed all of this noise and chaos and didn’t concern herself with what might be simmering underneath the surface.

Added to all this there were now also the joys of Paris, which had seemed like an unattainable dream, so near
and yet so far away for the early years of Marie Antoinette’s residence in the closed world of the French court. However, although King Louis, so unpopular himself in his capital, generally discouraged his family from going there, he graciously gave his permission in February 1773 for the young couples, the Dauphin and Marie Antoinette and the Provences,
to secretly attend a masked ball at the Opéra House in the last week of the Parisian carnival. The Dauphin and Provences were less than enchanted by the ball, which thanks to its masked and public nature involved a great amount of licentious freedom between the sexes, but Marie Antoinette was in her element, thrilled both by the unusual anonymity of being able to mingle with the public
in her mask and also by the wild dancing, the air of flirtatious excitement and the unprecedented freedom of being away from the endless dreary etiquette and protocol of the royal court. Amused by her clear delight the Duc de Chartres invited the incognito royal party to continue the fun at was doubtless an extremely wild after party at his Parisian residence, the Palais Royal but Marie
Antoinette sadly declined his invitation, sensing the Dauphin’s disapproval and also a little alarmed by the fact that they had been recognised by other revellers. In the end the royal party arrived back at Versailles at seven in the morning, just in time to hear Mass before collapsing into bed, worn out by their frivolities. Later on, the Dauphine would proudly recount her adventures to her
mother, naively adding that ‘everyone appears to be delighted by the fact that Monsieur le Dauphin should have consented to come to the ball, for he usually has an aversion to this kind of party.’

Marie Antoinette, like so many other women before and since, had fallen madly in love with Paris and would not rest until she could taste its pleasures again. She was
therefore delighted when King Louis, realising that his own sadly diminished popularity could get a much needed boost from the clear affection that the Parisians had for the younger members of his family, agreed that it was about time she and the Dauphin made their official entry to the capital, after which they would be free to openly visit whenever they liked. The ‘Joyeuse Entrée’
of Marie Antoinette and Louis Auguste took place on 8 June 1773 when dressed in formal magnificence they travelled by carriage to the gates of the capital where the Duc de Brissac, Governor of Paris was waiting to formally present them with the keys and freedom of the city. After this they travelled in a procession through streets lined with enormous cheering crowds to Notre Dame where
they heard Mass before inspecting the newly completed church of Sainte Geneviève (now known as Panthéon) and returning to the long abandoned royal palace of the Tuileries which had barely been used since the young Louis XV, brought up there by his regent, the old Duc d’Orléans, had taken the court back to Versailles in 1722.

In the gloomy and decayed
surroundings of the old Tuileries palace Marie Antoinette and Louis Auguste dined in solitary state, attended only by the Dauphine’s ladies. A gallery overlooking the chamber was open to respectably dressed members of the public though and they respectfully filed past as the young couple affected not to notice their presence. Less easy to avoid, however, were the shouts and
bawdy cat calls of the Parisian market women who were allowed inside in deference to their traditional position as unofficial and extraordinarily outspoken mouthpieces of the general populace and who now began to, albeit in a good natured fashion, heckle the Dauphin and his pretty wife about the lack of an heir. Luckily, Louis Auguste and Marie Antoinette were sufficiently
buoyed up by their enthusiastic reception to find this more amusing than offensive and it all ended well on both sides with the market women congratulating the Dauphin on his pretty wife and him grinning with agreement.

After this interlude the royal couple went out on to the balcony overlooking the Tuileries gardens, there to receive the acclaim of the
several thousand people that had gathered there while they were eating. Marie Antoinette took a step back, astonished and a little frightened by such an enormous crowd, whispering, ‘There are so many of them’ to the Duc de Brissac, who immediately replied, with great aplomb: ‘Madame, I hope that Monsieur le Dauphin won’t be jealous when I say that you have two hundred
thousand lovers.’ Delighted by this, Marie Antoinette then insisted upon going down to the terrace to mingle with the people, taking her husband’s arm as she went so that the Parisians would see for themselves just how affectionate the young couple were towards each other. The Dauphin was equally keen to be seen and gave orders that the people must be allowed to come as
close as they liked and were not to be pushed away by the crowds or hurt in any way. The couple then walked as far as they could until the tremendous press of the cheering, clamouring crowds forced them to return to the palace. A few days later, a still over excited Marie Antoinette would write to tell her mother all about it. ‘Last Tuesday I had a day which I will never forget as long as I
live; we made our entrance into Paris. As for honours, we received every conceivable one; but although this was very well, it was not what touched me the most, but rather the tenderness and eagerness of the poor people, who, in spite of the taxes which oppress them, were carried away with joy on seeing us. How fortunate we are, in our position, to have been able to win the love of
our people so cheaply. And yet there is nothing more precious and I will never forget it.’

Marie Antoinette even tactfully informed Louis XV, who listened rather wistfully to her tales of their great success, that ‘Your Majesty must be very much loved or we would never have received such a welcome.’ They both knew the sad truth of the matter but it was
typical of Marie Antoinette’s thoughtfulness that she should try to smooth any potential awkwardness over. Now that the Dauphine was free to visit Paris whenever she liked, she threw herself into the social life of the capital with enormous delight: visiting the opera, theatre and balls in the city, making excursions to factories, fairs, artistic studios and museums and basking in
the adulation of the crowds that turned out in their hundreds to see her. To her great pleasure, the Dauphin usually accompanied her on these excursions, prompted both by his love for her and also the fact that he was all too aware that as future King of France it was necessary for him to win the affection of the notoriously fickle Parisian populace. In this at least, though, he seemed to be
having no difficulty as the Parisians looked all set to take both Louis Auguste and his wife to their hearts, seeing in them the hope of a more golden age once the vice riddled regime of Louis XV came to a much longed for end.

Drawn into a new pleasure loving world and encouraged by her friends the Princesse de Lamballe and the Duchesse de Chartres, Marie
Antoinette began to see Paris as the perfect antidote to the problems that she faced at Versailles. Now in her late teens, she felt the full weight of her mother’s disappointment about her continued childlessness, a situation that she too found deeply distressing as she longed for a baby of her very own. In the past she had sought distraction by asking her ladies and even the lesser
servants to bring their children to her apartments so that she might play with them and spoil them a little with treats and presents. Now, however, all the years of endless reproaches from her mother and those unfulfilling night time fumblings from her husband had worn her down completely and left her desperate for distraction, for some form of escape. She was flattered and pleased by
her husband’s growing love for her and the shy way that he tried to appeal to her by trying to participate in her interests even if she couldn’t quite bring herself to entirely reciprocate. However, her own feelings for Louis Auguste, although affectionate were not romantic and she had not, to date, ever truly fallen in love with anyone.

It was the silly, frivolous
Duchesse de Chartres, who had the enormous wealth of both her husband and her father at her disposal, who first introduced Marie Antoinette to the polite gaming tables of Paris, where far more exciting games than cavagnole were played and for much higher stakes. It was also the Duchesse who introduced the Dauphine, previously so careless of her appearance that she had
needed not one but two interventions, to the workshop of a certain Rose Bertin, a Parisian dressmaker and milliner whose immense talents matched the tremendous costs of the outfits and ridiculous headpieces that she designed for her aristocratic clientele. Fed up with what felt like the endless frustrations of her life at court, frustrated by her mother’s complaints,
frightened that Madame du Barry’s coterie would have their way and get her sent back to Vienna and beginning to wonder if she would ever experience for herself what she considered to be the supreme joy of motherhood, the deeply unhappy Marie Antoinette sought to distract herself with all the fashionable, extravagant frivolities that Paris could offer her.
It was at a masked ball at the Opéra on 30 January 1774 that she was to meet Axel von Fersen for the first time and perhaps behold in him something of a romantic ideal. She had gone to the ball with her husband and the rest of their usual party and then, as was now her custom, had wandered off to have delightful little chats with the other party goers, who politely pretended not to
know who this pretty little ingenue was. However, Axel von Fersen, as rich and handsome as the hero of a romantic novel and newly arrived from his native Sweden, had no idea of the identity of this ravishingly dressed stranger who accosted him by the dance floor and so enjoyed several minutes informal conversation with her before he overheard whispers of ‘It’s
Madame la Dauphine’ and realised whom he had been flirting with so delightfully. The giggling little Dauphine was whisked away by her companions and beyond being a little flattered to have been so singled out, he thought no more of it and nor did Marie Antoinette when they continued to occasionally meet at Versailles over the following few months before Fersen left
for England.

Besides, she had other matters to distract her as she had been encouraged by her mother to champion the cause of her former music tutor, the already celebrated composer Gluck who wished to have his groundbreaking opera *Iphigénie in Aulide* performed in Paris but was having no luck persuading the snobbish directors of the Paris Opera to accept the piece. However,
with Marie Antoinette’s patronage, a performance was secured and when the Dauphine announced that she would be attending the premiere on 19 April, tickets began to sell like hot cakes as, already, where the Dauphine led everyone else must surely follow. The performance was, unsurprisingly, a resounding success and Marie Antoinette, used to regarding herself as
something of a dunce, was able to instead preen herself for being a patroness of the arts.

However, in the wake of this great public triumph came enormous tragedy when on 27 April, Louis Auguste and Marie Antoinette were informed that their grandfather Louis XV had been taken ill at the Petit Trianon, his pleasure pavilion in the grounds of Versailles,
and would soon be told that they must prepare themselves for the worst.
King Louis fell ill while cavorting with Madame du Barry during a romantic getaway to the Petit Trianon, their little pleasure pavilion in the grounds of Versailles. At first the King insisted that he just had a cold, but when his
symptoms took a more serious turn a physician was summoned who insisted that he return to Versailles immediately, telling the ailing King: ‘Sire, you must be ill at Versailles.’ Although there was not at first considered any reason to fear the worst, it was clear to everyone that should the King’s illness take a dire turn then it would be far more dignified to die amidst the baroque
splendours of his bedchamber at Versailles than in his mistress’ pretty boudoir at the Petit Trianon. Even in the act of dying did etiquette and the terrible overriding fear of losing even the slightest bit of dignity rule the lives of the French royal family.

King Louis was whisked back to Versailles, where it was confirmed two days later that he had fallen prey to that scourge of royal families.
across Europe: smallpox. For the good of his soul, he was ordered to send the terrified Madame du Barry, who had never had smallpox and so had not acquired immunity, away but instead insisted, rather recklessly, that she remain beside him, which to her credit she did. Marie Antoinette, who had survived smallpox as a child and so was immune, also offered her service as nurse but was
ordered, along with the her husband and his siblings, to stay in the safety of her apartments. Only the three aunts, who had never had smallpox, were permitted to remain by their father’s side and nurse him through his illness.

At first the doctors were fairly sanguine about the King’s prospects of making a full recovery but by 4 May it became clear to everyone that
he was dying and when once again he was asked to send his mistress away so that he could confess and make his peace with God, he did not this time demur but instead entrusted her to the care of his Chief Minister, the Duc d’Aiguillon. The distraught Madame du Barry, who realised that she would reap all that she had sown once Louis Auguste and Marie Antoinette, the girl that she
had mocked and schemed against ever since her arrival in France, succeeded to the throne, left Versailles in the early hours of the morning in a plain hired carriage and hastened to Aiguillon’s château at Ruel. She was almost as unpopular as her royal lover and it was feared that she might be attacked by the large, more curious than upset, crowd that had begun to gather outside the palace
when news of the King’s illness began to spread.

On the morning of 7 May the libertine King, by now in a terrible state and lying on a camp bed in his bedchamber, made his first confession for almost thirty years, the holy sacraments having been brought to his chamber by a long state procession headed by the Grand Almoner of France and the devastated Louis Auguste and Marie
Antoinette, who waited in the adjoining council chamber as the King confessed then received communion, promising to ‘uphold the faith and his religion and dedicate himself entirely to the welfare of his people’ should he make a miraculous recovery.

For Marie Antoinette the next few days were a nightmare as, barred from approaching the King’s rooms which were filled with...
a stench of death so terrible that his servants fainted and no one dared approach his deathbed, she waited for news with her husband. Louis Auguste was also in a terrible state and spent most of the time praying for his grandfather’s soul, when he wasn’t weeping helplessly in her arms. Despite all of his faults he had truly loved King Louis and could not yet bring himself to contemplate the
fact of his imminent succession to the throne, which he did not feel at all prepared for. ‘I am the most unhappy man in the world,’ he told his wife as they waited together for the news of his grandfather’s death, which came at quarter past three on the afternoon of 10 May when a candle placed in the King’s bedchamber window was symbolically snuffed out and an usher
stepped out to announce that the King was finally dead.

Immediately an immense crowd of courtiers, who had been loitering around the state rooms of the palace, rushed down the beautiful Hall of Mirrors, making ‘a terrible noise, exactly like thunder’ to the Salon of Peace at the start of the Queen’s rooms, where they found Louis Auguste and Marie Antoinette, pale,
tearful and clinging together like children, waiting for them. ‘Dear God, guide us and protect us. We are too young to reign,’ Louis Auguste whispered as they fell to their knees and led the court in a prayer. He was just nineteen years old while Marie Antoinette, his consort and the new Queen of France, was eighteen.

After receiving the homage of their new court, the new
King and Queen of France were hustled out of the palace, where over a dozen people had now died of smallpox along with King Louis, and packed off in a carriage to the royal château at Choisy, which had been a favourite love nest of the now dead King and Madame de Pompadour and was a precursor in laid back, airy style and ambience to the smaller Petit Trianon. Sharing
their carriage were Louis Auguste’s brothers and their wives, who all sat in stunned silence until the Comtesse d’Artois, only relatively recently arrived in France and still not in full command of the language, chanced a remark which because of her comical mispronunciation sent everyone off into fits of laughter, thereby breaking the ice.

Pretty, simply decorated
and secluded, Choisy was the perfect place for the bereft, confused and frightened young royal couple to come to terms with both their loss and also the tremendous change in their circumstances. They remained there for several days, while in their absence from Versailles, the old King’s body, which was believed to be highly contagious, was driven with
all speed and very little ceremony to the royal necropolis at Saint Denis to be quickly buried. The rather undignified haste with which his cortège made the journey giving rise to mocking shouts of ‘Tally ho!’ from the populace, who showed a distinct lack of regret about his passing and were instead looking forward to an era of happiness and prosperity under the new régime,
blissfully unaware that their new monarchs were a pair of frightened adolescents, considered by even their closest family and advisors to be in no way fit to rule.

However, on the surface, the new reign started off well with the new King sending 200,000 francs of his own money to be distributed among the Parisian poor and then refusing the increased income that was
automatically given to him upon his succession. Marie Antoinette immediately followed suit by refusing to accept the Queen’s traditional *droit de ceinture*, an allowance dating from Medieval times that had been named for the girdles that the Queens of France had traditionally worn in the middle ages. ‘Girdles are no longer in fashion,’ the little Queen said in explanation,
shrugging her scented shoulders. There was no need to add that conspicuous expenditure was also out of style - everyone knew that the royal coffers had been left in the parlous state by the extravagant Louis XV and that the country itself was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy.

The philanthropic gestures of the new Louis XVI (the ‘Auguste’ of his youth was
now summarily dropped) and Marie Antoinette had long since made them favourites in Paris, where they had the habit of responding with prompt generosity to any pleas for assistance from the populace and, indeed, were often the only members of the royal family to do so. Their open handedness now was seen as further proof that this new reign would be very different to the last, as was
the young couple’s obvious fondness for each other. Previous Kings of France had squandered astronomical sums on their rapacious, expensive mistresses while more or less ignoring their wives, who led quiet lives out of the public eye, content to be trotted out on state occasions in between doing their duty and producing heirs. Now though there was a morally wholesome King
who was obviously entirely in love with his wife and had eyes for nobody else. How could this be anything other than an augur for happier, more prosperous times to come? The days when unruly Kings had been kept in line by threats of Papal excommunication and interdict on their kingdoms were in the dim and distant past but even so, away from the enlightened circles of the
court and cities, the eighteenth century was still a superstitious age and it was felt by many of his people that a sinful King was indicative of a more general rot at the very heart of the nation itself.

Nonetheless, not everyone was happy with this new and rather unusual status quo. For all their unpopularity, and most of them had been very unpopular indeed, the Kings’
mistresses in the past had almost always been French and, court factions and tiresome squabbling aside, therefore perceived as always being loyal to France and its interests. There had never been a foreign maîtresse en titre (although in Madame de Maintenon there had once been a French morganatic wife to the King) and the prospect of an Austrian mistress-queen with absolute
and unrivalled influence over the King was both unprecedented and, in many quarters, disquieting.

It didn’t help matters that Louis XVI, so bumbling and clumsy but nonetheless always so well intentioned, had always been dismissed at court as something of a weak reed with none of his ancestor Louis XIV’s greatness nor even the saving grace of Louis XV’s indisputable
charm. It now belatedly occurred to some people that more should have been done to check Marie Antoinette’s growing influence over such a clearly susceptible young man and that, perhaps, efforts should have been made to throw a few dainty young ladies in his way in order to distract him from his wife. Not that it would have worked - Louis was apparently entirely
impervious to the charms of all women other than his wife and her ladies giggled behind their painted fans at his awkward manner and habit of never making eye contact when addressing them, preferring instead to stare either down at the floor or at a point somewhere above their shoulder.

Besides which, would Marie Antoinette, so outwardly outgoing, fun
loving and popular, be content to relinquish her social life and the small influence she had apparently acquired over her husband and retire to the quiet, rather dull and dutiful life normally expected of a Queen of France? It seemed very unlikely. Horrified though she undoubtedly was by her new and unexpected pre-eminence at court, it was also quickly becoming clear that
the new young Queen, like a kitten just beginning to show its claws, was beginning to relish her new power which she exercised by encouraging the compliant King to first banish Madame du Barry then dismiss her creature, the hated Duc d’Aiguillon from his position of Chief Minister. However, her attempts to have the Duc de Choiseul, whom she still revered as the one responsible for having
doggedly arranging her marriage in the face of what she now knew was enormous opposition from the court and within the royal family itself, reinstated to his former position came to nothing when the King, who personally disliked Choiseul and had vowed never to reinstate him, also showed his mettle and instead, on the advice of his meddlesome aunt Adélaïde who was
determined to usurp Marie Antoinette’s position at her nephew’s elbow, appointed the elderly Duc de Maurepas as his chief advisor.

Marie Antoinette was furious and also not a little hurt and humiliated to have her wish in this matter so summarily snubbed by her husband. It seemed to her that in refusing to support Choiseul, to whom she felt so much gratitude, he was in
essence harkening back to the anti-Austrian teachings of his hated old governor, the Duc de Vauguyon and acknowledging the fact that their marriage had not, initially at least, been of his choosing. However, there was nothing she could do about it and Maurepas at least had the benefit of being unaligned with any of the court factions and was indeed well known to be a man entirely devoid of
ambition - an unusual stance perhaps in a royal minister but one that was greatly appreciated by his new master Louis XVI who, with extraordinary humility for a Bourbon King of France, frankly acknowledged himself to be lacking ‘both knowledge and experience’ in his first letter to his new advisor.

That the new King, who had been entirely excluded
from the government of the nation by his grandfather, was desperately unprepared and in need of advice was an indisputable fact, although ironically he was the oldest new King of France for over a hundred and fifty years as his grandfather had succeeded at the age of five, Louis XIV had succeeded at four and Louis XIII had come to the throne at the age of eight in 1610. That the new King had
reached his majority and could thus dispense with a regent was considered a huge point in his favour but to those who more closely knew him it was, again, the cause of some alarm for unlike his predecessors he would not be spending his boyhood learning statecraft during a long regency before being allowed to take up the reins of government himself but would instead be thrust
straight into the deep end of kingship. However, the refusal to appoint the Duc de Choiseul his Minister of State had at least quietened some worries that Marie Antoinette would become the power behind the throne, giving as it did a clear signal that the new King, hitherto considered so weak and malleable, was determined not to become the cat’s paw of his wife and was in fact actively keeping her at
a distance from his government.

As for Maria Theresa, who was being kept closely informed about events by Mercy, she too felt disquiet about the fact that her daughter and son-in-law had been called upon to reign too soon, being all too aware of how terribly unprepared they both were. She instructed the faithful Mercy to immediately report Louis’ every action to
her so that she could judge whether he was following her own interests and also added that her daughter, who wrote to say that she could not ‘help but admire the disposition of Providence which chose me, the youngest of your daughters, for the finest kingdom in Europe. I am more than ever aware of how much I owe to the love of my august mother, who took such care and effort to get me such
a good settlement’, should ‘never for a minute lose sight of all the possible ways of ensuring her complete and exclusive control over her husband’s mind’. Clearly, as far as Maria Theresa was concerned, they should make the best of the situation and set to work reaping the full benefits of the marriage they had brokered four years earlier. However, she looked set to be unexpectedly
confounded and thwarted by Louis, allegedly so irresolute and meek, having the hitherto unimagined backbone to stand up to his wife and make it clear that he was not going to be the puppet of either her or her Austrian relatives, which led the Empress to eventually reluctantly conclude that ‘some of his behavioural traits make me… doubt that he will be very compliant and easy to
control’.

When smallpox followed the royal party to Choisy they unwillingly left its delights behind and moved on to La Muette on the edge of the Bois de Boulogne, where Marie Antoinette had spent the night before her wedding and which was a favourite summer residence of the young couple. The gates to the Bois de Boulogne were usually locked against the
populace whenever the royal family were in residence but this time, to signal perhaps the new informal direction that they wanted their reign to take, Louis and Marie Antoinette ordered that they be left open so that the people could enter and walk about the shady avenues between the trees as usual. The Parisians were astonished and delighted to regularly see their new King and Queen
having picnics in the glade with their friends or simply walking amongst them, arm in arm and clearly devoted to each other. There were cheers and applause on one occasion when the Queen, out riding on her stallion, came across the King on one of his walks and immediately dismounted and ran to greet him, whereupon he picked her up in his arms and kissed her in front of everyone. It made a
pleasing contrast to their shy diffidence with each other just four years earlier and everyone was enchanted by it. Even Maria Theresa wrote from Vienna to compliment her daughter, saying: ‘Everyone is ecstatic, everyone is mad about you; there are expectations of great happiness; you bring new life to a nation which was in desperate straits and sustained only by its
attachment to its princes.’

Louis XV’s death was so horrible that it was not entirely surprising when Louis XVI and his brothers announced their intention of getting inoculated against smallpox, encouraged by Marie Antoinette who was already immune thanks to a minor childhood bout with the dreaded disease. Smallpox inoculation in the eighteenth century was still a
relatively risky business though and there was a great deal of panic when the King’s intention was announced as it was feared that he might die too. Marie Antoinette, still erroneously believed to be the power behind the throne, was blamed for the whole thing and even accused of putting her husband’s life at risk with this foolhardy procedure. Luckily for everyone, the inoculation was
a success and after a brief convalescence, Louis was fully restored to health.

The fledgling court of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette was a pleasure seeking one but for now, as they were still in mourning for the previous King, they delighted in the gentle pastimes of horse riding, picnics, quiet parties and concerts. On one occasion at La Muette, Marie Antoinette
suddenly announced that she had never seen the sun rise and so a small party was arranged to climb one of the nearby hills at three in the morning and watch the day begin. Louis refused to come too as he liked his sleep too much but the others gamely trotted up the hill at the appointed time and watched as the sun rose over Paris, while Marie Antoinette exclaimed and sighed like a
true child of Rousseau about the majestic wonder of nature.

The young royal couple had never been so close and as further proof of his great affection for his wife and knowing how much she disliked the stifling formality of court life, Louis presented her with the domain of the Petit Trianon, the delightful little pleasure pavilion in the grounds of Versailles where
his grandfather had been taken ill not all that long before. This sad recent event didn’t seem to weigh too much on their minds though and indeed there wasn’t really much scope for such sentimentality at a court where every room had its sad little ghosts from the past. Marie Antoinette was clearly delighted by her present and immediately began to plan renovations to the main
building, an exquisite little château just big enough for herself and only a few trusted companions, and the surrounding gardens, which she envisioned becoming a true paradise on earth where she could escape and truly be herself. Of course, people couldn’t help but notice that the Petit Trianon had previously always been the preserve of the old King’s mistresses, having originally
been built for Madame de Pompadour and then passed on to Madame du Barry, and so for it now to given to the Queen was taken as another clear signal that they were living under different times and that Louis was obviously going to be a very different type of Bourbon King to his predecessors.

The court stayed away from Versailles for almost six months, a halcyon
honeymoon period for the new reign which they also spent at Compiègne, Marly and Fontainebleau as well as Choisy and La Muette. The summer and autumn of 1774 were delightfully sunny and warm, perfect honeymoon weather, which seemed to make the new reign seem even more enchanted and blessed. In keeping with the relaxed, optimistic mood, the new King and Queen took the
opportunity to set a more informal tone at their court, surrounding themselves with people of their own age and making as many changes as they dared to the rigid ceremonial etiquette that had dominated court life for decades, for instance abolishing the custom of dining in public every day and also ending the custom whereby Marie Antoinette needed to be accompanied by
two ladies in waiting at all times. Instead she now made do with a valet and two footmen, who were chosen for their good looks and impressive height and bearing. Another change was to allow the ladies of the royal family to dine with men who were not related to them, which meant that the King and Queen could now hold merry little twice weekly supper parties in their
apartments to which they invited people whom they most particularly wanted to honour. Naturally, the competition for invitations was intensely fierce but guests were rewarded with the edifying spectacle of the young royal couple flicking rolled up bread crumbs at each other across the table so clearly thought it well worth the trouble.

However, this new
informality could also go too far. Not long after his succession to the throne, Louis decided at the very last minute to attend a court ball being held in the Salon of Hercules, arriving without his usual entourage and a total lack of any fanfare so that no one noticed that he was actually present until, failing to push his way through the crowds to where his wife was holding court, he asked an
absolutely astonished lady of the court if he could share her stool. Marie Antoinette found this immensely amusing but the rest of the court was scandalised by such un-majestic behaviour. It seemed extraordinary that a King should not even be noticed in his own ballroom. No one could imagine something like this happening to Louis XIV or even Louis XV and Maurepas was forced to warn
his abashed royal master that ‘we are not accustomed to seeing our King count for so little in public.’

This diffidence and lack of presence on the part of the King would in time become increasingly problematic for both his ministers and his wife and nowadays it might even be wondered if Louis was on the autistic spectrum, although such a thing was unheard of in the eighteenth
century. Certainly his total lack of interest in anything that bored him, his scruffy appearance, strange shambling manner, inability to hold eye contact, intense and often unusual interests, impressively retentive memory, difficulties with facial recognition (probably down to short sightedness but could facial blindness have been an issue as well?), social awkwardness and often
inappropriate sense of humour might all suggest such a thing. Either way, what could be considered mere eccentricity in a normal man, was intolerable in a King.

However, it wasn’t just the King’s manners that were beginning to raise eyebrows at court. At the age of eighteen, Marie Antoinette hadn’t really grown up at all and wasn’t all that different to
the quick tempered, petulant, fun loving and eager to please girl that had left Vienna over four years earlier. Although her powers of concentration had improved along with her French, she was still incapable of hiding her boredom while sitting through the interminable court ceremonies that now became her lot and caused much offence by openly yawning, rolling her eyes,
fidgeting and giggling behind her diamond encrusted fan during presentations. Louis was also bored by royal ceremonies but hid it much better than his wife, although he could often be abrupt to the point of rudeness with people, even his ministers if he wasn’t interested in what they were saying. Many of the older courtiers now began to pessimistically wonder if their impetuous little Queen
was ever going to grow up and it was certainly beginning to look as though her continued childlessness and lack of a properly fulfilling marriage were artificially prolonging her own childhood and were in danger of eventually trapping her in an extended adolescence.

She was also exceedingly rude to the older ladies of the court, a grave mistake when many of them were actually
extremely influential and could have done much to smooth her way at court and make life easier. In alienating them, she was also alienating some of the grandest families in France and forcing more people to lend an ear to the malicious little tales and songs that were starting to circulate about her, most of which came from the apartments of Madame Adélaïde, the grandest older
lady of all. ‘I don’t know why women over the age of thirty bother showing their faces at court,’ Marie Antoinette said on one occasion with the blissful lack of foresight of youth, causing a furore and making many women declare that if that was how she felt then they wouldn’t come back again. Others, however, wondered if she would feel the same way when she herself turned thirty.
There was also an unfortunate incident at La Muette when all the ladies of court came in their mourning clothes for the old King to pay homage to the new Queen, some of them looking really quite macabre in their black weeds and elaborately veiled headdresses. One of Marie Antoinette’s younger ladies, the Marquise de Clermont-Tonnerre, was so amused by this weird
spectacle that she sat down on the floor behind the other ladies in waiting and began to mock them mercilessly in an undertone while Marie Antoinette, herself perturbed by the strange sight, tried her best but naturally completely failed to hide her laughter, completely affronting the visiting ladies.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, one of her first moves after becoming Queen was to
appoint her dearest friend the Princesse de Lamballe to the position of *Surintendante de la maison de la reine* (which had now swollen to over five hundred people), an old and extremely highly salaried position which was revived specially for her and outranked the haughty Madame de Noailles, already very offended by Marie Antoinette’s impolite behaviour towards the older
members of the court, who immediately tendered her resignation as Mistress of the Household, doubtless to Marie Antoinette’s great relief. The position of Surintendante was one that required great tact and social aplomb, neither of which were skills that the Princesse was exactly replete with. A silly little affected mouse of a woman, she was so nervous and highly strung that she
once fainted clean away at the sight of a painting of a lobster.

Although she had all the enormous personal wealth and polished, well dressed veneer of a great court lady, Madame de Lamballe was, like Marie Antoinette, completely out of her depth and in no way suitable for such an important court job. Also, although she gave all the appearance of being a
wispy, ethereal, special little snowflake, Madame la Princesse was at heart also extremely proud and just as ambitious and grasping as anyone else who entered Marie Antoinette’s circle at this time and worked tirelessly to promote the interests of her family while at the same time neglecting her own post and insulting the other court ladies by refusing to invite them to balls and
supper in her apartments, which was one of the traditional duties of the *Surintendante*, claiming that her ill health and royal status made it impossible and wilfully ignoring the fact that her enormous salary was intended as recompense for hosting such gatherings. The ladies began to stay away from Versailles in protest and Marie Antoinette was forced to intervene and demand that
her friend perform her duties properly.

As Surintendante it was the Princesse de Lamballe’s duty to supervise Marie Antoinette’s daily routine at Versailles and the royal family’s other residences: Fontainebleau, Marly, La Muette and Compiègne as well as, later on, Saint Cloud, Rambouillet and the Tuileries. Whereas the King’s routine, laid out so precisely
by Louis XIV that you could set your clock by it, was dynamic and busy, the Queen’s, in contrast, was languid and involved many empty hours which had to be filled. In the early years of her queenship, Marie Antoinette was a late riser who liked to have a lie in after coming back from the delights of Paris in the early hours of the morning and would lounge in bed with her.
breakfast of hot chocolate infused with cinnamon and coffee and Austrian pastries for quite a while, dreamily sticking pins in her wardrobe book to select the day’s clothes and chattering about the previous evening’s exploits, before finally rolling out of bed and heading off to have her daily bath. Her official toilette, attended by the Princesse de Lamballe, a lady in waiting, the First
Woman of the Bedchamber and two ladies, would then follow. Madame de Lamballe had the honour of helping Marie Antoinette into her lace edged petticoat before the lady in waiting poured the lavender scented water that she used to wash her hands then handed her a fine lawn chemise, although this honour would be given to any ladies of the royal blood that happened to be present.
The rest of the Queen’s elaborate dressing ritual would then follow as she was laced into her morning gown and had her hair dressed and powdered by Léonard, who came from Paris every morning for this purpose, his apparently endless store of juicy gossip about the courtiers being a definite bonus to his ministrations. When she was ready, Marie Antoinette would then go
down to Mass in the royal chapel, either accompanied by her ladies or with the King, who would come to collect her on Sundays, when the official weekly court was held at Versailles. The royal party would progress down the Hall of Mirrors and Marie Antoinette would make a point of nodding and smiling at anyone that she wished to show favour to or pointedly blanking those whom she did
not want to notice.

Mass took place at midday and Louis, Marie Antoinette and the royal princesses would observe from a gallery above the rest of the congregation, while the Queen’s ladies threw their trains over their panniers and rushed to find spots close by. Each lady was attended by a page boy carrying her missal in a large red velvet bag, trimmed with gold fringe but
as Madame de la Tour du Pin would later recall rather ruefully, the ladies would hardly ever get to read it for the scramble to find a pew took so long that the priest would already have moved on to the Gospel before they had found the right place.

When Mass was over, the Queen would curtsey to her husband and then return to her apartments, again making a point of stopping to talk to
favoured people on the way. Once back in her rooms, she would amuse herself with her friends, play cards with her ladies or withdraw into her private rooms in the ever growing maze that lay behind her state apartments to play her harp, listen to the Abbé de Vermond read or, more thrillingly, consult with her favourite dressmakers Rose Bertin and Madame Éloffe who came out from Paris at
least once a week to show off their latest designs or discuss ideas for new gowns and pieces of millinery, until it was time to go off to dinner, which was eaten publicly in the Antechamber of the Grand Couvert in the Queen’s apartments.

Marie Antoinette and Louis would sit in front of the fire on two large green armchairs placed behind a small table laid with just two places and
covered with a white tablecloth that came down to the ground, on top of which was an array of dishes. A semi circle of stools was placed about ten feet in front of them where the grand ladies who had the privilege of being permitted to sit on a stool in the royal presence could observe them eat, while everyone else arranged themselves behind. As Madame de la Tour du Pin
would later recall: ‘The King ate heartily, but the Queen neither removed her gloves nor unfolded her napkin, which was a very big mistake. As soon as the King had drunk his wine, everyone curtseyed and left.’ The abstemious dining habits drilled into Marie Antoinette as a child remained with her for the rest of her life as she would always eat very sparingly and would never
touch alcohol, despite the rumours that floated about her dissipated social life. The fact that she was expected to take meals while being stared at by curious bystanders can’t have helped matters very much either.

On Sundays, the courtiers would then head off to pay their respects to the rest of the royal family in their apartments, with Madame de la Tour du Pin later recalling
that everyone loved calling on the Comte d’Artois, who was ‘young and had that charming appearance which he was never to lose. Great efforts were made to please him, for to succeed was a guarantee of fame.’ That he had an eye for the ladies of the court didn’t hurt either. Everyone then returned to the Queen’s apartments for seven, when the Queen would play cards in public until,
yawning behind her fan, she either headed off to bed or to Paris for more congenial entertainment. On other days of the week, Marie Antoinette and her ladies would be left to their own devices until the early evening when there were either the usual court entertainments such as the weekly balls, supper parties, card games or concerts or she was free to go off to the capital to amuse herself at the
opera, theatre or at a ball before coming back in the early hours and falling back into bed again.

Louis’ coronation took place at Rheims on 11 June 1775 with the entire court in attendance. There had been suggestions that the ceremony should take place at Notre Dame in Paris, which would be both more economical and also appeal to the good nature of the Parisians, who had so
loathed the old King. However, Louis was adamant that tradition must be upheld and so they all trooped off to Rheims as usual. Marie Antoinette took no active part in the coronation itself, an attempt by Mercy to have her crowned alongside her husband having been firmly rebuffed with it being pointed out to him that Queens had traditionally always been accorded separate coronations.
in France and that the position of this one, who remained childless five years after her marriage, was by no means secure even if her husband seemed so fond of her. To add further insult to this undoubted injury, the Comtesse d’Artois, wife of Louis’ youngest brother, had recently announced her pregnancy, which only served to further highlight the fact that the Queen herself had
failed to conceive.

Marie Antoinette gave every appearance of being entirely unconcerned by her exclusion from the ceremony, although it must have rankled at least at some level, and consoled herself by ordering a magnificent new dress and an exceedingly high feathered headdress from Rose Bertin for the event, which she no doubted regretted when the coronation day turned out to
be swelteringly, headdress drooping, hot. Although she was not herself to be crowned, Marie Antoinette sat in a place of honour close to her husband and was seen to be visibly moved by the coronation ceremony, even having to withdraw for a few moments when she was completely overcome by tears. Afterwards, she appeared on her newly crowned husband’s arm and
the couple promenaded around Rheims, receiving the applause and acclamations of their people. Later she would write to her mother that: ‘The sacred ceremony was perfect in every way. Everyone is delighted with the King, and rightly so. From the grandest to the humblest of his subjects all were equally enthusiastic. There was even a moment during the coronation when the ceremony was interrupted
by an outburst of spontaneous acclamations. It was so touching that however much I tried I was unable to restrain my tears.

Although Marie Antoinette remained on outwardly good terms with her brothers-in-law and their wives, their relationship had soured a great deal after the succession of her husband. His brother Provence, always so resentful of Louis’ pre-eminence, was
deeply jealous of him but still clever enough to treat both him and Marie Antoinette with the greatest respect. In fact it was rumoured at court that he had a bit of a crush on his sister-in-law, which just added to the secret hatred that he harboured for his brother. His wife, Marie Josephine and her sister Marie Thérèse now both cordially loathed Marie Antoinette though and took very little trouble to hide
the fact, doubtless emboldened by Marie Thérèse succeeding where Marie Antoinette most clearly had not when she became pregnant. They now openly aligned themselves with the aunts and everyone knew that most of the jealous, nasty tittle tattle about the Queen almost certainly originated with them. Artois, the King’s handsome, charming youngest brother, was the
only one whom Marie Antoinette counted as a friend as their tastes and personalities accorded so well and he was not spiteful or jealous like the others. However, his cheerful over familiarity and total lack of outward respect for both the King and Queen raised eyebrows at court and, in the case of the latter, kicked off several rumours that their relationship was rather more
intimate than that of just brother and sister-in-law. 

Although Louis and Marie Antoinette had become much closer in the immediate wake of his grandfather’s death and the prolonged honeymoon period of their early reign, they soon began to slide even further apart as Louis became caught up in the seemingly never ending work of government. Encouraged by Maurepas, he was also
becoming increasingly suspicious of his wife’s allegiance to Austria, only too well aware of the constant letters that passed between the Empress, Emperor Joseph II, Mercy and Marie Antoinette, who was still being encouraged by her mother to seek total dominance over her husband and bend him to her will. There were practical issues too - now that Louis was
living in the King’s apartments at Versailles, he was even further away from his wife than before and going to her rooms had become a mortifyingly public event requiring passage through the busy Bull’s Eye Chamber, which always seemed full of loitering courtiers who watched his every move with malicious amusement. To Marie Antoinette’s chagrin, he had
installed Maurepas in the rooms formerly inhabited by Madame du Barry, which were linked directly to the King’s rooms by a private staircase, which was handy if he needed late night political advice but far less useful when it came to the important task of conceiving an heir to the throne. In the end, a passage way was built between the two apartments but still Louis’ conjugal visits
were becoming increasingly infrequent and once again Marie Antoinette found herself back in the same frustrating position of a few years ago - more or less ignored by her husband, harangued by her disappointed mother and beset with worries about her vulnerable position at court, while all the while her enemies seemed to massing against her.
Thanks to the influence of her brother-in-law and her extravagant, foolish new friends, the Princesse de Lamballe, the Princesse de Guéménée and Lucie Dillon, all of whom were habitués of the Duc de Chartres’ incredibly wild Parisian set, Marie Antoinette began to spend more time at the Duc’s Parisian residence the Palais Royal where the balls were licentious, the gambling
stakes were high, the parties were extraordinarily opulent and the champagne apparently never stopped flowing. Frustrated and distressed by the King’s apparent lack of interest in her and also her mother’s endless stream of complaints about her continuing childlessness, Marie Antoinette saw no reason not to throw herself headlong into this new, enticing and
extremely glamorous world, where all that mattered were the latest fashions, the most up to date gossip, the throw of the dice and the turn of a card. The Duc de Chartres threw a splendid fancy dress ball for her at the Palais Royal, which she attended without the King, who did not at all approve of his handsome cousin’s dissipated lifestyle but at the same time did not stand in the way of his
wife joining in. There were also sleigh rides during the winter and visits to the races, where Marie Antoinette caused a stir by travelling alone in her brother-in-law Artois’ open carriage, this being considered quite shocking behaviour. Again, Louis was absent and it began to be much remarked upon that the royal couple were rarely seen together at this time: the King preferring to
stay behind at Versailles while Marie Antoinette went off to Paris every night to be amused.

‘I am so terrified of being bored,’ she told Mercy when he tried to talk to her about the dangerous effect that her extravagant and increasingly erratic lifestyle was having on her already precarious marriage. She found life at Versailles stagnant, dull and hostile and whereas once
upon a time she had felt like she could count on Louis for support, he seemed to be becoming increasingly distant to her. She couldn’t remember the last time he came to her bedchamber and their sex life, never particularly fulfilling or all that amazing to start off with, was even worse than before as these days he was too tired by his duties of state to do more than make a desultory
attempt to have sex before rolling over to his side of the great bed and starting to snore, which just incensed her even more. For his part, Louis was well aware of his limitations and how miserable his wife was but felt too overwhelmed by work and his own natural diffidence and awkwardness to do very much about it. Encouraged by the wily Maurepas, who was keen to see Marie Antoinette
kept well away from any meddling in politics and believed her to be an agent of Austria at heart, he urged his increasingly capricious wife to enjoy her chaotic social life and spend as much money as she liked, hoping in this way to both distract her from her troubles and also, in some way, make amends for his own shortcomings.

Their interests also continued to be completely
different and very rarely overlapped. While Marie Antoinette escaped the tedium and frustrations of her life by indulging in sartorial extravagances, gambling and other expensive and meaningless frivolities, her husband escaped the pressures of his own new, restrictive and bewildering role by retreating to his private forge, where he tinkered about happily with
his tools and made locks and other small articles which he would shyly present to his family as gifts. He also enlarged the royal libraries for his personal use, whereas nowadays Marie Antoinette, as the Abbé de Vermond sadly noted, never so much as glanced at a book any more. Like his grandfather, Louis had always been fascinated by astronomy and he installed a comfortable armchair and
telescope high up on the roof on Versailles so that he could both look at the stars and also spy on his courtiers, the latter rather surprisingly mischievous activity perhaps being more to Marie Antoinette’s taste than the rest. However, although she could never bring herself to take even the slightest bit of interest in his forge, Louis did on occasion scrub up, put on a splendid suit and
accompany her to the balls that she loved so much. On one occasion he attended a costume ball dressed as Henri IV, one of his most popular ancestors (notably Marie Antoinette appeared dressed as Henri’s mistress Gabrielle d’Estrées rather than one of his two wives) and he made very rare appearances at the court balls that Marie Antoinette held twice a week (the one on Monday nights
was costumed, which involved enormous expense) in her rooms, although it was rumoured that his wife and brother, Artois liked to put the clock forward so that he left an hour earlier than usual.

The star that was the Princesse de Lamballe was also beginning to wane as Marie Antoinette began to tire of her timidity and silly, pretentious affectations, although she still referred to
her as her ‘dearest heart’ and fussed over her as much as ever. Instead she found herself drawn more towards the delightfully pretty Comtesse de Polignac, a niece of the Comte de Maurepas, who was newly arrived at court and was just the sort of charmingly frivolous and playful companion that Marie Antoinette most yearned for at this time in her life. The
Comtesse shared the exact same birthday as the Princesse de Lamballe, which no doubt gave Marie Antoinette an excuse to throw an annual wildly extravagant party, but was a very different character. On the surface she was all huge soulful blue eyes, artlessly tumbling dark curls and languid charm yet she was also extremely amusing, excellent company and could always be relied
upon to say exactly the right thing to placate Marie Antoinette, whose always erratic mood swings had become much worse, and distract her thoughts towards a more cheerful direction. However, like the Princesse de Lamballe, although on the surface Yolande de Polignac was all about sighing over clouds and flowers and enjoying innocent frivolities, she was at heart as rapacious
as any royal favourite and managed to amass an enormous amount of wealth and favours for her large and grasping family.

Marie Antoinette didn’t care though. She had felt desperately lonely at court until Yolande came along and now gratefully showered her with affection, keeping her with her at all times and whole heartedly transferring the rather schoolgirlish crush.
that she had once had on the Princesse de Lamballe to her new friend, who to her great delight gave every appearance of reciprocating. Although the malign gossips of the court obviously whispered that there was something ‘unnatural’ about the Queen’s love for her friend, who was being accorded the sort of attention and honour that had always in the past been accorded to a
King’s *maîtresse de titre*, it was almost certainly nothing more than another example of the intense friendships that flourished between women at this time, which took on an almost romantic cast thanks to the heatedly emotional language employed in the era and the fashion for extravagantly affectionate gestures between friends of both sexes. Although malicious court gossip hinted
that the Queen and her favourite were engaged in lesbian orgies in the relative privacy of the Petit Trianon, where even the King had to wait to be invited, there was almost certainly nothing more scandalous than an innocent and sentimental girl crush going on between them.

In fact, relieved that his wife had made a close friend at court and almost certainly entirely deceived by Yolande
de Polignac’s deceptively sweet and innocent demeanour, Louis encouraged this friendship to blossom, although he baulked somewhat when he learned what sort of company the new favourite was keeping in her new and extremely lovely apartments at Versailles, where she entertained her lover, the Comte de Vaudreuil, apparently with the full complacency of her
husband, Monsieur le Comte. She was also encouraging Marie Antoinette to squander even greater sums in her pursuit of distraction so that by the late 1770s her extravagances were becoming worrying even to her indulgent spouse and, more troublingly still, her public popularity began accordingly to wane. This fall in Marie Antoinette’s popularity was
also fanned by the stories about the Queen’s behaviour that were beginning to leak out from Versailles and be whispered around Paris where her critics tutted over the tale of how her carriage broke down on the way to a ball and she had been forced to hail a common hackney carriage to take her to her destination. Marie Antoinette, so desperate for novelty, had considered this an enormous
adventure and told everyone she met about it the next day but it was very much frowned upon outside her own rather rakish and cocky circle. There was also general condemnation over the fact that she still visited the masked balls at the Opéra with her brothers-in-law and friends, where Provence had caused an immense stir by punching a total stranger in the face after being jostled by
him. It wouldn’t have been so bad if the King had accompanied her every now and again, after all the sentimental Parisians loved to see the royal couple mooning over each other in public, but he was always left behind at Versailles and would often rarely see his wife for weeks on end as she rushed off to balls in the evening, arriving back at Versailles in time for Mass before going off to bed
for the rest of the day so as to refresh herself for another round of dissipation later on.

In November 1776, Marie Antoinette turned twenty one and to celebrate there were several fetes, balls and parties arranged at Fontainebleau where the court was enjoying its traditional autumn stay. By this time the heedless little Queen was completely obsessed with gambling and entreated her husband to
allow some proper Parisian gambling bankers to come to the palace for a special game of Faro, a much more exciting game that was played for far higher stakes than the polite cavagnole enjoyed by the older members of the royal family. Louis agreed to her request but stipulated that they could remain in the palace for one game only. The bankers duly arrived and the game was
played in the apartments of the Princesse de Lamballe with all of Marie Antoinette’s circle, including Yolande de Polignac and the Duc de Lauzun, who was said to be madly in love with the Queen and to be conducting a surreptitious flirtation with her, in attendance. The gamers paused in the early hours of the morning then resumed again in the evening, eventually lasting for thirty
six hours. When Louis gently remonstrated with his wife, she laughingly reminded him that he although he had agreed to a single game he had not, however, stipulated how long it should last. ‘You are all a worthless bunch!’ Louis replied, joining in her laughter.

At the end of her life, Marie Antoinette’s cosmetics were reduced to a tarnished mirror, a swansdown puff
with some powder and a vial of scented water. As she patted the powder onto her already pallid cheeks, she must have reflected with some wonder and sadness about the fact that not too long ago, her toilette had been one of the high points of the court day, attended by dozens of courtiers, all vying for attention and dictated by an arcane and complex etiquette that had been
handed down for generations. Ironic then that Marie Antoinette’s own tastes inclined towards the discreet and modest. To the ordinary people, she was a haughty, spoiled, pampered creature who delighted in extravagance and ceremony whereas those who were closest to her, knew that on the contrary she preferred simplicity and a total lack of pomp and fuss.
She had an unerring and exquisite taste and the beautiful objects owned and worn by Marie Antoinette still exert a tremendous fascination today. Sadly the ravages of the Revolution resulted in the destruction of Marie Antoinette’s fabulous wardrobe and much of her belongings were either looted, sold abroad or lost forever but enough remains for us to have a very good
idea of the luxury that she liked to surround herself with. The Queen’s clothes collection was vast, with three whole rooms put aside at Versailles just to store it. The rooms were open to public so it was possible to visit the Queen’s clothes, just as you could go and watch her have dinner or walk past on her way to Mass in the morning and it’s likely that to the fashion mad ladies of
Versailles a trip to the Queen’s wardrobe, where her amazing gowns were laid out on special shelves to keep them from crumpling and other damage, was viewed with as much reverence as seeing her in person.

Marie Antoinette was given a fixed allowance of 120,000 livres a year for clothes and accessories, a vast sum that was somehow never quite enough (she spent
258,000 livres in one year), probably because at some point along the line etiquette had decreed that eighteen pairs of pastel coloured gloves scented with violet, hyacinth or carnation and four new pairs of shoes had to be ordered for her on a weekly basis along with other such items that seemed like small fry but amounted to vast sums when added together. Her weakness for
the designs of Rose Bertin was also a problem as each of her gorgeous dresses which had swooning, romantic names like ‘Indiscreet Pleasures’, ‘Heart’s Agitation’ and ‘Stifled Sighs’ cost around 1,000 livres, sometimes even 6,000 livres each, which quickly mounted up when you were ordering dozens at a time along with matching shoes, perfumed fans, feathers and extravagant
hair decorations. Strictly speaking, Marie Antoinette’s wardrobe purchases were supposed to be restricted to orders of thirty six dresses for the summer and thirty six for the winter but the Queen adored fashion and so ordered far more, bypassing the usual court dressmakers and instead directly consulting with the fashionable couturiers of Paris. According to etiquette
she was only supposed to wear dresses once and had to change three times a day but clearly seventy two dresses a year wasn’t going to cut much of a dash at Versailles and so she ordered more. Once worn, favourite dresses were kept and carefully looked after, and perhaps cleverly altered, so that they never looked anything less than brand new but others were given away to her ladies
in waiting, who saw this as being one of the most valuable perks of what could be a very arduous and tiresome job.

When the Queen’s gorgeous bedchamber was renovated in the last century, several pins were discovered wedged between the wooden floorboards, a remnant of the elaborate daily ceremonial that surrounded the dressing of the Queen. Every morning
before she got out of bed, Marie Antoinette would be presented with the gazette des atours, a huge book full of fabric swatches from each of her gowns and she would place a pin in the dresses that she wanted to wear that day, which would then be brought down from the wardrobe in vast green taffeta (which was provided brand new every day) covered baskets.
change three times in the course of the day: first of all there would be a formal silk or velvet gown to be worn to Mass, followed by a lighter, more informal muslin, lawn or cotton dress for the rest of the day and then finally a gorgeously elaborate evening dress to be worn to dinner, concerts, balls or the theatre in Paris, where Marie Antoinette had private boxes at the Opéra House, Comédie
Française and Comédie Italienne. The young Queen’s preference was for light fabrics and pale, pastel colours such as a soft lemon yellow, dove grey, pale green and lilac. Again, Madame Bertin was inventive, taking an almost poetic pleasure in thinking up names for different shades – ‘Incendie de l’Opera’ was a vivid orange red; ‘Cheveux de la Reine’ a soft gold inspired by
her hair colour and, most poetically, ‘Caca Dauphin’ was a pale brown.

Marie Antoinette took as much care of her person as she did her clothes and her beauty regime was extensive. At night she would sleep wearing gloves lined with wax, rose water and sweet almond oil and she probably treated her hair with a wash of saffron, turmeric, sandalwood and rhubarb in
order to accentuate its strawberry blondness. Before she applied her make up, she would carefully cleanse her skin with *Eau Cosmetique de Pigeon*, followed by *Eau des Charmes* astringent and then *Eau d’Ange*, a gentle whitener. After this, white paint was carefully applied to her face, followed by a dusting of scented powder then kohl around her eyes and a touch of rouge to her
cheeks. Sticks of pomade scented with rose, carnation or vanilla were used to gloss her lips, eyebrows and eyelashes. Marie Antoinette had survived a childhood bout of small pox relatively unscathed bar a few scars but it is likely that she still enjoyed the fashion for black velvet beauty patches – perhaps applying one to the corner of her mouth, which signalled her wish to be
kissed or one on the forehead, which suggested that the wearer was haughty.

There was a definite emphasis on the senses – Versailles at this time was absolutely foul smelling and the courtiers did everything they could to keep the smell at bay. Marie Antoinette’s rooms were scented with a profusion of fresh flowers, melted fragrant pastilles, pot pourri, oils and perfumed
sachets. She particularly loved the fresh scents of orange blossom, lemon, rose, lavender and violet and her rooms would have smelled heady and sweet as you entered them. The Queen loved to douse herself with eau de fleur d’oranger (orange blossom water); simple violet, rose and jonquil scents or more complex perfumes made with vanilla, musk, lavender, iris,
jasmine and lily or lemon, cinnamon, angelica, cloves and coriander. It seems that everywhere she went, she wanted to be surrounded by gorgeous fragrances.

Unusually for the time, Marie Antoinette insisted on frequent baths and her bathroom at Versailles still exists with simple dove grey walls and a sloping tiled floor so that the water could drain away. Her perfumer Fargeon
invented for her the *bain de modéstie*, which involved donning a flannel chemise so that her body would not be exposed even to the gaze of her ladies in waiting. Once in the bath she would sit on a large pad filled with sweet almonds, pine nuts, linseed, marshmallow root and lily bulb while she washed herself with muslin pads filled with gentle and exfoliating bran and soaps scented with herbs,
amber and bergamot, before settling back in the water to daydream about what the future might hold.

Glimpses of this world of beautiful lace trimmed dresses, scented hair and delicately applied cosmetics can be gleaned from the portraits of Marie Antoinette during this time. She was perhaps one of the most painted Queens of France and portraits exist from every
period of her life, charting her development from wide eyed ingénue to dignified Queen, dressed in elaborate silks and with a glittering crown on the table beside her. However, her famously luminous complexion was difficult to accurately capture and as she grew older and her features developed, artists seem to have difficulty reconciling her strong and not conventionally attractive
Habsburg looks with the annoyingly intangible qualities of charm and charisma that the vivacious little Queen exuded in real life. Certainly her mother would frequently complain about the likenesses that made their way to Vienna and Marie Antoinette would be forced to explain that the available artists were not quite up to scratch.

The famous 1775 portrait
by Jean-Baptiste Gautier-Dagoty, which depicts the young Queen in an extraordinarily elaborate swagged and embellished state gown with the robes of state falling elegantly from her shoulders and one small hand resting lightly on a prominently positioned globe is considered very pleasing to modern eyes but failed to come up to scratch at Versailles, where it was
roundly denounced as a hideous and amateurish daubing. It was actually intended as a present for Marie Antoinette’s mother but she decided that she was too scared to send it to Vienna and so instead presented it to a friend. Gautier-Dagoty’s 1776 goache painting of the Queen sitting in her beautifully flounced dressing gown in her exquisite bedroom at
Versailles surrounded by friends, her milliner, musicians, hairdressers and poor Gautier-Dagoty himself, shown hard at work on his earlier portrait, was much more successful, as were his portraits of her sisters-in-law, whom he managed to make look exceedingly pretty.

On 6 August 1775 the Comtesse d’Artois, wife of Louis’ youngest brother went into labour at Versailles and
gave birth to a son, the Duc d’Angoulême. Although the new régime had gone some way towards abolishing the outmoded ceremonials of the past it had not yet managed to do away with the tradition whereby ladies of the immediate royal family gave birth in public, a most humiliating ritual designed to ensure that no tiny interlopers could be smuggled into the royal bedchamber to take the
place of still births or girl babies. Not that the Comtesse, thoroughly enjoying her new and unprecedented prominence at court as the first of the trio of wives to give birth, cared about this and indeed she probably relished having as many people as possible there to witness her triumph. Etiquette decreed that Marie Antoinette should be present at the birth along with her
husband and although she found this to be an intensely painful experience, fully aware that the censorious eyes of the court were trained as much on her as on the labouring Comtesse, she bore it as gracefully as she could and even managed to smile and compliment the overjoyed new parents when their son was eventually born. However, on her way back to her apartments, she was
rudely harangued by a crowd of market women, the traditionally self appointed voice of the Parisian people, who demanded to know when she would give the nation a Dauphin and shouted crude advice about what she should be doing with the King to make it happen. Overwhelmed, humiliated and devastated, Marie Antoinette broke down as soon as she reached the
relative safety of her magnificent bedchamber and according to her First Lady of the Bedchamber, the sympathetic Madame Campan, cried for a long time. When her friend, the Duchesse de Chartres gave birth to a stillborn child, the Queen told her mother that she envied her even this sadness for she longed so much to be pregnant and feared that it might never
Encouraged by her friends, Marie Antoinette now became even more extravagant and reckless than ever, seeking to forget her personal troubles with an endless round of parties, gambling and self indulgence. Her innocent flirtations with those handsome, sophisticated womanisers the Duc de Lauzun (who was said to be the secret illegitimate
son of the Duc de Choiseul, who was married to his aunt and had also been his mother’s lover), the Prince de Ligne and the Duc de Coigny, the latter the acknowledged lover of her friend, the Princesse de Guéménée, caused much comment at this time, even though they were almost certainly just meaningless and entirely understandable distractions from her dissatisfactory
marriage. While Marie Antoinette loved to flirt and to be admired as the most beautiful lady at her court, she was not by nature a very sensual woman and the thought of taking these brief little infatuations any further would have appalled her, although on the other hand there was talk at court that she had told her friends that she wished the King would take a mistress and that she
would be ‘neither grieved nor very annoyed’ if it happened as he ‘might thereby acquire more vitality and energy’. Perhaps more troublingly in the long term, she also developed a fascination with jewels, particularly diamonds, encouraged by the Princesse de Guéménée, who had extremely expensive tastes herself and persuaded the Queen to buy a pair of beautiful diamond earrings.
from the Swiss jeweller, Boehmer for the amazing sum of 400,000 francs. Huge sums were also spent on the continued beautification of the Petit Trianon which became her refuge now against the mounting disapproval of the court and Count Mercy’s endless boring lectures about her mounting debts which Louis, with typical generosity, insisted upon paying off.
Like many other young people at court, Marie Antoinette was also gripped by a passion for all things English, particularly horse racing and country dances, which she loved to dance with young British gentlemen visiting the court. She sent to London for her riding habits and smattered her conversation with a few choice English phrases, although it must be assumed
that she stopped short of reading the translations of Shakespeare’s plays that were popular at the time and such a favourite with her husband. She also delighted in making friends with English visitors, in particular striking up a very close friendship with Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire who visited Versailles in 1775. The two young women had met before but it was during this visit
that they really hit it off, perhaps because they realised that they had a lot in common - both had been married at a young age to men that they didn’t love, had difficult relationships with overbearing and highly critical mothers, had a tendency to form extremely close and passionate friendships with other women and had had difficulties conceiving a child and were
hiding their frustrations and unhappiness beneath a brittle veneer of fashionable frivolity. Yes, Georgiana and Marie Antoinette probably had much to talk about over the hot chocolate and cakes that were served when they got together at the Petit Trianon.

Another, perhaps more surprising friendship was the one that developed over the years between Marie
Antoinette and her British counterpart Queen Charlotte. It had long been the custom for the British and French rulers to write polite letters of acknowledgment of happy and sad events in each other’s life, maintaining at least a pretence of friendship even when hostilities raged between the two nations. However, a true friendship sprang up over the years between Charlotte and Marie
Antoinette, who had both been in their teens when they were sent away from their own countries to be married and had become queens before they were out of their twenties. Although their personalities were markedly different and Charlotte, obviously, had never had any problems conceiving children (by May 1774, when Marie Antoinette became Queen of France, Charlotte already had
ten children and would go on to have five more) they were still drawn together by the things that they did have in common which included a typically Germanic lack of pretension and a certain wry sense of humour. Later on, when things turned sour for Marie Antoinette, Charlotte would urge her to escape to England and even had apartments made ready for the French royal family.
should they make it to London. Sadly they were never used.

Rather touchingly, Marie Antoinette also at this time adopted a little peasant boy called Jacques, who had the bad luck to be knocked down by her carriage while she was travelling past Louveciennes. The impetuous Queen immediately jumped down to make sure that the boy was unhurt and then, upon
learning that he was an orphan and had five other siblings besides, offered to raise him at court before whisking him away to a new and doubtless bewildering life in the lap of luxury at Versailles. Her mother did not at all approve of this measure, which was as foolish as it was well meaning, but Marie Antoinette did not care and for a time was fully absorbed
in her new role as ‘mother’ to Jacques before she once again lost interest and returned to her former pleasures although she continued to supervise the boy’s education and send an allowance to his family as payment for keeping him.

Increasingly troubled by the reports of Mercy and the Abbé de Vermond, who at one point handed in his notice, which the Queen refused to accept, Maria
Theresa redoubled her efforts to force her daughter to take a more sensible course in life, foreseeing that her current hedonistic lifestyle could only end in ruin. She was also profoundly shocked by Marie Antoinette’s dismissive, almost contemptuous way of speaking about the King, even referring to him as ‘the poor man’ which to Maria Theresa’s mind suggested that there had been a severe
diminishment in her respect towards him. The continuing lack of a royal baby, which she blamed on the fact that Marie Antoinette and Louis did not share a room every night, also weighed heavily on the Empress’ mind and she never ceased to lecture her daughter about how best to accomplish this while at the same time apparently completely failing to grasp that Marie Antoinette’s
marriage and, indeed, husband were very different to how her own had been. In the end, she decided that the best course of action was to send Marie Antoinette’s eldest brother, Emperor Joseph II, to Paris to speak to the hapless pair and find out what was happening - or rather, not happening. A previous royal visit from Marie Antoinette’s younger brother, Archduke
Maximilian had ended badly due to some arguments with the royal dukes over precedence as the young Archduke was travelling incognito as a lowly count, as was the fashion at the time, but still demanded that proper reverence be paid to him as the brother of the Queen which the royal dukes, unsurprisingly, refused to do. It was determined that this visit would go much more
smoothly and, unlike the last one, cause the Queen of France, already in such a precarious position, no residual embarrassment.

The Emperor Joseph II, travelling incognito as Count von Falkenstein, arrived at Versailles on the morning of 18 April 1777. Unlike his youngest brother, he had no wish to insist upon the full honours that were due to his rank but instead rather
relished being treated as a lowly count just as his sister Marie Antoinette loved to play at being an ‘ordinary’ woman at the Petit Trianon. The always faithful Abbé de Vermond was waiting to discreetly escort the Emperor through the secret back staircases and passages of the palace to where his sister, dressed in a simple mourning gown (her godfather, the King of Portugal had recently
died) and with her hair loosely pinned up and lightly powdered as she had been so impatient to see him that she’d rushed away from her morning toilette before it was finished, was waiting for him in the warren of intimate private rooms that lay behind her opulent bedchamber.

Marie Antoinette had not seen her eldest brother, whom she had hero worshipped as a child, for seven years and
wept with joy as she threw herself into his arms and embraced him, delighted beyond measure to be reunited with someone from her own family and furthermore one who had always seemed so capable and supportive. Surely, she felt, if anyone could sort out the mess that she had made in France, it would be Joseph? She took him into one of her private sitting rooms and for
the next few hours poured all of her troubles and woes into his apparently sympathetic ears, sparing no detail about her unfulfilling marriage, desperate wish to have a child and sad attempts to distract herself and at the end, to her immense relief, Joseph did not read her the riot act but instead promised to do all that he could to help.

She then took him to meet the King for the first time and
found that, rather touchingly, Louis had made a great deal of effort to look presentable for his brother-in-law which made a good first impression and probably confounded Joseph’s preconceived ideas about the King of France being a scruffy, badly dressed clown. They then took luncheon together at a table placed at the end of Marie Antoinette’s bed and everything looked set for a
very cordial visit.

Joseph stayed in Paris for over three weeks, having a whale of a time exploring the city and its environs and spending lots of time with his beloved sister who introduced him to all of her friends and spent most of her afternoons alone with him, talking about her life and its problems to this most sympathetic and kindly of listeners. However, after listening for hours to the
shy yet astonishingly frank confidences of both the King and Queen about their sex life and relationship, Joseph suddenly went on the offensive and started to lay down the law. First of all he told Marie Antoinette that he didn’t approve of her friends and considered them at best frivolous and stupid and at worst downright iniquitous. Secondly, he informed her at an evening *soirée* that they
were attending without the King, that she ought to pay her husband more attention and made her go off and fetch Louis, who no doubt protested strenuously to be dragged away from his books, telescope and forge, to the party.

Most crucially though, he took a great interest in the young couple’s sexual issues, writing to his brother Archduke Leopold that ‘in his
conjugal bed, he has normal erections; he introduces his member, stays there without moving for about two minutes, then withdraws without ejaculating, and still erect, bids good night. This is incomprehensible because he sometimes has nocturnal emissions, but while inside and in the process, never; yet he is content, and says quite frankly that he is doing it purely from a sense of duty.
and without any enjoyment. Oh, if I could only have been present once, I would have taken care of him; he should be whipped so that he would discharge sperm like a donkey. My sister, moreover, has very little temperament and together they are two complete fumblers.’ Ouch.

He further commented that Louis was ‘badly brought up; his appearance works against him, but he is honest… The
man is weak but no fool.’ About his sister Marie Antoinette, he was far more harsh, saying that she was ‘fulfilling neither her duties as a wife nor her duties as a Queen in satisfactory fashion… She is empty headed and driven to run all day from dissipation to dissipation. She thinks only of having fun. She feels nothing for the King. She is a likeable and honest woman, a bit
young, unreflective, but deep down honest and virtuous.’ All of this would form the basis of the instructions that Joseph left with Marie Antoinette upon his departure, which he hoped would go some way towards rectifying her poor attitude towards both her marriage and her husband.

‘Look into yourself. Do you put all your efforts into pleasing him? Do you study
his desires and his character and try to conform to them? Do you try to make him enjoy your company - beyond all other objects or amusements - and the pleasures you can grant him, where, without you, he would find only a void? Do you make yourself essential to him? Have you persuaded him that no one loves him more sincerely than you, or takes his glory and happiness more to heart?
Does he see your affection focused exclusively on him?’ Although Joseph could totally understand why Louis, so lacklustre and shambling beside the debonair Duc de Lauzun and other highly polished gallants of Marie Antoinette’s circle, had failed to capture either her attention or affection, he was still very clear that it was her absolute duty to make the King love her no matter what.
He also strongly criticised the ‘dreadful fecklessness’ of her current lifestyle, addressing poor Marie Antoinette in the strongest terms because he had come to the conclusion that shaming her was perhaps the only way to make the reckless young Queen, of whom he was actually genuinely extremely fond, see sense. ‘What is it that you want? To be unknown and play the role of
a person different to yourself? Why the need for adventures and naughtiness? Why mingle with a crowd of libertines, girls, strangers, listening to their conversation and replying in kind? What indecency! The King left alone for a whole night at Versailles and you mixing with the Paris riffraff!’ Marie Antoinette was exceedingly distressed both by her brother’s departure
and his final missive before leaving which she saw as a personal attack not just upon herself but also her dearest friends, whom he made no secret of thoroughly disapproving of. However, she was also forced to admit the truth of his words and did her best to comply with his advice by toning down her whirlwind of a social life and trying to spend more time with the King and less with
her friends. In October she proudly wrote to her mother that ‘I hardly ever stay up late at night any more, and I hardly went out all summer, both for my health and because I know a little better how to spend my time at home than in the past. I read, I embroider, I have two music masters, one for voice, the other for the harp; I have started drawing again - all that keeps me busy and
entertains me.’

She also told her mother that she was gambling much less but pointed out that etiquette decreed that she still play in public three times a week. These public royal card games took place on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays and occurred at a large round table set up in the Salon of Peace that lay between Marie Antoinette’s rooms and the Hall of
Mirrors. However, unlike the gambling that went on at the Palais Royal or apartments of the Princesse de Guéménée, the stakes at the royal table at Versailles were exceedingly small and they were really only a way of making the presented ladies, who were allowed to either take part in the game or decorously sit and observe on stools placed against the walls, feel included.
As for Louis, nothing remains of the advice that Joseph left for him but we can be sure that it was expressed in equally blisteringly forceful terms and doubtless reminded the young King that it was his duty towards his wife and his nation for him to man up and do the deed properly, whether he liked it or not. Like Marie Antoinette he was doubtless exceedingly stung and
humiliated by whatever the forthright Joseph said to him but similarly was forced to concede that his brother-in-law was in the right and so do his best to comply.

Although the young couple would never fully regain the honeymoon atmosphere of the beginning of their reign, they made a great deal of effort to increase the intimacy and affection in their marriage by once again
walking about arm in arm in public and taking the signal step of spending two hours every day closeted alone together in their rooms, Joseph having advised his sister to ‘get him to bed with you in the afternoon as there’s no use waiting until after supper, when he is already sunk in a state of apathy’. Finally, on the morning of 18 August, not all that long after Joseph’s
departure, the King shyly came to see his wife after she’d had her bath and they fully consummated their marriage for the first time. ‘I am now enjoying the most essential happiness of my entire life,’ Marie Antoinette wrote to her mother. ‘It has already been more than eight days since my marriage was perfectly consummated; the event has been repeated and again yesterday more
completely than the first time…. I do not think I am pregnant yet, but at least I have the hope of being so any day.’

In fact, Marie Antoinette was not to become pregnant until the following spring. She wrote to her mother on 19 April 1778 that: ‘Already eight days ago I wanted to tell you something of my hopes but did not dare to do so, for fear of how upset you
would be if they failed to materialise.’ Luckily, her hopes turned out to be reality and the royal pregnancy was announced the following month, causing enormous excitement at court where quite a few people had long given up all hope of the Queen ever conceiving a child. As might be expected, Louis was pleased as punch about the great news and his approaching fatherhood gave
him a new swagger and confidence while his wife renounced her former chaotic life and instead took up more gentle pursuits, preferring to spend her time in solitude at the Petit Trianon, supervising the planting of her new gardens, than staying up until all hours gambling and dancing with the Polignac and Chartres sets.

Marie Antoinette’s first and much longed for
pregnancy should have been a peaceful and halcyon time but was instead marred by the eruption of hostilities between Prussia and Austria after her brother, emboldened by the death of the Elector of Bavaria, laid claim to territories in southern Bavaria which were immediately contested by the King of Prussia, who had no wish to see his Austrian enemies grab still more land. To the
annoyance of Marie Antoinette, the French came down firmly on the side of the Prussians and she soon found herself caught between a rock and a hard place, beset on one side by passive aggressive recriminations from her family who ordered her to secure French support and kept at arm’s length on the other by her husband who informed her, not unsympathetically, that ‘the
ambitions of your family are going to upset everything. They started with Poland and now it is Bavaria. I am annoyed on your account.’

As might be expected, Marie Antoinette completely lacked the political acumen to be able to navigate the pitfalls of such a situation and, unsurprisingly, ended up pleasing nobody. Although her natural instincts were now to be loyal to her adopted
country France, she had tried her best to placate her family by promising them as much assistance as she was able to procure, which when it failed to materialise ended up leaving them disappointed and, worse, aroused the old feelings of distrust in her husband and his advisors, especially Maurepas. However, when it came to the fledgling war between America and England, in
which the French had thrown their support behind the American republicans, Marie Antoinette had no qualms about wholeheartedly supporting the French in what looked set to develop into a war with England itself, even though she had many English friends, including the charming Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire and Queen Charlotte herself. However, all these political
contretemps could not entirely diminish the joy that Marie Antoinette found in her pregnancy. The proud expectant mother sent regular reports about her health to her mother and was often to be found measuring her waist as if to reassure herself that, after all those years of longing, a child was indeed growing inside her. When she felt the baby’s first movements she immediately
hastened to Louis’ apartments and announced: ‘Your Majesty, I have come to complain about one of your subjects, who has had the audacity to kick me in the stomach.’ Louis was thrilled and immediately lifted her up into his arms and kissed her in front of everyone.

Although there were still weekly card parties, balls and suppers at Versailles, the overall atmosphere was
altogether more muted and low key as everyone waited for the royal baby to be born. Marie Antoinette no longer travelled by carriage for fear that this might bring on early labour and so the usual summer excursions to Compiègne and Marly were cancelled. Instead, the Queen fled the stifling apartments of Versailles for the Petit Trianon, which she had transformed into a sumptuous
jewellery box of a house since Louis had presented it to her with the words: ‘Vous aimez les fleurs. J’ai un bouquet à vous offrir’.

It’s easy to see why Marie Antoinette lost her heart to the Petit Trianon though – built along the lines of a small and compact chateau and exquisitely decorated in light, fresh colours, it was the perfect size for a tiny court with only enough bedrooms
to house the Queen, her children and a couple of her closest companions, which included her sister in law Madame Élisabeth, Madame de Polignac and the Princesse de Lamballe. As with all the royal palaces, there was a special Trianon Livery – scarlet and white, which was worn by all visiting gentlemen and would have made a striking spectacle set against the delicate gilded
panelling, which had been designed to set off the golden haired beauty of a mistress but was now the backdrop of a queen.

Over the years, Marie Antoinette probably spent her most happy hours at the Trianon either overseeing her extensive (and extremely expensive) plans for the gardens, playing with the animals on her farm, putting on plays before extremely
exclusive audiences in her theatre and entertaining friends in the beautiful pavilions. Although her world there was extremely private, she did from time to time show especial favour to visiting royalties by throwing wonderful parties in the gardens, complete with illuminations, dancing and fireworks, all carefully orchestrated and planned to highlight the exquisite beauty
of her personal domain.

The rooms of the Petit Trianon remain one of the most perfect examples of late eighteenth century design and mark the moment when the rococo frivolity of the mid part of the century began to give way to the more austere beauty of the neo-classical. Keen to stamp her own personal taste on the building, Marie Antoinette very deliberately eschewed the
grandeur of nearby Versailles and instead filled her rooms with pale greens, blues and pinks and hung soft painted muslins at the windows and around her bed. The paintings too were a mixture of romantic classical scenes and portraits of her own brothers and sisters, most of whom she would never see again. Rumours gradually spread across France that the Petit Trianon was a temple to
excess with diamond encrusted panelling and all manner of lavishness to frame the orgies of the woman they were beginning to regard as a Courtesan Queen. The truth was actually very different, although her critics would probably have had heart attacks if they’d known how much she was squandering on the gardens rather than the actual decor of her house, which remained a simple and
unstuffy antidote to the stifling splendours of Versailles and the perfect retreat from the rigours of a pregnancy in the public eye.

To underline the difference between Versailles and the Petit Trianon, Marie Antoinette also dressed completely differently there – eschewing the powdered coiffures, stiff panniered gowns and jewels that formed her court attire and instead
favouring softly flowing silks and her favourite muslins, un-
powdered loosely dressed hair styles and straw hats. Obsessed with theatre, it must have seemed natural and perhaps even comforting to Marie Antoinette to don different costumes for what she must increasingly have seen as her two completely different lives – as the elegant and sparkling Queen of France and also the private
individual, quietly tending her flowers and drinking herbal tea in a muslin dress and straw hat at the Petit Trianon.

There was a new arrival to Marie Antoinette’s close circle of friends that year when the handsome Swedish nobleman Axel von Fersen arrived back in France after an unsuccessful attempt to woo an heiress in England. The young Axel loved
Parisian high society and was also hopeful of securing a commission in the French army in the war against England. Although the Queen had certainly not been pining for him during the four years that had passed since they first met and briefly chatted at the Opéra ball, she was glad to have him back at Versailles, where his good looks and charming manner won hearts everywhere.
However, it didn’t take long for jealous whispers about Marie Antoinette’s obvious admiration of this good looking and rather dashing young man to start doing the rounds, even though the flirtation between them was almost certainly entirely innocent, not least because of the Queen’s pregnancy. There were also, predictably, all the usual malicious rumours about the
paternity of the royal baby, probably fanned by Louis’ disgruntled younger brother the Comte de Provence who saw his position as heir to the throne slipping away from him. It was whispered around the louche salons of Paris that the baby had actually been fathered by either the Duc de Lauzun or Duc de Coigny, both of whom were known to be particular favourites of the Queen, who had the much
prized entrée to the Petit Trianon. It was all nonsense of course but had the effect of making Marie Antoinette retreat still further away from the court, hurt that her much longed for happiness was being tarnished so cruelly and turning more towards the few people that she felt she could really trust.

Like many other expectant mothers, Marie Antoinette took a great deal of interest in
her appearance, turning to the redoubtable Rose Bertin to provide her with lovely, flowing new gowns to make her feel more comfortable and attractive. Mademoiselle Bertin started to make wonderful breezy silk gowns, known as lévites for her royal mistress, which were designed to accommodate the growing royal bump, which the royal physicians thought was measuring very large for
her dates, and also keep her cool during what turned out to be a scorching hot summer, when it was so hot that the Queen had to spend all day indoors and could only venture out in the evening when it was cooler and musicians were hired to play on the terraces while she took the air beneath the stars. There were also concerns about Marie Antoinette’s hair, which had a habit of
thinning whenever she was under emotional strain and which now began to fall out in clumps, a common enough problem in pregnancy, which her hairdresser Léonard had to conceal with artful use of hair pieces, feathers and poufs of muslin.

The long awaited royal labour began in the early hours of 19 December 1778, when Marie Antoinette began to feel ominous pains shortly
after midnight and realised that her time had come. The Princesse de Lamballe was immediately summoned to preside over the event and word was sent to everyone who had the right to be present with the King arriving at three in morning, full of excitement and also not a little fear too for childbirth in the eighteenth century was still a very risky business indeed. Marie Antoinette had
chosen Charles-Toussaint de Vermond, the brother of Abbé de Vermond, to act as her accoucheur and under his watchful eye she paced her chamber until eight in the morning when, overwhelmed by the pain, she took to the little delivery bed that had been placed next to the ornate fireplace in her chamber.

As Marie Antoinette laboured, she was attended by Vermond, physicians and
midwives and surrounded by the royal family, the princes and princesses of the blood and her closest friends while beyond in the cabinet next door there was crammed the rest of the royal households and everyone else who had the right to be present at such an auspicious event. The rest of the court, their numbers swollen by nobles who had travelled to Versailles just for the day, found whatever
space they could in the outer rooms of the Queen’s apartments and the Hall of Mirrors, where they lounged against the walls as they waited for news of the royal delivery to spread. The whole situation must have been absolutely intolerable for a woman so fastidious and concerned with her privacy but it’s likely that, at least once the pains of labour had begun in earnest, Marie
Antoinette probably didn’t care who was there to see it although she was no doubt glad to have the steadfast, practically minded Louis keeping vigil at her side.

The baby, a little girl, was born at around 11.30am. At first she did not make a sound and there was panic when it was thought that she had been born dead but then the first cries were heard and all was well. Enthralled by his
daughter, Louis went off with the rest of the royal family to watch the child being washed and swaddled in the next room leaving Marie Antoinette, who had not yet been informed of the child’s sex, to the ministrations of the midwives. However, within moments of the King leaving the room, the Queen had a convulsive fit and lost consciousness, no doubt overcome by exhaustion and
the sweltering heat of the room in which the windows had been sealed up to prevent even the slightest wintry breeze touching the precious newborn. Seeing that the Queen had collapsed some of the gentlemen jumped up and tore the windows open, which revived her from her faint.

Shortly after this the King returned with their daughter and Marie Antoinette was allowed to hold her for the
first time. Naturally both Marie Antoinette and Louis had hoped that their first child would be a Dauphin, as girls were barred by Salic Law from succeeding to the throne, but they hid any disappointment well. For now they were both just truly delighted to finally be parents at last. ‘Poor little girl, you are not what was desired, but you are no less dear to me on that account,’ Marie
Antoinette, visibly moved, said to her daughter. ‘A son would have been the property of the state. You shall be mine; you shall have my undivided care; you will share all my happinesses and you will alleviate my sufferings.’

Marie Antoinette spent the next eighteen days recuperating from the birth of her daughter. As was the custom she remained in bed
and received her friends Yolande de Polignac and the Princesse de Lamballe there, propped up against lace edged pillows and dressed in a charming lace and ribbon trimmed *peignoir* and a delightful cap which hid the fact that her hairdresser Léonard had given up with her hair and persuaded her to have it cropped so that it would grow back stronger. She was extremely proud of
her baby, who had been christened Marie Thérèse Charlotte (the first two names were in honour of her mother, while Charlotte was almost certainly for her favourite sister Maria Carolina, the Queen of Naples), and kept her beside her as much as she could. She even tried to breastfeed for a time, even though it was far more usual for women of her status to exclusively employ wet
nurses as her own mother had done. Naturally, this deviation from tradition caused some consternation in Vienna, with Maria Theresa making her displeasure known.
Madame Deficit
1779-1788

‘My fate is to bring bad luck.’

Everything changed for Marie Antoinette when she finally became a mother. Reared since early childhood to believe that one of her primary functions was to bear children for some unknown
prince, she had regarded the lack of a child as a shameful failure and a total betrayal by her own body. She had done her best to distract herself from this great lack in her life and had in the process lost of her husband’s affection and the respect of her people. Now, however, Louis loved her more than ever but could she also regain the love of their people? Only time would tell but for now the
future looked promising as the young couple celebrated the birth of their baby by distributing money to their favourite charities and attending a celebratory Mass at Notre Dame. Naturally, there was some disappointment that the baby had turned out to be a girl rather than the hoped for Dauphin but they were both still only in their early twenties and now that they
had defied all expectation and had one child, surely more would follow?

Meanwhile, the main care of the little princess, who was to be known as Madame Royale at court, fell to the charge of the royal governess, the Princesse de Guéménée, whose rather rakish lifestyle makes her seem like a most unsuitable person for such an important charge. However, this was typical of Versailles
where all the most plum jobs had been passed down through families for generations, regardless of the suitability of the latest incumbent. In this instance, Madame la Princesse was the niece of the former royal governess Madame de Marsan, who had had the charge of Louis XVI and all of his siblings until her retirement, upon which the Princesse had taken over the
The Princesse de Guéménée had been born Victoire Armande de Rohan at the beautiful Hôtel de Soubise in the Marais district of Paris, the daughter of Charles de Rohan, Prince de Soubise and his second wife, Anne Thérèse de Savoie, which made her a relative of the Princesse de Lamballe as well as the Comtesse de Provence and Comtesse
d’Artois. Clever, lively and extravagant, the Princesse was known to be something of an eccentric, who was always surrounded by several tiny dogs wherever she went, some of whom she claimed were able to communicate with the dead. She had also, more seriously, been accused several times of cheating at cards, not that this discouraged Marie Antoinette from attending her card
parties in her apartments which the Emperor Joseph, who thoroughly disapproved of the sophisticated Princesse, described as nothing better than a ‘gaming hell’. However, for all her faults, Victoire, who had five children of her own, seems to have had an affectionate, fun loving nature that young people really responded to. Even Madame Élisabeth, Louis’ pious youngest sister
(her elder sister Madame Clotilde had been married to the Prince of Piedmont, the brother of the Comtesse de Provence and Comtesse d’Artois, in August 1775), who had entered her charge after the departure of Madame de Marsan, was very fond of the Princesse de Guéménée although, unlike Marie Antoinette, she managed to resist the lady’s attempts to make her attend
her rather *risqué* parties.

The low key atmosphere that had prevailed during the Queen’s pregnancy continued for quite some time to come as Marie Antoinette devoted herself to her daughter and allowed herself to delight in the entirely novel but thoroughly delightful joys of new motherhood. Duty compelled her to continue to attend the weekly card parties, suppers and balls that
had always formed an important part of her routine but she took much less joy in the rakish soirées and clandestine excursions to the masked balls that had once delighted her so much.

In the spring of 1779, Marie Antoinette was struck down by a bad case of measles which left her so debilitated that she was encouraged by her physicians to completely retire from
court life for three weeks and recuperate in the peace and quiet of the Petit Trianon. Up until now she had only been there during the day and although there was a pretty bedroom set aside for her use, had never actually stayed the night so naturally she was delighted to be packed off to her favourite little bolthole, which she had transformed into a house entirely to her own taste. There was only
room for her most favourite ladies to stay with her though, while the rest of the household stayed at the nearby Grand Trianon. Unfortunately, Madame de Polignac had also fallen ill with measles and was unable to join her.

Although Marie Antoinette felt genuinely poorly at first, she still managed to have the most delightful time as she spent her days eating
strawberries in her lovely new gardens and lazily drifting across the Grand Canal on a boat. The evenings were spent in the new salon where she was attended by her favourites: the always loyal Duc de Coigny, Baron de Besenval, Count Esterhazy and the Duc de Guines (whose influence over the Queen was considered especially harmful by Count Mercy), who took
turns to amuse her with light conversation and the occasional musical interlude. It was all completely harmless but as usual the malicious tongues of the court gossips had plenty to say about the whole thing, especially as the King, who had never had measles and so was kept away for fear of contagion, was not present although he visited on one occasion and stood out in the
courtyard, calling up to the Queen who leaned out of her bedroom window like Juliet to his unlikely Romeo.

It was around this time that Marie Antoinette was painted for the first time by Madame Vigée-Lebrun, whose portraits of the Queen remain amongst her most iconic representations. Their association began when Marie Theresa asked the Count Mercy to approach
Marie Antoinette to request two full length portraits for a room filled with family portraits. Forgoing the usual court painters, Marie Antoinette chose someone new for this important commission: a rising star in art, the Parisian portraitist Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, who had already painted Marie Antoinette’s brother in law the Comte de Provence. It was to be the first painting in
a series that was to immortalise both sitter and artist in the eyes of posterity: when one thinks of Marie Antoinette, it is the vision of her as painted by Madame Vigée-Lebrun that one usually sees, either dressed in shimmering white silk with plumes in her powdered hair, radiant in blue silk and holding a rose in the gardens of the Petit Trianon, shyly smiling in soft white muslin
or holding her precious children close while surrounded by the splendours of Versailles.

‘She was then in the heyday of her youth and beauty,’ Madame Vigée-Lebrun later wrote in her memoirs. ‘Marie Antoinette was tall and admirably built, being somewhat stout, but not excessively so. Her arms were superb, her hands small and perfectly formed, and her feet
charming. She had the best walk of any woman in France, carrying her head erect with a dignity that stamped her queen in the midst of her whole court, her majestic mien, however, not in the least diminishing the sweetness and amiability of her face. To any one who has not seen the Queen it is difficult to get an idea of all the graces and all the nobility combined in her person. Her
features were not regular; she had inherited that long and narrow oval peculiar to the Austrian nation. Her eyes were not large; in colour they were almost blue, and they were at the same time merry and kind. Her nose was slender and pretty, and her mouth not too large, though her lips were rather thick. But the most remarkable thing about her face was the splendour of her complexion.
I never have seen one so brilliant, and brilliant is the word, for her skin was so transparent that it bore no umber in the painting. Neither could I render the real effect of it as I wished. I had no colours to paint such freshness, such delicate tints, which were hers alone, and which I had never seen in any other woman. ’

The first of the paintings, a full length work depicting the
twenty three year old Queen in white silk, was sent off to Vienna in January 1779 and the Empress immediately fired off a letter saying how delighted she was with it while Marie Antoinette liked it so much that she ordered another copy to be hung in her apartment at Versailles. Marie Antoinette was painted several times during this period by a wide variety of different artists but none
managed to capture her essential charm and freshness as well as Vigée-Lebrun, who managed the hitherto apparently impossible feat of managing to capture a likeness while at the same time hinting at the elusive charm that made Marie Antoinette so irresistible in person and softened those rather heavy Habsburg features.

The period of
Convalescence at Petit Trianon was just the beginning of Marie Antoinette’s gradual withdrawal from court life as she pursued a more informal and private existence. Whereas before she had become a mother the Queen had perhaps been a little too visible thanks to her hectic Parisian social life, now she was not seen enough and would often spend weeks on
end at the Petit Trianon surrounded only by the congenial company of her closest friends and enjoying the delights of the gardens, small farm and the theatre, completed in 1780, where she put on amateur theatricals for a very select audience and, tellingly, made a point of always playing simple village maidens, milk maids and servant girls - women who were free of expectation and
responsible in a way that the Queen of France could never be.

When Marie Antoinette entered a room at the Petit Trianon no one was expected to stop what they were doing and rise, as they were at the palaces, but instead could continue playing the piano, reading or sketching without doing anything more than politely acknowledging the Queen’s arrival. At Versailles
too, things were taking a more informal tone. In 1783, it was decided that gentlemen could appear before the Queen in a plain frock coat and not the glorious court dress previously demanded. While debutantes being presented for the first time could now wear coloured dresses instead of the formal black, which had previously been worn. Otherwise, court dress for women barely
changed over the years and remained the formal grand habit of a panniered gown with a tightly laced bodice and short sleeves that revealed the pearly white shoulders of the wearer. For more informal occasions, the court ladies would wear the much less constrictive robe à la Française, which was much more becoming and far less unwieldy to wear. Meanwhile, behind the
scenes, Marie Antoinette was copying her husband by creating a veritable warren of stairs, corridors, mezzanines and exquisite little rooms behind her apartments at Versailles, where she could escape from the prying eyes of the courtiers and be entirely herself with only a few of her most favoured companions. Here there was to be found a library, some pretty little sitting rooms and
a billiards room as well as rooms for her maids. It was all very cosy but again added to the general feeling that the Queen was gradually vanishing from public life, which naturally gave rise to rumours that she clearly had something to hide - after all, Louis XV’s well known passion for privacy was popularly supposed to have derived from his dissolute and sexually promiscuous
lifestyle which he wished to keep a secret from both his courtiers and the general public so why should it not be the same case with Marie Antoinette, whose fondness for both handsome young men and clandestine behaviour were both so well known?

In the spring of 1780, her childhood friends the princesses of Hesse-Darmstadt came to visit Paris
and Marie Antoinette was delighted to be reunited with them after so many years apart and show them around her world. They were immediately honoured with invitations to the most hallowed precincts of the Petit Trianon with Marie Antoinette writing that: ‘It’s looking so beautiful that I should be charmed to show it to you… I shall be quite alone so don’t dress up; country
clothes and the men in frock coats.’ The young Queen truly relished what she fondly imagined to be a simple bucolic country existence and considered it to be a much needed respite from what she increasingly regarded as the relentless and tiresome drudgery of court life.

However, although 1780 began brightly for Marie Antoinette it would end with tragedy. Her mother Maria
Theresa had been ailing for quite some time but had struggled on, her indomitable spirit refusing to accept that it was time to slow down. On 3 November she wrote to her daughter: ‘Yesterday, I spent the time more in France than Austria, and I remembered all the happy times in the past, which is indeed gone. Just the memory consoles me.’ It was to be her last letter to Marie Antoinette as just a couple of
days later the Empress caught a chill while praying in the family vault beneath the Capuchin church. The chill turned into pneumonia and after two terrible weeks the Empress died in the arms of the distraught and sobbing Joseph.

It took eight days for the terrible news to reach Versailles and when it eventually did, Louis insisted that the Abbé de Vermond
should be the one to tell Marie Antoinette that her mother, who had been the mainstay of her life, was gone. ‘Crushed by most dreadful misfortune, I cannot stop crying as I write to you,’ she wrote to Joseph. ‘Oh, my brother, oh, my friend! You alone are left to me in a country which is, which will always be, dear to me! Take care of yourself, watch over yourself; you owe it to all…"
Adieu, I no longer see what I write. Remember that we are friends and allies. Love me.’ Marie Antoinette was completely devastated by her mother’s death, perhaps sensing that without Maria Theresa’s overbearing care and, admittedly often entirely unwelcome, advice, she was from now on adrift in the world without a proper anchor to keep her from harm. Her mother may have
been prophesying doom and all manner of woe ever since the giddy, thoughtless Marie Antoinette first arrived in France over ten years earlier but at least she had been able to be reasonably confident that should the worst happen, Maria Theresa would be there behind her to pick up the pieces, dust her down and put everything right again. Could she trust Joseph, now Emperor in fact as well as
name, to do the same for her? Inconsolable, Marie Antoinette retreated for several weeks to the peace of the Petit Trianon where she remained sequestered alone but for her closest friends Madame de Polignac and the Princesse de Lamballe. She gave herself up completely to grief, reminiscing for hours about her childhood and berating herself for not paying proper attention to her
mother’s well meaning advice while she still had the chance. It was only now that she had lost her forever that Marie Antoinette finally came to realise just how much her mother had loved her and, equally, how much she had lost.

Louis, it seems, was one of those clumsy, awkward men who have the gift of being able to truly step up to the mark when called upon to do
so and he was a rock now for Marie Antoinette. He sat for hours with her, listening to her outpourings of grief and regret and always seemed to know exactly what to do and say to make her feel better. The couple were drawn together by Marie Antoinette’s sorrow and within a couple of months were surprised and delighted to find that she was pregnant once again. Intimidating
though she may have been in latter years, Maria Theresa had always retained a certain dry sense of humour and she would no doubt have appreciated this unlooked for result of her passing, especially as she had spent the two years since Madame Royale’s birth haranguing her daughter constantly about the necessity of having another baby.

Marie Antoinette’s second
labour began on the morning of 22 October 1781 with, as before, the Princesse de Lamballe summoning the King and other dignitaries to the royal bedchamber where the Queen was pacing back and forth in order to alleviate her pain. However, keen to avoid the terrible and mortifying press of people that had attended the Queen’s last lying in, Louis restricted the audience this time to just
those who absolutely had to be there with the Comte d’Artois, aunts and Princesse de Lamballe representing the royal family. Also present were Marie Antoinette’s most favoured ladies: the Comtesse de Mailly, Comtesse d’Ossun, Princesse de Chimay and Comtesse de Tavannes as well as the Princesse de Guéménée, who was waiting to take the baby to the royal nurseries. Everyone else was
banished to the outer rooms of the Queen’s apartments to wait for news.

As is common with second labours, this one was much quicker than the first and was over in around an hour and fifteen minutes when the Queen gave birth to a healthy child. The baby, as was the custom, was immediately whisked away to be washed and swaddled before the King, weeping and his voice
trembling with emotion, brought the child back to Marie Antoinette saying, ‘Madame, Monsieur le Dauphin asks for permission to enter.’ The wonderful news was announced to the crowds of courtiers waiting outside and spread like wildfire through the palace so that by the time the Princesse de Guéménée, looking as proud as if she had given birth to the heir to the
throned herself, appeared with the baby in her arms and seated in a bath chair so there would be no risk of dropping the precious heir on his way down to the chapel to be baptised, there were enormous crowds thronging the Hall of Mirrors to see her go by. King Louis hurried in the wake of his son, unable to take his eyes off this most miraculous and longed-for child, and grinning affably at
the shouts of congratulations. Finally, he felt that he had done his duty and furthermore proved himself to be a man like any other.

The baby, who weighed thirteen livres and measured twenty-two inches in length, was baptised Louis Joseph Xavier François in the glorious chapel at Versailles before being taken off to the royal nursery to meet his sister Madame Royale and be
placed into the care of his wet nurse, the wonderfully named Madame Poitrine (Madame Breast). Meanwhile, Marie Antoinette, completely worn out, rested in her bedchamber where shortly she would received the homage of the Parisian market women, who regaled the happy royal couple with some salacious couplets about Louis’ sexual prowess before trooping off to enjoy a splendid supper in
the royal apartments.

Shortly after the Dauphin’s birth, on 21 November 1781, the wily old Maurepas, Louis’ chief advisor and Chief Minister and uncle of Madame de Polignac, passed away. There was immediate debate about who would be his successor as Chief Minister but Louis surprised everyone by rejecting Loménie de Brienne, who was the choice of the Queen’s
party and making it known that from now on he would be ruling alone, with the Comte de Vergennes as advisor. This news was greeted with delight by Mercy and the Emperor Joseph, who had taken up Maria Theresa’s mantle when it came to persuading Marie Antoinette to make herself the power behind the throne. However, Marie Antoinette had very little taste for politics and her
few attempts at persuading King to take her advice had had mixed results. She had failed when it came to restoring Choiseul but then again had undoubtedly had a hand in the disastrous appointment of the Comte de Ségur as Minister of War and the fall of Turgot in 1776 after he had attempted to put through plans for a more egalitarian tax system that no longer disproportionately
favoured the aristocracy. The principle danger here though, as Louis knew all too well, was that Marie Antoinette had no real grasp of politics and based her political opinions on personal likes and dislikes and, worse, whatever her friends, specifically the ambitious and grasping Polignac cotérie, and family chose to tell her. Her advice could therefore never be trusted as she was
usually acting as the mouthpiece of other people.

‘This ill starred princess either did not know how to consider people’s feelings or was not prepared to do so,’ Madame de la Tour du Pin would later recall. ‘When she was displeased she allowed it to be evident, regardless of the consequences. And this did great harm to the King’s cause. She was gifted with a very great courage, but very
little intelligence, absolutely no tact and worst of all a mistrust always misplaced in those who were most willing to serve her.’ However, even if her political use was severely limited by her own deficiencies, Marie Antoinette could still be useful in other ways. When her brother and Empress Catherine II of Russia were in cahoots and planning to partition the Ottoman Empire,
Joseph asked Marie Antoinette to lend a hand and royally entertain the Empress’ son and heir Tsarevitch Paul and his wife Archduchess Maria Feodorovna when, travelling incognito as the Comte and Comtesse du Nord, they visited Paris in May 1782. Their visit was not altogether popular with Louis and Vergennes, who did not at all approve of the Austrian alliance with Russia or their
plans for the Ottoman Empire and were well aware that although the Tsarevitch was keen to make his visit look like simple tourism, he had actually been sent by his mother to try and gain some French support. When Marie Antoinette, following her brother’s instructions, asked to be allowed to entertain them, Louis was grateful to hand the baton over to her, relieved to have nothing to do
with it.

Marie Antoinette spared no expense when it came to entertaining their Russian guests, who were treated to a concert in the Peace Room, a splendid supper party, a trip to Trianon, several magnificent galas and a fancy dress ball in the royal opéra where Marie Antoinette again appeared dressed as Gabrielle d’Estrées, the mistress of her ancestor Henri IV, with the
Pitt diamond, valued at 2 million francs, attached to her plumed hat. The whole visit was extraordinarily expensive, with the Queen and her ladies spending a fortune on dresses from Rose Bertin and Madame Éloffe and the Russian party spending even more in order to compete with the famously fashionable French courtiers.

There was also a visit to the famous porcelain factory
at Sèvres, which had long enjoyed the particular patronage of the royal family, which involved a special week every year when the company’s new wares would be laid out on display at Versailles so that the court could make purchases. The Russian visitors spent over 300,000 francs at the Sèvres factory, with the additional treat of discovering that a particularly lovely lapis blue
toilette set which the Grand Duchess had particularly admired was to be a personal present from Marie Antoinette.

The visit ended with a formal court ball in the Hall of Mirrors where the Queen danced with the Tsarevitch and Louis partnered Maria Feodorovna. However, although the Russian party left Versailles completely overawed and delighted by
the reception they had enjoyed, Marie Antoinette was pleased to see them go, having taken one of her sudden dislikes to the Tsarevitch after he had asked her some very impertinent questions about her falling out with Madame du Barry, who was still banished from the court.

Once her awkward guests had gone, Marie Antoinette took herself off to the Petit
Trianon for a few weeks, doubtless congratulating herself on the success of her hostessing even if she winced a bit at how much it had cost. However, the true costs were yet to be counted as the people grumbled about such extravagance at a time when the nation’s coffers were known to depleted almost to the point of bankruptcy by the wars in America. Worse still was to come later on in the
year when the Prince de Guéménée, husband of the Royal Governess, declared himself to be bankrupt with astonishing debts of over 33 million livres. This catastrophe caused an enormous scandal at court with wider repercussions elsewhere as the fall of the powerful Guéménée family also ruined countless tradesmen and others who were owed vast sums of
money and would now never be paid. The ripples caused by the Prince’s bankruptcy were to be widespread and devastating, not least for his wife who was now in awkward position when the full extent of the disaster became known, as it was considered utterly unthinkable for the wife of someone so completely ruined to continue as governess to the royal
children.

Marie Antoinette, who was very fond of the Princesse, did everything she could to help even though Mercy counselled her to keep her distance so that she wasn’t tainted by association, but had to accept the Princesse’s resignation of her post in October 1782, exactly a year after the birth of the Dauphin. She managed to secure a huge pension for the couple though.
and encouraged the King to buy the Princesse’s country estate at Montreuil, near Versailles, for his sister Élisabeth who had fallen in love with the spot during her numerous visits there when she was under the charge of the disgraced governess.

The whole dismal affair was talked about everywhere and although Marie Antoinette had had nothing to do with the Guéménée’s
debts, it still had a parlous effect on her already dwindling popularity, which had revived a little after the birth of the Dauphin but then plummeted sharply when word of the extravagance that attended the Russian visit started doing the rounds of Paris. With the country teetering on the verge of financial disaster, the excessive spending of the royal family and those close
to them was being held up to scrutiny and this very public disgrace of two key members of the royal household was considered a justification of the criticisms that were beginning to be directed at the frivolity and wastefulness of the court in general and the Queen in particular.

The not entirely unexpected appointment of Madame de Polignac (who had recently become a
Duchesse) to the post of Royal Governess also caused murmuring at court as the position had been passed down through the Rohan family for years and to bestow it elsewhere and, furthermore, on someone who was not from one of the most prominent blue blooded families at court, was considered extremely controversial, if not provocative on the part of the
Queen. Here again, Marie Antoinette’s personal feelings had got the better of her - she had never quite liked the numerous Rohan family since hearing that their scion Prince Louis de Rohan (now Cardinal de Rohan), who had performed Mass before her in Strasbourg when she first arrived in France, had been going about the place saying insulting things about her mother. She knew that
Madame de Polignac’s appointment to such a prestigious court position was not entirely appropriate but she didn’t care and in this she was unexpectedly supported by Louis, who would have preferred to place his children in the care of his aunt Adélaïde but knew better than to oppose Marie Antoinette in a matter of such personal interest to her.

Madame de Polignac didn’t
have any complaints though. The post of governess came with a splendid thirteen room apartment next door to the rooms of the royal children, right on the palace terrace and overlooking the famous Orangerie. The enterprising Duchesse proceeded to build an elaborate wooden conservatory at one end of her rooms so that she would have more space to throw lavish parties three times a
week, which were attended by the entire court as well as the Queen, who astounded everyone by behaving like a guest rather than the mistress of the palace.

In early 1783, Marie Antoinette posed again for Madame Vigée-Lebrun, this time choosing not to appear in a splendidly ornate court dress but rather a simple muslin gown of the sort that she liked to wear while
frolicking with her children and pet dogs at the Petit Trianon. Although she still liked a good party, the twenty-seven year old Queen was engrossed by her domestic life, preferring to spend her time at her own private residence rather than showing herself off amidst the splendours of Versailles. This portrait was intended to portray what Marie Antoinette was increasingly
seeing as her true self; the real woman behind the glittering façade of the Queen of France.

The painting caused a sensation when it was displayed at the prestigious Paris Salon of 1783. Marie Antoinette and Madame Vigée-Lebrun, young women with minds full of all sorts of romantic and idealistic ideas about the simplicity and virtue of private life were
entranced by the lack of etiquette in the painting, by the lack of heavy court gowns and jewels, by its essential charm and honesty. The critics and visitors to the Salon, however, were rather less charmed and saw in the lack of queenly decoration and etiquette a quite deplorable *lesé majesté* that acted as a metaphor for the gradual erosion of the dignity of both France and its royal
family. It was also whispered that the Queen had posed in her shift, which of course was not at all the case and, worse, that the painting was deliberately intended to ruin the silk industry at Lyons, which formed an important part of the country’s revenues. The painting was intended for Versailles but Marie Antoinette was so upset by the reaction that she sent it to her friends the
Princesses of Hesse-Darmstadt instead. Interestingly a very similar portrait by Vigée-Lebrun of the Comtesse de Provence dressed in a muslin gown with a pale blue sash was displayed nearby at the same time and received no way near so much opprobrium as the one of Marie Antoinette and was in fact praised.

A second portrait, painted in the same year, was far
more popular as it depicted the young Queen in much the same pose, holding a pink rose, but this time dressed in shimmering pale blue silk, trimmed with costly lace and ribbons and with priceless pearls around her white throat. *This was apparently more like how a Queen of France should look and indeed this painting remains the most iconic portrayal of Marie Antoinette even now,*
probably because it delivers the most perfect balance of majesty and coquetry, both of which are qualities associated with the doomed Queen.

Certainly, Marie Antoinette’s alleged coquetry was giving rise to plenty of talk that year as the handsome Swedish nobleman Axel von Fersen, who was all chiselled high cheeks, steely blue eyes and pouting lips, had arrived back in Paris and been
immediately accepted into the heart of the Queen’s circle yet again. It was rumoured that he was her lover but this seems very unlikely to have been the case. Marie Antoinette may have been capricious, rather shallow and essentially frivolous but she was also extremely personally modest and above all deeply devoted and loyal to her family. She may never have been madly in love with
Louis, her ‘poor man’, but she respected him and furthermore knew that she owed him her loyalty.

However, that’s not to say that she wasn’t partial to the odd bit of harmless flirtation, as several other gentlemen of the court, such as the dashing Duc de Lauzun, could (and sadly would) testify to. That she, as we would say today, fancied Axel von Fersen cannot be doubted and that
he, deeply flattered to have been singled out by the Queen of France, reciprocated her attraction is also very likely but it is very unlikely that this was ever acted upon or at least went further than perhaps the odd kiss if it even went as far as that. That Marie Antoinette, raised by her mother to be a dutiful spouse and bred for the very highest position, should compromise the
French royal succession for the sake of a pair of fine eyes and a tumble in bed is unthinkable, while for Axel von Fersen it was her very untouchability, her unattainability that made her so irresistible. One gets the sense from his letters that if Marie Antoinette had capitulated and welcomed him to her bed then his image of her would have been forever tarnished as his
adoration was fuelled as much by her aloofness as by her gentle charm and obvious favouritism.

Marie Antoinette became pregnant again during the summer of 1783 but despite taking all of her usual precautions she suffered a miscarriage on her birthday in November. It was to have a devastating effect on her health and she did not fully recover for several months,
which were naturally mostly spent in the seclusion and safety of the Petit Trianon. There were other worries too as the two year old Dauphin’s health began to give concern, whereas his sister Madame Royale continued to be a boisterous butterball of a child, all pink cheeked good looks and bouncing blonde curls, just as her mother had been in her youth. The Dauphin was wan and sickly
though and it was becoming unpleasantly clear to his doting parents that it might be prudent to have another son to secure the succession should the worst happen.

In the meantime, Marie Antoinette lavished attention on her children, who took up residence with their households in the Grand Trianon so that she could keep them close to hand when she was living at the Petit
Trianon. Sadly for the Queen though, the closeness that she had anticipated with Madame Royale failed to materialise as the child made it plain that she much preferred her father, probably because he was far less strict than her mother, who was fond of making her play with peasant children in order to curb her snobbish tendencies (even adopting a girl called Albertine to be her constant playmate) and on
one occasion gave all of her toys away to the poor. While such egalitarian sentiments are obviously admirable, they don’t seem to have pleased the haughty little Madame Royale very much and when the Abbé de Vermond told her that her mother had almost died after suffering a fall from her horse, the little princess replied that she wouldn’t have minded, before going to explain that she
wouldn’t mind not seeing her mother ever again because then she could do as she pleased.

Although the princess only turned five at the end of 1783, her future marriage was still a topic of considerable importance with several glittering matches, ranging from the heir of the King of Sweden to various Habsburg cousins on Marie Antoinette’s side, being considered. Closer
to home there was also the Duc d’Angoulême, the eldest son of the Comte d’Artois and the Duc de Valois, the eldest son of the Duc de Chartres, who would be Duc d’Orléans one day. Although Marie Antoinette was naturally hoping for a match that would keep her daughter in France, she could not bring herself to approve of a marriage into the Orléans family now that her early
friendship with the Duc de Chartres, who had acted as her host at the Palais Royal on more than one occasion, had soured into an icy feud thanks to her not entirely unfounded suspicions that he was responsible for some of the nasty rumours circulating about her. When the Duc de Chartres formally requested the hand of the princess for his son at the start of 1784, he was turned down flat by her
parents which had the effect of increasing his enmity towards Marie Antoinette, whom he regarded as entirely responsible for this humiliation. In hindsight it was probably not the wisest course of action to offend the Duc and turn down this opportunity to ally themselves with the powerful and, above all, very popular house of Orléans but the events of 1789 were five long
years away and no one could ever have predicted what terrible calamities lay in the future.

By the summer of 1784, Marie Antoinette had recovered from her miscarriage and was beginning to feel much more optimistic about the future. It was during this period that she oversaw the building of her pretty little hamlet at Petit Trianon, a masterpiece of
elaborate set design which the Queen fondly imagined looked just like a real peasant village. Here, she could oversee the milking of specially imported pure white Swiss cows, feed her hens and help her children pet the rabbits. The sight of Marie Antoinette frolicking in her white frock and straw hat (both of which cost a fortune), was utterly charming to be sure, but not
everyone was a fan. ‘Perhaps by spending a little more, Her Majesty would have been able to erase the look of misery worn by our real hamlets within a radius of thirty leagues and improve the dwellings that are the homes of so many decent citizens, instead of representing them in their hideous decay,’ the Marquis de Bombelles wrote, admittedly with some
In June 1784, Louis and Marie Antoinette were astounded by the news that the eccentric King Gustav III of Sweden had suddenly arrived, fashionably incognito of course, at Versailles to pay a surprise visit. That he had brought the dashing Axel von Fersen with him in his train was probably of small consolation to the French royal couple as they hastened
to greet their unexpected guest with all the necessary pomp and aplomb. In fact, so hasty were their preparations that Louis, who had been hunting in the forests at Rambouillet when the news of Gustav’s arrival came, appeared in odd shoes, which earned him a gentle rebuke from his famously soignée wife, who naturally looked immaculate as ever.

King Gustav stayed for six
weeks and despite his unexpected arrival, Louis and Marie Antoinette put on an astonishing and most gratifying parade of entertainments for his amusement, culminating in a wonderful party at the Petit Trianon on 27 June, where the guests had to wear white and were treated to ballets and music by Grétry as they wandered freely about the pavilions, hamlet and new
English gardens, all of which were illuminated by thousands of coloured lanterns for the occasion. Marie Antoinette also found time during the visit to whisk off to Paris for the gala performance of Beaumarchais’ *Le Mariage de Figaro*, which had been previously banned by the King due to its seditious nature, and was reportedly very much amused by this
tale of aristocratic iniquity, assignations and mistaken identity. Her husband, only too aware of the calumnies that were being spread about his wife and her friends, thought that Beaumarchais’ play would do them all untold harm but Marie Antoinette, who loved to be at the forefront of all that was fashionable even if it was at the cost of her own dignity, believed that it was all just a
piece of harmless fun and no worse than the Shakespeare plays that Louis was so fond of.

Marie Antoinette, who had become so large during pregnancy that it was thought that she was expecting twins, gave birth to her third child, another son, at half past seven in the morning of 27 March 1785. As was the custom, the baby was immediately whisked away to the royal
chapel to be baptised Louis Charles and was given the title Duc de Normandie by his overjoyed father before Madame de Polignac took him off to the royal nursery on the ground floor, where he joined Madame Royale and the Dauphin. As with his elder sister, Marie Thérèse Charlotte, his last name was given in honour of his godmother, Marie Antoinette’s favourite sister,
Maria Carolina, Queen of Naples.

However, whereas the births of her two eldest children had been greeted with universal acclamation, Marie Antoinette was astounded to be greeted by silent, resentful crowds when she drove into Paris for the formal thanksgiving ceremony at Notre Dame after the birth of Louis Charles, whom she referred to
as her ‘chou d’amour’. Until that moment she had had no real idea just how unpopular she actually was and was completely shocked and bewildered by the experience. ‘Why do they hate me so much?’ she asked her husband upon her return to Versailles. ‘What have I ever done to them?’ Her unpopularity was further increased when the King, who in his usual clumsy way
was seeking only to show his gratitude and affection to his wife, purchased the Orléans’ family’s rather grand country seat, Saint Cloud on the outskirts of Paris for 6 million livres (with the assistance of his brilliant Director General of Finance, Calonne who had temporarily abated the pressure on the royal coffers by borrowing large sums of money) and presented it to Marie Antoinette.
The main impetus for this rather expensive and foolish purchase was the ongoing major renovation work going on at Versailles (in fact, Louis and Marie Antoinette had even considered rebuilding large parts of the palace until they realised that this plan was financial unfeasible) which made it advisable to have another large residence near Paris. It was also thought that the air
at Saint Cloud, which was built on a hill overlooking the city and had famously beautiful gardens that swept down towards the Seine, was far healthier than that at Versailles, which after all had been built on a swamp, and would therefore be better for the royal children, in particular the ailing Dauphin. The purchase of Saint Cloud was still an act of folly though and the fact that it
now belonged to Marie Antoinette just made the situation far worse as it was completely unprecedented that a foreign Queen of France should own property in her own right and therefore have the right to dispose of it as she pleased. That she had already said that the property would be inherited by one of her younger children did not matter - people were worried that it would somehow
become the property of the hated Austria and that the Emperor would therefore have a foothold in France, as if having his sister on the throne with the King popularly supposed to be under her thumb, wasn’t bad enough.

Marie Antoinette ignored all of the murmurings and threw herself wholeheartedly into the refurbishment of Saint Cloud, which hadn’t
been visited by the Orléans family for quite some time and was in serious need of an overhaul, which the Queen enthusiastically delivered, installing beautiful pastel coloured panelling and filling the rooms with exquisite furniture and costly decorations. She took great delight in posting rules there ‘by order of the Queen’ and insisted that all of the servants wore her own
personal livery and if she knew that this was causing opprobrium in certain quarters, she didn’t seem to care one little bit.

In the wake of the Duc de Normandie’s birth and the purchase of Saint Cloud, rumours about the Queen’s private life began to multiply at an alarming rate. There had always been ill-natured whispers about the paternity of the royal children, but
never on quite the same scale as now when all of Paris was talking about the fact that the latest royal baby had obviously been conceived during the Swedish royal visit when King Gustav had had the dashing Axel von Fersen, whom the Queen was known to have a liking for, amongst his entourage of handsome young men. Pamphlets, leaflets, ribald songs and erotic novels about the
Queen’s alleged sexual exploits with a variety of partners that included her brother-in-law Artois and friends Yolande de Polignac and the Princesse de Lamballe began to appear in such great numbers that the Parisian police could barely keep tabs on the situation, although they seized and destroyed as many as they could. However, countless more were being openly sold
in the arcades of the Palais Royal and many even made their way to Versailles where they were left on chairs in the royal salons and even on occasion surreptitiously placed where the Queen herself would see them.

Marie Antoinette did her best to laugh all of this off but the real danger lay in the fact that although the pamphlets and rhymes were seen as amusing little pieces of
nonsense in the glittering and sophisticated salons of Paris and Versailles there was a risk that they were being taken as fact by the less erudite and cosmopolitan citizens of her country. The sullen reception that she had received in Paris after the birth of the Duc de Normandie certainly suggested that her star was not so much on the wane but had fallen completely and the
rumours of her promiscuity had much to do with this. ‘How many times have you left the marriage bed and the caresses of your husband to abandon yourself to Bacchantes or satyrs and to join yourself with them through their brutal joys?’ one pamphlet demanded of the Queen. The message was clear - Marie Antoinette was a bad woman, a bad wife and a bad Queen.
Not that the rumours were entirely restricted to the gutter press of Paris, however. There had been all sorts of lurid little tales floating around the candlelit rooms of the royal palaces for years: whispers about the Queen’s flirtations with various gentlemen of the court and raised eyebrows over her close friendships with Madame de Polignac and Madame de Lamballe, which
were obviously completely innocent but, then as now, malicious tongues will find fodder wherever they can and can twist even the most innocuous things to make them appear far more sinister than they actually are. There was also plenty of talk about Marie Antoinette’s secretive behaviour at Versailles and the other palaces where she insisted upon locking herself away in her private cabinets
and even the King would often find himself left out in the cold on the other side of the door. There had been much laughter, for example, over the occasion at Fontainebleau when poor Louis had traipsed past several amused courtiers to visit his wife’s bedchamber at night only to find the door firmly locked against him. The unfortunate and extremely embarrassed King
had then had to perform the very worst sort of walk of shame past a crowd of sniggering courtiers, who hid their smiles behind the painted fans and wondered just what the Queen was trying to hide.

However, bad as all of this may have seemed, things were about to take a turn for the worse for Marie Antoinette. On 12 July 1785, while the Queen was
excitedly preparing for the court’s first period of residence at the newly refurbished Saint Cloud and painstakingly learning her lines for the role of Rosine in a private performance of Beaumarchais’ *The Barber of Seville*, the Parisian jeweller Charles Auguste Boehmer, who worked in partnership with Paul Bassenge, presented her with a very strange and perplexing note.
‘Madame,
We are filled with happiness and venture to think that the last arrangements proposed to us, which we have performed with zeal and respect, are a further proof of our submission and devotion to Your Majesty’s order, and we have genuine satisfaction in thinking that the most beautiful set of diamonds now
existing will belong to the greatest and best of Queens.’

Amused by what she believed must be an unfortunate misunderstanding, Marie Antoinette read the note out to her First Lady of the Bedchamber Madame Campan then, remarking that the letter wasn’t worth keeping, set fire to it with a candle. Boehmer and
Bassange had visited her a few times in the past to beg her to buy a most extravagant and extremely outmoded looped necklace which had actually been made for Madame du Barry when she was at the height of her relationship with Louis XV and had her royal lover so completely wrapped around her little finger that he would have bought it for her without a single qualm. Marie
Antoinette had never got over her adolescent loathing of Madame du Barry, who was still banned from ever returning to Versailles and this association with the hated former royal mistress would have been more than enough to put her off buying the necklace if it hadn’t also been utterly hideous and ruinously expensive at an eye watering 1.8 million livres. Always eager to please his wife,
Louis at one point offered to buy the piece for her but Marie Antoinette, who thought it a most outmoded and crude piece of work and had, besides, begun to economise where diamonds were concerned, turned him down, saying that the country had more need of war ships than diamonds and besides she had enough of the latter anyway.

However, the cryptic note
brought none of this to mind and instead Marie Antoinette thought that it must simply be a rather stupid ploy to persuade her into buying some other extravagant piece of jewellery. She instructed Madame Campan to let Boehmer know that she would no longer be patronising him and then would almost certainly have thought no more of the matter if it hadn’t been forced upon
her attention once again and in rather more alarming terms after Boehmer visited Madame Campan later that same day and poured his tale of woe into her increasingly horrified and shocked ears. It seemed that having given up all hope of the Queen relenting and taking the now infamous necklace off his hands, Boehmer had been delighted to be contacted by the Cardinal de Rohan who
informed him that he had been instructed to buy the necklace on behalf of Marie Antoinette, who wished the transaction to be kept secret. Convinced by notes that had allegedly been signed by the Queen herself, the jeweller had delivered the necklace to the Cardinal, who in return informed him that the Queen would make the first payment of 400,000 livres on 1 August and would make her glittering
début in her purchase in the next few weeks.

A few days later Boehmer and Bassenge were summoned to Versailles in order to repeat their tale in front of Marie Antoinette, Vermond and the Minister of the King’s Household, the Baron de Breteuil, all of whom were appalled by the implications of what they were being told. Marie Antoinette was particularly
incensed - she had hated the Cardinal de Rohan for years, ever since he’d been extremely rude about her mother, and had snubbed several attempts on his part to get into her good books. It seemed absolutely incredible to her that he, knowing full well how much she disliked him, could ever have believed that she would put such a commission into his hands or that she could have been in
cahoots with him behind the back of the King.

However, Baron de Breteuil’s investigations were to uncover even worse revelations when further questioning of the unfortunate Boehmer and Bassenge brought the name of Madame de la Motte-Valois, a well known adventuress who claimed descent from the Valois kings and was obviously desperate to get
accepted into the Queen’s inner circle, into the mix. Madame de la Motte-Valois had been going about Paris boasting of her friendship with Marie Antoinette and popularity at court where, she said, she was received everywhere as a cousin of the King and Queen and was privy to all their little secrets. It was all lies, of course, but the desperate jewellers had fallen for it hook, line and
sinker and asked her if she would have a word in Marie Antoinette’s ear about the diamond necklace. After taking a look at the piece in question, Madame de la Motte-Valois had promised to do her best and at the start of 1785 had returned to inform them that she had succeeded in her quest and managed to persuade the Queen to buy the jewels. According to Madame de la Motte-Valois,
Marie Antoinette had been secretly hankering after them all along but had not dared to openly buy them for fear of displeasing the King and drawing further adverse comment about her extravagance.

At the same time as she was enmeshing the unfortunate Boehmer and Bassenge in her web of lies, Madame de la Motte-Valois was also spinning a fairytale
for her lover Cardinal de Rohan, who was well known to be desperate for the Queen’s favour and a chance to reinstate himself in her good books. The Cardinal, who was clearly a rather credulous man, was only too willing to believe that Madame de la Motte-Valois was friends with the Queen and after she appeared to set up a secret midnight meeting between him and Marie
Antoinette in one of the secluded groves at Versailles, he was like putty in her hands and agreed to act as go between with the jewellers in the purchase of the fabulous necklace, his haughty aristocratic authority dispelling any lingering concerns that they might have had about the veracity of Madame de la Motte-Valois’ claims to be on intimate terms with the Queen. It was the
Cardinal who had taken charge of the necklace after the jewellers brought it to the Hôtel de Rohan at the start of February and he who had made the arrangements for payment before it was passed on to Madame de la Motte-Valois, who had allegedly been instructed to take it straight to the Queen. However, when Marie Antoinette failed to appear in public wearing the fabulous
necklace, Monsieur Boehmer had begun to get rather nervous about the whole transaction. Reports that Madame de la Motte-Valois had gone on a massive shopping spree then departed Paris in order to take up residence in her extremely opulently furnished château were also very worrying and in the end the jewellers had decided to break their silence and approach Madame de
Campan, in order to find out what had happened.

At first the Baron de Breteuil had advised keeping the whole affair from the King until more was known about the Cardinal’s involvement. However, on 14 August he decided that the time had come and laid the whole sorry affair in front of his master, who in turn discussed it with his advisor Vergennes and Lord
Chancellor Miromesnil. Breteuil, who was wholeheartedly the Queen’s man, was all in favour of publicly humiliating the Cardinal for this act of lese majesté but the more canny Vergennes and Miromesnil were mindful of the terrible scandal that this might provoke and instead hastened to advise the King to tread carefully and privately question the Cardinal about
the affair before he made any rash decisions.

The Cardinal was ordered into the presence of the King, Queen and three Ministers the very next day, 15 August 1785. It was the Feast of the Assumption and Marie Antoinette’s name day and the whole of Versailles had turned out en masse to watch the procession and attend that morning’s Mass in the Queen’s honour. Having been
out of royal favour for several years, Cardinal de Rohan was extremely surprised to be informed that he had been summoned to the King’s presence but, hopeful that his secret assignment for the Queen had marked a turn in his fortunes at court, he obediently made his way through the huge crowds in the Hall of Mirrors to the Council Room. However if he expected to find the King
wreathed with grateful smiles he was sorely mistaken as instead he found himself being interrogated by Louis and his ministers, all under the cold and distinctly unfriendly gaze of Marie Antoinette who spoke only once to insist that the notes that had allegedly passed between herself and the Cardinal must have been forgeries.

When the Cardinal had left,
Vergennes and Miromesnil counselled the King to tread cautiously and keep the whole sorry affair completely quiet, no doubt already fearing that there were further sordid revelations in the pipeline and all too well aware how much damage such a scandal, touching as it did upon the Queen’s alleged extravagance as well as her much whispered about personal relations with the
courtiers, would do to Marie Antoinette’s already beleaguered reputation. However, Breteuil and the Queen, who had burst into tears, were determined to see the Cardinal fully punished for his actions and urged Louis to have him arrested and properly questioned. Never able to resist his wife’s tears, Louis duly gave the order to have the Cardinal arrested and his Lord
Chancellor, no doubt rather reluctantly, stepped out of the Council Room and loudly gave the order to have Rohan apprehended at once. It would have been more usual for such a high profile arrest to take place in private so to have the Cardinal arrested so publicly and within the walls of Versailles itself was extremely shocking and had the effect of causing an immense scandal before
anything was even known about the whole affair. Madame de la Motte-Valois was arrested shortly afterwards and, naturally enough, denied everything, painting herself as the innocent patsy in the Cardinal’s schemes and claiming to have nothing to do with the necklace, which had, of course, now completely vanished from sight. The official
investigations continued well into the summer until Louis called another meeting and, despite the continued reservations of Miromesnil and Vergennes, ordered that the Cardinal be put on trial so that his wife’s name could be completely cleared of any involvement in the matter. Marie Antoinette was horrified that the Cardinal, a man whom she absolutely loathed, could have been so
stupid as to think for so much as a second that she would not only pass him secret notes behind Louis’ back but, far worse still, arrange private little assignations with him in the middle of the night. That a public revelation of such matters could hardly do her any credit did not at all weigh on her mind which was entirely focussed on both clearing her name and getting revenge on the arrogant
Cardinal. It would have been a kindness on the part of Vergennes to point out at this juncture that her own reputation was by now so blackened that a public trial of this nature could only do harm no matter what the outcome was, but he remained silent and the whole miserable process continued. Meanwhile, Marie Antoinette continued to distract herself with her
performance as Rosine in *The Barber of Seville* which was put on at the Petit Trianon theatre in front of a very select audience made up of members of the royal family and the Queen’s own close little circle of friends. She had also thoroughly enjoyed her first proper stay at her new acquisition Saint Cloud, which had lived up to expectations and quickly become a favourite residence
of the royal family. Marie Antoinette even opened up the gardens to the public and the curious Parisians had turned up in their droves to see the royal family disporting themselves in their country idyll and even managed to politely applaud when the Queen appeared on the flower lined and fragrant parterres holding the Dauphin in her arms and with Madame Royale trotting at her side in
a pretty dress. However, if Marie Antoinette thought that this applause was indicative of a softening of the public mood towards her, she was to be sorely disappointed as the rumours were worse than ever thanks to the ongoing inquiry into the affair of the diamond necklace, the juicy details of which were, as had been gloomily predicted by Vergennes, being talked about all over Europe.
At the start of October, Marie Antoinette travelled by boat to Fontainebleau for the court’s traditional autumn visit to the palace, where the King was looking forward to some excellent hunting. The boat was a new purchase - a pleasure yacht in the English style, complete with a beautifully appointed salon, which had cost 100,000 livres. However, despite the glory of her arrival, looking
like Cleopatra aboard her splendid new ship, the Queen was downcast during her stay at Fontainebleau, with the events in Paris clearly weighing heavily on her mind as La Motte-Valois and the Cardinal did their best to incriminate each other in their testimonies. However, the only person who was really incriminated, in the minds of the people at least, was the Queen. Although she had
been amazed to hear that the Cardinal believed her to be the woman he met in the moonlight glade at Versailles, it seemed that no one else found this all that hard to believe, so thoroughly had Marie Antoinette’s reputation been tarnished over the years. When it was further revealed that the woman in question had in fact been a Palais Royal prostitute who traded off her spurious resemblance
to the Queen, this made the whole scenario all the more appalling as people chuckled over the mental image of the proud Cardinal falling to his knees in reverence before a common whore. However, there were those who muttered that Queen or whore, there was no difference either way and therein lay the danger of the whole enterprise.

On 2 November, Marie
Antoinette turned thirty and like plenty of other women she had some trouble reconciling herself to the inexorable onward march of time and became obsessed with her weight and appearance, declaring to Rose Bertin that she would be dressing more maturely from now on and renouncing the ostentatious fashions of her youth. Possibly she also regretted her foolish words as
an arrogant nineteen year old Queen, when she had wondered why women over the age of thirty still bothered showing their faces at court. Although delightfully pretty by anyone’s standards as a young girl, by her thirties Marie Antoinette had filled out and become rather more rubenesque and was, in modern parlance, more a woman who made the best of herself than a natural beauty.
Although never naturally blessed with great natural beauty she had, thanks to the artifice of wonderful clothes, elegant coiffures, make up, jewels, exquisite bearing and a winsomely charming demeanour, long been used to hearing herself described as the most beautiful woman at court - now, however, her new young ladies in waiting, newly married girls in their late teens and early twenties,
were instructed by the older and wiser ladies of the court to stay out of direct sunlight so the fresh radiance of their complexions wouldn’t remind the Queen of the youthful good looks that she had now lost.

Marie Antoinette’s rejection of the pretty, frothy, beribboned gowns of her youth can be charted in the portraits of Madame Vigée-Lebrun who painted the
Queen’s favourite portrait of herself in late 1785, depicting Marie Antoinette in a lace and fur trimmed gown of rich crimson velvet that opens over a skirt of saffron yellow silk. Her fichu is trimmed with exquisite lace and on her head there is balanced one of Mademoiselle Bertin’s famous *poufs* of white muslin trimmed with pearls. The Queen’s gaze is steady and somewhat amused and in her
hands, neatly arranged on a green velvet cushion, she holds a book with her fingers marking the place—presumably to signify her renunciation of the frivolities of youth. It’s a delightful portrait and one of the very few that properly manages to convey Marie Antoinette’s famous charm, despite being more obviously sober in both palette and composition than her previous depictions.
Also captivating is another portrait that Vigée-Lebrun painted in the same year for the Comte d’Artois’ exquisite Paris residence the Château de Bagatelle, which was built in the Bois de Boulogne after Marie Antoinette, who loved a wager, bet her brother-in-law that he couldn’t build a château in less than three months. In the end it took sixty three months to complete and a grand full
length portrait of Marie Antoinette, who was often entertained there, was commissioned for one of the salons. In this work, which bears some aesthetic resemblances to the later more famous painting of Marie Antoinette with her children, Madame Vigée-Lebrun painted the Queen against splendid surroundings, dressed in a sumptuous gown of rich blue
velvet, trimmed with lace and fur and opening over a cream silk skirt. Once again she holds a book in her lap, her fingers marking the place, while her gaze is dignified with just a touch of amusement. This time though the overall effect is undoubtedly majestic thanks to the combination of that splendidly restrained yet still magnificent gown, the rich swags of crimson velvet
falling from the table and the opulent beauty of the sitter herself, who presides over her palatial surroundings with a combination of both grandeur and grace.

One of her pages, Alexandre Tilly, described her at this time as having ‘eyes which were not beautiful but which were expressive of every disposition: benevolence or aversion were displayed on
her countenance in a manner which was entirely her own... Her skin was admirable; her neck and shoulders also; the bust a little too full and the figure lacking in elegance; I have never seen such beautiful arms and hands. She had two ways of walking: one firm and a little hurried, but always noble; the other less vigorous, more poised.’ He added that: ‘In a word, she was the sort of woman to
whom one would instinctively have offered not a chair but a throne.’

With great insight into the character of the Queen that he served, Tilly also wrote that: ‘She treated us all with a singular sweetness and we all adored her. Her most destructive fault, and one which did a lot of harm, was her dislike of all pomp and formality, the formality which is more necessary in France
than anywhere else. She was childish and inconsequential, with no definite ideas except to free herself of the burdensome ties imposed by her rank. When she wanted to, no one could be more royal and dignified. One has never seen anyone curtsey so gracefully, singling out ten persons in one curtsey and giving to each in turn the regard which was their due.’

Marie Antoinette’s
charitable and philanthropic instinct never abated and each significant event in her court life, such as the births of her children, was marked with generous financial gifts to favourite charities, such as those set up for orphans or indigent wet nurses, while Louis also regularly emptied his coffers to assist the less fortunate. During the winter of 1784, he distributed three million francs of his own
money and also ordered that much of the royal forest should be cut down to provide firewood for those who could not afford it. Madame de la Tour du Pin, one of Marie Antoinette’s ladies in waiting and the daughter of the delightfully pretty Madame Dillon who had been mistress of the Prince de Guéménée and such a favourite of the Queen early on in her reign until her
premature death of consumption, would record in her memoirs that the Queen would walk around the games room at Versailles with a small bag in order to collect donations from the courtiers playing at the cards tables. Men were expected to give a gold louis, while women were asked for six francs - a mere pittance compared to the fortunes that were won and lost at cards at court on a
daily basis, and yet this strategy ‘aroused considerable resentment among the younger courtiers’.

The Cardinal’s trial came to a dramatic conclusion on 31 May 1786, when Madame de la Motte-Valois and her accomplices were found guilty and the gullible Cardinal, whose family, the powerful Rohan clan had turned up to the court room
all decked out in full mourning, acquitted. Marie Antoinette was incensed by this result and not at all pacified by the sentencing of the others, who were small fry in comparison to the hated Cardinal. She burst into tears when she heard the verdict, furious and deeply hurt that the judges had appeared to believe the Cardinal’s defence that he had totally believed the web of lies
created by La Motte-Valois and seen no reason to doubt that the woman he met in the arbour at Versailles was not in fact the Queen. Others would go further and express their belief that the Cardinal had been the puppet of not one but two faithless women: La Motte-Valois and the Queen, who had probably colluded together to try and bring about his downfall. Either that or the entire blame
lay at the door of Marie Antoinette who had engineered the whole thing in order to grab the diamonds without paying for them and bring down the Cardinal at the same time. Either way, although the Cardinal had been acquitted and the trial was at an end, Marie Antoinette felt as though she herself had been condemned by the judge’s verdict which had, as Vergennes had feared,
only served to underline the fact that she was now so unpopular that the French people would believe her guilty of any calumny.

The news at the start of 1786, that Marie Antoinette was expecting another baby did nothing to cheer the depressed Queen up but rather made her feel even more pressured and put upon as she had considered her family complete and had no
wish to undergo the rigours of pregnancy and childbirth once again. The King left her at Versailles for the last few weeks of her pregnancy while he went off to Normandy on a rare trip to the provinces, which lasted for eight days and involved visits to harbours and coastal fortifications. Astonishingly, it was the first time that Louis, who had only once in all his life left the environs of
Paris and the Ile de France when he travelled to Rheims for his coronation, had ever beheld the sea. Marie Antoinette, however, would never see it and would instead have to content herself with her husband’s excited reports about his visit when he returned to Versailles to be greeted by herself and their three children, who shouted ‘Papa! Papa!’ when they saw the King approach, standing
on the balcony overlooking the marble courtyard of the palace.

Just over a week later on 9 July, Marie Antoinette’s labour began. Keen to put off the inevitable and also rather alarmed as the baby was not due for a few more weeks, she at first claimed that all was well and the pains were due to indigestion before finally having to concede defeat at around half past four
in the afternoon when the ministers were summoned to attend the royal birth. Sophie Hélène Béatrice was born three hours later and from the start it was clear that like her eldest brother the Dauphin, this new baby was far from robust, which just added to Marie Antoinette’s feelings of dejected lassitude. She was also physically ailing and suffering from unexplained pains in her legs, terrible
headaches and feelings of breathlessness which were probably all due to anxiety and depression. When her sister Maria Christina visited Paris for a month in the summer of 1786, Marie Antoinette made very little effort to see her and caused great offence by not inviting her to the Petit Trianon and a few months later she turned down an opportunity to visit her brother Joseph in
Brussels, claiming that her fragile health and that of the Dauphin and baby Sophie would not allow it. Later on in the year the royal family went to Fontainebleau for the customary autumn visit, little realising that this was to be their last stay in the splendid old Renaissance palace. Marie Antoinette inhabited rooms as opulent as those at Versailles, including her
pretty boudoir decorated in shimmering mother of pearl which had only just been completed for her that year and which she would barely have a chance to enjoy. Madame Vigée-Lebrun, the Queen’s favourite portrait painter saw her there that year and later recalled in her memoirs that: ‘When the Queen went for the last time to Fontainebleau, where the court, according to custom,
was to appear in full gala, I repaired there to enjoy that spectacle. I saw the Queen in her grandest dress; she was covered with diamonds, and as the brilliant sunshine fell upon her she seemed to me nothing short of dazzling. Her head, erect on her beautiful Greek neck, lent her as she walked such an imposing, such a majestic air, that one seemed to see a goddess in the midst of her nymphs.
During the first sitting I had with Her Majesty after this occasion I took the liberty of mentioning the impression she had made upon me, and of saying to the Queen how the carriage of her head added to the nobility of her bearing. She answered in a jesting tone, “If I were not Queen they would say I looked insolent, would they not?” Things went from bad to
worse in 1787, which started with the death of Louis’ friend and advisor Vergennes in February, just when the King needed his support and level headed advice more than ever in the face of a financial crisis that threatened to tip the country over the edge of bankruptcy. The distraught Louis cried when he heard the news and lamented that ‘I have lost the only friend that I could rely
on, the only minister who never betrayed me’ and his distress deepened when rumours began to spread that his wife had poisoned Vergennes in order to put a stop to his consistently anti-Austrian policies.

Without Vergennes at his elbow, Louis floundered when confronted with the facts about his country’s financial situation which involved a deficit of 112
million francs and appalling debts, many of which were due to the French involvement in the American Revolution. Calonne, whose clever juggling of loans had enabled the purchase not just of Saint Cloud but also that of the château of Rambouillet for Louis, came up with a plan for a radical tax overhaul that would free up some extra cash but as it involved taxing the property of the nobility,
who had been living it up tax free up until then, this was bitterly opposed at Versailles and led to the ignominious fall from grace of Calonne and calls for the return of his predecessor Jacques Necker, whose resignation in 1781 was blamed on Marie Antoinette, who had been displeased by the attention he drew to the enormous expenses of the court and the extravagant financial favours
being showered on her friends, particularly Madame de Polignac. It would be another year before Necker was recalled to office and hailed as the saviour of France but in the meantime things would only get worse for the beleaguered Queen of France as she was harangued by Count Mercy and her brother about the appointment of replacements for both Vergennes and Calonne. It
was her duty, they told her, to ensure that both posts were filled by people sympathetic to the Austrian alliance. However, Marie Antoinette had had enough of playing piggy in the middle between the interests of Austria and those of France and curtly informed Mercy that: ‘It is not right for the Viennese court to appoint ministers to the court of Versailles.’ However, it was her choice
Loménie de Brienne who was appointed to the position of Director General of Finance in the end.

The atmosphere at court was becoming increasingly gloomy. As Madame de la Tour du Pin wrote in her memoirs: ‘It was the fashion to complain of everything. One was bored being in attendance at court. The officers of the Garde de Corps, who were lodged in
the château when on duty, bemoaned having to wear uniform all day; the ladies of the household could not bear to miss going to supper in Paris during the eight days of their attendance at Versailles. It was the height of bon ton to complain of their duties at court, profiting from them nonetheless. All the ties were being loosened, and alas it was the upper classes which led the way.’ Attendance at
court was extremely poor (the royal couple held ‘court’ on Sundays and for religious festivals and occasionally on Tuesdays, when the ambassadors would come to pay their respects) and even the Queen’s balls were very scantily attended, which led to a lack of partners and general disgruntlement all round. The royal couple were becoming increasingly
elusive. Louis had sunk into a depression after the death of Vergennes and spent all of his time either hunting, eating, sleeping or crying on his wife, while Marie Antoinette hid herself away either at the Petit Trianon or in the warren of tiny rooms behind her state apartments and saw very few people. Even Madame de Polignac, from whom she was becoming increasingly estranged, was being kept at
arm’s length as the Queen began belatedly to realise that it was the favours that she had showered upon Yolande and her set that had, in part at least, contributed to this terrible mess. However, with Louis wallowing in a state of depressed apathy, it fell to Marie Antoinette, encouraged by Loménie de Brienne, to take up a more active role in the government. She had taken no interest in politics in
the past and had very little wish to get involved now but the circumstances demanded that she do her best to support the weakened King - which of course played straight into the hands of her enemies who could now go about the place saying that she was meddling in politics and entirely to blame for everything that went wrong.

She was even beginning to feel alienated from people
who had always been wholeheartedly on her side, such as the Duc de Coigny, who had always been one of her greatest admirers but had fallen out with the King and Queen when their financial reforms at court had forced him to lose one of his most prestigious and fiscally rewarding positions. The Comte de Vaudreuil and Duc de Polignac also lost positions and income and
became noticeably icy around the Queen and her husband as did many others who also found themselves bereft of valuable favours and offices in the royal economy drive. Marie Antoinette had always counted upon her little faithful cotérie of friends to boost her ego and offer a sweetened antidote to the unpopularity and censure that she faced elsewhere but it seemed as though even they
were beginning to desert her now that she had cut off their supply of favours. It must have made the already downcast Queen wonder if she had ever truly had any friends at all.

There were some consolations though. The Princesse de Lamballe was as faithful as ever and Marie Antoinette was also beginning to spend more time with her Mistress of the
Robes the Comtesse d’Ossun, who was an altogether more steady character than Yolande de Polignac and her rakish set and did her best to cheer the disconsolate Marie Antoinette up with quiet supper parties and balls in her apartments. The Queen, who had once danced until dawn, rarely danced nowadays but she obliged the kindly Comtesse by politely taking part in a few dances before
sitting out the rest.

Marie Antoinette also did her best to foster a friendship with her young sister-in-law Madame Élisabeth, who had turned twenty three in 1787. Élisabeth was a sweet natured and extremely devout girl, very similar in appearance to her eldest brother Louis and passionately devoted to both him and her youngest brother the Comte d’Artois, who could do absolutely no wrong.
in her eyes. On her sixteenth birthday in May 1780, the princess had left the nursery behind for good and moved into her own apartment at Versailles which Marie Antoinette, with typical generosity, had arranged to have freshly and most sumptuously decorated. The princess had never made any secret of her wish to be allowed to become a nun like her aunt Louise and as the
years went by without any sign of a suitable husband (the princess told Madame d’Oberkirch that ‘I could only marry a King’s son, and a king’s son must reign in his father’s states so that I would no longer be a Frenchwoman. Better to stay here at the foot of my brother’s throne, than to ascend another’) it is probable that her brother and those who loved her were worried that she too might
take flight in the middle of the night and run away to a Carmelite convent.

However, her new rooms overlooking the Orangery were in a complete contrast to the tiny nun’s cell that her soul desired. She had eight rooms to herself: two antechambers, a reception room, a bedroom (hung with green Lyons damask in the summer and crimson silk velvet in the winter), a grand
cabinet, a billiard room, a library and then a private boudoir, all of which were furnished with the most exquisite taste and luxury. She also now owned the Princesse de Guéménée’s delightful country house at Montreuil and was happily doing it up although her brother had ordered that she would not be allowed to spend the night there until she turned twenty five in 1789.
Always delighted to offer a surprise to someone that she loved, Marie Antoinette had revealed the news of the purchase of Montreuil in a typically playful manner by suggesting to Élisabeth that they drive out to the house together to say goodbye before surprising her with the keys when they arrived.

However, despite this generosity and thoughtfulness, the two
young women never really hit it off. Although she would never say so to Marie Antoinette, Madame Élisabeth very much disapproved of her sister-in-law’s ramshackle lifestyle, the dissolute company that she insisted upon keeping and, perhaps worst of all, the disrespectful manner with which she occasionally treated and spoke of the King. Meanwhile, for her part,
Marie Antoinette found Élisabeth’s gentle manners and rigid piety extremely dull and perhaps sensed the disapproval that the younger woman tried so hard to conceal, fearing that it would hurt her brother’s feelings. However, for now they muddled along well enough and Marie Antoinette liked her sister-in-law’s company enough to have a room prepared for her beneath the
eaves of the Petit Trianon so that she could stay there with her.

However, her main comfort during these dreary last years of the ancien régime was the elegant Swede Axel von Fersen, who had returned to France in the summer of 1787 and immediately hastened to the side of Marie Antoinette at Versailles. Although they were almost certainly not
lovers in the sexual sense, they were definitely very close with Axel seeing himself as a sort of chivalric knight chastely adoring and defending the honour of his lady while Marie Antoinette, whose life seemed full of cares and troubles, sought solace in his flattering attentions and the fact that he never seemed to ask anything of her, unlike everyone else. The fact that, like her, Fersen
was an outsider and also didn’t come with a demanding family and clinging troop of hangers on all clamouring for money and positions can’t have hurt either. Although they probably weren’t sleeping together, it is likely that Marie Antoinette, wishing to keep him close, invited Axel to stay in the warren of rooms that lay behind her apartments, which were so
secret that one of her own pages was astounded to come across them after the court left Versailles for good in 1789.

Besides her tattered reputation and the ever worsening financial crisis, Marie Antoinette was also desperately worried about the health of her children. The delicate Dauphin was still continuing to give concern and on 14 June 1787 her
youngest daughter Sophie, who had been weak and ailing since birth, died at the age of just eleven months old probably as a result of convulsions brought on by teething. Marie Antoinette was devastated to lose one of her children and referred to the baby as her ‘little angel’ when she took her sister-in-law Madame Élisabeth to the Grand Trianon to view the child lying in state beneath a
tiny coronet and a mantle embroidered with gold fleur de lys. According to court etiquette princesses were not officially mourned until they had reached the age of seven so only her immediate family wore black in her memory that summer.

Nonetheless, there was a last lingering reminder of Sophie in the painting of the Queen surrounded by her surviving children which was
painted by Madame Vigée-Lebrun in 1787, where the Dauphin points towards the baby’s blue silk swathed empty cradle, the child herself having been hastily painted out after her death. To modern eyes, Marie Antoinette, dressed in opulent crimson velvet trimmed with exquisite lace, looks careworn and rather older than her thirty one years and even Vigée-Lebrun’s
famously flattering brush couldn’t conceal the coarsening of the Queen’s once radiant complexion, her double chin or the puffiness of eyes that sparkled not with happiness but with tears. Overall though the portrait is a triumph that cleverly draws inspiration from paintings of the holy family to create something both stately and touching. For many though this portrait evokes feelings
of sadness, representative as it is of a way of life and a family that was rapidly approaching destruction.

The portrait of the Queen and her children, for which Madame Vigée-Lebrun was paid an enormous 18,000 francs, was due to be displayed at that year’s Salon in Paris. However, it arrived late and when the empty frame was displayed for a few days before its arrival,
someone pinned a placard saying ‘Behold the Deficit!’ inside. However, the painting itself was to be a great success, much to the relief of its artist who, well aware of the unpopularity of its chief sitter, had stayed away from the Salon for fear of hearing it insulted. When the exhibition ended it was transferred to Versailles and placed where Marie Antoinette could see it every
day as she passed by on her way to morning Mass, while the King informed the extremely gratified Madame Vigée-Lebrun that ‘I know nothing about painting, but you make me like it.’

Meanwhile, the political situation was worsening by the day as Loménie de Brienne, well meaning but completely lacking the brilliance of the likes of Calonne and Necker, battled
to save them from financial ruin, was aghast at the ever increasing deficit and struggled to make the King, now completely sunk into apathy, assert himself against his opponents. Louis, never the most prepossessing of figures at the best of times, was cruelly lampooned everywhere and mocked for his corpulence, laziness and lack of vigour, which of course included sexual ability
as well as political acumen. The worst insults, however, were as always reserved for Marie Antoinette, the foreign Queen who was now compared to Catherine de’ Medici, Isabeau of Bavaria and Messalina, all women who were deemed to have brought disgrace upon their sex by behaving in an ‘unwomanly’ way. Then as now, women who refused to remain meekly silent and
were seen to step out of line and meddle in affairs that were considered best left to their menfolk, were derided as being somehow unnatural and immoral - their ‘vices’, of course, being traits that their powerful male counterparts were usually congratulated for. That Marie Antoinette was actually nowhere near as politically savvy, intelligent or ruthless as the likes of Catherine de’ Medici is
perhaps her tragedy but this fact didn’t spare her from having a placard saying ‘Tremble, tyrants’ placed inside her box at the theatre.

In August 1787, Louis made a rare visit to the *lit de justice* at the parliament, in order to give his support to Loménie de Brienne’s extremely unpopular financial reforms. However, when he tried to push the edicts through he was loudly
opposed by his cousin the Duc d’Orléans who had set himself up as a liberal opponent of the royal party and a mouthpiece for the disaffected nobility. Furious, Louis stalked out of the hall then had the recalcitrant Duc exiled to his château at Villers-Cotterets, far away from his rabble rousing circle at the Palais Royal which had become the source of some disturbingly anti-monarchist
sentiments, inflamed by Orléans himself who now came out as Marie Antoinette’s greatest and most implacable enemy although social politesse still continued between the two politically estranged sides of the royal family with Marie Antoinette and Louis acting as very generous godparents to the Duc’s eldest sons at their official baptism in May 1788.
Added to these public troubles, there were private ones too as the Dauphin’s health became increasingly worse and his despairing parents were forced to confront the fact that their sweet natured and handsome little boy was unlikely to live for much longer. In March 1788 he was sent to live at Meudon, a charming château with a famously beautiful view that had in the past been
the traditional residence of the Dauphins of France. Here he resided in great comfort with the Duchesse de Polignac and his tutor the Duc d’Harcourt in attendance. His parents visited as often as they could, although his mother was extremely distressed by his appearance which was emaciated and twisted by tuberculosis. However, the air at Meudon was said to be
extraordinarily good and so she was still hopeful that he would make a miraculous recovery.

Unable to face the court let alone the general populace, Marie Antoinette moved to the Petit Trianon in July but it was a sad shadow of former summers spent there as she held no balls or any sort of galas and instead played games of bowls, read sentimental novels and
plucked out melancholy tunes on her harp. She kept her two other children Madame Royale and the Duc de Normandie close by her and even entertained the aunts to a splendid supper, where they were served roast suckling pig, capon in breadcrumbs and German waffles amongst other treats. The King sought distraction from his cares by spending most of his time hunting at Rambouillet but
came to Trianon every day to
dine quietly with his wife and
children when they weren’t at
Meudon keeping the Dauphin
company. The state
apartments of Versailles lay
silent and empty, deserted by
everyone.

Unfortunately, Marie
Antoinette’s hopes for the
nation were not quite so
sanguine as those she
harboured for her son. The
political and financial crisis
proved unstoppable and steadily worsened throughout 1788 as Loménie de Brienne and his efforts to resolve matters became increasingly discredited and the King increasingly powerless to do anything to stop the tide rising against him. Finally, on 8 August Louis took the step of announcing a meeting of the Estates General hoping that this would calm his critics and show that he was
ready, willing and able to deal with the mounting crisis. The Estates General was a coming together of the three notional estates of France - the nobility, clergy and commons (known as the ‘third estate’) where voted for representatives met to discuss the issues of the day. However, although it sounds much like a contemporary parliament there had been no meeting of the Estates
General for a hundred and seventy five years so this was a bold and significant move on the part of Louis and his council.

There was a small respite from all the strife when the three ambassadors of Tippoo Sahib, King of Mysore arrived at Versailles on 12 August and took up residence at the Grand Trianon where the air was soon filled with the scent of spices from their
meals. Their formal reception took place at the main palace when they were received by the royal family and rest of the court in the magnificent Hercules Room where the King, looking suitably majestic, was waiting for them on his throne, Marie Antoinette at his side on an armchair. Their daughter the nine year old Madame Royale, who had just recovered from an alarming
fever, was sitting amongst the most important ladies on a brocade covered dais to the side.

Everyone was fascinated by these exotic visitors to the court and the grand reception rooms of the palace were cramped full of courtiers, all dressed in their very finest clothes and eager to catch a glimpse of the three ambassadors and their entourage as they made their
way through Versailles. After the formalities had been dispensed with they were taken on a barouche ride around the park and treated to a display by the beautiful fountains before returning to the lofty marble colonnades of the Grand Trianon. Marie Antoinette, always keen to be distracted by novelties, was delighted by them but rather less keen on their curries, although she still gamely
managed to try one before
deciding that spicy food was
not for her.

However, although
apparently it was business as
usual at Versailles, behind the
scenes the crisis had reached
a head and the nation was
finally bankrupted while the
royal shares plummeted at the
Stock Exchange. The
desperate Loménie de
Brienne announced that the
much anticipated Estates
General meeting would take place the following May, hoping that this would cause an upswing in confidence and share prices but it was too little, too late. On 16 August, a few days after the glorious reception of the Mysore ambassadors, word spread that he was considering compulsory taxation in order to give the economy a much needed boost. This unpopular measure turned out to be his
downfall and after a last ditch attempt to secure the support of Necker, who disdainfully repudiated him, he was forced to hand Marie Antoinette his resignation just over a week later. She summoned Necker, still commonly believed to be the only hope of turning the situation around, to see her early the next morning and asked him to accept the position of Director General of Finance as well as a
position on the Council of State. ‘As I am responsible for bringing back Necker and my fate is to bring bad luck, I feel that, should some infernal combinations be once more at work to make him fail, then the King’s authority will suffer and I will be even more detested than before,’ the dejected Queen later told Mercy, sadly accepting that as far as the French people were
concerned, nothing she ever did would ever be right and she would be damned by them whatever she did. She may never have actually said the words ‘Let them eat cake’ but as far as the French were concerned, she might as well have done.
The Austrian Woman
1789-1791

‘The abyss opening at their feet.’

The winter of 1788 was one of the harshest that anyone could remember and as it followed on from the drought and terrible hailstorm of that summer which had decimated much of the
country’s crops, the poor of France were brought to their knees, crippled by rising bread prices. Meanwhile at Versailles, Louis and Marie Antoinette prepared themselves for the worst as the Dauphin’s condition deteriorated by the day. The Queen now spent much of her time at Meudon, watching over her child’s sick bed and making stilted small talk with his governess, Madame de
Polignac.

The two women, once so close that rumours had spread that they were lovers, were now barely on speaking terms. Having finally woken up to the harm that the grasping, gossiping Polignac set was doing to her reputation Marie Antoinette had taken a step back and disassociated herself from them and their antics. She also found herself at odds
with the Duchesse over the disgrace of Calonne, who was very much a creature of the Polignacs, and the financial cut backs which had resulted in the loss of some pecuniary favours to Madame de Polignac’s relatives including her husband and her lover the Comte de Vaudreuil.

The Dauphin, suffering from the final stages of his illness but still as sweet natured as ever, was quick to
pick up on the silent hostility between the two women and now declared that he didn’t like the Duchesse’s heady floral scent as it gave him headaches and asked for her to be banned from his bedside, which meant that his mother was alone as she sat beside him during the long cold early months of 1789. The little boy tried to cheer her up by ordering that she be served all of her most
favourite meals when she stayed to dine with him but still the silent tears trickled down her cheeks as she looked at her sick child and wondered what the future held.

There had been a great deal of argument about where the much anticipated meeting of the Estates General, the first for 175 years, should take place before the King, who hoped to get plenty of hunting
in between the various debates that he would be forced to attend, got his way and the meeting was scheduled to open at Versailles on 4 May 1789. Wracked with worries about her son’s health, Marie Antoinette could hardly bear to contemplate what was bound to be a miserable experience and so when she wasn’t at Meudon, spent all of her time shut up alone in
her private rooms at Versailles where she whiled away the long hours worrying about the Dauphin’s health, the forthcoming meeting of the three estates and the reports of serious unrest on the streets of Paris, where the Réveillon wallpaper factory had been involved in an immense riot in which three hundred people were killed before the royal troops could impose order.
'Come, dress my hair, Léonard, I must go like an actress and exhibit myself to people who may hiss me,' Marie Antoinette said to her hairdresser on the morning of 4 May as she readied herself for the procession through the streets of the town of Versailles that was due to start the meeting of the Estates General. Although her words sound flippant, it was clear that her mood was very
far from light hearted as dressed in glittering cloth of silver and with the Sancy diamond in her hair, she walked at the side of the King (who also looked splendid in cloth of gold, with the Regent diamond pinned to his plumed hat) at the head of the enormous procession that made its way past huge crowds from the Church of Notre-Dame in Versailles to the Church of Saint Louis,
where a celebratory Mass would be heard. Behind the royal couple there was the rest of the royal family and their attendants, followed by the deputies of the Estates General, with the clergy in their religious dress, the nobility in black silk and white breeches, flourishing plumed hats and with their swords jangling at their hips and the Third Estate in plain black.
To Marie Antoinette’s great annoyance, Louis’ mutinous cousin the Duc d’Orléans was a deputy for the nobility but in typical showman style had opted to walk with the Third Estate instead, towering over the other deputies and making sure that all of the loudest cheers were for him while Louis received only a few muted shouts of approval and the Queen, who stared
straight ahead in haughty silence, got nothing at all. It must have been an alarming experience, to find herself on foot and surrounded by hostile crowds but as the true horror of the revolutionary mob had not yet been exposed, it’s unlikely that Marie Antoinette felt particularly frightened for her life as she walked by, her face completely impassive until she drew level with the royal
stables where the little Dauphin, who had been brought from Meudon for the occasion, was lying on a sofa on one of the balconies. Both the King and Queen looked up and smiled at their son as they went past but it was noticed that they had tears in their eyes as they did so.

The meeting officially began a day later when the royal family, court and over a thousand deputies crammed
into the huge Salon of the Menus Plaisirs at Versailles to hear the opening speeches, one of which was to be delivered by Necker, who was still being hailed as the man of the moment and the potential saviour of France. Marie Antoinette, this time wearing purple satin spangled with diamonds and with a towering white ostrich feather and delicate *aigrette* of diamonds in her powdered
but sadly thinning hair, sat on an armchair placed slightly below her husband (who fell asleep and audibly snored during Necker’s admittedly extremely long winded speech) and fanned herself with a diamond studded fan as she bleakly surveyed the rows of faces in front of her, who all stared back curiously at the Queen of whom they had heard so much and seen so little in recent years.
Versailles was expected to play host to the deputies for quite a few months and with typical generosity Marie Antoinette insisted that the gardens of Versailles and her own Trianon should be open to the delegates, who were then able to assuage their natural curiosity about the extravagance that they had heard so much about. It had been reported that the Trianon was incredibly
opulent with columns inlaid with huge diamonds and cloth of gold hanging at all the windows and all manner of shocking self-indulgent luxuries, but the deputies, seeing instead a charming little pavilion decorated with elegant simplicity, were disappointed to find that this was not at all the case. What else, they might have wondered, had been exaggerated about the Queen
and her reportedly depraved lifestyle, which allegedly involved orgies with both sexes.

However, Marie Antoinette’s thoughts were not with the deputies but with her son the seven year old Dauphin who was quietly dying at Meudon. Both of the boy’s parents spent many long hours at his bedside, doing their best to remain cheerful and trying to distract
the ailing child from his sufferings. Like his father he was extremely fond of history so the King read to him from his favourite history books, while the Queen did her best to hide her tears before collapsing and sobbing her heart out on her husband when they had left the room. It was said that the little boy was so good natured that he even endured the ministrations of a particularly
clumsy valet rather than have the man sent away and one wonders what sort of King he would have made if he had survived. Possibly he was too gentle for the fledgling France that was emerging even as he lay on his deathbed.

The Dauphin died in the arms of his mother in the early hours of 4 June. Both Louis and Marie Antoinette were devastated by their
son’s death and spent the next day in total seclusion at Versailles while the embalmed body of the dead prince lay in state at Meudon. On 7 June, the entire court turned out to offer their condolences to Marie Antoinette who was going out of her mind with grief and exhaustion as the result of severe insomnia, while the deputies of the Third Estate gave offence by asking if the
King would receive them in the palace to discuss business pertaining to the Estates General. ‘Are there no fathers amongst them?’ the distraught King asked. Both of the royal couple were stung by the general lack of interest in their son’s passing. It seemed inconceivable to them that they had lost the love of their people to such an extent that the death of the Dauphin, whose birth had
occasioned such extraordinary joy amongst the populace, gave rise to little more than a polite apathy.

Marie Antoinette’s eldest son was laid to rest beside that of his sister Sophie at the royal necropolis at Saint-Denis on 12 June. It was normally decreed that the funeral of a Dauphin, with all the fuss and ceremony that court etiquette demanded, should cost in the region of
350,000 livres but the royal coffers were completely empty and so a rather more modest funeral took place funded by some cash that Louis had managed to get together by cutting corners elsewhere. According to custom, the King and Queen did not attend their son’s funeral but instead spent the day in prayer at Versailles before going to Marly with their most trusted attendants.
for what they hoped would be a week of solitude and mourning away from the pressures of the court.

However, their troubles only pursued them from Versailles when on 17 June, after weeks of squabbling between the orders, the Third Estate, who saw themselves as the saviours of France, declared themselves a National Assembly, invited the other orders to join them.
and announced that they, not the King, would be responsible for drafting a new constitution for the nation. Louis and Marie Antoinette were appalled by what they saw, quite rightly as it happened, as a direct attack on the authority of the monarch. Necker tried in vain to persuade them to seek terms with the fledgling Assembly, which he reminded them was intended
to be the mouthpiece of the nation, and even proposed that they modify the current constitution so that it was along the same lines as that in England. However, Marie Antoinette, backed by her two brothers-in-law and most of the aristocracy, urged the King to hold firm and repudiate their insolence, even appearing before him with her remaining two children and falling, weeping
prettily, to her knees in order to beg him not to give in to the demands of the Third Estate.

Indecisive as always, Louis wavered between the two sides. On one hand, he had no wish to annoy the Queen, whom he feared as much as he loved, but on the other he was terrified of causing offence to Necker and the dour faced men of the Third Estate, whom he knew had
ever increasing support throughout the country. Once again he bemoaned the absence of the dead Vergennes, who would have known just what to do and in the end agreed to give a speech, prepared by Necker, to the deputies of all three orders on 23 June. Although Louis promised to introduce reforms and overhaul the current taxation system, Necker was furious to hear
the King whom he had counselled to be conciliatory towards the members of the Third Estate, alter the wording of his carefully prepared speech and go on to denounce the merging of the three orders as a National Assembly as illegal and against the constitution of France. Clearly Louis had hoped to please everyone with his speech but while Marie Antoinette was
relieved to see him stand firm against the Third Estate, Necker was furious and immediately handed in his resignation.

Angry crowds gathered at the palace when news of Necker’s resignation began to spread and Marie Antoinette was forced to go to him and personally beg him to reconsider, even though she had every intention of foiling his attempts to get Louis to
accept the National Assembly. In the event, it took just four days for Necker to have his way and Louis to agree that the estates could meet and vote together, by which time most of the clergy and a large chunk of the nobility, including the Duc d’Orléans and the extremely popular Marquis de Lafayette, had already joined with the Third Estate. The news was greeted with
acclamation in Paris, but although people were celebrating on the streets about ‘their’ victory over the old régime, the uneasy atmosphere simmered on and there were increased bouts of violence and rioting amidst the celebrations.

At Versailles, Marie Antoinette appeared with her son in her arms on the balcony above the marble courtyard to receive the
cheers of the huge crowd that had gathered there when news of the National Assembly’s triumph broke. However, although she was all smiles for the populace, inside she raged against Necker and the King, whose weakness, she believed, looked set to leave them entirely at the mercy of the Third Estate. She urged the King to use his troops to make a show of power and at
the same time control the unrest in the capital but as might be expected, the sudden arrival of several thousand soldiers around Paris just made matters much worse as the populace, whipped into terror by the speeches of the rabble rousers of the Palais Royal, believed that the King, hitherto regarded as the apathetic but ultimately benevolent tool of his wicked wife, was
planning to massacre them all.

The National Assembly demanded that the troops be withdrawn only to be informed that they were there to control unrest not cause trouble. Urged on by talk of an ‘aristocratic plot’ masterminded by the Queen and designed to overthrow the Assembly, the deputies, fearing for their lives, proclaimed themselves to be
a Constituent Assembly with the power to make their own laws. Urged by Marie Antoinette, Louis reacted by dismissing Necker and most of his ministers on 11 July, replacing them with conservative nobles who could be relied on to follow the King’s line.

The news of Necker’s dismissal was greeted with disbelief and then fury in Paris, where the Queen and
her cronies were blamed for the former minister’s disgrace. There were riots in the capital’s streets, which were exacerbated when a regiment led by the Prince de Lambesc, a distant cousin of the Queen, charged into a crowd at the Tuileries in an attempt to disperse protestors who had been pelting them with stones, giving rise to more fears that the King was planning the massacre of his
own people. On 12 July, a young lawyer called Camille Desmoulins clambered on to a table outside the Café du Foy at the Palais Royal to give a rabble rousing speech that likened the current situation to the infamous St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of August 1572 and ended by entreating the already panic stricken populace to arm themselves and don cockades so that they
would know each other in the violence that was sure to ensue. Whipped into a frenzy by this the people first adopted a green cockade, green being the colour of liberty, but then when word spread that green was the colour of the Comte d’Artois’ livery, red and blue, the traditional colours of the city of Paris were worn instead.

Two days later a huge crowd seized control of the
Hôtel des Invalides, where the royal weaponry was stored, and took several thousand guns and a number of cannons which they used to arm themselves against the royal troops. They had no ammunition though and believing that this could be found at the royal fortress of the Bastille, which had been a symbol of royal oppression for over a century thanks to the practice of sending
prisoners there by order of a royal *lettre de cachet* which involved no trial and could not be appealed against, they duly marched in their thousands across town to the Faubourg St Antoine where the dark fortress towered over the neighbouring streets. Although more strongly defended than the Invalides, the Bastille fell in a matter of hours and its governor the Marquis de Launay was taken.
prisoner and crudely decapitated with a flick knife before his head was paraded in grisly triumph through the streets.

At Versailles, the royal family remained in blissful ignorance of events in Paris until nightfall when the Duc de Liancourt woke Louis up at dawn to inform him that the Parisians had rioted and seized control of the Bastille, releasing the seven political
prisoners held there. ‘Is it a revolt?’ Louis asked wearily. ‘No, sire,’ Liancourt replied. ‘It is a revolution.’

The next morning, Louis paid a visit to the deputies in the Menus Plaisirs, interrupting a rather offensive speech about his wife and Madame de Polignac fraternising with the troops that had recently been stationed at Versailles. For once he had not relied on one
of his ministers to prepare his speech but instead improvised his own, in which he informed the deputies that it was never his intention to attack the people of Paris but rather to protect them and that the royal troops stationed there would be immediately ordered to withdraw. In return, the deputies demanded that Necker be reinstated to his former position as this would do much to calm the
agitated populace, which the clearly beleaguered King reluctantly agreed to do. Louis was then escorted back to the palace by a great crowd of cheering deputies, relieved that the crisis looked set to end.

However, back at the palace all was in turmoil as Marie Antoinette ordered her trunks to be packed with clothes and her jewels and discussions took place about
where the royal family and their associates should flee to. Word had got back to Versailles that the leaders of the mob that had overwhelmed the Bastille and then murdered its governor, had threatened to kill the Queen, Comte d’Artois and Madame de Polignac as well and so it was decided that the latter two at least should leave France with their families until the situation
had calmed down. However, there was still some doubt about what Louis, Marie Antoinette and their own family should do. Louis, hesitant as always, called a meeting of his council and family and suggested that they should withdraw either to Compiègne or to Metz, the fortified town close to the Austrian border where Marie Antoinette had spent her first night on French soil nineteen
years earlier. The Queen was in total agreement with the Metz plan, which had the additional bonus of meaning that she would be close to her own country of Austria as well as far away from the dangers of Paris.

However, some members of the council as well as the Comte de Provence argued that the King and his family should remain at Versailles and that it would be ill
advised for the royal family to be seen deserting the palace at such a time. They also thought that Metz’s proximity to Austria, the very thing that recommended it to Marie Antoinette, would give rise to even more panic if the Parisian rabble rousers got it into their heads that the forces of the Emperor would soon be massing against them in defence of the foreign Queen while the royal family nipped
across the border and abandoned the country altogether. There was also the fact that unlike his wife, Louis had not yet been directly threatened by the Parisian mobs and so his safety was not felt to be at immediate risk. Marie Antoinette, however, was a different matter but when it was suggested that she should take the royal children and leave for a place of greater
safety, she haughtily refused and reminded everyone present that as both his Queen and his wife it was her duty to remain at Louis’ side during this time of crisis even he himself was urging her to leave.

However, everyone was in agreement that the Comte d’Artois and Madame de Polignac, both of whom were almost as unpopular as Marie Antoinette and held equally
to blame for the financial ruin that threatened the stability of the nation, should leave France as soon as possible along with the Abbé de Vermond and some of the conservative members of the court such as the Prince de Condé. The Comte d’Artois, who remained sanguine that this was just a temporary hiccup and everything would be restored back to its normal state before long, was keen to
leave but Madame de Polignac proved harder to persuade and initially refused to go, claiming that her place was beside the Queen and with her charges, the royal children. In the end, Marie Antoinette and Louis, both of them in tears, had to persuade her to leave, with the Queen telling her that: ‘I am terrified of everything; in the name of our friendship go, now is the time for you to escape from
the fury of my enemies. Don’t be a victim of your attachment to me, and my friendship for you.’

The Artois and Polignac families, as well as several others of the Queen’s formerly close little *cotérie* of friends left Versailles at midnight on 16 July. The emotionally shattered Queen, unable to believe the surreal situation that they had found themselves in, could not bring
herself to say goodbye in person to her dearest friend (who was disguised as a maid for her escape) but instead sent a purse containing five hundred louis, the last of the royal gifts that had brought ruin to them both, and a tear-stained note that said only: ‘Adieu, the most tender of friends. The word is terrible to pronounce but it must be said. Here is the order for the horses. I have no more
strength left except to embrace you.’ Although Marie Antoinette had been somewhat estranged in recent years from both Madame de Polignac and her brother-in-law Artois, who had once been the most sympathetic member of her French family, all of this was forgotten in the horrors of the present situation and the terrible sorrow of hearing their carriages rumble out of the
palace courtyard at the start of their long journey. It was the end of an era.

The next morning, Louis went off to Paris to show himself to his disordered populace and try his best to restore calm to the situation. Marie Antoinette offered to go with him but, aware of her unpopularity, Louis sadly refused to allow this and instead insisted upon going alone, having taken the
precaution of writing his will and receiving what he hoped would not be his final communion before departure. Left behind at Versailles, Marie Antoinette spent the day alone in her apartments with her children, trying her best to distract them while at the same time attempting to hide her apprehension. She had already decided to throw herself on the mercy of the National Assembly should
Louis fail to return from Paris and as the day wore on she confided tearfully in the faithful Madame Campan that she believed that he would not be coming back, her faith in the basic humanity of the Parisian mob having been shattered by the hideous and vicious death of the Marquis de Launay.

At six, word came that the King was returning from Paris and several hours later,
Louis himself arrived back at Versailles - exhausted, bedraggled but otherwise unharmed and with a tricolour cockade, the new symbol of the French nation, attached to his hat. His wife and children ran down the stairs to greet him and Marie Antoinette, overcome with relief, threw herself into her husband’s arms and hugged him as he murmured: ‘Thank God there was no more
violence.’ The departure of the Polignacs was just the first in what was to be a steady exodus over the next few months as several aristocratic families, fearing the violence and, like the Comte d’Artois, believing that they would soon be able to return to France, fled Versailles and travelled abroad. The once bustling palace now fell ominously quiet as the
cramped apartments, once so prized and hotly sought after, began to empty while their noble inhabitants scurried away like rats fleeing a sinking ship. Marie Antoinette, desperately lonely and fearful of what the future would bring for her family, did her best to keep up appearances but it was obvious to everyone that she was on the verge of a breakdown. The news coming
in from the rest of France of rioting in the provincial cities and destruction of dozens of châteaux did nothing to allay her fears but rather underlined that this revolution, apparently no longer contained just to Paris, was not a problem that would easily go away.

The beleaguered Queen spent the rest of July isolated in her apartments, seeing hardly anyone other than her
family, Count Mercy, who came to deliver bulletins about the latest events in Paris elsewhere and Axel von Fersen, who had discreetly rented rooms in Versailles and spent as much time with her as he dared to. She spent much of her time writing frantic letters to her sisters and brothers and Madame de Polignac, who had settled in Switzerland with her family. Absence did much to make
the heart grow fonder in the case of these two friends and the Queen now poured all of her anxieties and fears out on to the paper, expressing thoughts that she barely dared to speak out loud in this newly silent and sinister Versailles. ‘We are surrounded only by distress, misfortune and unhappy people. Everyone is fleeing and at this point I take comfort in thinking that all
the people whom I care most about are far away from me. Also I see no one and I spend the whole day alone in my quarters. My children are my sole resource.’ For Marie Antoinette, always so desperate for approval and admiration, the thought that she brought only misfortune to those whom she cared about was a deeply distressing one and the Queen became increasingly
withdrawn as the year progressed, while all the while the lampoons and pamphlets denouncing her depravity and cruelty continued to multiply and become ever more vicious.

Outwardly, it seemed as though things had not really changed at Versailles, where the remaining ladies and gentlemen still attended the King and Queen’s levée and courtiers could still watch as
they ate their dinner or played cards in public. But the signs of strain were visible everywhere. It was whispered that the King, like his sister-in-law, the Comtesse de Provence, had taken to drink to ease his worries while the Queen was frequently seen to blink away tears or fiddle nervously with her bracelets and rings, which she compulsively twirled around her thin fingers. She seemed
utterly bewildered by the new state of affairs and fatally unable to grasp that times had changed and she needed to change with them if she was to survive. On the King’s name day in August the state representatives came to Versailles to pay their respects to their monarchs who looked as glittering and remote as ever on their thrones. The new Mayor of Paris, the astronomer Bailly
decided to bow to the Queen rather than fall to his knees in abject reverence as etiquette usually decreed and was rewarded with a look of frigid hauteur and an unfriendly nod that broadcast her annoyance at this impudence to everyone present.

It was at this time that an English visitor, Dr Edward Rigby, who was visiting Versailles wrote home that he could not ‘behold the face of
Marie Antoinette, and not see symptoms of no common anxiety marked on it. The dignity of countenance which, according to various descriptions, formed at an earlier period of her life a most interesting addition to those claims of natural beauty so profusely bestowed on her, might be said, indeed, to remain, but it had assumed more of the character of severity. The forehead was
corrugated, the eyebrows thrown forward, and the eyes but little open, and, turning with seeming caution from side to side, discovered, instead of gaiety or even serenity an expression of suspicion and care which necessarily abated much of that beauty for which she had once with truth been celebrated.’

The one bright ray of hope at this time was the
appointment of the Madame de Tourzel as Governess to the Royal Children, replacing Yolande de Polignac who could obviously no longer continue in this role. Sensible, kind hearted, pragmatic and extremely loyal, Louise-Élisabeth de Tourzel was the perfect choice for such an important role in the royal household and gave the Dauphin and Madame Royale some much
needed stability at this difficult time. Marie Antoinette wrote her some lengthy instructions when she took up the post, describing her children’s characters and advising Tourzel about the best way to deal with them, naturally with a particular emphasis on the Dauphin who was, after all, the heir to the throne. ‘My children have always been accustomed to have complete trust in me and
when they do something wrong, to tell me so themselves. Which means that when I scold them, I look more hurt and sad about what they did than angry. I have accustomed them to the idea that a yes or no from me is irrevocable; but I always give them a reason befitting their age, so that they do not think it is moodiness on my part. My son does not know how to read and has difficulty
learning; but he is too distracted to concentrate. He has no idea of rank in his head and I would like that to continue: our children always find out soon enough who they are. He is very fond of his sister and has a good heart. Every time something makes him happy, a trip somewhere or a gift, his first impulse is to request the same thing for his sister. He was born cheerful; for his health
he needs to be outside a great deal, and I think it is best to let him play and work on the terraces rather than have him go any farther.’

Life at Versailles may have carried on much as it had always done with the inhabitants doing their best to ignore what was happening outside their privileged bubble but events were moving quickly elsewhere. At the end of September, the
wife of a labourer who had been assisted by Madame Élisabeth requested a private interview and told her that the people of Paris suspected the King of plotting to escape with his family to Metz and were planning to prevent this. Alarmed, Élisabeth immediately went to tell Marie Antoinette who naturally began to worry about what measures the people might possibly be
planning to take. Her thoughts took a more hopeful turn a few weeks later though when the loyal Flanders Regiment arrived at Versailles to act as reinforcements in case there was indeed an incident at the palace. Their arrival at the start of October did much to lighten the mood at court and encouraged the Queen to make the imprudent gesture of taking her family along to
visit the banquet being held in the regiment’s honour in the palace theatre, on the very same stage where her own wedding banquet had been held over nineteen years earlier.

The cheers and shouts of ‘Long live the Queen!’ that greeted her as, dressed in white and blue silk with a beautiful turquoise necklace around her neck, she stepped into the royal balcony went
straight to Marie Antoinette’s head and smiling radiantly she led her family down to the stage to meet the dashing and no doubt rather drunk officers who now cheered all the more loudly. She carried the Dauphin, who looked most winsome in his sailor suit, in her arms and encouraged by the men, she allowed the boy to walk from one end of the dining table to the other, surrounded on all
sides by smiling happy faces as his doting mother, who had not been so acclaimed for a very long time, stood to the side and proudly watched with tears of joy in her eyes.

However, as always, this innocent diversion that had given Versailles’ sadly deflated morale such an immense boost, was completely twisted by the Parisian gutter press who described it as an appalling
orgy of drunken sedition. They claimed that the Queen and her ladies had distributed white cockades designed to show support of the Bourbons to replace the tricolour cockades that the soldiers had torn from their hats and trampled on the ground in a fit of royalist fervour. They also claimed that the Queen had deliberately intoxicated the soldiers before ordering them to march on the
National Assembly and close it down and once they had accomplished this, who was going to stop them marching on the capital as well?

This hysterical reporting of the Versailles banquet unfortunately coincided with a total lack of bread in Paris, where the bakers shops were ominously closed and not a single loaf was to be had in the entire city. Enraged, the market women stormed the
Hôtel de Ville on the morning of 4 October and finding no satisfaction there, armed themselves and, no doubt inflamed by the speeches of the Duc d’Orléans’ paid rabble rousers who had probably engineered the whole sorry situation, announced their intention of marching on Versailles to demand that the King, who was still regarded as being intrinsically benevolent,
provide them with flour. However, amidst the shouts demanding bread for their starving families, there were more sinister cries threatening violence towards the Queen, who had for a long time been the focus of all their most bitter hatred and resentment.

It was a beautiful day and, completely unaware of the turmoil in Paris, Marie Antoinette decided to spend it at the Petit Trianon, which
was still her most favourite refuge. Axel von Fersen was back in the vicinity again and it’s likely that he spent at least some of the morning there with her before returning to the palace. Certainly she was alone in her grotto, enjoying the tranquility of a perfect autumn day, when one of her pages raced across the lawn to tell her that an immense mob of women was marching
on foot towards Versailles. Alarmed, the Queen scrambled up into the waiting carriage and, perhaps with one last wistful look at the pleasure pavilion where she had spent so many happy hours over the years, hurried back to Versailles where she was reunited with her children and awaited the arrival of the King, who was hunting at Meudon when the news reached him. She was
also joined by her sister-in-law Madame Élisabeth who had been at Montreuil but immediately hurried over to Versailles to support her brother and his family.

As the army of women marched inexorably on the palace, the King, Queen and their ministers met to discuss the best response to this new and sudden threat. Saint-Priest the Minister of the Royal Household suggested
that troops be sent to guard various points along the route in order to either slow the march down or prevent it from passing, while at the same time the Queen and royal children should be taken to Rambouillet where there was a garrison of royal troops to protect them. The King could then lead the rest of the troops out to meet the mob and either pacify them with promises of assistance
or, if they should prove intractable, use force to disperse them. Several of the ministers thoroughly approved of this plan which, it must be said, showed just the right sort of decisiveness and vigour that had hitherto been sadly missing from the royal response to current affairs. However, there was opposition from Necker and also, much more surprisingly, the Queen, who declared that
she had no wish to desert her husband, whom she guessed could not be counted upon to act with the necessary firmness, in his hour of need. ‘I know that they have come from Paris to demand my head,’ she said. ‘But I learned from my mother not to fear death and I will wait beside my husband for whatever comes.’

Once again an opportunity to escape passed the royal
family by thanks to Louis’ indecisiveness and Marie Antoinette’s determination to do her duty and remain at her husband’s side. Although it was not entirely unheard of for royal families to flee their palaces and live as exiles, it had not happened in France for quite some time (the last time was when the young Louis XIV had been forced to leave Paris in 1648 in the wake of the Fronde uprising).
and seemed very much like a last resort option to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, who were both of the opinion that leaving Versailles would be a weak gesture that left the nation prey to further anarchy.

The beautiful sunshine had given way to torrential rain by the time the first straggling groups of women arrived at Versailles at around four in the afternoon with still more
arriving over the next few hours until the courtyard before the palace was a great seething mass of people by early evening. The more observant courtiers noticed that several of the new arrivals were either extraordinarily muscular and mannish in appearance or were actually men disguised as women, which further increased suspicions that the whole thing had been
carefully orchestrated by the Duc d’Orléans and his cronies, who would have known that Louis would never allow his troops to fire on women, no matter how much they were provoked.

A delegation of women bearing a petition was received by the King who listened to their lists of grievances and gave his assurances that they would be given all possible assistance.
His kindly demeanour reduced all of them to tears and one of them even reportedly fainted before they all departed, chanting ‘Long live the King’, back to their comrades in the courtyard, who were deeply unimpressed by this show of loyalty and had by now apparently conceived a plan to take the King and his family back to Paris with them. When this news arrived
in the King’s council chamber, Saint-Priest ordered that the gates of Versailles, stiff and rusty from lack of use, should be closed and again urged both the King and Queen to leave for Rambouillet with their children. This time, terrified of the bedraggled mob that she had glimpsed from the palace windows, Marie Antoinette immediately assented and ordered for their
luggage to be packed and the carriages prepared. However,
as soon as the carriages were brought from the royal stables
across the way from the palace, the angry mob, guessing that the royal family
were planning to leave, surrounded them and cut the traces so that they could not
move. The royal family were now trapped in the palace.

The mood was desperately tense as the King and Queen,
determined as always to behave as normal, sat down for supper in the presence of their attendants. Louis, ravenous as always, ate heartily but Marie Antoinette could barely manage a single bite of food as she sat dazed and shocked at the table. The courtiers gathered at the windows overlooking the main courtyard and peered through the gathering darkness at the dozens of
campfires that had been lit in front of the palace. While the King remained with his ministers, Marie Antoinette stayed in her apartments with her sisters-in-law Madame Élisabeth and the Comtesse de Provence, all three of them not knowing quite what to do with themselves as they waited for news. At midnight, General Lafayette, a war hero, liberal aristocrat (his wife was the niece of
Madame de Noailles) and toasted darling of all Paris, arrived with thirty thousand men to boost the defence of Versailles and offer his support to the King, telling him that ‘If my blood must flow, let it be in the service of my King.’ Reassured, Louis immediately sent a note to his wife, telling her not to worry and to go to bed for all was well.

Believing that Lafayette
had managed to restore calm, Marie Antoinette sent away the noblemen who had offered to protect her and told her ladies Madame Thibault and Madame Auguié, the sister of Madame Campan who was known as the Queen’s ‘tigress’ thanks to her great height and fierce loyalty to her mistress, to go to bed and get some much needed sleep. However, clearly not at all reassured by
Lafayette’s show of bravado, the two ladies decided instead to barricade the doors and spend the night keeping watch over their mistress.

In the early hours of the morning, a large group of no doubt inebriated and thoroughly fed up women prowling around the palace had discovered that one of the small side gates had not been locked overnight. In no time at all, the mob had been
roused to action again and had teemed through the gate and into the courtyard before racing up to the palace itself, shouting curses and threats at the Queen, who was fast asleep in her apartments. The invaders overwhelmed the guards, decapitating at least one of them, before they rushed into the palace and up the marble staircase that led straight to Marie Antoinette’s apartments where they
slaughtered another guardsman, brutally beheading him with an axe before starting to hack their way through the locked door.

Hearing the terrible shouts and screams and the ominous sound of several dozen pairs of feet, clad in the wooden clogs commonly worn by the lower classes, rushing up the marble staircase, Madame Auguié ran to the guard room to investigate only to be
confronted by the sight of a young guardsman, covered in blood and leaning against the outer door that led to the staircase with all his might to keep the invaders out. ‘Save the Queen!’ he shouted over his shoulder to the appalled Madame Auguié. ‘They have come to murder her!’

Terrified, Auguié and her companion Madame Thibault immediately barred the door and ran to alert their mistress,
who was already awake, having been disturbed a noise on the terrace below her windows. Hastily pulling a petticoat and yellow redingote jacket on over her nightgown and still holding her stockings in her hand, Marie Antoinette pushed open the concealed door beside her bed and ran down the secret corridor that led to the Oeil de Boeuf chamber which acted as an
antechamber of the King’s apartments. However, the door turned out to be locked against her and, with the terrible shouts of the mob as they broke into her bedchamber behind her, she had to hammer frantically against the door, screaming for help until one of her husband’s valets came to open it with the terrifying news that her husband had gone to her apartments to
look for her.

Luckily for Louis, who had taken yet another one of the secret passages that lay behind the splendid walls of the royal apartments, the mob had already been thrown out of Marie Antoinette’s now completely trashed and destroyed bedchamber by the time he arrived and reassured that she had come to no harm from the guards now posted there, returned to his rooms
where he was reunited with his wife, with their children appearing soon after in the care of Madame de Tourzel who had been given strict instructions to take them both straight to the King if anything untoward happened. Everyone worried now about Madame Élisabeth and the Provences, whose apartments lay in a different wing of the palace but there was nothing that could be done to help
them now that the awful shouts and screams of the invading mob could be heard in the Oeil de Boeuf chamber, where they were trying to force the doors open to get to the Queen.

However, just as Louis and Marie Antoinette must have been bracing themselves for disaster and almost certain death, Lafayette arrived on the scene with his troops and dispersed the crowd, forcing
them out of the palace and into the courtyard below where they massed in seething fury, shouting threats and insults up at the windows and demanding that the royal family show themselves on the balcony. Marie Antoinette stood beside the window with her daughter and Madame Élisabeth, mercifully unscathed, on either side of her, while the Dauphin stood on a chair in
front of her, plaiting his sister’s long blonde hair and complaining about being kept waiting for his breakfast. Naturally, no one wanted to step out on to the balcony but somehow Lafayette managed to persuade them to do so and so the windows swung open and after a moment’s hesitation, Louis and Marie Antoinette, who carried her son in her arms and held her daughter by the hand, stepped
out to confront the hostile gaze of the mob.

Louis tried in vain to speak to the people but his voice was drowned out by the shouts of the mob. There were a few heartening cries of ‘Long live the King!’ but they were outnumbered by the calls of ‘To Paris! To Paris!’ that thundered from every side. Lafayette, who had followed the royal family out on to the balcony, spoke a
few words to remind the mob that the King had promised to provide bread, before they all went back inside. However, no sooner had they escaped than the mob began to chant ‘We want the Queen’. Even Lafayette, who had been at some pains to stress that the mob would never actually hurt Marie Antoinette, tried to persuade her to stay indoors but it turned out that the daughter of Maria Theresa
was made of far sterner stuff than anyone had hitherto realised and she insisted upon facing the crowd.

Taking her children by the hand, perhaps at the suggestion of Lafayette who hoped that the crowd would be moved to compassion by the sight of the Dauphin and Madame Royale weeping in terror as they clung to their mother, she stepped once more on to the balcony. ‘No
children! No children!’ the crowd bayed and reluctantly she sent them back into the room and turned to stand alone in front of the people. There was a moment of tense silence as they stared up at her and then to the surprise of everyone, including possibly themselves, they began to shout ‘Long live the Queen!’ Stunned, Marie Antoinette responded with a deep curtsey which just made them
cheer all the more wildly. Lafayette, relieved that the Queen had not been assassinated on the spot, stepped out and kissed her hand as the crowd roared their approval and redoubled their shouts of ’To Paris! To Paris!’

‘What are your intentions, Madame? Lafayette asked her as they stepped back into the blessed safety of the palace.

‘Whatever may be my fate,
it is my duty to die at the King’s feet with my children in my arms,’ Marie Antoinette replied before turning to the wife of Necker and saying: ‘They are going to force us to go to Paris, preceded by the heads of our bodyguards on pikes.’ To Saint-Priest, who had tried his very best to persuade her to leave the previous day, she could only lament: ‘Oh, why did we not leave last night?’
The decision to go to Paris having been made, everyone returned to their apartments to pack and prepare for departure. At one in the afternoon, Louis, Marie Antoinette, their children, Madame Élisabeth and the governess Madame de Tourzel, whose young daughter Pauline followed in another carriage, climbed into one of the King’s enormous travelling carriage and set off
towards the capital. Instead of the usual flanking outriders there were the grotesquely twisted heads of their slaughtered guards carried on pikes on either side of their carriage. ‘We’re bring back the baker, the baker’s wife and the baker’s boy!’ the jubilant crowd chanted as they walked alongside this peculiar cavalcade, while behind them at Versailles the shutters were slammed shut.
and a heavy silence fell on the gilded rooms.

As the royal carriage drew level with the gates of Madame Élisabeth’s pretty country estate at Montreuil, the princess gazed sadly up the avenue that she already had a presentiment that she would never see again. ‘Are you admiring your new lime avenue?’ her brother asked her with a fond smile. ‘No,’ she replied sadly. ‘I am
saying goodbye.’

It took seven long and incredibly weary hours for the royal carriage to reach Paris. Marie Antoinette, shocked and traumatised by the events of the last twenty-four hours, spent much of the journey crouched on the floor of the carriage, shielding her young son from the sight of the heads being waved outside the windows and trying her best to reassure
both of her terrified children. Protected, pampered and cushioned all her life long, Marie Antoinette had been, until now, effectively shielded from the unpleasant realities of life for the ordinary people of France. The journey to Paris that drizzly, miserable afternoon, surrounded by thousands of shouting, jeering people, many of whom were dressed in little more than a few rags,
was to be a baptism of fire for her and she would never again have any trust in the intrinsic goodness of the Parisian people.

They reached Paris late in the evening and came to a halt at the Chaillot tollgate where Bailly the Mayor of Paris was waiting to greet them. With no apparent irony, he presented the King with the keys to the city on a velvet cushion, saying with
an admirable attempt at courtly grace: ‘What a beautiful day it is, Sire, that has brought you and your august consort to take up residence in the capital.’ Louis, who was under no illusions that he and his family were effectively hostages, if not prisoners, of the National Assembly, managed to reply with equal good grace that he only trusted that his ‘coming to
Paris will put an end to lawlessness and bring back peace and order to the city.’

The exhausted royal family had expected to be taken straight to the royal palace of the Tuileries but instead found themselves taken to the Hôtel de Ville where they were persuaded to appear on the balcony again as the jubilant crowds that had gathered in the Place de Grève cheered themselves.
hoarse and shouted ‘Long live the King!’ There were even a few shouts for Marie Antoinette as she clutched her son to her bosom and faced the mob, rigid with indignation and wondering when her humiliating ordeal would finally come to an end.

In the event, the royal family, thoroughly shattered by their ordeal, arrived at the Tuileries at just after ten that
evening. The dilapidated old palace, which had not been properly inhabited by royalty since the minority of Louis XV, had become a kind of grace and favour residence since the young King moved to Versailles and was now home to a hotchpotch mix of people that included elderly courtiers, retired royal officials, artists and actors, many of whom had altered the internal fabric of the
palace beyond all recognition by adding haphazard staircases, partition walls and flimsy windows to suit their own requirements. The news of the royal family’s imminent arrival had come that morning and immediately Mique, who was in charge of the palace, now set to work evicting all of the tenants and supervising the dozens of servants who now swarmed through the draughty old...
rooms to prepare them for their new inhabitants.

The royal family were to inhabit the small apartment where Marie Antoinette had once or twice slept during visits to the capital in her ramshackle youth, while Madame Élisabeth was assigned rooms on the ground floor and the rest of the courtiers were expected to make shift as best they could with many sleeping on sofas.
and floors once all the available beds had been spoken for. The rather more fortunate Comte and Comtesse de Provence, who had followed them to Paris, were allowed to go to their own much more comfortable residence, the Palais du Luxembourg (the Comtesse lived at the nearby Le Petit Luxembourg mansion on the Rue de Vaugirard). While the adults did their best to hide
their unhappiness, the Dauphin was much more forthright and looked around in horror at the shabbily furnished rooms. ‘It’s so ugly here, Maman,’ he remarked as the family sat down to supper which the King, as usual, enjoyed enormously. ‘Departure for Paris 12.30, visit to the Hôtel de Ville, dine and sleep at the Tuileries,’ he wrote, rather phlegmatically, in his Journal.
later on.

The next morning, Marie Antoinette woke up to the sound of the market women of Paris shouting on the terrace outside her new bedchamber. They wanted to see the Queen and after a moment’s hesitation she asked her ladies, who looked disheveled and tired after a night camping out on sofas, to dress her in one of her prettiest dresses and find a hat
covered in flowers and ribbons. Thus charmingly arrayed, she went out on to the terrace to meet the women and answer their questions, eventually winning them over to the extent that she ended up distributing the trimmings on her hat amongst them before they let her go back inside. Later on she would sit down at her desk and write a quick note to Count Mercy: ‘Things look better this
morning. Don’t worry, I’m quite alright. And if one could forget where we are and how we came here we should be quite pleased with the way the people are behaving.’ And things must have seemed rather more hopeful on that first morning at the Tuileries - the people had appeared gratifyingly pleased to have them in the capital and perhaps, Marie Antoinette reasoned, having them in
Paris would do much to dispel the ugly rumours that had spread about them all once the people realised that they were, at heart, just an ordinary loving family. Certainly, when she was in the right mood, there could be no one more charming and charismatic than Marie Antoinette.

Their apartments, which had seemed so ramshackle and uninviting the night
before, looked much better in daylight and as the weeks progressed the Tuileries began to regain its former splendour thanks to Mique’s ongoing renovations and the appearance of several cart loads of furniture, paintings and other pieces from Versailles, which did much to improve matters. The Queen was lodged in a pretty ground floor apartment that had been recently renovated at
enormous expense by the Comtesse de la Marck, while the King slept on the floor above near the rooms assigned to the royal children and their governess. The aunts, who had come with them from Versailles, were lodged in the Pavilion de Marsan and Madame Élisabeth had rooms on the ground floor but quickly moved after a gang of market women clambered in through
her windows while she was at breakfast. The fact that they only wanted to praise her beauty and goodness was beside the point – after the events in October, she was now very nervous and insisted that she be moved to the far less accessible Pavilion de Flore, where she whiled away the hours with over a hundred books, most of which were religious tracts, sent from her own
personal library at Versailles or sadly sketching imaginary nature scenes while sitting on a window seat that looked towards the Seine.

Gradually, life returned to some semblance of normality as the stately antechambers and reception rooms of the Tuileries which, as Marie Antoinette reminded her complaining son, had once been considered a suitable residence for Louis XIV and
we must not be more particular than him’, were gradually restored to their former grandeur and hummed once again with life. The Princesse de Lamballe, who had been away from court for health reasons, returned to once again supervise the Queen’s household and Axel von Fersen, who had followed the royal family from Versailles, was able to discreetly dance attendance
on Marie Antoinette every day and night just as he had done before. The ladies of the court continued to attend the Queen’s *levée* and *coucher* and escorted her to Mass in the royal chapel just as they had done at Versailles, with the ones fortunate enough to have a Parisian residence being issued with passes that allowed them entry to the Tuileries. After a while the usual round of suppers and
receptions resumed again in the state rooms of the palace with the Queen holding court on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays and dining in public on Tuesdays and Sundays. In some ways it was as though nothing had really changed.

No one was quite sure if the King and Queen were indeed prisoners but for now they were content to stay where they were and let things happen. To the
deputies and ordinary Parisian people that she encountered, Marie Antoinette was all smiles and benevolence but in private she told Madame Campan that ‘Kings who become prisoners are not far from death’ and often shut herself away to cry, exhausted by the effort of maintaining an outwardly calm and amiable exterior and also deeply fearful about what the future
The National Assembly had agreed that the King should have an extremely generous 25 million livres a year, as well as the revenue from his estates, for living expenses but with over seven hundred people at the Tuileries, economies still had to be made and although Marie Antoinette was still getting her hair done by
Léonard and her dresses designed by Rose Bertin and Madame Éloffe, who came to see her as often as they always had, she was also having a lot of her older dresses adjusted and altered in order to save some money - with particular attention being paid to white, blue, red and pink dresses which were trimmed with tricolour ribbons in the hope of appealing to the Parisians.
She couldn’t resist splashing some cash on a few pieces of exquisite Reisener furniture for their apartments though, clearly resigned to staying there for quite some time to come.

However, although the future seemed uncertain, there were some compensations for this abrupt change in Marie Antoinette’s circumstances - for a start, thanks to the close
confinement of the family, she was now free to enjoy her children just as she had always longed to do and became more personally involved in their education. She took great pleasure in supervising Madame Royale’s lessons and enjoyed taking them out for walks in the famously beautiful public gardens of the Tuileries where the Dauphin, who turned five in March 1790,
won all hearts with his innocent, light hearted cavorting and games and was encouraged to wave and chatter to the admiring crowds that gathered to see him. Inside the palace, the family enjoyed spending more time together and the royal ladies were often to be found sitting together with their books and embroidery while the King taught his children how to play billiards.
and draughts or look at the stars through his precious telescope. When someone asked the Dauphin if he preferred Paris or Versailles, the little boy replied: ‘Paris, because I see so much more of my Papa and Maman.’

This new delight in family life can be glimpsed in the charmingly carefree painting by François Dumont of Marie Antoinette and her two children sitting beneath a tree.
in the Tuileries gardens. This lovely portrait looks at first glance as if it should belong to the family’s pre-1789 existence at Versailles but was in fact painted in the summer of 1790 and shows just how content the happily smiling Queen had become in the new even more close maternal role that she had adopted after the departure from Versailles, even if she was wracked with anxiety.
behind the scenes. The family are also dressed extremely elegantly in the pale muslins and silks that they had enjoyed at Versailles, while the Queen’s blue silk covered hat, bedecked in pale pink and white plumes, is a masterpiece of millinery. Certainly no greater contrast can be imagined to the stiff and rather unattractive Wertmuller portrait of the unhappy looking Queen and
her two eldest children walking in the gardens of the Petit Trianon back in 1785.

In February 1790 there came the terrible news of Emperor Joseph’s death, which was a terrible blow to Marie Antoinette who had idolised her eldest brother and had, at heart, always assumed that one day he would come and rescue her from a situation that she was finding increasingly
intolerable. His successor was their brother Leopold, whom she hadn’t seen since he paid a brief visit to Vienna just before her marriage. Although she and the rather starchy Leopold had never really got on, the letter that he wrote to her after Joseph’s death must have allayed some of her fears, even if in time she was to be sorely disappointed by her brother’s lack of assistance: ‘I can
picture your grief, all the greater as his late majesty was particularly attached to you and had your interests so very much at heart. Though I know such a loss is irreparable, I hope you will find in me a friendship and attachment and a real and sincere interest in everything that concerns you, which will be in no way less than that of our late brother. Please give me the same friendship, the
same confidence in return, and I flatter myself that I will in every way deserve it.’ Tactfully, he made no mention of the deceased Emperor’s ominous final deathbed advice for his sister: ‘I commiserate with them, but from this distance I cannot think of any means to extricate them from so bad a situation other than to show both prudence and firmness. If they have both, then
everything will perhaps arrange itself. If they lack them, then I have nothing more to say.’

Keenly aware that they urgently needed to win back the love and respect of the people, Louis and Marie Antoinette began to go on occasional official visits around Paris, much like the sort of engagements that the British royal family perform today, to see hospitals,
factories and poor areas like the streets of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine which had once been dominated by the now demolished Bastille prison, the fragments of which were being sported as earrings by the fashionable ladies of Paris and used as paperweights by their lovers. The royal family would turn up looking elegant but demure, wreathed in smiles and asking lots of questions
so as to appear interested and engaged. The overall effect was very successful, with both Louis and Marie Antoinette hearing nothing but cheers but there was still a long way to go before the scars of October 1789 were entirely healed. ‘Behold the joy of these good people,’ Bailly told the Queen when one of her appearances was greeted with particularly enthusiastic acclaim. ‘Yes,
the people are good when their masters visit them,’ she replied icily. ‘But they are savage when they visit their masters.’

To Marie Antoinette’s delight, they were allowed to spend the summer of 1790 at their château of Saint Cloud where the family could indulge in such bucolic and innocent delights as picnics in woodland glades, flower picking, small concerts at
which the Queen sang once again, carriage rides to Meudon and, for the King, his beloved hunting. Deprived of his daily sport, Louis had started to put on even more weight and had become even more lethargic and sluggish than before, which Marie Antoinette, unsurprisingly, found utterly annoying. She was bound to the King by ties of loyalty and affection but had never been romantically
in love with him - this emotion was, it seemed, entirely reserved for the handsome Swede, Axel von Fersen who followed the court to Saint Cloud and there resumed his daily visits to the Queen, often staying until the early hours of the morning, which provoked a great deal of gossip in certain circles. Marie Antoinette, always a bit of a flirt, seemed more infatuated with him than ever
while Axel’s obvious devotion had apparently been inflamed by his lady love’s new situation as a damsel in distress. Whereas their romance had almost certainly been intrinsically chaste when she was the Queen of Versailles it would be fair, perhaps, to wonder if matters had not taken a rather more intimate turn now that she was the beleaguered not quite a prisoner of the Tuileries and
in need of whatever comfort and attention he was able to provide.

However, Axel von Fersen was also besotted, and in a very obviously carnal way, with his lusciously beautiful mistress Eléanore Sullivan, who had once upon a time been the mistress of Marie Antoinette’s brother Joseph before ending up with an incredibly wealthy Indian Nabob Quentin Craufurd,
who set her up in considerable style in Paris. Madame Sullivan was the total opposite of Marie Antoinette - sophisticated, sensual and witty and was, furthermore, just the sort of woman that Fersen had always conducted his affairs with in the past. The sort who knew the rules of the game and how to play it which Marie Antoinette, so sentimental and desperate for
affection, did not. However, besides being a bit of a rake who was well aware of his own devastating effect on women, Fersen was also a massive snob and the royal mystique as well as the terrible tribulations with which Marie Antoinette was surrounded was enough to make him her devoted slave even if their relationship was entirely platonic.

It is clear though that
Marie Antoinette loved Axel von Fersen or was at the very least completely infatuated with his handsome face, his dashing air and, most compelling of all, his way of treating her with dewy eyed reverence which she needed more than ever at a time when everything little thing she did seemed to attract nothing but censure. Fresen’s apparently uncritical approval of her must have seemed like
a balm to her soul. However, although she loved to flirt and be admired by handsome young men, Marie Antoinette was not a particularly sensual woman (remember, it was not just Louis’ clumsiness and lack of ardour in the bedchamber that had been criticised by her brother) and even though Fersen was almost certainly a much more attractive prospect than poor Louis, she took her duty to
her husband and his crown far too seriously to ever seriously risk hurting either. The fact that she was so hurt and appalled by the broadsheets denouncing her promiscuity and alleged affairs also speaks volumes.

There were other visitors to the Château of Saint Cloud where courtiers and commoners alike were encouraged to visit the gardens and see their rulers at
play and Marie Antoinette, who was beginning to feel quite her old self again in such congenial surroundings, received friends from the past such as the Duchess of Devonshire and entertained them to elegant supper parties on the terrace. However, one visitor, the Comte de Mirabeau, one of the leaders of the National Assembly and, in the past, one of the King’s most vicious
opponents, came at dead of night and in utmost secrecy for an audience with the Queen. They met in the gardens, which may have held an echo of the infamous meeting that had caused such a stir during the Diamond Necklace scandal, and talked at length about Mirabeau’s plans for the King and royal family. Having been so opposed to them in the past, Mirabeau had concluded that
the revolution had run its course and discreetly offered his services to the King to act as a medium between them and the National Assembly - that this deal involved the settling of his enormous debts and a royal salary of 72,000 livres a year was just the icing on the cake.

Marie Antoinette did not like the Comte de Mirabeau, whom she regarded as venal, corrupt, immoral and violent
but, encouraged by Mercy who saw in him their best chance of resolving the situation, even she could not deny that he was a formidable weapon to have in their arsenal. He was a brilliant and passionate orator (as they had learned to their cost thanks to his diatribes against the royal family) and was still regarded with great respect by both the Assembly and, most crucially, the Parisians.
For his part, Mirabeau had no illusions about Louis, whom he regarded as completely pathetic, but he admired the spark of defiant courage that the Queen, whom he had once dismissed as frivolous and stupid, now displayed, declaring her to be the only one of the royal family worth talking to and the ‘only man’ that the King had about him. Although Marie Antoinette would never quite conquer
her revulsion of Mirabeau, she willingly gave him her hand to kiss at the end of their meeting and had to blink away tears when he fell to his knees before her, declaring, ‘Madame, I swear the monarchy will be saved.’ However, he had not always been so sanguine about their chances of survival and had previously commented to the Comte de la Marck that: ‘Can’t they see the abyss
opening at their feet? All is lost, the King and Queen are going to perish, and you yourself will see it. The mob will trample their bodies underfoot.’

On 14 July, the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, the royal family temporarily left the comforts of Saint Cloud to attend the great Fête de la Fédération, which took place on the Champs de Mars in Paris.
Naturally, Marie Antoinette had been dreading this occasion which for her marked a miserable year of upheaval and despair, but she pinned on a smile and appeared dressed to impress in white with tricolour ribbons and feathers in her hair and a pretty red, white and blue trimming on her shoes. There were enormous cheers from the three hundred thousand strong crowd when
the royal family arrived that morning, sheltered from the pouring rain in their covered carriage. Annoyed to have been dragged away from a day’s hunting at Saint Cloud for what he considered to be an insulting and undignified charade, Louis glowered from his throne as they watched Talleyrand, the rakish Bishop of Autun, celebrate Mass in the torrential rain before the time came for Louis to take
an oath to the constitution. Pleased by his show of acquiescence, the crowd erupted into cheers again and buoyed up by this enthusiasm, Marie Antoinette lifted her son up into her arms and showed him off to the people, who shouted ‘Long live the Dauphin!’ in his honour.

From almost the first moment that the royal family arrived at the Tuileries there
had been talk of their escape. Even Mirabeau had encouraged them to consider either retreating to Compiègne or Fontainebleau or travelling even further afield to Normandy, which still remained overwhelmingly royalist. His plan was that the royal family should leave openly but remain in France but other voices counselled a far more bold manoeuvre whereby the
King and his family would join forces with the émigrés who were massing beyond the borders of France, champing at the bit to kick start a counter revolution.

At first Louis was unwilling to leave, preferring instead to put his faith in the National Assembly and the French people, but this trust was beginning to wane rapidly and hit a steep nose dive at the end of 1790 when
the National Assembly decreed that from now on all church affairs were to come under their jurisdiction rather than that of Rome and that all priests had until 1 January 1791 to make an oath of loyalty to the Assembly, with those who refused being summarily defrocked and banned from office. Louis, who had been raised to be extremely devout, was appalled by this but had no
option but to give his assent to this measure even if he privately detested it. His aunts, however, were more forceful in their condemnation and in February 1791 left Paris with the intention of travelling to Rome where they would be free to follow their faith in peace. The old ladies, who had done so much to damage Marie Antoinette’s reputation in France, were briefly
apprehended at Arnay-le-Duc in Burgundy but then, thanks to the intervention of Mirabeau, were allowed to leave the country unmolested and make their way to Italy via a visit to their nephew the Comte d’Artois, who had settled at Turin with his family. How Marie Antoinette must have envied them all.

However, the departure of the aunts gave fresh impetus
to Marie Antoinette’s own secret escape plans. At some point after the events of October 1789, the royal couple had vowed to each other that from now on they were not going to be separated and so all suggestions that either Louis or Marie Antoinette should leave without the other were immediately dismissed. More plausible, however, was the suggestion that Marie
Antoinette should escape with her son, who would be dressed as a girl for the enterprise while the Queen herself went in disguise as a servant. However, yet again she rejected this plan, reiterating her decision to remain at the King’s side no matter what happened and in secret she continued to plot with Axel von Fersen, whom she trusted implicitly, and the General de Bouillé, who was
based at Metz near the Austrian border. It was Bouillé’s plan that the royal family separate into two groups, leave Paris in two swift separate carriages and make their way to Montmédy, where a loyal royalist regiment was based and where Louis could rally more to his cause, safe in the knowledge that the border with Austria was not too far away if his plans to regain
control of his own throne went sadly awry.

Excited and nervous about their plan, Marie Antoinette ordered Axel von Fersen to make the necessary arrangements. She refused to consider Bouillé’s suggestion that the family split into two, arguing that she had no wish to be separated from either her husband or her children, and instead of buying two small carriages she
commissioned a large and much more slow travelling carriage, known as a *berline*, in which the family would make their escape. Claiming that the commission was for a former mistress, the Baronne de Korff who would also be providing the fugitives’ identity papers, Fersen spared no expense and overlooked no detail when it came to the planning of this huge and cumbersome vehicle which
would have to be both commodious and comfortable for their long journey. The outside was a discreet green and black while the interior was upholstered in sumptuous white velvet and equipped with such conveniences as a small cooker, leather chamber pots and a concealed table that could be raised at mealtimes.

Marie Antoinette’s all important *toilette* was not to
be neglected either and the Queen decided to treat herself to a lavish *nécessaire*, a travelling dressing case of beautiful walnut wood, inside which reposed a silver teapot and candlesticks as well as everything that Marie Antoinette could possibly require in order to beautify herself during the trip, all of which was fashioned out of the most exquisite crystal, silver and tortoiseshell. She
also ordered new clothes for herself and her children and entrusted her hairdresser, the delightfully catty Léonard, who was to follow her to Montmédy to ensure that she looked her very best at all times, with her jewels. Madame Campan was bewildered by this attention to sartorial matters and tried to remonstrate with the Queen, pointing out that ‘a Queen of France should be
able to procure whatever she needed wherever she went’ but Marie Antoinette, completely carried away and elated by her clandestine plans which served as such a delightful distraction from the mundanity of life at the Tuileries, would not listen.

In April 1791 the furtive escape plans received further impetus from the sudden death of the Comte de Mirabeau who passed away
wasted by years of dissolute excess. His final words, whispered to Talleyrand were: ‘I am taking with me the last vestiges of the monarchy’. Marie Antoinette, who had grown to rely on his support even if she never warmed to him personally, wept when she was informed of his death, believing that in him they had lost one of their most powerful supporters. He was accorded the signal
honour of the first state burial in the Panthéon, which from then on was intended to be the final resting place of the great men of France. Shortly after this, the royal family were prevented from leaving for their planned Easter holiday at Saint Cloud by a large and ferocious mob who suspected them of trying to escape as the aunts had done not too long before and caused a riot that Lafayette
had to disperse with his troops. The fact that they had been allowed to move relatively freely around Paris and had been able to spend the previous summer at Saint Cloud had done much to reconcile Louis and Marie Antoinette to their situation and even allowed them to pretend to themselves that they were not really at the beck and call of the National Assembly. However this
unfortunate incident served to emphasise their effective powerlessness and increased their resentment of their situation as they returned in great disappointment to their apartments in the Tuileries.

‘The event which has just occurred confirms us more than ever in our plans,’ Marie Antoinette wrote to Mercy, who had left for Brussels in October 1790. ‘Our position is dreadful. We absolutely
must flee from here next month. The King wishes this even more vehemently than myself.’ Plans continued to be made for the escape despite the reservations of Bouillé about both the mode of transport, which he considered too slow and cumbersome for a journey whose success relied on its speed and efficiency, and the passengers. It had been decided that the King, Queen
and royal children should be accompanied by Madame de Tourzel and Madame Élisabeth, who remained in total ignorance of the plan, but Bouillé would have preferred Tourzel and Madame Élisabeth (who would then travel with the waiting women Madame de Neuville and Madame Brunier, who would be following the berline in their own carriage) to be replaced
by two capable officers with the resolution and quick intelligence to be able to cope with any emergencies that might arise along the way. However, Marie Antoinette insisted that her children could not manage without their governess and that there was no way that a Princess of the Royal Blood could be expected to travel with her servants and that was apparently the end of the
matters.

‘The departure is now finally decided for June 20, midnight,’ Axel von Fersen wrote to his fellow conspirator Bouillé. ‘A treacherous nurse of the Dauphin who could not be dismissed and who will not be leaving before Monday night, makes it necessary to postpone the journey until then; but you can be assured that it will take place.’ All
was ready for the great escape which, incidentally, had been mostly financed by Fersen himself who had got much of the money from his mistress Eléanore and her lover, both of whom were loyal royalists.

To the courtiers and servants milling around the Tuileries, Monday 20 June must have seemed like an ordinary day just like any other. Marie Antoinette spent the morning listening to her
children having their lessons then went down to the chapel with them at midday for Mass, where they met the King, who had spent the morning reading in his study. They then took luncheon together, after which the family gathered in the salon and Louis quietly told Madame Élisabeth that they were planning to leave Paris that night. ‘What should I bring with me?’ the princess
asked Marie Antoinette. ‘Bring nothing,’ was the reply. ‘I can lend you anything that you need from my own trunks.’

Louis and Marie Antoinette then played billiards against each other before going off to the King’s rooms on the ground floor where a short while later Fersen joined them to give the final briefing about their plan. He was to act as coachman for the first
leg of the journey before leaving them to ride to Brussels. He would have preferred to stay with them for the entire journey but Louis, although he was grateful for Fersen’s help, was adamant that he had to leave, which could be taken to suggest that he suspected that the dashing Swede was having an affair with his wife and had no desire to arrive at Montmédy in the undignified
position of having him acting as their coachman. An alternative theory is that the King was put off by the fact that Fersen was not French and having made the decision to remain in France, had no wish to look as though he was accepting any foreign assistance against his people.

Later on the Queen, feeling weepy and emotional after her interview with Fersen, took her children for their
customary walk in the Tuileries gardens where the Dauphin, who was in total ignorance of the secret plans, waved and smiled at the crowds that had gathered as usual to see him. After the royal children had gone to bed, the Provences came over from the Palais du Luxembourg for their usual supper with Louis, Marie Antoinette and Madame Élisabeth. They would be
leaving that night as well but being blessed with more common sense than the Queen and Fersen had followed Bouillé’s instructions to the letter and purchased two light carriages in which they would travel separately, taking different routes and leaving most of their belongings behind. Louis and his brother had had many clashes over the years but they were seen to be
visibly moved when the time came to say goodbye.

At ten, Marie Antoinette went upstairs and woke up the children, who were then dressed by their governess Madame de Tourzel. Madame Royale wore a brown dress patterned with white and yellow flowers while the little Dauphin, who upon being told there were to be soldiers where they were going had insisted upon wearing his
sword and soldier boots, was to his great disappointment dressed as a girl. The children and Madame de Tourzel, bearing a note stating that she was taking the Children of France away on the King’s orders, were taken down to Axel von Fersen who was waiting in the Carrousel courtyard before the Queen returned to the drawing room as though nothing had happened.
The family went to bed at their normal time. Élisabeth was accompanied to her rooms in the Pavilion de Flore by a National Guard who left her at her door and later testified to hearing her push the bolts across. Meanwhile Marie Antoinette impatiently endured the traditional *coucher* ceremony before dismissing her maids and getting quickly dressed again in a plain grey silk
dress and a black hat with a veil which could be pulled down to conceal her face. She then left her apartments and went down to the courtyard where her bodyguard, Monsieur de Malden was waiting to escort her to the carriage that was to take them out of Paris to where the *berline* was waiting for them. Disaster almost struck when Lafayette’s carriage went past, but he did not recognise
the Queen, who quickly pulled down her veil, and all was well. Malden then escorted Marie Antoinette through the warren of streets surrounding the Tuileries, getting a bit lost along the way, until they reached the carriage rather later than they had been expected.

They drove to the Saint Martin barrier at two in the morning, thankfully unmolested, and changed
from the carriage to the magnificent berline, which had been furnished with every possible comfort including a delicious picnic lunch of roasted pigeon, veal, cakes and wine. Fersen then drove them at a spanking pace to Bondy, where he was to leave them and go on alone to Brussels. Again he tried to persuade Louis to let him stay with the royal party until they reached Montmédy but he
was gently turned down and was powerless to do anything other than watch as the massive coach, already three hours behind schedule, went on its way. At this point Fersen should really have taken the initiative, disobeyed the royal orders and either ridden behind the berline or, even better, gone on ahead to let the young Duc de Choiseul, who was waiting with his troops to escort the
royal family on the final leg of their journey, know that they would be late. He did neither though but instead turned his horse’s head towards Brussels and rode off, leaving them to their fate.

The berline was already well on its way and was crossing the Marne river at La Ferté-sous-Jouarre at around the time that their departure was discovered by the servants at the Tuileries, who
immediately rose the alarm and alerted the National Assembly, whose temporary president at the time was Alexandre de Beauharnais, the first husband of the future Empress Joséphine. At this point no one knew where the King, who had left behind a letter listing the various injustices that had led to his departure, had gone and it was feared that the royal family had either been
abducted by counter-revolutionaries or had gone to join forces with the Austrians. It’s likely that many of the deputies had no great desire to see the royal family brought back again - this departure had, after all, played right into the hands of the extremists who wanted the monarchy abolished altogether, but even so the order was made to send troops in hot pursuit.
Meanwhile, the happy little band were now travelling towards Metz and, believing themselves safe, had begun to relax and even enjoy their adventure. It had been decided in advance that Madame de Tourzel should play the part of the Baronne de Korff while Marie Antoinette, keen as mustard as always to indulge in a little role reversal, masqueraded as her waiting woman Madame
Rochet, the King played the part of her valet Durand and Madame Élisabeth played the nurse Rosalie. The royal children were to be the Baronne’s daughters, Aglaié and Amélie. Having seen very little of France beyond the Isle de France, Marie Antoinette gazed rapturously out of the carriage window at the beautiful countryside and insisted upon walking alongside the coach while her
children, glad to be freed from the berline, chased butterflies and picked flowers in the fields. Meanwhile, Louis, also beaming with delight, stopped to chat about the harvest with the peasants that they passed and struck up conversations with the postillions and other patrons at the various posting stations along the way, apparently not caring when he was recognised, while in the
coach he joked about wishing that he could see Lafayette’s face when he realised that the royal chickens had fled their glittering coop.

Each little chat, each stop to pick flowers and each slowing down of the berline so that Marie Antoinette and her children could take a walk beside it, cost them precious minutes. However, the King and Queen naively believed that they had put enough
distance between themselves and Paris for pursuit and capture to be virtually impossible and so saw no need to make any especially haste to reach the meeting place. They were also untroubled by the fact that they were so obviously being recognised in every town and village that they passed through - after all, no one had made any effort to detain them and in fact they were
being hailed with cheers and offers of accommodation and refreshments wherever they went, which they took as proof that outside Paris they were as well loved and popular as ever. This was not really the case though and even as they drove tranquilly on towards Metz, things were beginning to go wrong.

The first hint that disaster had struck came at the Somme Vesle bridge, where
the Duc de Choiseul, who was the relative and heir of the Choiseul who had been chiefly responsible for brokering Louis and Marie Antoinette’s marriage, was supposed to be waiting for them with his troops. However, there was no one there and so the coach carried on towards Sainte-Menehould where they were once again recognised and when they left, the postmaster Drouet
and a detachment of National Guard were in hot pursuit. Varennes was the next stop on the journey and the royal party, worn out by the excitement of the day, were fast asleep in their luxurious carriage when they arrived at about eleven o clock and shortly afterwards found themselves surrounded by soldiers while the tocsin bell on the local church was rung to alert the residents, who
stumbled out of bed, armed themselves and gathered in a hostile crowd around the carriage. The procurator of the commune, a Monsieur Sauce, who also moonlighted as a grocer, was called upon to check that the now awake and anxious passengers’ papers were all in order, which he duly believed them to be.

However, the postmaster Drouet’s stubborn and
increasingly irate insistence that the carriage carried the King and Queen of France and their family could not be ignored. In vain did Louis and Marie Antoinette protest that they were in fact merely the maid and valet of the Baronne and insist that they should be allowed to continue their journey unmolested - not realising that their outspoken behaviour only served to create more
suspicion as no genuine servants, outside the works of Monsieur Beaumarchais at least, would ever speak so out of turn while their aristocratic mistress remained so nervously silent. However, if Sauce had been left to himself he would probably have waved them on but Drouet was equally insistent and the crowd was getting ugly so he asked the royal family to get out of the berline and come
into his grocery store while he sent for a local resident who had, providentially, once lived in Versailles. The royal cover story was completely blown when this gentleman, clearly overawed to be in the presence of majesty once again, fell to his knees in reverence before the King, who with typical kindness embraced him and admitted his true identity, saying: ‘Yes, I am your King’. Louis and
Marie Antoinette then tried in vain to persuade Sauce to let them continue on their way but he stood firm, more scared of the National Assembly’s reaction should they find out about his actions than worried about offending his King. His wife, although sympathetic, also refused to help. ‘Well, Madame, you are in a very unfortunate position but my husband is not responsible,’ she said to
Marie Antoinette, who was weeping with chagrin. ‘I don’t want him to get into any trouble.’

At this point, the scene outside, where a crowd of curious townsfolk were still gathered, descended into chaos as the Duc de Choiseul’s hussars appeared along with some other loyal troops that had been in the area and raced to Varennes as soon as they realised what
had happened. It turned out that Choiseul had waited for the berline for quite a while before concluding that the escape had been foiled at the outset, if it had even been attempted, the message that the royal escape was a few hours behind schedule having failed to reach him. Choiseul and another officer forced their way through the crowd and into the grocery shop, where they asked Louis,
delighted to see them, for orders. ‘I have forty hussars with me,’ Choiseul told him before outlining an impromptu escape plan which involved them cutting their way through the crowd outside and whisking the entire family away to safety on horseback. In the meantime, Choiseul had also sent a message to Bouillé, telling him where the family were and asking him to make
haste with his troops.

Indecisive as always, Louis could not make up his mind what to do and so they turned to Marie Antoinette, begging her to make a decision and put her trust in the brave hussars waiting to take them to freedom. ‘I do not want to take the responsibility for this,’ she replied. ‘It is up to the King to make the orders and my duty is to follow them.’ When Choiseul
admitted that he could not absolutely promise their safety, Louis finally decided to turn the scheme down, saying that he had no wish to put any lives at risk and was content to wait until Bouillé arrived with his troops as then they would be able to proceed by carriage.

However, it was two representatives of the National Assembly who arrived next in Varennes,
dusty and dishevelled after their long journey from Paris and bearing an official decree that ordered the royal family to return to the capital immediately. ‘There is no longer a King in France,’ Louis said in sad resignation after he read it and dropped the paper on to the bed where the Dauphin and Madame Royale were still fast asleep, worn out after their adventure. ‘I will not let my
children be contaminated by this thing,’ Marie Antoinette shrieked, crumpling the order into a ball and petulantly throwing it on to the floor. ‘What audacity, for subjects to have the temerity to pretend to give orders to their King.’ The royal couple still had faith that Bouillé would arrive to save them but despite their best attempts to delay departure by feigning
illness and the like, they were forced to give in and at half past seven in the morning sulkily clambered back into the berline to make the journey back to Paris, surrounded by a hostile mob of armed countryfolk. Bouillé and his much longed for troops would arrive in Varennes almost two hours later to find them well and truly gone and their last chance to escape at an end.
The Widow Capet
1791-1793

‘Everything leads me to you.’

Whereas it had taken the royal family less than twenty four hours to reach Varennes, the journey back to Paris took four long, miserable days during which they were harangued by the angry
crowds that swarmed like furious wasps around the *berline* whenever it stopped. At Epernay they were spat at and had their clothes torn by an angry mob, an experience that reduced Marie Antoinette and Élisabeth to tears. The weather had become unbearably hot and they had not been permitted to change their clothes since they were apprehended at Varennes nor were they allowed to close
the carriage’s windows which meant that the dust from the roads got inside and they had no respite from the violent threats and curses of the mobs that ran alongside waving guns and pitchforks in the air. The high spirits and optimistic cheerfulness of their journey from Paris had completely vanished and been replaced by a melancholic despair as, at last, they considered the consequence
of their actions and bemoaned the mistakes that had led to their recapture so tantalisingly close to their final destination. Just outside Epernay, they were joined by representatives of the National Assembly, who had travelled out to meet them and accompany them back to the capital. Although Marie Antoinette had every reason to distrust the two men
Barnave and Pétion (a third representative, the Marquis de Labour-Maubourg travelled with the waiting women in their carriage) who clambered without ceremony into the berline, squeezing themselves between the members of the royal family, she was also relieved to have their protection for the rest of the journey as the crowds were becoming increasingly acrimonious and threatening.
the closer they drew to Paris and had turned out in their hundreds to harass and insult the royal family as they passed.

However, although Pétion and Barnave had not exactly been the royal family’s greatest fans, they were shocked by how different they were to the popular mythology which made the King out to be an oafish imbecilic buffoon led by the
nose by his haughty wife. Instead they found them polite, touchingly affectionate towards each other and their children and not at all stupid, although they were undoubtedly ignorant. Pétion wrote afterwards: ‘I noticed simplicity and a family air which pleased me… there was ease and domestic bonhomie. The Queen called Madame Élisabeth ‘ma petite soeur’. Madame Élisabeth
did the same ... The Queen danced the prince up and down on her knees.’ He was exceedingly taken with Madame Élisabeth, Louis’ pious and undoubtedly virginal sister who had long believed herself to have a vocation to become a nun and believed her to have taken a bit of a fancy to him in return, encouraged by the fact that her arm occasionally pressed against his when they were
thrown together by the movements of the carriage. ‘Madame Élisabeth foxed me with melting eyes, with that languishing air that unhappiness gives and which inspires a lively interest… The moon began to shine softly… She sometimes interrupted her words, in such a manner as to agitate me. I replied…with a kind of austerity… She must have seen that the most seductive
temptations were useless. I noticed a certain cooling off, a certain severity, which women often show when their pride is wounded.’ Or more likely, she had realised that her overtures of polite friendliness had been completely misinterpreted and was trying to give him a tactful brush off, although she would later write to a friend that: ‘The deputies were really quite pleasant and
Monsieur Barnave in particular behaved extremely well.’

Monsieur Barnave, much to his surprise, was quickly falling under the spell of Marie Antoinette. A nice boy from a decent middle class and Protestant family who’d trained as a lawyer after being homeschooled by his mother, he’d grown up with an absolute hatred of the aristocracy whom he saw as
the chief architects of the country’s ruin. He had not been looking forward to the rendezvous with the royal family and had, in particular, been feeling some trepidation about finding himself in close quarters with the Queen, who was the very worst of the whole worthless lot as far as he was concerned. At first he did his best to ignore Marie Antoinette, wincing when she sprinkled her perfume around
the carriage in order to make the fetid air more pleasant, avoiding eye contact with her and speaking only to Madame Élisabeth, who was keen to engage him in a lengthy political debate. However, as the hours dragged on, he found himself unexpectedly enthralled and fascinated by the Queen as she chatted most unaffectedly with her husband and sister-in-law and fussed like any other fond
mother over her grizzling children, who were now sitting on the knees of the adults in order to make room for the deputies.

Although she was visibly worn out, travel soiled and distressed by the events of the last few days, Marie Antoinette still retained the gentle charm that had won Mirabeau to her cause and made men like Fersen willing to risk their lives to save her
from the indignities of her situation. Like many people, Barnave had become so accustomed to the swirl of terrible rumours, gossip and calumny that she was a real woman behind it all and having encountered her now, he rapidly began to fall beneath her spell.

They stopped at Meaux on the third night and after
supper Marie Antoinette spent several hours talking to Barnave, quietly winning him over to her cause. That the young deputy was exceedingly handsome, gently mannered and extremely eloquent merely boosted his appeal in the eyes of a Queen who had once scandalised Versailles by choosing her footmen purely on the basis of their good looks and height rather than
their ability to do the job. No, she would be very pleased indeed to have Barnave as her new champion in the debating hall of the National Assembly.

The next morning they got up early to begin the final stretch to Paris. It was one of the hottest days of the year and as Marie Antoinette gazed listlessly out at the angry crowds that lined the road to the capital, she may
well have thought back to the journey by stages, following a very similar route, by which she had first approached Versailles over twenty one years before. It’s more likely though that it was the horrible present and uncertain future that weighed on the beleaguered Queen’s mind as she smiled wanly across the berline at Barnave and tightly held her weeping daughter’s hand. At one point she pulled
down the window and offered a piece of beef to one of the guardsmen riding beside the carriage but then recoiled in tears when a woman in the crowd shouted, ‘Don’t take it! She’s probably poisoned it!’ Instead she pointedly gave the meat to the Dauphin to eat and made no further attempts to speak to the guards.

Despite the terrible heat of the day, they had been forbidden from closing the
blinds and so were exposed to the hostile stares of enormous crowds that swelled in size as they got nearer to Paris. Although Barnave was quick to open the window and shout at the worst offenders to desist their insults, he could not stop them all and so the *berline* lumbered slowly past a menacing mob of screaming, shouting people, their faces contorting with fury as they yelled curses into
Marie Antoinette’s very face, threatening to cut off her head, make pies from her intestines and lace from her fine white skin. The Queen kept her composure as best she could, determined not to lose control in the face of such hostility, but her children screamed with fear, terrified as much by the angry faces of the mob as by their horrible words.

Things only got worse
when they entered Paris at around six in the evening and began the slow drive through the crammed and noisy city streets, where it seemed like almost everyone had turned out to see their King and Queen’s ignominious return. ‘Anyone who applauds the King will be flogged; anyone who insults him will be hanged,’ threatened the dozens of placards that had been placed along the route
and so they entered the city to a hostile silence, broken only by a few shouts of ‘Vive la nation!’ Lafayette had also ordered that all heads should remain covered to signify that the King was no longer considered worthy of respect and so the crowds kept their hats and caps on as they glowered menacingly at the royal carriage while the National Guard lining the route kept their crossheads
high as if they were the guard of honour at a funeral.

It was late in the evening when the berline finally pulled up at the Tuileries where Lafayette was waiting to greet them, his air of smug triumph annoying the Queen so much that she could hardly bear to look at him as she whisked past on her way to her rooms where her ladies were waiting to prepare her bath and would make the sad
discovery that their mistress’ hair had gone completely white during her brief absence. Louis, however, politely stopped to talk to Lafayette, who asked him if he had any orders. ‘It seems to me, Monsieur de Lafayette, that it is you who are giving the orders now,’ the King said with a sad smile before he too departed to his rooms.

As soon as she was able to snatch a few moments alone,
Marie Antoinette sat down to write to Axel von Fersen. ’I am alive. Oh, the anxiety that I have been feeling for you and the sorrow I feel for all that you must have undergone in not hearing from us. God grant that this reaches you. Do not write to me, this would compromise all of us and above everything do not come back under any circumstances. Everyone knows that you helped us to
escape and should you show yourself, all would be lost. We are guarded night and day, I do not care. Do not feel sad for me, nothing will happen to me. The National Assembly will be forgiving... I am able to tell you that I love you and have time only to do that. I am well. Suffer no pain for me... Let me know where I should send my letters so that I can write to you, for without them I
cannot survive. Farewell my most beloved and loving of men. I embrace you with all my heart.’

The news that both the Comte and Comtesse de Provence, who had followed Bouillé’s instructions and separated into two small carriages before taking different routes (no doubt with great thankfulness as they had been living in a state of polite estrangement for
years), had both managed to successfully leave the country without any hindrance was just salt in Marie Antoinette’s wounds, although naturally she outwardly expressed relief that they had managed to make their escape even if it highlighted the mistakes that had made their own attempt such a failure. Officially the National Assembly let it be known that the whole incident had been due to an
abduction attempt by the now thoroughly discredited Bouillé and Axel von Fersen and that the royal family had been taken against their will but everyone knew the truth and as always the blame was placed squarely on Marie Antoinette’s shoulders. It didn’t matter that both she and the King had frequently made it plain that they had no intention of actually leaving France - no one really
believed them and matters only grew worse when a group of protesters who had gone to the Champs de Mars to sign a petition demanding the deposition of the King, who was now suspected of being in cahoots with the counter-revolutionaries abroad, were fired upon by the National Guard, which just served to inflame the situation even further.

When Marie Antoinette
arrived back in her sumptuous rooms at the Tuileries it was to find guards posted on every door and security arrangements tightened throughout the palace where visitors, including Marie Antoinette’s ladies, were now searched upon entering and the Queen was attended by four guardsmen wherever she went, including out to the Tuileries gardens which had
now been closed to the public, and had her mail opened and read before it was passed on, which meant that she now had to use intermediaries to get her coded letters out without detection. Any pretence that the Tuileries was not simply a gilded prison had been dropped and the royal family were left in no doubt at all that they were now captives, although they were reminded
that the precautions were as much for the sake of their own safety as they were to prevent their escape. In retaliation, Marie Antoinette rebelled by giving up the patriotic tricolour ribbons with which she had taken to bedecking her gowns and instead ordering dresses in greens and purples, both colours strongly associated with the royalist cause.

Marie Antoinette continued
to make contact with Barnave, who had joined forces with Alexandre Lameth and Adrien Duport, both of whom shared his belief that a constitutional monarchy of limited powers was now the best hope for France’s recovery. However, as Louis had sunk even further into depression and apathy, it was to the Queen that they turned for support and once again Marie
Antoinette found herself having to literally struggle to comprehend matters of which she had very little understanding as she read through the political reports that Barnave obligingly sent to her in the Tuileries. Although she was far from being stupid, Marie Antoinette was undoubtedly ignorant and had very little political acumen and understanding beyond her
own narrow interests and those of her friends - the bigger picture was, alas, not one that she was at all equipped to view. She was also fatally unable to compromise and although she strung Barnave along with her half promises, had no real intention of ever fully accepting the Constitution as he urged her and Louis to do, believing this to be the only way to save any vestiges of
the monarchy.

At the same time, she was maintaining her dangerous links with the counter-revolutionary leaders and keeping up a clandestine and voluminous correspondence with her brother Emperor Leopold, sisters in the Netherlands, Parma and Naples and other foreign leaders, whom she begged for help and support, receiving in return the usual flurry of
vague promises intended to raise her hopes while at the same time delivering no actual concrete assistance. Although they all sympathised with the plight of Marie Antoinette and her family, there was a general feeling that they had brought a lot of their problems on themselves. There was also a feeling that revolutions, like the dreaded smallpox, had a tendency to be contagious.
and so no one really wanted to make any definite moves to get involved on the behalf of the embattled French King and Queen. However, even though she was undoubtedly well aware of the true feelings that lay behind the soothing words from the other European courts, Marie Antoinette, who had so hated writing as a girl, still continued to work late into the night wearily writing her
coded letters in lemon juice and painstakingly puzzling over the cyphered replies which had been smuggled in to her.

On 14 September, feeling himself caught between a rock and a hard place, Louis officially accepted the Constitution as he had been urged to do by Barnave and his cohorts, a decision that would seriously limit his powers, make him King of
the French rather than King of France and meant that he no longer had the treasury income to drawn upon but would instead receive a fixed Civil List income. An impassive Marie Antoinette watched from a private box as her husband mounted a podium at the Salle de Manège, the riding school in the Tuileries gardens where the National Assembly held their meetings. Eager to
please as always, Louis had removed his hat and stood up to deliver his speech before realising that the deputies had remained sitting down and kept their hats firmly on their heads. Thrown and rather offended by this, the King had thrown himself down on his chair and read out the rest of his speech in a dull and barely audible monotone. However, despite this lack of enthusiasm, he was soundly
cheered for his efforts before he returned to the palace to collapse weeping on his wife, bemoaning that she had come to France in order to be a Queen and instead had witnessed the end of the monarchy. Later on though they went out to preside over the official celebrations, which included a performance at the ballet and a firework display in the Place Louis XV.
In return for this humiliating capitulation many of the guards were removed from the Tuileries, security was stepped down a few notches and the gardens were opened to the public once again, while the remaining courtiers began to return to the Tuileries. The royal family were also once again free to leave the palace and go for drives around the capital and even ride in the
Bois de Boulogne as before. There was even a suggestion that trips to Marie Antoinette’s beloved Saint Cloud might well resume again in the near future.

While Marie Antoinette redoubled her efforts to win the fickle Parisians over by appearing in public with her children at every opportunity and making sure that she looked like a model of affectionately smiling.
benevolence at all times, her private life was less of a comfort. Her husband had become even more withdrawn and uncommunicative since the events of September 1791 and her sister-in-law, Madame Élisabeth was consoling herself by keeping up a correspondence with her favourite brother the Comte d’Artois, who had surrounded himself with schemers and counter-revolutionaries and
was plotting with foreign powers to overthrow the revolution. It’s not certain how far Élisabeth went – some believe that she was also a key figure in the counter-revolutionary plots but others think that her nature was too conciliatory and peaceful for this to have been possible. However, Marie Antoinette was sufficiently alarmed to write that Élisabeth was ‘so
indiscreet, surrounded by intriguers, and, above all, dominated by her brothers outside (France), that it is impossible for us to speak to one another, or we would quarrel all day’ and miserably added that it was ‘hell at home’.

However, there was one small comfort in the person of Madame de Lamballe, who had returned from her exile in England and moved back into
the Tuileries, bringing with her a pet spaniel called Thisbée who was intended as a present for the Queen. Marie Antoinette had begged her friend not to consider returning to Paris but was nonetheless delighted to be reunited with her. Silly and affected though the Princesse de Lamballe undoubtedly was, her loyalty to Marie Antoinette could not be faulted and her sensitive sighs
and flutterings and uncritical admiration were a definite balm to the Queen’s low spirits. In early 1792, there was to be further consolation when Axel von Fersen, risking his life now that he had been denounced by the Assembly as one of the chief architects behind the flight to Varennes, returned in disguise and with a fake passport to Paris and was quickly reunited with his
Queen in her private apartments where she acquainted him with everything that had happened during their separation and he told her that he had come as the emissary of the King of Sweden who wished to assist another escape attempt. They remained closeted alone together for twenty four hours before Louis came in to join their discussion. ‘I know the people tar me with weakness
and irresolution but no one has ever found himself in such a difficult situation,’ he told Fersen sadly. ‘I had one chance of escape and I missed it. That was over two years ago after the fourteenth of July. Such a chance never came again and now the world has abandoned me.’ He was firm now in rejecting Fersen’s plan, reminding him that he had given his word to the National Assembly to
make no further escape attempts and intended to stick to this. Fersen had no option but to withdraw. Marie Antoinette never saw him again.

Less than a month after Fersen’s clandestine visit, the news arrived that Marie Antoinette’s brother Emperor Leopold had died and been succeeded by his twenty-four year old son Francis who had never met his aunt and was
no friend of the revolutionary regime in France, which he immediately made plain by refuting a French ultimatum and letting it be known that he intended to initiate hostilities between the two nations with the backing of his new ally, the King of Prussia. Marie Antoinette, like much of the National Assembly, favoured a war with Austria but unlike them she was desperate for the
Austro-Prussian forces to win, writing to Mercy that: ‘There must be war, so that we may be at last revenged for all the outrages committed in this country.’ Although she naturally made every appearance of patriotically desiring a French victory, she actually pinned all her hopes on her nephew’s forces destroying those of France then putting her husband back on his throne.
again and even sent on some little snippets of military information that she had become privy to.

However, the declaration of war in April 1792 dealt a not unsurprising blow to Marie Antoinette’s already rock bottom popularity and once again she heard herself being booed and threatened when she went out in public, while in the National Assembly the Girondin
Vergniaud declared that: ‘From here I can see the windows of a palace within which counter-revolution is at work, where there is being planned details to thrust us back into the horrors of servitude... Let each one of those dwelling therein realise that our Constitution allows inviolability to the King alone. Let them know that the law will stretch out without the slightest discrimination to
all the guilty, and there is not one single head which, once convicted, can escape its sword.’ His meaning was clear - the Austrian Queen was not trusted and the Constitutional laws that protected the King did not extend to his consort who could be removed and punished at the slightest hint of treachery, regardless of the fact that it was obvious to everyone that the war was
effectively pitting the nation and monarchy against each other. She could not even rely on the faithful Barnave for support any more for he had been removed from the National Assembly several months earlier. ‘I am afraid that I place little hope in the success of the plan you now follow,’ he despondently wrote to her in his final letter. ‘You are too far away from any outside help, and you will
be lost long before it can reach you. I only pray that I may be mistaken in my gloomy presentiments. I myself have no doubt that I will pay with my head for the interest that I have shown in your misfortunes. All I ask in recompense is the honour to kiss your hand.’

Matters reached a head on 20 June when a protest at the Tuileries ended with the palace being stormed by an
immense armed crowd who swarmed through the royal apartments shouting threats against the Queen. Marie Antoinette took refuge in the Dauphin’s bedchamber while her husband, who had been trapped in a room with his sister, did his best to pacify the intruders who at first thought that Madame Élisabeth was Marie Antoinette but then became much less aggressive when
they realised their mistake. When the rioters began to ransack the Queen’s rooms below where she was hiding, Marie Antoinette hurried with her children to the King’s apartments and then on to the Council Chamber where a large table was placed in front of them as a barricade, protecting them from the angry crowd that streamed into the room. A battalion of National Guard kept
desultory watch while for over two hours the mob screamed their insults in the face of the Queen, who remained utterly impassive as her terrified son and daughter sobbed at her side. Finally, the crowd was dispersed late in the evening and the royal family, shattered by their experience, cried together with relief. ‘I still live, but only by a miracle,’ Marie Antoinette wrote to Axel von
Fersen. ‘The 20th was appalling. It is no longer against me that they hurl their fury but against my husband’s very life and they do not disguise it.’

Although life in the Tuileries appeared to continue as normal after this, in private the King and Queen had almost reached breaking point, having finally had to confront their own unpopularity as well as the
fact that it was almost certainly only a matter of time before the palace was invaded again. Marie Antoinette’s secret correspondence with foreign courts continued apace as she hoped against hope that Austrian forces would invade and rescue her from a life that she was finding increasingly intolerable. Meanwhile, outside the Tuileries the pamphlets denouncing the
Austrian Queen’s lecherous behaviour and treachery against France were increasing in number while the National Assembly was beginning to wonder if they might do better without the King. Many of the deputies would have preferred to do away with the monarchy altogether but some were more in favour of forcing Louis to abdicate in favour of his son, who would be
removed and moulded by specially appointed tutors into the perfect malleable Constitutional King. Their fears were only increased by the disquieting news from the front, where the Austro-Prussian armies were easily getting the better of the disorganised French troops and the counter-revolutionaries led by well trained aristocratic emigré officers were reported to be
preparing for invasion. While the National Assembly panicked about what appeared to be imminent invasion, Marie Antoinette secretly prayed for it and even optimistically confided in one of her ladies in waiting one night that: ‘When I see this moon again in a month’s time, I will be freed of my irons.’

On 14 July the royal family appeared as usual at the
celebrations for the anniversary of the Bastille’s fall. Louis was wearing a bullet proof vest beneath his suit while beside him Marie Antoinette, who had refused body armour, telling Madame Campan that it would be a blessing if the insurgents murdered her, blinked back tears as the crowd cat called and booed during his speech. Matters worsened just weeks later when the Duke of
Brunswick, commander of the Austro-Prussian allied army, issued a terrifying manifesto addressed to the citizens of Paris. ‘Their aforesaid Majesties (the King of Prussia and Emperor of Austria) declare... on their word and honour as Emperor and King, that if the Tuileries Palace be insulted or invaded, that if the least injury, be inflicted on their Majesties the King, Queen
and the Royal Family, and if measures are not at once taken for their safety, preservation and security, they, their Imperial and Royal Majesties, will wreak exemplary and unforgettable vengeance by yielding the town of Paris to military execution and utter subversion, and the guilty rebels to deserved death.’ Marie Antoinette had already been warned about
the manifesto by Fersen who counselled her when Lafayette suggested that the royal family remove to the comparative safety of Compiègne. ‘Your bravery will be much praised and the King’s steadfast behaviour also,’ he wrote. ‘It is essential to maintain this, and above all else to remain in Paris. This is absolutely essential. Thus it will be simple to reach you, and this the Duke
of Brunswick is planning to accomplish. Before his actual entry he will publish a powerful manifesto from the allied powers making all France, especially, Paris, responsible for the lives of the royal family.’ Both Louis and Marie Antoinette had approved the wording of Brunswick’s diatribe before it was made public, evidently hoping that its forceful language and threat of
imminent menace would intimidate the unruly Parisians into behaving better. However, yet again they managed to woefully misjudge the mood on the streets of their own capital and failed to realise that the Parisians, whom they clearly regarded as little more than unruly children who could be threatened into obedience, were in no mood to be ordered around by foreigners.
They ought to have realised that the manifesto, intended to cow them into frightened submission, would only make the Parisians, already so fed up and simmering on the brink of violent outburst, all the more angry and resentful, particularly of Marie Antoinette who was naturally assumed to be behind the whole thing. The arrival of Brunswick’s manifesto just confirmed what everyone has
been suspecting for months - that for all their pretence at patriotic fervour, the King and Queen weren’t on the side of France at all but were clearly in cahoots with the enemy.

While in the past, Louis had managed to escape most of the opprobrium directed at his wife things had gradually begun to change and now it was he who was viciously denounced during the
sessions of the National Assembly, with increasingly violent demands being made for his repudiation and overthrow, particularly by Robespierre and his followers who believed that France would be better off as a republic. Meanwhile tensions were rising on the streets of Paris where the people were beginning to arm themselves again and there was an almost palpable atmosphere of fear.
and distrust, mostly directed towards the royal family in the Tuileries and inflamed by the denunciations of the National Assembly and the ever increasing stream of pamphlets accusing both Louis and Marie Antoinette of being traitors to the nation, living in the lap of luxury while they sold their own country out. It was only a matter of time before Paris erupted into violence again.
Inside the Tuileries both Louis and Marie Antoinette were well aware of the danger that they were in and were bracing themselves for the next invasion. The Queen was suffering from insomnia again and looked like a worn out shadow of her former self as she paced her rooms in the early hours, worrying about the future and praying that the Austro-Prussian troops would arrive in Paris before matters
worsened any further. She had left her rooms on the terrace and was now sleeping on the first floor, next door to her husband who spent most of his time fretting that he was about to be put on trial. Both knew that invasion was imminent and began to take protective measures - calling in nine hundred Swiss Guardsmen to join their existing palace defenders of gendarmes and two thousand
National Guardsmen of dubious loyalty. The loyalty of the Swiss Guards was unimpeachable however and it was upon them that the hopes of the King and Queen rested when on 9 August the news arrived that the faubourgs of Paris were rising up against them and attack was imminent.

As the royal family retreated to the safety of their apartments they could hear
the tocsins, the warning bells, of Paris, being rung all over the city to call the people to arms. Meanwhile, the grand apartments of the Tuileries swarmed with hundreds of noblemen who had arrived, armed to the teeth, to defend their King and Queen. However, they must have wondered why they had bothered when they saw Louis shambling from room to room with his hair un-
powdered, his suit in urgent need of a pressing and his expression blankly terrified. It was hard to feel any confidence when it seemed as though just when Louis most needed to be decisive and bold he had once again become even more irresolute and weak than ever. Marie Antoinette however was as brave as a lion and had a grateful word and a tight lipped smile for everyone as
she personally distributed food and drink to the men who had willingly come to lay down their lives for her.

The tocsin bells stopped in the early hours of the morning and the courtiers inside the Tuileries seized the chance to get some rest, camping on sofas and floors and trying to snatch some sleep in the intolerable heat of that balmy August night. Marie Antoinette and
Madame Élisabeth couldn’t bring themselves to go to bed and instead napped on sofas in a little closet overlooking the courtyard, watched over by their ladies in waiting and the faithful Princesse de Lamballe, who had refused to leave the palace. Unable to sleep, Madame Élisabeth got up and went to the window to watch a red and pink streaked dawn rise over the Tuileries gardens. ‘My sister, come and
see the beautiful sunrise,’ she said over her shoulder to Marie Antoinette, who came to stand beside her and gazed up in wonderment at a crimson sky.

After a hurried breakfast, Louis, Marie Antoinette and Madame Élisabeth made a tour of the Tuileries’ defences to make sure that everything was ready and to speak encouraging words to the troops. The tocsin had begun
to ring again in the early hours and any hope they may have had that the invasion had been abandoned faded when news arrived that the people were marching in their thousands on the palace. Marie Antoinette watched from the safety of a window embrasure as the mob, who had brought several cannons along with them, began to swarm in front of the palace gates. Louis went down to
give a pep talk to the waiting troops but while he was greeted with cheers by the faithful Swiss Guards, the National Guardsmen, who had been fraternising with the crowd that was growing behind the palace gates, booed him and shouted ‘Down with the King!’ and ‘Down with the fat pig!’ until he went away again. His wife, who was watching from a window above, broke down
in tears and could hardly bear to look at him when he shambled into the room and threw himself down on a sofa, declaring that he had given his orders and they had been told to hold their fire until the insurgents shot first. ‘He has done more harm than good,’ Marie Antoinette angrily muttered to Madame Campan.

While the crowd outside grew and became more
ferocious by the minute, the atmosphere inside the palace became increasingly strained and anxious as the assembled courtiers gazed anxiously out of the windows and wondered when the attack would start. The jeers of the National Guardsmen seemed to have drained all of the last vestiges of fight out of both Louis and Marie Antoinette and they both slumped miserably on sofas, apparently incapable of
making a decision about what to do next. Some of the courtiers advised the Queen to take her children to the Assembly and ask for their protection. ‘I would rather be nailed to the walls of the palace than seek the protection of those who have behaved so badly towards us,’ she replied with magnificent hauteur.

The Comte de Roederer, the public prosecutor, then
stepped in and made a direct appeal to Louis, telling him that there was not a minute to lose and that his family’s only hope of safety lay with the Assembly. Louis hesitated and looked wildly at his wife, clearly hoping that she would make the decision for him. ‘We have a considerable force ready and willing to defend us,’ she said angrily. ‘We cannot leave our loyal nobles and gallant Swiss to
die without us.’ Roederer sighed. ‘Madame, you are hopelessly outnumbered,’ he said patiently. ‘They are still arriving in their thousands. In staying here, you are endangering not just the life of your husband but also those of your children.’

Louis sighed and stood up. ‘Let us go,’ he said before walking away, leaving his wife staring after him. ‘We will be back soon,’ she said to
the assembled courtiers before taking her children by the hand and following her husband from the room. The sad little procession was joined by Madame Élisabeth and the Princesse de Lamballe, who had demanded to be allowed to accompany them even though she was sure that they were all about to meet their deaths. ‘We will never return to the palace again,’ she whispered to
Madame de Rochefoucauld, one of the several faithful courtiers left behind at the palace to save themselves as best they could.

‘What will happen to all those who are left behind?’ Louis asked Roederer as they made their way across the gardens to the hall where the National Assembly had its meetings. ‘They will not be able to resist for long,’ was the frank reply. Marie
Antoinette remained tearful but silent as she walked across the garden, leading her son who was delightfully kicking his way through the fallen leaves. ‘The leaves are falling very early,’ his father sighed with a melancholy look. Behind her there walked Madame Élisabeth who was doing her best to comfort the terrified Madame Royale. When they finally arrived at the National Assembly the
door was closed against them and they were kept waiting for half an hour in a corridor while a debate raged inside as to whether they should be allowed to enter. Finally, the doors were opened and they walked inside – the Queen with every appearance of dignity and serenity, determined to give no sign that she was either insulted or afraid of the mob that had gathered to scream insults at
Her self control cracked only once when a guardsman took the Dauphin out of her arms to protect him from the mob and she began to scream, terrified that the boy was being taken away from her.

The royal family were crammed in the tiny and uncomfortable ‘loge du logographie’ which was used by the editor of a newspaper to record details of the debates. They remained there
for sixteen long and hideous hours while outside the screams of the attacked and dying filtered into the hall. A huge mob had invaded the palace, slaughtering and mutilating the Swiss Guards who had protected the royal family and received the order to lay down their arms too late for it to be of any use. Another order from the National Assembly, letting the populace know that there
was no reason to attack the palace now that the royal family had left, had also gone astray - not that the enormous crowd, inflamed by righteous rage and bloodlust, would have paid much attention as it now rampaged through the gilded rooms of the Tuileries, killing anyone who stood in their way and looting anything that came to hand, including the famously fabulous contents of
Marie Antoinette’s wardrobe, which was now being triumphantly worn by the market women or had been taken away to be auctioned off later on. The usually serenely lovely Tuileries gardens now reeked of blood, burning, gunpowder and death as the battle raged on the terraces and surrounding streets.

Over a thousand people died in the Tuileries that day,
most of them needlessly, while all the while the royal family sat crammed in their tiny box at the Manège listening to the debates raging on and the sound of gunfire and screams outside. They had nothing to eat but a few biscuits and some wine provided by a kind hearted porter, which the King enjoyed before having a chat with the artist David about the portrait that he was
painting of him and then falling asleep in his chair. The children fell asleep later on but Marie Antoinette, who spent most of the day in tears, remained awake and relatively alert, determined not to let death creep up on her while she slept. Finally, at nearly two in the morning, they were allowed to leave and escorted to the nearby Feuillants convent on the Rue de Saint-Honoré where they
were to spend the next three nights.

Madame Campan and some other attendants who had managed to escape the carnage at the Tuileries came to offer their services to the unfortunate Queen, whom they found lying on a narrow bed in her green painted cell. ‘We are lost,’ she cried out to Madame Campan when she entered the room. ‘We are all going to die.’ The family had
lost virtually everything in the sack of the Tuileries, escaping only with the clothes on their backs and forced to rely on the kindness of their supporters to lend them fresh linen and money while the Countess of Sutherland, wife of the English Ambassador, sent over some clothes for the Dauphin, who was inconsolable over the presumed loss of his pet dog
Citron, who had been left behind in the palace and not seen since.

The royal family were depressed, exhausted and thoroughly demoralised. They were taken every morning to the Mènage to listen to the deputies argue for hours over their fates until nightfall when they were escorted back to their cells in the Feuillants. Finally on the 13 August they were informed that they were
to be taken to the Temple, a large fortified complex close to where the Bastille had once stood and which had once been a *pied à terre* of the Comte d’Artois and Prince de Condé, who liked to entertain actresses and courtesans in a special little love nest in one of the towers. When they were told that they were to be taken to the Temple palace.

‘You will see, they will put us in the tower, and they will
make it a veritable prison,’ Marie Antoinette whispered in dread to Madame de Tourzel. ‘I have always had such a horror of that tower, that a thousand times I begged the Comte d’Artois to have it pulled down; it must surely have been a foreboding of all that we would suffer there… you will see if I am not mistaken.’

They left the Tuileries for the last time at quarter past
seven in the evening on the 13th of August, all crammed together in one of the state carriages. The malicious Jacobin deputies gave orders that the vehicle should drive slowly so that the people could get a good look at the royal family and warming to this task, the coachman made sure that he took a detour through the Place de Vendôme so that Louis and Marie Antoinette could see
the once proud statue of Louis XIV that had been pulled down from its plinth during the riots and now lay in pieces on the ground.

At first they thought, quite understandably, that they would be lodged in the main palace, which was still rather opulently appointed, but after supper they were taken instead up the narrow spiral staircase to the apartments which had been formerly
inhabited by the Keeper of the Archives of the Order of Malta, Monsieur Berthélemy who had been hastily evicted just an hour earlier. Luckily for the royal family, Monsieur Berthélemy had expensive tastes and so the apartment, which was arranged over three floors, was not quite the hideous hell hole that they might have been expecting when they first got down from their
carriage and stared despondently up through the pouring rain at the tower that was to be their new home.

On the ground floor there was a porter’s lodge; on the first floor: an antechamber, dining room and library; on the second floor there were rooms for the Princesse de Lamballe, Madame de Tourzel and the Dauphin and also the Queen and Madame Royale as well as a privy and
guard room. On the third floor there was another guard room, a kitchen where Élisabeth and Pauline de Tourzel slept, a room for some servants, the King’s bedroom, a study and a room for the King’s valets. Once Mesdames de Lamballe and Tourzel had been taken away, Élisabeth moved down to the Dauphin’s room which she then shared with Madame Royale and the little Dauphin
moved in with his mother. All of the rooms had been decorated very tastefully in bright, cheerful colours and had plenty of small luxuries such as a clavichord and a well stocked library so they all had to agree that it could have been much worse, even if Louis did not at all approve of some of the racier books and insisted upon taking down some of the erotic engravings and paintings that
hung on the walls because he didn’t want his innocent young daughter to see them.

The royal prisoners did not know what to expect next and spent the next few days awaiting more drama. It came at midnight on 19 August when the guards arrived in their rooms and took the two Tourzel ladies and the Princesse de Lamballe away to La Force prison. Marie Antoinette broke down in
tears as she said goodbye to the Princesse, who had been one of her best friends ever since her first arrival in France twenty two years earlier. Although Madame de Lamballe had frequently got on her nerves with her silly affectations and nervous laugh, Marie Antoinette had never ceased to be fond of her and had come to truly love her in recent years thanks to her true and wholehearted
loyalty, which must have thrown the perfidy of many others into sharp relief. ‘Take care of my dear Lamballe,’ Marie Antoinette whispered to Madame de Tourzel as they were being taken away. ‘Try to prevent her from having to reply to any awkward and embarrassing questions.’

Once the ladies had gone, life at the Temple settled into a dull and monotonous
pattern broken only by the occasional snippets of precious news from outside, which were brought to them by a loyal kitchen boy Turgy and Louis’ personal valet Cléry. When they were banned from talking aloud about current affairs, Turgy, Cléry and Madame Élisabeth resorted to the medium of coded hand gestures, all under the watchful eyes of the Tisons, an unpleasant couple...
who had been brought in to look after (and spy on) the royal family.

The three royal ladies got up at six every morning and in the absence of servants helped each other to dress in the simple morning gowns of plain white cotton and bombazine that had been sent over by Mademoiselle Bertin, before Cléry came in to help them simply arrange and lightly powder their hair
which they then covered with white linen bonnets. Rather surprisingly, the Assembly had authorised the royal ladies to order a large amount of fashionable new clothes to replace the ones that had been lost in the sack of the Tuileries and Marie Antoinette had taken great pleasure in ordering three new dresses of brown floral toile du jouy and puce and ‘Paris mud’ coloured taffeta;
shoes; linen and muslin shifts; petticoats in white linen and black taffeta; nine fichus and two white bonnets for herself as well as clothes for Madame Élisabeth and Madame Royale, while the King ordered for himself two pale brown suits, ten pairs of black silk breeches, a black hat and some white waistcoats as well as a riding coat in the once fashionable ‘cheveux de la Reine’ shade.
that had mimicked his wife’s strawberry blonde hair that was now so sadly faded and streaked with grey.

Marie Antoinette would help the Dauphin to dress and at nine they went to the King’s room for a breakfast of hot chocolate, coffee and rolls and jam before they all went downstairs to Marie Antoinette’s room where the royal children had their lessons. Marie Antoinette and
Madame Élisabeth had taken over the lessons of Madame Royale and did their best to instruct her in religion, music, drawing and maths while Louis took full charge of the Dauphin’s education which in their restricted circumstances involved a lot of looking at maps as well as teaching him how to read and write with the help of the books in their limited library.

At midday, the royal ladies
went off to change into their day clothes before they went out to take a very heavily guarded walk in the gardens where the little Dauphin could play with his ball or with Marie Antoinette’s little dog until it was time to go in again for luncheon, which was very nearly as lavish as the meals they had been accustomed to in better times with several courses and plenty of meats, cakes and
other treats. As usual Marie Antoinette barely touched her food while Louis was observed to have as good an appetite as ever and also enjoyed several glasses of wine and champagne with his meal while Marie Antoinette only ever drank mineral water from Ville d’Avray, which continued to be supplied to her in prison. After luncheon, the family settled down to a game of backgammon or
cards before the King settled down to his four o’clock nap and the royal ladies either knitted, did embroidery or read to each other quietly while Cléry gave the Dauphin his handwriting lesson and took him off to play in Madame Elisabeth’s room where he would not disturb the King’s sleep.

When Louis woke up, the family would gather together again and either played the
clavichord or read aloud to each other until supper, which the children took in Madame Elisabeth’s room while the King read them riddles from a book he had come across in the library. There was sometimes a rare treat at around this time in the form of some loyal newspaper vendors who deliberately positioned themselves close to the tower in the evening and called out the latest news,
which the family would strain to hear. After this the royal children would say their prayers then go off to bed escorted by the faithful Cléry, who had been the Dauphin’s valet before he was transferred to the service of the King, and the adults would have their supper together, which was often interrupted by the calls of the Dauphin who found it difficult to settle down to
sleep and would demand that his aunt and mother come in to sit with him until he nodded off. After supper was over the King would say goodnight to the rest of his family then head off to his study where he would shut the door on his problems and read until late at night. Marie Antoinette and her sister-in-law would then remain together for as long as they could in Madame Élisabeth's
room, perhaps reading one of Mrs Burney’s novels or a devotional tract to each other or working on their embroidery. Madame Élisabeth, whose thoughts had clearly taken a rather depressed turn, was working on a morbid device of a pansy shaped like a death’s head with ‘Elle est mon unique pensée’ (This is my only thought) embroidered underneath. They would
remain together until the guards came at around eleven to escort the Queen back to her own bedchamber, where she would be locked in for the night.

Despite the enormous strain that the royal family were under, life in the pretty pale blue apartments of the Temple was ordered and intimate and there must have been a small amount of ironic pleasure for the royal captives
in the fact that they had finally been granted the quiet family life that they had always so desperately craved while on show at Versailles. The Dauphin in particular flourished thanks to this sudden closeness to his parents, even if the lively little boy felt frustrated by the restrictions of his new life. Louis seemed perfectly content with the new status quo as well and was more
than happy to spend hours quietly reading his way through the library that the unfortunate Monsieur de Berthélemy had left behind. He read two hundred and fifty seven books during the next five months and, perhaps rather optimistically, ordered several more.

Marie Antoinette meanwhile worried about the fate of her friends, in particular the Princesse de
Lamballe who had been taken off to the La Force prison in the Marais district of the city. During their time at the Temple, Madame de Tourzel and her daughter Pauline had become accustomed to keep an eye on the always nervous Princesse, who had long been prey to fainting spells and fits which may have been caused by epilepsy. However, she later noted that while they were in the dank and awful
La Force prison Madame de Lamballe had ‘not been in such good health for a long time’ which seems quite remarkable considering the terrible stress and fear that they must have been existing under. La Force was primarily used to imprison prostitutes and so the three court ladies found themselves assailed day and night by crude songs, jokes and remarks. ‘The least chaste
ears would have been offended by everything (we) continuously heard, night and day,’ Madame de Tourzel would later recall.

On 2 September, things began to change and their gaoler told them not to leave their cell, warning them that there were rumours that the Prussians and Austrians were advancing on Paris with the result that the streets were becoming restless and even
dangerous as mass panic spread throughout the Faubourgs. The aristocratic ladies must have thought themselves relatively safe within the albeit unpleasant walls of their prison but alas forces were already conspiring against them. That night Madame de Tourzel was woken up by a mysterious stranger creeping into their cell. To her alarm he went to the bedside of her
young daughter and shook her awake, asking her to come with him at once. Powerless to disobey or indeed make a fuss, Madame de Tourzel instructed the girl to go with the stranger – who luckily for them both turned out to be a Scarlet Pimpernel like rescuer known to posterity as Monsieur Hardy. The next morning, Madame de Tourzel and the Princesse de Lamballe prayed
for Pauline and then climbed up on to the Princesse’s bed which afforded them a small view onto the street below. They saw that there was already a large mob gathered around the prison door while the prisoners were clustered together in silent, frightened groups in the corridors and courtyard. A few hours later, at eleven o’clock in the morning, a gaoler came to fetch the Princesse de
Lamballe. Madame de Tourzel’s presence had not been requested but she decided to accompany her friend all the same. They walked behind the gaoler to the prison records office where a rudimentary court had been set up. The two ladies sat together and watched the proceedings which all followed more or less the same method – the prisoner was briefly
interrogated for about ten minutes and then either found innocent with a cry of ‘Vive la Nation’ or pronounced guilty. The innocent were carried from the prison, congratulated and embraced by all before being whisked away to freedom while the guilty were passed over to a pair of sans culottes who led them out into the courtyard to be summarily despatched by the waiting mob who had
armed themselves with whatever rudimentary weaponry they had managed to lay hands upon.

When Madame de Tourzel’s turn came, it turned out that the intrepid and mysterious Monsieur Hardy had managed to get the judges and their henchmen so completely drunk that they proclaimed her innocent when she agreed to declare ‘Vive la Nation’ and he was
able to get her away and reunite her with her daughter. She noted with a certain amount of irony that while she was being handed into the carriage that was waiting to whisk her away, the same blood splattered men who had been murdering her fellow prisoners all day took special care to tell her coachman which route he should take so that she would avoid seeing any of that day’s carnage.
However, her friend the Princesse de Lamballe had no brave rescuer on hand and was not to be as fortunate as the Tourzel ladies. To the surprise of absolutely no one, she was found guilty by the tribunal even though she denied any knowledge of treasonous plots emanating from the royal court. She then sealed her fate by refusing to take an oath proclaiming her hatred of the king, queen and
monarchy although she accepted the oath of loyalty to Liberty and Equality. She was then led out to the courtyard where the mob awaited her. What happened next is open to some debate. We are all familiar with the horrific accounts of gang rape, evisceration and so on, but did any of this actually really happen? Axel de Fersen was to write to the Duke of Södermanland that ‘the
Princesse de Lamballe was most fearfully tortured for four hours. My pen jibs at giving details. They tore off her breasts with their teeth and then did all possible, for two whole hours, to force her back to consciousness, to make her death the more agonising.’

We are told by numerous sources that the Princess was either hit from behind and felled to the ground or run
through with a sword and then eviscerated. In an orgy of violence she was then apparently stripped, tortured and terribly mutilated by the gleeful crowd who were keen to enact their loathing of the queen on the body of one of her closest friends. After this her head and according to some accounts also her heart and genitalia were placed on pikes and then paraded through the streets with her
naked mutilated body before being waved in front of the windows of the Temple so that Marie Antoinette could see them.

However, later that same day a group of men, including two members of the Parisian National Guard, reported to the administrative office of the Quinze-Vingts Section with what the clerk noted to be ‘the headless body of the former princesse de
Lamballe, who had just been killed at the Hôtel de La Force.’ The clerk, who must have felt much put upon to be expected to deal with such a gruesome matter, then went on to dispassionately note that the lady’s head was elsewhere and also helpfully itemised the contents of her pockets which included ‘a gold ring with a bezel of changeable blue stone, in which was some blond hair
tied in a love-knot with these words above it: ‘Whitened through misery’ which had been sent to her by the Queen after the return from Varennes, ‘a sort of double-faced image, on one side representing a bleeding heart surrounded with thorns and pierced by a dagger, with these words below: ‘Cor Jesu, salva nos, perimur,’ on the other a bleeding heart with a fleur-de-lis above and
below the words: ‘Cor Mariae unitum cordi Christi’ and ‘a medallion on light blue cloth, on which was painted a bleeding heart pierced by a dagger, embroidered in blue silk’. There is no mention of mutilation other than decapitation nor any reference to nakedness (the pockets are a clue that the corpse arrived fully dressed) or anything else that fits in with the usual lurid
descriptions of the violence enacted against the Princesse. Could it therefore be that they had been exaggerated? Shortly afterwards, head and body were reunited and, apparently unimpeded, servants of the Penthièvre family arrived to take them away for proper burial in the family chapel.

Marie Antoinette first became aware of the prison massacres when the royal
family’s daily walk was cut short on 2 September and they were hurried inside while the now dreaded tocsin began to ring once again to call the populace to arms. The royal family were forced to remain in their rooms for the next few days, enduring the sweltering height and noise from the crowds outside while their guards were doubled and were even jumpier than usual, well
aware that it was only a matter of time before the mob, who had stormed the city’s prisons and massacred most of the prisoners, turned their attentions to the most prestigious captives of all. Devoid of all information about what was going on outside, the royal family spent the days in silent anxiety and prayer, tormented by the shouts of the crowd and the sinister grins of their
most hostile guards. Finally on the 3 September they thought that the end had come when they heard shouts and screams from the courtyard below their tower. ‘What is happening?’ Louis asked one of the guards, who replied that they had brought the head of Madame de Lamballe so that the Queen could give it a kiss. Marie Antoinette screamed and fainted as Cléry sprang forward to close the
curtains, sparing her the grisly spectacle of her friend’s head stuck on a pike.

Although the royal family were not directly harmed during the prison massacres, they were to mark a turning point in their treatment at the Temple. Although their captors had treated them surprisingly well up until now, matters now took a distinct nose dive as their lives became more
uncomfortable and restricted and their guards became increasingly disrespectful and downright hostile, speaking rudely to the King, openly ogling the royal ladies and scrawling crude graffiti about the Queen where the royal children would be sure to see it. Marie Antoinette did her best to stoically ignore all of this as she was still pinning her hopes on an allied victory against the French, heartened
by the little snippets of news that Cléry managed to winkle out of the other servants and Turgy gleaned during his trips to the local markets. The Duke of Brunswick’s troops had finally crossed the border and the Queen went in daily expectation of hearing the news that the French army had been crushed and rescue was on its way.

When a group of officials and guards entered their
rooms in the Temple on 21 September, she may well have expected them to come with the news of another French defeat and the imminent fall of Paris to the Austro-Prussian armies but instead was dismayed to learn that they had come to inform the prisoners that by order of the Assembly, the monarchy had been abolished, France was now a republic, the National Assembly had been
replaced by a National Convention and from now on the King was to be known as simple Louis Capet, a reference to a much older French royal dynasty. To the annoyance of the officials the King greeted this news with a shrug before he continued reading his book while Marie Antoinette hid her chagrin and continued her embroidery. However, she went off to bed to cry in
private as soon as the men had gone. Her deep despair only worsened when the news of the French victory at Valmy and Brunswick’s retreat back over the frontier arrived later on.

Just over a week later the officials were back again to confiscate all of the royal family’s paper and writing implements (they would later have all sharp objects such as knives and scissors taken...
away too) and then to take the King away to the main tower of the Temple, an altogether more forbidding place than the comfortable quarters that they had now been inhabiting for well over a month. Marie Antoinette pleaded in vain to be allowed to accompany her husband to his new prison but was told that she must remain where she was. After a few days the family were allowed to take their meals, which
were still as extravagant as ever, together again and then after a month they all moved across to the main tower to share the King’s imprisonment. Although the family’s new quarters were not nearly so comfortable as the ones that they had just left, they were still far from being the miserable, gloomy cells described by later monarchist writers and were actually freshly decorated and
furnished and relatively cheerful with blue and green striped wallpaper and pretty flower sprigged fabrics in the room that Marie Antoinette shared with her daughter. However, they were boiling hot in the winter and freezing cold and damp in the autumn and winter, which meant that the royal prisoners fell prey one after the other to colds, fevers and all manner of aches and pains. Madame
Élisabeth was stricken with a terrible toothache, while both the Dauphin and the King caught severe colds and had to be nursed by the Queen, who was far from well herself.

We get a glimpse of Marie Antoinette in the period after the September Massacres in a painting by the Polish artist Kucharski, who replaced Madame Vigée-Lebrun as the Queen’s favourite portrait
painter after the latter’s flight from France in 1789. It’s not known when Kucharski visited the Temple but two paintings exist from this time - the most striking of which was painted at some point after September 1792 and depicts the Queen in mourning for the murdered Princesse de Lamballe. It’s a stark and moving piece of work in which Marie Antoinette, who turns huge
red rimmed eyes on the viewer, looks closer to sixty than thirty six and is a complete contrast to the pretty little pouting Queen of Drouais’ paintings or the majestic matron depicted by Vigée-Lebrun. However, dejected though she clearly is, there is still defiance in that erect carriage and a hint of challenge in that unsettlingly direct gaze. The Queen’s rather luxurious garments
make an interesting and rather startling contrast to the bleak misery of her expression though: she wears a very lovely flounced, lace trimmed and beribboned cap on her powdered hair and the fichu that she wears over her plain black taffeta gown is exquisitely embroidered.

While the royal family got used to their increasingly restrictive imprisonment, the deputies at the National
Convention were continuing to row about what to do with the now deposed King with the Jacobins and several others being in full favour of putting Louis on trial. Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, Robespierre’s handsome but entirely charmless left hand man argued in early November that the King was an enemy of France who must either ‘reign or die’ and added that ‘no man can reign
innocently’. A point of view that seemed entirely justified when just over a week later Louis’ secret strong box was discovered in its hiding place in the Tuileries where he had hurriedly stashed it just before leaving the palace for the last time. When opened, the box was found to contain voluminous correspondence between the former King and various foreign powers, his brothers, several counter-
revolutionaries and, most disturbingly of all, Mirabeau who was still being hailed by many as a hero of the revolution but was now revealed to be a two faced schemer who sold his republican principles out in return for some royal gold and a chance to kiss the Queen’s hand. However, Mirabeau was already dead and safe from the vengeance of the Convention and
Parisian mob and so it was Louis who bore the full brunt of their fury as his duplicity was publicly unveiled in all its glory and the contents of his letters revealed what everyone had suspected all along - that he was a traitor to France who had betrayed his own people by putting on a show of being a true patriot while all the time he apparently had been egging the country’s enemies on and
encouraging them to invade.

At the start of December Cléry, who was now the family’s sole source of information from outside, let them know that the Convention was planning to put Louis on trial. Marie Antoinette, who was already barely sleeping and eating and had become a thin, anxious shadow of her former self, was distraught at the thought of her husband being
taken away but Louis was much more sanguine even though he knew that a trial could only end with his execution. On 11 December, the King had lunch with his family and then started to play a game with his son before being interrupted by the entrance of several guardsmen and the Mayor of Paris who informed him that he was to be taken away and put on trial. Cléry went at
once to the Queen to tell her that her husband had been taken to the Convention but any hopes that she may have had that he would be returned to them at the end of the day were cruelly dashed when Louis failed to come back to their rooms and she was brusquely informed by the guards that he was forbidden to have any contact with his family until the end of the trial. Louis had, in fact, been
told that he could have Madame Royale and the little Dauphin live with him in his rooms below those of the Queen so long as the children didn’t see their mother and aunt but Louis, although he would have loved to have had their company, refused to separate them from their mother and so lived alone in his rooms at the Temple, totally cut off from the rest of his family whom he could
hear walking about overhead but was unable to communicate with, for the next six weeks.

He wasn’t even allowed to see them on Madame Royale’s fourteenth birthday on 19 December or on Christmas Day, which caused them all great distress. Marie Antoinette spent the day in tears while Louis, completely resigned to his fate, sat down and wrote his last will and
testament with the future fate of his family, particularly his wife, clearly very much on his mind. ‘I recommend my children to my wife. I have never doubted her tenderness as a mother. I particularly recommend her to raise them as good Christians, promote their minds to virtue, make them regard worldly pomps, if they are condemned to experience them, as a perilous and transitory
heritage, and to deflect their thoughts to the only solid and lasting glory, that of eternity. I entreat my sister to continue her love for my children, and to be their mother should they tragically be deprived of their own.’ He then added: ‘I entreat my wife to forgive me all the evils now inflicted upon her because of me, and whatever troubles I may have caused her throughout our marriage; as she may be
absolutely certain that I secrete nothing against her, should she imagine anything with which to reproach myself.’ To his lawyer, Malesherbes he admitted sadly that his wife ‘was a child when she first came to France and had no one to help her, not even my own relatives.’ Louis was sentenced to death by a small majority on 16 January and to his distress
he learned that his own cousin the Duc d’Orléans, who now preferred to be known as Philippe Égalité, was amongst those who had voted for death. There was still a slim chance that he might be reprieved and perhaps banished from the country instead but this was rejected and on the afternoon of Sunday 20 January Louis was given the news that he was to be guillotined the very
next morning. His distressed family had had very little news of him for the last six weeks other than a few coded messages from Cléry and a few of their more sympathetic guards, the ones who didn’t shove their fingers into their bread to search it for hidden letters or blow pipe smoke in their faces. Marie Antoinette found the long weeks of separation deeply distressing and spent most of her time in
floods of tears as she fretted about her husband. It was the longest that they had been separated since she first came to France and she missed him terribly.

Marie Antoinette and Madame Élisabeth learned of Louis’ death sentence from the news vendors outside the Temple who shouted the news up to the tower where they were being held. At first the Convention had decreed
that the former King should not be allowed to see his family before he was taken away to die but then had relented and agreed that he should be reunited with them for one last time. At eight in the evening the family were escorted downstairs to Louis’ rooms by a group of guardsmen and some officials who were supposed to keep an eye on the family but were so distressed by the dreadful
sobs of the royal family as they clung together that they turned their backs to give them some much needed privacy.

Marie Antoinette clung to her husband for the next two hours, crying piteously. Although they had never been lovers in the romantic sense, she had grown to love and care for Louis, the shy, awkward boy that she had first met in a sunny clearing.
at Compiègne less than twenty three years before, most sincerely and the thought of carrying on without him was completely devastating. She begged him to let them stay with him for the night so that they could have a little more time together but Louis gently refused, telling her that he wanted to be alone so that he could properly prepare himself for death although he
eventually relented and promised that he would send
for them to come and see him before he left the next
morning so that they could say a proper last goodbye.
‘Do you promise?’ Marie Antoinette asked, still crying.
‘I promise,’ her husband said.
He did not send for them. Unable to bear the distress of
his children and unwilling to make his family, whom he
loved more than life itself,
suffer the horror of saying a last goodbye, he went without seeing them ever again. ‘Tell the Queen, my dear children and my sister that I had promised to see them this morning, but that I wanted to spare them the pain of such a cruel separation,’ he told Cléry before he left the Temple for the last time, handing him his wedding ring and seal. ‘It grieves me very much to go without receiving
their last embraces and so I give to you the task of making my farewells. Please tell my wife that I leave her with sorrow.’ He left just before nine in the morning in a closed carriage. His wife waited in the rooms above for the summons that never came, refusing all food and sustenance before dressing in white, the traditional colour of mourning for the Queens of France, and lying down on
her bed where she cried helplessly for the next hour until the cheers and shouts of the crowds outside told her that the deed had been done. ‘The monsters!’ Madame Élisabeth cried, distraught with grief as her niece screamed with distress, knowing that her father was dead. ‘I hope that they are satisfied now.’

Marie Antoinette was completely devastated by her
husband’s death and according to her daughter fell into a ‘near catatonic state’, refusing to eat or leave her room, getting barely any sleep and sitting in total silence for hours on end. Already thin, she now became absolutely scrawny to the extent that she was virtually unrecognisable and looked much older than her thirty seven years while her hair, which she was always
prone to lose in times of stress, began to fall out in handfuls. In vain did her family implore her to eat, sleep and get some exercise but it seemed as if life had lost all meaning for the beleaguered former Queen. Gradually though she became to recover, buoyed up by the fact that her children, particularly little Louis Charles who was now hailed by the faithful remaining
monarchists as King Louis XVII, still needed her. She requested black taffeta mourning apparel for herself and her family and some additional chic black accessories from Rose Bertin for herself: a fan, two pairs of kidskin gloves, one pair of silk gloves, three fichus and two rather fetching mourning bonnets with trailing black ribbons. The intrepid artist Kucharski returned, disguised
as a guardsman, to the Temple at about this time and sketched what was to be the final portrait of the Queen, broken but never beaten, looking mournful in her mourning clothes.

The conditions in which the prisoners were kept gradually worsened over the next few months as their living quarters became more restricted with Marie Antoinette and her children
jammed in one room, Madame Élisabeth in another, their warders, the Tisons, in a third and two guards on constant duty in a fourth. Their meals were no longer quite so splendid as they had been while Louis was still alive, not that Marie Antoinette noticed for she wasn’t eating much anyway. They had also lost the services of the faithful Cléry, who had been dismissed after
Louis’ execution and banished from the Temple. Their unhealthy lifestyle began to quickly take its toll on the already thoroughly demoralised prisoners and a doctor eventually had to be called in to look at Madame Royale, who developed painful ulcers on her leg, and her mother who was now so weak that she was prone to fainting fits and had also begun to suffer terrible
haemorrhages, caused either by stress, early menopause, fibroids or something much more sinister. Although several of the guards delighted in being as rude and insolent as possible towards the royal family, they were not all bad and one in particular called Goret seems to have taken them under his wing. He tried to persuade the Queen to eat and even nagged her into going outside to take
some exercise. ‘I don’t want to walk past the door which my husband crossed for the last time,’ Marie Antoinette protested, only for Goret to suggest that instead of going down to the gardens she should go up to the top of the tower where there was plenty of room to walk about.

Completely cut off from the world, Marie Antoinette had no way of knowing that the execution of her husband
had sent shock waves through all of Europe and that the very next day England had declared war on France. She did not know that Axel de Fersen was equally devastated by Louis’ death and, terrified that a similarly brutal fate awaited the rest of the royal family, had been travelling from court to court trying to get support for another escape attempt. Mercifully she also didn’t
know just how uninterested her own family, whom she assumed would be pulling all possible strings to save her, were in getting her out of the Temple although her sisters Maria Carolina and Maria Amalia were frantic with worry about her and would have undoubtedly helped if they could.

However, the long, dark, miserable days in the Temple tower were lightened by a
vague hope of rescue when another sympathetic guard Toulan joined forces with the Chevalier de Jarjayes, a monarchist and passionate admirer of the Queen, whose wife had managed to get inside the Temple disguised as a laundrywoman. Enlisting a second faithful guard Lepître, they formulated a plan to whisk the disguised royal family away from Paris and take them by carriage to
the Normandy coast where they could set sail for England. They had the funds to pay all the necessary bribes and had theoretically even managed to secure false passports but the plans had gone sadly and catastrophically awry when the increasing unrest in Paris caused the city barriers to be closed and forced the authorities to increase their vigilance over the royal
family. Lepître, always the weakest link in the plan, lost his nerve at this point and backed out but the undaunted Jarjayes and Toulan now tried to persuade Marie Antoinette, judged to be the most endangered member of the royal family, to leave alone without her sister-in-law and children. However, although Madame Royale and Madame Élisabeth begged her to take this chance, she refused to
leave and sadly wrote to Jarjayes that: ‘We have dreamt a pleasant dream, that is all... I know that you have my interests at heart and that the chance we are now missing may never come again. But I should never have a moment’s happiness if I abandoned my children. And therefore I have no regret.’

Toulan and Lepître were dismissed shortly afterwards.
thanks to the Tisons, who spied on the royal family and reported the two guards for behaving in a suspiciously favourable way around them. The defeated Jarjayes, deeply distressed to have been unable to rescue the Queen, left Paris but thanks to the offices of Toulon he took with him Louis XVI’s wedding ring and seal which were destined for the Comte de Provence and Comte
d’Artois, who were still in exile abroad. He also had a message for Fersen as well as a printed impression of the words on a signet ring that he had given to Marie Antoinette in exchange for one of her own rings. ‘*They are more true than ever,*’ the Queen sadly told Jarjayes. ‘*Tutto a te mi guida.*’ Everything leads me to you.

Frustrated and depressed, the royal ladies now took
solace in their books, spending hours reading the religious tracts that they had with them and forgoing the light-hearted society novels of Mrs Burney that they had enjoyed before the King’s execution. Marie Antoinette’s only thoughts nowadays were for her son, who was now eight years old. He had become sickly and understandably fractious thanks to the close
confine the royal family and although his mother and aunt did their best to continue his lessons, he was clearly in need of a proper tutor and a lot more exercise and stimulation. The Convention evidently agreed but instead of appointing someone worthy of the task like the philosopher and mathematician Condorcet who had offered his services, they instead decided to place
him under the guardianship of Simon, a former shoemaker who was now employed as general factotum at the Temple where he ran errands for the royal family and oversaw their treatment. Their reasoning was that the boy needed to have all of his royal pretensions drummed out of him and what better way to do this than have him brought up by a proper man of the people.
On the evening of 3 July, several officials came to the Queen’s room where the boy was already asleep in his bed and his mother, aunt and sister were quietly reading together. The family had been enduring random night time searches of their persons and rooms since the King’s death and at first assumed that this was yet another such imposition until one of the men stepped forward and
began to read out the official decree from the Convention which announced that Marie Antoinette and her son were to be separated and from now on the boy would reside in the former King’s rooms downstairs where he was to be looked after by Simon and his wife. Horrified, the Queen took her son, who had woken up crying, into her arms and refused to hand him over, finally only relenting when
the officers threatened to use force if she didn’t let them take the boy away.

Weeping, Marie Antoinette then dressed her son for the last time and gave him one final kiss before the officers took the sobbing, terrified boy away from his family. For the next few days they could hear him crying in his rooms downstairs as he begged to be taken back to his mother. However,
although royalist legend paints the Simons as cruel monsters who mistreated the boy King terribly, they were not nearly so bad as they have been painted and, in their own rough way admittedly, even treated him with a certain amount of brusque kindness even if they followed the instructions of the Convention to the letter and did their best to transform the little princeling into a
‘child of the nation’ by teaching him revolutionary songs, giving him the occasional sip of alcohol and encouraging him to use rough language and swear. His guards were also kind and relatively indulgent to the boy and tried their best to cheer him up until finally the tears that his family could hear gave way to boyish laughter and cheerful singing of republican songs.
Already shattered by the death of her husband, Marie Antoinette was almost completely destroyed by the loss of her son, her chou d’amour, whom she had cherished and idolised. For days she did not know what to do with herself but could only lie on her bed, weeping listlessly and straining to hear his voice in the rooms below. When Madame Élisabeth realised that they could catch
brief glimpses of the boy playing in the gardens from an arrow slit on the stairs to the top of the tower, she roused herself and went up the stairs to keep watch, hoping to see her son for herself. For the rest of her stay in the Temple this became her chief occupation and only pleasure in a life that was otherwise devoid of all happiness. As her daughter would later recollect: ‘living
and dying had become all the same to her.’

As Marie Antoinette sank into a deep depression that neither her daughter nor sister-in-law could rouse her from, she had no idea of the forces that were ranging against her in the outside world. Another failed escape attempt planned by the Baron de Batz had put the authorities on the alert and had the effect of tightening
surveillance on the three women cooped up in their tower rather than, as had been hoped, liberating them. Attempts were also made by members of the Convention to negotiate an exchange of the former Queen for French prisoners but these too came to nothing thanks to the apathy of her nephew the Austrian Emperor. It was a series of defeats by the rapidly advancing Austrian-
Prussian forces, however, that would eventually force the hand of the Convention when it came to the fate of their former Queen. Calls were made to have the ‘Austrian Woman’ tried for her crimes against the nation and so the decision was made to have her separated from her remaining family and taken into closer confinement while a case was prepared against her.
At 2am on the morning of 2 August, the prisoners were woken by a loud hammering on the door to their rooms at the Temple before a group of officials and guardsmen entered and informed the terrified women, who were made to get out of bed and were dressed only in their nightclothes, that they had come to take ‘Widow Capet’ away to the Conciergerie. The men then watched as
Madame Élisabeth, with shaking fingers and many tears, dressed her sister-in-law for the last time before begging in vain to be allowed to go with her and share her prison - a request that was roughly denied. Marie Antoinette then had her pockets roughly searched and was permitted to give her daughter one last tearful embrace before she picked up the small bundle of
belongings that she had been permitted to hastily throw together and left forever. She struck her head on a doorframe as she walked out of the Temple for the last time, passing by the closed door behind which her son lay asleep and through which her husband had left for his execution. ‘Never mind,’ she murmured in response to the concerned enquiries of one of the officers. ‘Nothing can
hurt me now.’

It was still the dead of night when Marie Antoinette was taken by carriage across the slumbering city to the Conciergerie on the Quai d’Horloge. She had doubtless seen the forbidding old palace countless times over the years but had almost certainly never once set foot inside the older parts of the building which had been used as a prison for a long time and
currently housed around three hundred prisoners. Once as pretty as a fairytale castle in a Medieval book of hours, its age blackened towers had long since taken on a more sinister aspect as they loomed gloomily over the murky Seine. Marie Antoinette would have seen none of this though as her carriage pulled up in the courtyard and her guards led her inside the prison where the turnkey
Larivière was waiting to take her to her cell. First though she had to be entered in the register. ‘Look at me,’ Marie Antoinette, formally designated as ‘Prisoner 280’, said when the nervous young registrar asked for her name.

She was then taken to her new quarters - a cell that had only just been hastily vacated by the now housed elsewhere General de Custine. It had formerly been used as the
Council Chamber of the old palace and was fifteen square metres inside and very meagrely furnished with just a table, two chairs, a bucket and a camp bed which the jailor’s kindhearted wife Madame Richard had made up with her own best linen and some lace edged pillows. Madame Richard and her shy young maid Rosalie Lamorlière were to have the chief care of Marie Antoinette
and, filled with understandable curiosity, hastened to greet her after she had been left in her cell. There they found the Queen hanging her little watch, a present from her mother that she had brought with her from Vienna all those years ago, from a nail protruding from the wall. Along with her wedding ring, a diamond ring and a locket containing her children's hair, it was one of
the few jewels that still remained to her from the fabulous collection that she had once commanded as Queen of France.

Overawed to be in the Queen’s presence, Rosalie shyly asked Marie Antoinette if she needed help to undress. It was just after three in the morning and the exhausted Queen, whose sickly and bedraggled appearance shocked the two other
women, was obviously need of some sleep. ‘Thank you but no,’ she said gently to Rosalie. ‘I will look after myself from now on.’

After the relatively tranquil life that she had experienced at the Temple, it must have been a shock to Marie Antoinette to find herself in the heart of an actual prison. Although she was kept in strict isolation and forbidding from mixing with the other
prisoners, Marie Antoinette would still have been able to hear them chattering and laughing in the corridors and singing popular songs out in the women’s yard. Perhaps it even lifted her depressed spirits just a little to know that she was not entirely alone and to be able to feel for the first time in months as if life, even if she couldn’t see it, was still going on around her.
She continued her habit of getting up at six every morning, after which Rosalie would bring her a breakfast of coffee and rolls and help her to dress. Shortly after her arrival a parcel had arrived from Madame Élisabeth containing some fine lace edged underclothes, black stockings, fichus, caps, a white dress and a pair of satin shoes which meant that the former Queen was still able to
array herself with relative elegance even if her wardrobe was a long way off the sumptuous one that she had enjoyed in her glorious heyday at Versailles and was now kept in a small cardboard box donated by the kind hearted Rosalie and darned, patched and mended over and over again by Madame Larivière the turnkey’s mother rather than an army of maids and seamstresses. To
her credit though, Marie Antoinette rarely uttered a word of complaint and made virtually no references to a way of life that she now had to accept was vanished forever. Instead she quietly and with firm resignation accepted everything that happened to her, accepting changes of guards, stricter rules, searches and interrogation without any apparent demur and with
every appearance of quiet resignation.

Isolated from the other prisoners and seeing only a few people, Marie Antoinette found the long hours difficult to fill although Rosalie and Madame Richard did their best to cheer her up with little chats (they would eke out their tasks as long as possible in the evening to delay the moment when the Queen would be left alone for the
night), occasional presents of flowers and even some treasured snippets of news about her children. Forbidden to possess paper or writing implements, the woman who had once found reading such a terrible chore now devoured the few books that she had been allowed to bring with her. In the Temple she had enjoyed the translated light hearted novels of Frances Burney but in the
Conciergerie she showed a marked preference for travel memoirs such as *The Stories of Famous Shipwrecks* and *The Travels of Captain Cook*, which allowed her captive imagination to fly free of her damp and mouldy cell walls during the long, empty hours of confinement.

Both Madame Richard and Rosalie were excellent cooks and did their best to tempt the Queen’s waning appetite with
special little treats to supplement the simple diet of roast chicken, vegetables and noodle bouillon soup which she existed on. They were aided in this by several market women who insisted upon donating choice morsels such as the plumpest chickens and sweetest grapes to the Queen’s table. Her supply of Ville d’Avray mineral water also continued, much to her relief as the weather became
unbearably hot and made the conditions inside the Conciergerie intolerably humid and malodorous, so much so that Rosalie had to burn juniper in Marie Antoinette’s cell to hide the terrible smell that seemed to saturate the mouldering stone walls of the old prison by the Seine. While her guards would on occasion volunteer to scrape off the mould that grew on the bottom of the
Queen’s shoes.

Two guards kept watch over her at all times of the day and night and a small screen was provided to conceal her when she performed her natural bodily functions, which were made more difficult now by the increasingly dreadful haemorrhages that she was enduring, and dressed herself. As usual she was quietly courteous to her keepers and
for the most part they returned her politeness and did their best not to invade her privacy. However, the jailor Monsieur Richard was not adverse to making a bit of extra money out of his most famous prisoner and soon had a healthy little sideline going in charging people to come in and take a peek at the former Queen in her miserable little cell. Marie Antoinette was used to being stared at and
would sit in impassive silence, focussing all of her attention on her books or the backgammon and card games that the guards would play to while away the long hours and making no attempt to speak to these random visitors who came in their multitudes to gawp at her, even when they tried to whisper to her about escape schemes.

She paid a little more
attention though when one gentleman visitor the Chevalier Rougeville, whom she had met at the Tuileries during the terrifying invasion on 20 June 1792, threw a clandestine note wrapped around a carnation on the floor of her cell as he was leaving, offering her enough money to bribe her way out of the Conciergerie should she wish to make an attempt to escape in a carriage which
he would endeavour to have waiting for her outside the prison. Marie Antoinette tried to reply by picking out a message with a pin but the plan was quickly discovered after one of her guards blew the whistle and it all came to nothing. Rougeville fled the city and once again it was Marie Antoinette who bore the brunt of the failure of others when she endured an arduous and humiliating two
day interrogation, had her mother’s watch and few remaining pieces of jewellery confiscated and lost the right to have light in her cell after dusk. When the investigation was over it was decided that Marie Antoinette should be moved to a more secure cell and the Richard couple replaced by Monsieur and Madame Bault, who were judged to be far less indulgent and could be relied upon to
put a stop to the stream of visitors to the Queen’s cell. However, although they were more strict than the departed Richard couple, the Baults were also extremely kind in their own way and did their best to make Marie Antoinette’s life as comfortable as possible by making sure that she still got decent food and had fresh linen, often risking official censure in the process.
Marie Antoinette was moved to her new cell on the 11 September. It was the former dispensary of the prison and still smelt strongly of medicines, which wasn’t helped by the fact that the one window, which overlooked the women’s yard, was permanently closed to prevent communion between the Queen and the female inmates, some of whom she had known in happier times.
She could still hear them though as they gathered outside to do their meagre laundry in the giant stone tub in the corner of the yard every morning and took their dinner together in the afternoon, chattering, laughing and singing as if they hadn’t a care in the world as it was considered very bad form to show the least sign of fear of apprehension even when you
knew that you were facing certain death on the scaffold. Not for nothing was the Conciergerie known as the Guillotine’s Waiting Room and prisoners were brought there from the other prisons when it was time for them to face trial and almost certain death.

The other prisoners spent a great deal of time speculating about the former Queen who was known to be shut up
alongside them, wondering what sort of conditions she lived under and whether she would ever be allowed to walk free. Marie Antoinette also wondered about this and confided to Rosalie that she still had faith that her nephew would somehow manage to negotiate her release, little knowing that he had long since more or less washed his hands of her predicament and she was not considered of
enough diplomatic importance to exchange for prisoners although some desultory attempts had been made to negotiate her release, all of which had come to nothing. While the Queen waited and prayed for her relatives to come to her rescue, her fate was eventually sealed during a secret late night meeting at the Committee of Public Safety, during which it was
decided that Marie Antoinette should be put on trial and then executed as her husband had been.

Meanwhile at the Temple, her eight year old son had been caught playing with his genitals, a common enough pastime for boys of his age and one that his mother and aunt had frequently tried to put a stop to, by his ‘guardian’ Simon and, ashamed, the boy, whose
habit of lying to get out of trouble had long caused his mother and governess consternation, had claimed that he had been taught to do so by his mother and aunt. Delighted by this revelation, Simon had scurried off to let Hébert, Marie Antoinette’s greatest enemy and editor of the scurrilous newspaper Le Père Duchesne, know what had happened, clearly believing that here at last they
had some concrete evidence of the former Queen’s famous debauchery. The unfortunate Louis Charles persisted in his tale when interrogated at length by a group of officials although he was, rather tellingly, unable to provide much in the way of actual details other than a vague reference to it happening in the mornings when either his mother or aunt would take him into their beds. He was
even sufficiently buoyed along by the extremely gratifying interest that the officials were taking in his tale to persist in his allegations when confronted by his sister and aunt, both of whom naturally denied that any such thing had ever occurred. In fact the gently reared and innocent Marie Thérèse did not even understand what any of them were talking about. Her aunt
Madame Élisabeth did though and rounded on the unrepentant boy, calling him a ‘little monster’.

Marie Antoinette was woken up in the early hours of 12 October and taken to a secret cross examination in the court room of the Palais du Justice, which formed part of the Conciergerie complex and where the Kings of France, including her own husband, had once held their
formal *lits de justice* meetings. Here she was confronted by Hermann, the President of the Revolutionary Tribunal, Fouquier-Tinville, the Public Prosecutor and a clerk called Fabricius. The exhausted Queen was then assailed by a barrage of accusations that dredged up virtually every calumny, real and imagined, that she had been charged with since the beginning of
the revolution. She was accused of encouraging her husband in his treachery against the French people, of sending money to her brother in Austria and of encouraging the counter-revolutionary movement, all of which Marie Antoinette strenuously denied. Realising that they were getting nowhere, Hermann and Fouquier-Tinville brought the session to an end and asked the
Queen if she would like them to appoint two defence lawyers for her trial which, they informed her, was due to begin in two days time. Marie Antoinette assented to this and was taken away to her cell where she was visited upon the following day by her newly appointed defence: Tronçon-Ducoudray and Chauveau-Lagarde, who had unsuccessfully defended Charlotte Corday a few
months earlier.

Both men were rather thrown by the almost indecent haste with which the trial was being put together and immediately beseeched the Queen to write to the Revolutionary Tribunal and beg them to delay the trial by a few days so that they would have time to put together a proper defence. They both knew, of course, that Marie Antoinette was already
doomed and that the trial was just a charade intended to blacken the Queen’s name even further while at the same time appeasing her relatives by giving the whole miserable proceeding at least the vague semblance of justice but even so they couldn’t believe that they hadn’t been given more time to look at all the relevant documents, especially as preparations for the King’s
trial had gone on for months. Marie Antoinette grudgingly agreed to write to the Tribunal but her letter was completely ignored and she was escorted from her cell the following morning, Monday 14 October, as planned. Once again Marie Antoinette was taken through the prison to the court room which this time was packed to the rafters with people, which must have been rather off-
putting after so many months of solitary confinement. The judges in their heavy black robes and medallions saying ‘La Loi’ were arrayed in their seats along with a hastily assembled and decidedly shady looking jury, while the rest of the hall was crammed with a great noisy mob of spectators who had come to get a glimpse of the former Queen. If they had been expecting the jaunty, haughty
mistress of Versailles to appear in their midst they must have been exceedingly shocked when a wan faced woman in black widow’s weeds, aged almost beyond all recognition by her terrible experiences walked slowly and with the heavy tread of someone in terrible pain into the room and took her place once again opposite Hermann and Fouquier-Tinville. Wracked by another
haemorrhage, the Queen was suffering terrible abdominal cramps and was so weak with pain that she could not stand for long periods of time and indeed sank gratefully into the waiting armchair after she had taken her oath, giving her age as ‘almost thirty eight’ which must have stunned the onlookers who saw an elderly woman in front of them. She drummed her fingers on the arms of her chair as the clerk
of court read out the indictment, which had plumbed the depths of the libellous pamphlets about Marie Antoinette to come up with a distorted tissue of lies, misrepresentations and calumny.

The following cross examination was not much better as over forty witnesses stepped up to add colour to the Tribunal’s indictment, repeating every dreadful lie
that they had heard about the Queen and making up a few more besides. The hapless Marie Antoinette was accused of leading her husband astray, of plotting to murder the Duc d’Orléans, of smuggling vast sums of money out of the country to her brother and a whole other array of alleged crimes. With a deft mixture of contempt and humility, the Queen defended herself against every charge but fell
silent when Hébert stood up to deliver his denunciation which included mention of Louis Charles’ accusations towards his mother, adding that, ‘this criminal sexual intercourse was not dictated by pleasure, but by the calculated expectation of enervating the physical condition of the child, whom they still liked to think of as destined to occupy a throne and over whose mind,
therefore, they wanted to be sure of having power... Now that the child has been taken from the mother, he has become healthy and strong.’ When one of the jury members heartlessly prodded the Queen for a response to Hébert’s monstrous charge, she stood up and with tears in her eyes replied that, ‘If I did not reply, it is because nature refuses to answer such a charge against a mother.’ She
then turned towards the crowd that had gathered in the courtroom, many of whom were female. ‘I appeal to every mother here.’ There was a stunned silence followed by a roar of indignation from the spectators who harangued Hébert, the judges and the jury for trying to blacken the Queen’s reputation with what was obviously a horrible lie. They had come with the full
intention of seeing the former Queen condemned to death but this, it seemed, was a step too far even for them and Hermann was forced to stop the trial for several minutes so that order could be restored. Meanwhile Marie Antoinette turned to one of her defence lawyers and anxiously asked if perhaps her reply had not been too dignified. ‘Madame,’ he replied kindly, ‘just be
yourself and you will always be perfect.’

There was a brief break at half past four during which Marie Antoinette had a few mouthfuls of soup before she was once again forced to take her place on the stand and listen as more witnesses were called in to discredit her. The fifteen hour long session finally came to an end at ten in the evening when the exhausted Marie Antoinette,
barely able to walk due to blood loss and terrible agonising cramps, was escorted wearily back to her cell for the night. She was back in court again at eight the next morning, the guards coming to collect her before Rosalie had even had a chance to serve her breakfast. Again weakened by pain and loss of blood, the Queen faced her accusers and the enormous crowd that had
once again gathered, without any form of sustenance until the afternoon break when Rosalie made her some bouillon soup which alas was mostly lost when one of the guardsmen let his girlfriend give it to the Queen instead and the girl was so nervous that she managed to spill most of it down herself on the way.

The second session followed much the same lines
as the first with the same miserable parade of lying, embellishing witnesses and the furious cross examination of the judges. Marie Antoinette listened in dispassionate silence to their questions and denied everything when prompted for a response. She was even interrogated about the Diamond Necklace Affair and yet again denied having ever met Madame de la Motte-
Valois or having any involvement in the incident. Much was made of her alleged extravagances at the Petit Trianon and also the huge financial rewards that she had showered upon the Polignac family but time and time again they returned to the same old theme - that Marie Antoinette had been the true power behind the throne of France and a malign and scheming influence on
her husband Louis, now portrayed as a weak minded and susceptible fool for the purposes of fully incriminating his wife for his alleged crimes against the French people.

Finally at the very end, the Queen was asked if she had anything that she wished to say in her defence. ‘I will finish by observing that I was only the wife of Louis XVI and I had to submit to his
will,’ she said with quiet dignity. There was a brief adjournment before Fouquier-Tinville made his closing statement, declaring her to be ‘the avowed enemy of the French nation’ who had syphoned off the country’s assets to be disposed of amongst her friends, Austrian family and upon her own extravagant excesses, had been the chief architect of the bloody unrest that had soiled
the first years of the glorious revolution and had furthermore imposed her own stronger will upon that of her feeble and apathetic husband King Louis, enticing him with her womanly wiles into betraying the interests of his people. Her lawyers then took the stand and did their best to present a case for the defence but they were utterly unprepared and completely dispirited by the knowledge
that nothing they could say would make the slightest bit of difference to what was an obviously completely rigged trial. Nonetheless they put up a reasonably spirited defence of their client and she was moved to thank them both before she was escorted out.

After Marie Antoinette had left the court room, Hermann took the floor once again to sum up all the evidence, such as it was, for the jurors who
were asked to consider if they believed that Marie Antoinette had plotted and conspired with foreign powers, counter-revolutionaries and émigrés and given them monetary assistance with the aim of helping them invade France, cause a civil war and overthrow the republic. No actual proof of any such activities had been given and the Queen herself had most
strenuously denied these allegations but the Tribunal were not going to let these minor details stand in their way. Hermann ended by reminding the jurors that they were making history by putting the Queen on trial. ‘Equality triumphs. A woman once surrounded with all the brilliant splendour that royal pride and slavish servility could concoct, now occupies in the National Tribunal the
place given two days back to another woman, an equality assuring her impartial justice. Citizen jurors, this matter is not one of those in which a single deed, a single crime, is submitted to your conscience and intelligence. You have to judge the accused’s entire political career since she came to sit beside the last King of the French.’ At three in the morning, the jury went off for an hour
to pretend to deliberate before Marie Antoinette was brought back into the court room. She had given her lawyers the impression that she expected to be deported and they had gently let her go on thinking this even though it was clear to everyone else where the trial was heading. Shattered but still dignified she listened in impassive silence as Hermann announced that she had been found guilty on all
counts and Fouquier-Tinville informed her that she had been sentenced to death and would be executed later that morning. When asked if she had anything to say, Marie Antoinette simply shook her head and was observed to look stunned but not afraid as she made her way slowly out of the court room, flanked by guards and lifting her chin proudly as she ignored the cheers and catcalls of the
spectators who now rushed out into the chill morning air to secure the best spots around the scaffold in the Place de la Révolution.

It was half past four in the morning and outside the damp walls of the Conciergerie the first purple and pink glimmers of the approaching dawn were starting to appear above the slumbering city. Completely shattered and weakened by
lack of food, pain and blood loss, Marie Antoinette stumbled on the steps leading down to the cells and a young guardsman called de Busne took hold of her elbow to steady her then, with a courtesy that she had not seen for a very long time, politely removed his hat and offered her his arm for the rest of the way. He would be denounced and arrested the next day for this kindness.
There were candles, paper and a pen waiting for her in her cell when she got back, the first time she had been allowed writing materials and light for several months. Unable to sleep, desperately lonely and crying with fear for her children, Marie Antoinette sat down and pulled the paper towards her, words tumbling through her mind as she considered who to write to before finally
settling upon her sister-in-law Madame Élisabeth who was still imprisoned in the Temple. Sadly the letter was never to reach her as it was stolen by Robespierre, who hid it beneath his mattress along with other relics of the royal family.

‘It is to you, my sister, that I write for the last time. I have just been condemned, not to a shameful death, for it is shameful only for
criminals, but to rejoin your brother. Like him innocent, I hope to display the same firmness as he did in his last moments. I am calm, as one is when one’s conscience holds no reproach. I regret deeply having to abandon my poor children. You know that I lived only for them and for you, my good and kind sister. In what a situation do I leave you, who from your affection sacrificed everything to be
with us. I learned from the pleadings at the trial that my daughter was separated from you. Alas! Poor child, I dare not write to her, she would not receive it. I do not know even if this will reach you. Receive my blessing on them both. I hope that one day, when they are older, they will be able to join you again and profit to the full from your tender care and that they both remember what I have always
tried to instil in them: that the principles and the execution of their duty should be the chief foundation of their life, that their affection and mutual trust will make it happy.

Let my daughter remember that in view of her age she should always help her brother with the advice that her greater experience and her affection may suggest, and let them both remember
that in whatever situation they may find themselves they will never be truly happy unless united. Let them learn from our example how much consolation our affection has brought us in the midst of our unhappiness and how happiness is doubled when one can share it with a friend - and where can one find a more loving and truer friend than in one’s own family? Let my son never forget his
father’s last words, which I distinctly repeat to him, never to try to avenge our death. I have to mention something which pains my heart. I know how much distress this child must have given you. Forgive him, my dear sister, remember his age and how easy it is to make a child say anything you want, even something he does not understand. The day will come, I hope, when he will be
all the more conscious of the worth of your goodness and tenderness towards them both. I now have only to confide in you my final thoughts. I would have liked to write them at the beginning of the trial, but apart from the fact that I was not allowed to write, everything went so quickly that I really would not have had the time.

I die in the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman
religion, in the religion of my father, in which I have always professed, having no expectation of spiritual consolation, and not even knowing if there still exists any priests of that religion here, and in any case the place where I am would expose them to too much danger if they should enter. I sincerely beg pardon of God for all the faults I have
committed during my life. I hope that in His goodness He will receive my last wishes, and those I have long since made, that He will receive my soul in His mercy and goodness. I ask pardon of all those I know, and of you my sister in particular, for all the distress I may, without wishing it. Have caused them. I forgive all my enemies the harm they have done me. I say farewell here to my aunts
and to all my brothers and sisters. I had friends. The idea of being separated for ever from them and their troubles forms one of my greatest regrets in dying. Let them know, at least, that up to my last moment I was thinking of them.

Farewell, my good and loving sister. May this letter reach you! Think of me always, I embrace you with all my heart, together with
those poor, dear children. My God! What an agony it is to leave them forever! Farewell! Farewell! I shall henceforth pay attention to nothing but my spiritual duties. As I am not free, they will perhaps bring me a (conformist) priest, but I protest here that I shall not say a word to him and that I shall treat him as a complete stranger.

Unlike her husband it did not occur to Marie Antoinette
to write a will but then again she had precious little left to leave now that virtually everything had been stripped from her. When her cell was searched after her departure only a few meagre belongings were found: a sponge, a box of powder, a small box of pomade, some handkerchiefs, garters, two sets of pockets to be worn beneath her dresses, a black crepe mourning gown, some linen
undergarments, a bonnet and two pairs of black stockings, all stored in the box donated by the kindly Rosalie who also presented her with a small mirror backed with red lacquer that she had picked up from a market stall for a few coins.

The Queen spent the next few hours lying on her bed, unable to sleep and weeping silently as the dawn broke outside her windows and the
two guardsmen watched silently, muffling their yawns behind their fists, from the other side of their screen. At seven, Rosalie came in and asked her if she felt able to take some food, gently reminding the Queen that she had barely eaten since the trial began and would have need of her strength to get through the ordeal that lay ahead, but Marie Antoinette refused. ‘My child, I need
nothing now,’ she said sadly. ‘Everything is over for me.’ However, she relented when she saw how genuinely distressed the little maid was and agreed to have some left over soup and noodles, only managing a few mouthfuls before she pushed it to one side and they embarked on the important business of dressing her for her final public appearance.

Marie Antoinette had lost a
lot of blood overnight and was desperate to change into fresh underthings but when Rosalie attempted to discreetly remove her petticoats and help her change into clean ones, one of the guards stepped around the screen and made it clear that he intended to watch. ‘For the love of God, Monsieur, let me change my chemise in private,’ Marie Antoinette begged but he
insisted that orders were orders and refused to move, leaving the two women to do their best to hide the Queen’s bloodstained linen by rolling it into a ball and shoving it into a gap in the wall before pulling a black petticoat over her clean chemise. However, if she hoped to be allowed to wear a black dress that would hide the worst of her bleeding, she was to be disappointed for the
Committee of Public Safety had sent over an order that the Queen was not to be allowed to wear mourning for her husband to the scaffold but instead could wear any other colour. Marie Antoinette, who had once owned dresses in all the colours of the rainbow and a few more besides, had only one dress that wasn’t black and that was the plain white piqué morning gown that her
sister-in-law Madame Élisabeth had sent over from the Temple. Perhaps Marie Antoinette allowed herself a small sad smile as Rosalie helped her into the dress, remembering as no one else had that the long ago Queens of France, including her ancestress Mary Queen of Scots, had traditionally worn white when mourning their husbands. She completed her last toilette with a white
fichu, plain white lawn bonnet decorated with black ribbons, black stockings and a pair of purple shoes.

At some point Abbé Girard, a priest who had sworn the oath of allegiance to the Constitution, was brought to her cell but, as she had promised her sister-in-law, Marie Antoinette refused to acknowledge him, offended that, unlike her husband who had gone to his
death accompanied by his Irish confessor Abbé Edgeworth, she had not been permitted to have a priest who had not sworn the oath but instead had had someone of whom she could not approve foisted upon her at this most spiritually critical time. It probably also hurt that while Louis had been permitted to say goodbye to his family there was clearly no intention of allowing her
the same privilege and that she would be going to her death without so much as a glimpse of the faces that she loved best in all the world and would never get the opportunity to forgive her son for his childish rashness.

The turnkey Larivière and the judges, Fouquier-Tinville and Hermann went to Marie Antoinette’s cell at ten in the morning, finding her kneeling beside her bed and deep in
prayer. The court clerk read out the indictment again, ignoring the Queen’s gentle protest that she had already heard it and then stepped aside as the executioner Sanson entered with a length of rope. The Queen recoiled in horror. ‘You did not tie Louis XVI’s hands,’ she protested, obviously distressed, but with the judges of the Tribunal watching he had no choice but to follow
orders and roughly tie her hands behind her back as she fought to hold back her tears before his assistant fetched the scissors with which he roughly cut off what was left of her prematurely grey and straggly hair.

There was barely time to say one last farewell to Rosalie before the Queen was led up the nine stone steps to the Cour du Mai of the Palais du Justice where a horse
drawn cart was waiting for her rather than the closed carriage which had been provided for her husband’s final journey to the scaffold. Appalled by the terrifying prospect of being driven through the streets, exposed to the violent abuse and insults of the crowd, Marie Antoinette lost control of her bladder and had to retreat behind a wall to relieve herself before she felt able to
clamber on to the cart, where she was instructed to sit with her back to the horses so that everyone could see her. Abbé Girard, determined to remain beside her until the very end even if she repudiated his attempts to comfort her, climbed up and sat beside her while Sanson and his assistant hitched a ride at the back of the cart. It had been freezing cold overnight in the Conciergerie but the weather
had become warmer in the morning and was now reasonably pleasant as they set out on their journey, which would normally take less than an hour but took twice as long this morning thanks to the huge crowds that had gathered to see the former Queen go by for the last time.

The small procession made its way out through the gilded gates of the Palais du Justice
at eleven and turned on to the Rue de la Barillerie and then rumbled over the Pont au Change. The route was lined with over thirty thousand guardsmen who had been hastily deployed overnight to restrain the rabble and prevent any last minute attempts to rescue the Queen. They held back the enormous crowds that had begun to gather on the streets as soon as the verdict was announced.
in the early hours of the morning and which were now shouting and shrieking at the silent Queen, who stared straight ahead as if she simply could not hear them. An actor called Grammont rode ahead of the cart, waving his sword in the air and shouting ‘Here she is at last! It’s Antoinette, my friends, going to her death! She’s finished!’ Some stared at her in silent sympathy though and as she
passed one doorway a young mother held up her little boy, who waved and blew the Queen a kiss, almost reducing her to tears.

The tumbrel turned on to the long Rue Saint Honoré which Marie Antoinette had known very well in happier times. She went past beautiful old mansions where she had once danced all night, Mademoiselle Bertin’s shop, the Palais Royal and the
lovely Church of Saint Roch where the tumbrel halted for several minutes so that the huge group of the market women who had gathered there could scream abuse and spit at the Queen who still continued to stare straight ahead, apparently unmoved by their fury. The artist David was waiting on a wrought iron balcony at the Café de la Régence close by the Palais Royal; renowned for the
intellectual insight of his portraits, he quickly produced a line sketch of the beleaguered Queen in her tumbrel, broken but never unbowed as she confronted the fury of the mob. Only once would the Queen show some spark of emotion, when the tumbrel turned down the elegant Rue Royale and came within sight of the Tuileries palace and her eyes filled with tears as she gazed up at
the windows where once upon a time she had looked down at a sea of cheering faces and the Duc de Brissac, who had perished along with the Princesse de Lamballe in the prison massacres in September 1792, had murmured that ‘Madame, I hope that Monsieur le Dauphin won’t be jealous when I say that you have two hundred thousand lovers.’ A few moments later the
tumbrel came to a juddering halt in the Place de la Révolution, where Marie Antoinette’s husband had met his end almost ten months earlier. The square was still as lovely as ever but there was a pile of rubble where Louis XV’s equestrian statue had been toppled from its podium and smashed into pieces on the ground and the entire vista was now dominated by the wooden
scaffold where the guillotine, that most inelegant of contraptions, awaited her. Marie Antoinette blinked with surprise as she looked around the enormous crowd, several hundred thousand people strong, that had gathered in the square to watch her die, held back by several rows of guardsmen. ‘This is the moment, Madame, to arm yourself with courage,’ the tenacious
Abbé Girard exhorted the Queen as she was pulled down from the cart. ‘Courage?’ Marie Antoinette snapped, provoked into speaking to him at last. ‘The moment when my ills are going to end is not the moment when courage is going to fail me.’ The Queen hurried up the scaffold steps with the light-footed grace that had once enchanted all of Versailles,
her eyes fixed on the instrument of death that loomed above her. In her haste she managed to step on Sanson’s foot, making him yelp with pain and surprise. ‘I am sorry, Monsieur,’ Marie Antoinette murmured with a winsome smile. ‘I did not do it on purpose.’ She turned and looked over the heads of the enormous roaring crowd at the Tuileries but there was no time to dwell on the past
before she was roughly seized, tied to the plank then pushed down beneath the guillotine’s blade.
The Chapelle Expiatoire

‘Called to immortality.’

Tucked away on the Rue Pasquier in the 8th arrondissement of Paris, there is a small park that holds a precious secret – an exquisite little chapel behind a high wall that serves as a memorial to Louis XVI and Marie
Antoinette. Above the entrance there is the following inscription:

‘King Louis XVIII raised this monument to consecrate the place where the mortal remains of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette, transferred on 21 January 1815 to the royal tomb of Saint-Denis, reposed for 21 years. It was finished during the second year of the reign of Charles X, year of grace
After the executions of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in 1793, their bodies were dumped without ceremony alongside those of several thousand other victims of the revolution in the small graveyard of the nearby Madeleine church. Their bodies remained there forgotten alongside those of the Swiss Guards massacred in August 1792, Antoine
Barnave (who went to his death in November 1793 with a piece from one of Marie Antoinette’s dresses in his pocket), Charlotte Corday, Madame du Barry, Madame Roland and the Duc d’Orléans until 1803 when the site was bought by a loyally royalist magistrate, Pierre-Louis Olivier Desclozeaux who had been watching when the royal couple were buried and so
was able to recall where the bodies lay and do his best to discreetly mark the spots with cypress trees.

Intriguingly, in 1770 the little Madeleine cemetery was also the burial ground for the one hundred and thirty three victims of the tragic accident that occurred at the firework display to mark the Parisian celebration of Louis and Marie Antoinette’s wedding. Who could ever have guessed
that the royal couple would one day end up buried alongside them and in such grisly circumstances?

After the Bourbon Restoration in 1815, one of Louis XVIII’s first actions was to have his brother and sister in law’s bodies exhumed and buried with proper ceremony in the royal necropolis, the Basilica of Saint Denis. A year later, Desclozeaux sold the
graveyard to King Louis who then proceeded to build a memorial chapel on the site, sharing the three million livres expense with his niece and the sole remaining child of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, Marie-Thérèse, now the Duchesse d’Angoulême after marrying the eldest son of her uncle the Comte d’Artois.

As you walk up the path towards the main building,
you see memorials to commemorate the unfortunate Swiss Guards who were massacred at the Tuileries in August 1792 as well as memorials to other well known victims of the Terror buried there before the cemetery was officially closed in March 1794 after the executions of Hébert and his chief supporters. It’s not known how many victims of the revolution were buried at
this site, but it could be anything up to three thousand. Thousands of others, including Madame Élisabeth, Camille and Lucile Desmoulins, Robespierre and the handsome Duc de Lauzun were buried at the Errancis cemetery while others, including Madame de Noailles and several members of her family, lie in grave pits at the Picpus cemetery. The Chapelle Expiatoire
was designed by one of Napoleon’s favourite architects Pierre Fontaine and overseen by his assistant Louis-Hippolyte Lebas and took ten years to complete. By the time it was actually finished, Louis XVIII was no more and it was his brother Charles X along with the Duchesse d’Angoulême who presided over the chapel’s inauguration in 1826. The Archbishop of Paris was on
hand to bless the corner stone and, perhaps rather inappropriately, took this as an opportunity to preach about forgiveness for the exiled members of the Revolutionary National Convention. Or perhaps it wasn’t actually all that inappropriate – the chapel could be taken to not only be an apotheosis of the executed Louis and Marie Antoinette but also an acknowledgement
that the horrors of the Terror were now in the past, sanctified and cleansed by the erection of a memorial chapel and proper remembrance of the numerous dead.

The interior of the chapel mirrors the serenity and pale glow of the exterior and is a perfectly balanced and harmonious neoclassical design that manages to be both uplifting and sombre at the same time. I think that
Marie Antoinette would have absolutely approved as when one steps inside one is reminded of the gentle serenity of her chapel at the Petit Trianon and the dairy built for her at Rambouillet. Although the chapel is also dedicated to the memory of Louis XVI, it is clear that here as with other sites associated with the doomed couple it is his wife who is chiefly evoked and brought to
mind.

On the left hand side as you enter the chapel, there is a statue of *Marie Antoinette Supported by Religion* by Jean Pierre Cortot, in which Religion has the beautifully serene features of Marie Antoinette’s sister in law, Madame Elisabeth. This is a beautiful statue – elegant and moving at the same time as the Queen appears to almost abandon herself to religion in
a frenzy of devotion with her hair tumbling down her back and eyes gazing fervently upwards. We are reminded here that although Marie Antoinette lived an apparently frivolous life before the Revolution, she found enormous comfort in her faith during her final years, when virtually all else had been stripped from her, as symbolised by the crown that rolls forgotten and
abandoned on the ground by her knee.

On the right hand side is *Louis XVI Called to Immortality, Sustained by an Angel* by Francois Bosio. Poor Louis. He is anchored to the ground by his grand robes and gazes upwards with seeming relief as the light footed angel shows him the way forward. Here is a man who never wanted to be King, who did his best and died
feeling like he had failed in his duty both to his people and also his family.

It is impossible to stand in the Chapelle Expiatoire and not be moved by the horrible fates of the royal couple and of the other thousands of victims whose bodies reside on that hallowed site and others throughout the city, all lying together regardless of political viewpoint. You can descend to a vault below the
main chapel and see a black marble altar that marks the spot where the royal couple’s remains were allegedly discovered – they were identified thanks to the fact that unlike the other bodies that surrounded them, they had been buried in coffins.

On 21 January 1815, the remains of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were moved from their resting place close
to the Madeleine in Paris to the Basilica St Denis, there to lie for eternity alongside the bodies of their ancestors although possibly not in the way that they had planned as by the time they were interred here the remains of the royalty of France had been removed from their graves and dumped into mass graves outside the Basilica in the autumn of 1793 before being hurriedly replaced higgledy
piggledy and with very little order all together in the crypt.

Their beautiful memorial statues by Edmé Gaulle and Pierre Petitot kneel in the basilica with regal solemnity. The statue of Louis XVI bestows the maligned and ridiculed King with a dignity that he was denied in real life, while Marie Antoinette, pleasingly, is dressed in the elegant fashion of 1815 which sadly she never got to
wear. Their bodies, however, rest alongside those of Louis’ brothers and their wives beneath plain black marble slabs in the crypt below the main church, close to the memorials for Madame Élisabeth, who was guillotined in May 1794 and their children, Louis-Joseph, Sophie Béatrice and poor little Louis XVIII, who died in the Temple prison in June 1795 and whose heart was
laid to rest in Saint Denis in 2004.
My intention when I embarked on the feat of writing this book was to produce an entertaining, reasonably short and easy to digest history of France’s most infamous Queen, which would hopefully provide readers with an interesting introduction to her life. I
consulted several books while writing and have listed some of the most useful here in the hopes that it might inspire more reading.

Marie Antoinette - Ian Dunlop
Marie Antoinette - Joan Haslip
Marie Antoinette: The Last Queen of France - Evelyne Lever
Marie Antoinette: The
Journey - Antonia Fraser
Louis and Antoinette - Vincent Cronin
Marie Antoinette - André Castelot
Imperial Mother, Royal Daughter - Olivier Bernier
Versailles: A Biography of a Palace - Tony Spawforth
Royal Palaces of France - Ian Dunlop
Versailles - Ian Dunlop
Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the
Revolution - Caroline Weber
Before the Deluge - Evelyn Farr
Memoirs of Madame de la Tour du Pin
Voices of the Revolution - Peter Vansittart
Citizens - Simon Schama
Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire - Amanda Foreman
Marie Antoinette - RMN exhibition catalogue
Madame Élisabeth: Une
Princesse au Destin Tragique
- exhibition catalogue
Chère Marie Antoinette - Jean Chalon
Threshold of Terror - Rodney Allen
Portraits de femmes - Olivier Blanc
Fashion Victims - Kimberly Chrisman-Campbe
La Mode à la Cour de Marie Antoinette - Juliette Trey
Madame du Barry - Joan
Haslip
   Madame Elisabeth - Margaret Trouncer
Blood Sisters - Marilyn Yalom
The Terror - David Andress
1789 - David Andress
The Great Nation - Colin Jones
The French Revolution - Christopher Hibbert
The Fall of the French Monarchy - Munro Price
The Lost King of France - Deborah Cadbury
Dancing on the Precipice - Caroline Moorehead
The Scented Palace - Elisabeth de Feydeau
The Untold Love Story - Evelyn Farr
The Terror - Graeme Fife
Marie Antoinette’s Paris

I actually intended this book as a ‘beach read biography’ (I know, I’m sorry, but this description made sense at the time) but if you’re anything like me then there’s a fair chance that you’re much more likely to be reading this book in a rented apartment or hotel room in Paris. I love to read
books in the cities where they are predominantly set and this had led to many an impromptu walking tour over the years as I read about a street where the book’s subject once lived and have to go and stand in their footsteps for a while.

Quite a few of the places associated with Marie Antoinette, like Meudon, Saint Cloud, the Tuileries and La Muette, have either
vanished thanks to the ravages of revolution, war and town planning or been changed beyond all recognition by the relentless march of time. However, enough remains for the modern Paris visitor to be able to get some unforgettable glimpses into the world that she inhabited both before and after the extraordinary events of 1789. Assuming that you made it
to the end of this book, I’ve added a small list of some of my favourite Marie Antoinette spots along with some details about opening hours as they are in 2015. Maybe one day, if I become very rich, I’ll devote a whole book to places associated with Marie Antoinette - how fab would that be?

(I’d recommend checking opening times and so on
before you visit. They’re accurate right now in May 2015 but might have changed by the time you visit!

Compiègne

The Château de Compiègne is one of the finest surviving examples of Gabriel’s elegant neo-classical styling, which can also be seen at the Petit Trianon. The woods nearby were the location of Marie
Antoinette’s first meeting with her husband, the Dauphin and it would become one of their favourite summer residences both before their succession to the throne and afterwards with Louis XVI having the royal apartments extensively renovated after the birth of the Dauphin in 1781. Marie Antoinette’s rooms were on the terrace in the new wing, but only her splendid games room,
she played cards with her circle, have been restored to their original sumptuous appearance although there are lots of original decorations in the other airy and very pretty rooms of the apartments, which are mostly furnished as they would have looked during the residence of the Prince of Rome, son of Napoleon. The rest of the palace’s royal apartments have been restored to their
approximate appearance during the residence of Napoleon and the Empress Marie Louise, who was Marie Antoinette’s great niece, but you can still get a strong sense of how the palace interior must have looked in the time of Marie Antoinette. Compiègne is open to the public on every day except Tuesday between 10am and 6pm.
Versailles

The gilded monstrosity and mausoleum to excess that is Versailles has been written about at length in this book and remains one of the most famous and written about buildings in the world so almost certainly requires absolutely no introduction from the likes of me. Huge, amazing and rather overpowering it is an absolute must see and is an unmissable
treat for anyone even slightly interested in the life of the last Queen of France. Marie Antoinette’s rooms have been restored to their former splendour and you can also visit some of the secret rooms that lie behind her state apartments. I once almost fainted in her bedchamber during a visit in 1990 and was taken out through the secret door beside her bed and along the passageway through
which she frantically escaped in October 1789. My wedding and the birth of my children aside, I would say this was one of the highlights of my entire life so far. A particular highlight is the gorgeous chapel where Marie Antoinette and Louis Auguste were married in May 1770. It’s absolutely sublime. Versailles is open to the public on every day except Monday between 9am and
6.30pm. There are special tours to visit Marie Antoinette’s private apartments and the rooms where the aunts lived and span their web of gossip.

**Petit Trianon**

Although the Petit Trianon lies in the grounds of Versailles it has a completely different vibe going on which makes it feel like it’s far away
from the gilded monolith at the other end of the park. No doubt this was its appeal for Marie Antoinette as well. Lots of money has been spent on restoring the pleasure pavilion to the way that it would have looked during the Queen’s residence and new rooms and parts of the gardens seem to be opening up all the time, which is great. It’s a lovely spot and, usually, much quieter than the
main palace so you can enjoy a nice leisurely walk around. The Petit Trianon and Marie Antoinette’s estate have the same opening times as the main palace.

Fontainebleau
Often ignored in favour of Versailles, Fontainebleau is equally enormous, with over 1,500 rooms, and was the favourite Autumn residence
of the French royal family, which means that it was usually the location for Marie Antoinette’s birthday celebrations every November. Although Louis XVI was mostly concerned with the excellent hunting in the surrounding forests, Marie Antoinette loved to entertain on a lavish scale at Fontainebleau and there would be a constant round of parties and balls, while
Comédie Française actors would travel over from Paris three times a week to put on performances. Like Compiègne, Fontainebleau has been restored to mostly evoke the memory of the Bonaparte era but there are still strong glimpses of Marie Antoinette in the palace. Her two boudoirs have been beautifully restored to their former glory and the bedroom reflects her taste even if it has
been restored to its 1805 appearance. The bed however, bearing Marie Antoinette’s MA cypher, was commissioned for her but not completed until the late 1790s. Fontainebleau is open every day except Tuesday. Opening times vary depending on time of year.

Château de Bagatelle
Built in 1777 as the result
of a bet between Marie Antoinette and her favourite brother-in-law, the Comte d’Artois, the Château de Bagatelle, nestling in a beautiful pleasure garden in the Bois de Boulogne is, like the Petit Trianon, a perfect little gem of a building and a great example of the work of architect Bélanger. It really is a lovely spot and well worth a visit even if the opening times are somewhat restrictive.
Bagatelle can be visited every Sunday and on public holidays at 3pm when there is a guided tour.

Rambouillet
Originally a residence of the Princesse de Lamballe’s father-in-law, the Prince de Penthièvre, Louis XVI purchased the château in 1783 so that he would have somewhere to stay when he
went hunting in the surrounding forest. Although Louis loved it there, Marie Antoinette was much less keen and referred to it as a ‘gothic toad hole’. Hoping to win her over and knowing how much she loved to frolicking in her farm at the Petit Trianon, Louis surprised her with a delightful little dairy in the grounds, which he presented to her in June 1786. Marie Antoinette was
delighted and rightly so as it is a charming spot, but alas she would pay her last visit in the summer of 1787. Rambouillet château and the Dairy of Marie Antoinette can be visited every day except Tuesday. Opening hours vary.
alongside the Seine in Paris. Its fat turrets give it the appearance of a fairytale palace, which is ironic considering its past as the most feared prison during the Terror where prisoners were transferred when they were about to be executed, thanks to the fact that the infamous Revolutionary Tribunal met in the adjoining Palais du Justice. The prison has changed since the days of the
Terror but it is still possible to view the cells and the chapel where the prisoners prayed and where there is now a small memorial to Marie Antoinette on the site of her second cell, of which only the original floor remains. A neighbouring cell has for a long time been decked out as a reconstruction of her first cell and is suitably eerie with a model of the Queen and
peeling fleur de lys bedecked wallpaper. The Conciergerie is open every day between 9.30am and 6pm.

Chapelle Expiatoire
The beautiful Chapelle is one of the places that every Marie Antoinette enthusiast should make an effort to visit as it really is extremely beautiful and really serene and peaceful. The statues
depicting the martyred Louis and Marie Antoinette are very touching and somehow the luminous and elegant ambience of the building’s interior brings the Petit Trianon to mind. Possibly this was intentional and planned as a gentle tribute to the unfortunate Queen who is, hopefully, now at peace. The Chapelle Expiatoire can be found at 29 Rue Pasquier and is open during the summer
months on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays between 1pm and 5.30pm. Check that it’s open before you set out though as they are apparently prone to closing it without warning.

Saint Denis

I love visiting the basilica at Saint Denis – it’s so unapologetically gloomy inside despite the
sumptuously beautiful stained glass windows that allow rainbows of light to tumble onto the cold stone floor. It’s full of royal tombs, some stately but most relatively simple, all arranged with very little thought to aesthetics and basically crammed into every conceivable nook and cranny of the transept. It’s one of the real hidden gems of palace, which seems like an odd thing to say about an
enormous basilica which acts as necropolis to the royal tombs of France. However, not many visitors seem to want to get the train out to Saint Denis for some reason, which is good as it’s never crowded so you can get a good look at all the wonderful royal tombs. Sadly most of the royal graves were desecrated and emptied during the revolution before being hastily reinterred.
higgledy piggledy a few years later. Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI have wonderful memorial statues here and their tombs lie in the crypt alongside those of Louis XVIII and Charles X as well as memorials to Madame Élisabeth, the first sad little Dauphin and Louis XVII, whose heart was interred here not all that long ago. The Basilica of Saint Denis is open every day between
Some other Parisian locations that may be of interest...

The Hôtel de Biron - now the Musée Rodin at 79 Rue de Varenne, this beautiful Parisian mansion used to be the residence of the handsome and extremely dashing Duc de Lauzun, one
of Marie Antoinette’s cotérie of male admirers. Sadly the charming Lauzun was guillotined in December 1793 and his wife followed him to the guillotine in June of the following year.

The Hôtel de Soubise - now the Musée des Archives Nationales at 60 Rue des Francs Bourgeois in the Marais. This extraordinarily lovely mansion was the
birthplace of the Princesse de Guéménée, Marie Antoinette’s friend and the governess of the royal children until her fall from grace as the result of her family’s bankruptcy.

La Force prison - the prison is long gone but was located at what is now the junction of the Rue du Roi de Sicile and the Rue Pavée. It is at roughly this spot that the
Princesse de Lamballe was murdered in September 1792.

Rose Bertin’s shop - described by some as the birthplace of modern couture as we know it, the shop and studio of Mademoiselle Bertin, who was nicknamed Marie Antoinette’s Minister of Fashion and was responsible for her most beautiful and extravagant outfits, was located at 149
Rue de Saint-Honoré. In 1789 she moved to different premises at 23 Rue de Richelieu.

Residence of the Princesse de Lamballe - the Princesse de Lamballe resided at the stately Hôtel de Toulouse, one of the mansions belonging to her father-in-law, the Prince de Penthièvre, at 48 Rue Croix des Petits Champs, which is now the
headquarters of the Banque de France. Later in 1783 she moved to a mansion at 17 Rue d’Ankara, which is now the residence of the Ambassador of Turkey.

Temple prison - the prison where Louis XVI and his family were kept captive after August 1792 and where his son Louis XVII died in 1795 was demolished at the start of the nineteenth century. It’s
rough location can still be discerned at the Square du Temple, a pretty landscaped garden at 64 Rue de Bretagne.

Palais Royal - the central Paris residence of Louis XVI’s cousin, the Duc d’Orléans, who rented out the arcades to cafés, shops, restaurants, theatres, gambling dens and brothels and the rooms above as flats.
It was the most fashionable place to be seen in 1780s Paris. Marie Antoinette visited here more than once when she and the Duc were still on relatively friendly terms and he even threw a fancy dress ball for her in the palace. However, their relationship soon soured and rather a lot of the terrible lies about her emanated from the Palais.
The Comédie Française - housed in the Théâtre de l’Odéon on the Place de l’Odéon, this was one of Marie Antoinette’s favourite haunts where she would come to watch her favourite actors and actresses perform. It was here that she came to see The Marriage of Figaro by Beaumarchais. Camille Desmoulins and his wife Lucile Desmoulins, who grew up on a nearby street, lived in
an apartment directly opposite the theatre.

Residence of Madame de Polignac - Marie Antoinette’s beloved Yolande bought the Hôtel de Marle at 11 Rue Payenne but probably didn’t spend all that much time there as the Queen liked to keep her close. It is now the Swedish Cultural Centre.

Place Louis XV - now
known as the Place de la Concorde, this was the location of the guillotine for much of the Terror and Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, Madame Élisabeth and countless others were all executed here. The precise spot where the scaffold stood is not marked but it was close to the statue of Rouen in the corner of the square.

Montreuil - the beloved
country house of Madame Élisabeth, the King’s sister until she was forced to leave it behind forever in October 1789. It’s not far from Versailles but even so her brother wouldn’t let her sleep there alone until her twenty-fifth birthday, which as it fell in May 1789 didn’t give her much time to enjoy this. It can be found at 73 Avenue de Paris in Versailles and the park open every day between
11am and 8pm while the house can only be accessed as part of a guided tour.
A couple of years ago I threatened my poor, unfortunate blog readers with a biography of Marie Antoinette, which at the time I intended to call ‘Teen Queen to Madame Guillotine’. However, other projects intervened and my plan was temporarily shelved as I worked on my historical
fiction instead. I couldn’t stay away forever though as although my blog covers all sorts of different periods and people, Marie Antoinette is a subject that I often return to and one that I have always really enjoyed writing about as evidenced by the fact that my university dissertation was on the topic of different representations of her both before and after the revolution.
This book was originally intended as an extremely short biography (longer than a pamphlet but shorter than a novella) giving a basic précis of the doomed Queen’s life and maybe answering some of the most commonly asked questions about her along the way. I envisioned it as a sort of ‘beach read biography’ - in other words, an entertaining and not at all weighty read that could be dipped in and
out of at leisure and didn’t require a massive background knowledge of the period to be enjoyed. I wanted to convey something of Marie Antoinette’s life and times without getting too bogged down in the politics of the era, although naturally they can’t help but intrude, especially from 1789 onwards.

However, as the project developed it all got a bit out
of hand and instead of my not quite a novella, I ended up with multitudes of words and what I hope is actually a nicely well rounded biography that is still just the right length to be a fun and easy read without sacrificing too much detail at the same time. I realised quite early on that the original jaunty title just wouldn’t do, although it is a nice reference to my blog’s name and instead
opted for ‘An Intimate History’ as the book’s scope is intended to be intimate in both size and subject matter.

This book wouldn’t have happened without the relentless questioning and interest of my blog readers, bless their hearts and so I quite rightly dedicate it to them because it’s all their fault. I’d also like to thank my poor family for putting up with me while I was working
on this and my friends for cheerleading me along when I had the occasional complain on Facebook. Oh and Dr Lucy Worsley, my fellow admirer of the BBC Blue Peter documentary about Marie Antoinette, for encouraging me to have ideas above my station about calling myself a historian. You’re all ace.
The young Marie Antoinette.
Versailles, viewed from one of the windows.
The Hall of Mirrors at Versailles.
The royal chapel at Versailles where Marie Antoinette and the Dauphin Louis Auguste were married in May 1770.
Marie Antoinette’s bedchamber at Versailles. She gave birth to her children on a special birthing bed placed in front of this fireplace.
The ornate canopy of Marie Antoinette’s state bed at Versailles.
The wall decoration in Marie Antoinette’s bedchamber at Versailles.
The concealed door beside Marie Antoinette’s bed, through which she escaped the mob in October 1789.
1787 portrait by Madame Vigée-Lebrun of Marie Antoinette with her children, which now hangs in its original place in the Queen’s apartments at Versailles.
The Petit Trianon.
The salon at Petit Trianon where Marie Antoinette entertained her friends.
Marie Antoinette’s bedchamber at Petit Trianon.
Marie Antoinette’s 1783 portrait by Madame Vigée-Lebrun hanging in Petit Trianon.
The Conciergerie.
Reconstruction of Marie Antoinette’s cell in the Conciergerie. She was actually lodged in the cell next door but this conveys just how grim her situation was.
Memorial to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, basilica Saint Denis, Paris.
Memorial to Louis XVI, Basilica Saint Denis, Paris. The couple were ceremoniously reinterred there on the anniversary of the King’s execution.
MARIE-ANTOINETTE D'AUTRICHE
REINE DE FRANCE
ET DE NAVARRE
1755 - 1793
Slab marking Marie Antoinette’s burial place in the crypt of the Basilica Saint Denis in Paris.
MORT A VERSAILLES LE 23 OCT. 1781
DE FRANCE XI A VERSAILLES LE 23 OCT. 1781
MORT A VERSAILLES LE 23 OCT. 1781
Memorial to the ‘first’ Dauphin, Louis Joseph who died in June 1789.
Memorial to Louis XVII, who died in June 1795. The boy’s embalmed heart was interred close to his parents in 2004.
Interior of the Chapelle Expiatore, Paris.
Louis XVI Called to Immortality, Sustained by an Angel, François Bosio, Chapelle Expiatoire, Paris.
Marie Antoinette supported by Religion, Jean Pierre Cortot in the Chapelle Expiatore, Paris.