

**THE SWIMMER
OF THE GRAND CANAL**

Whenever my grandmother Eugénie used to talk about my mother as a young girl, she would tell the same two stories. First, how Jackie, who was obsessed with exercise, would always find a way to set up some corner of her workplace dedicated to her passion: once she fixed parallel bars in the back corridor of the lawyer's office where she was briefly employed as a secretary, and when she was working for a notary she used to unroll a bath mat in a corner so she could do her sit-ups. And my grandmother loved to tell the story of that day in the middle of July when her daughter was overcome by a mad impulse to leap into the Grand Canal in the gardens of Versailles and swim, calmly, in her elegant, superbly cadenced crawl, fast but not too fast; her steady crawl which made her seem, to anyone watching her at work in the water, like a force that could keep going forever. But that particular day it was unlikely that she'd be allowed to keep going for very long...

Among all the characters whom I've pictured at the Palace of Versailles and its gardens in the course of my

walks and my readings – alongside the remarkable Duchess of Burgundy, on hot summer nights, lifting her skirts with both hands and running barefoot over the green carpet of lawn, the Princess Palatine splitting off at a gallop from a hunting party without warning, the young infanta of Spain, Mariana Victoria, playing hide-and-seek behind the crimson curtains in the Hall of Mirrors, Marie-Antoinette in a fur bonnet, aged fifteen, eagerly awaiting a sleigh race, jumping up and down with excitement – there is my mother. She must have been sixteen or seventeen. Her parents had moved away from Versailles and 15 Rue Sainte-Adélaïde, the house where she was born, not far from the Queen's Gate. She lived with them in Viroflay but she often cycled back through the forest to Versailles. She did not have a specific plan that morning to swim in the Grand Canal, but she always took her bathing suit with her, just in case, and when she arrived, sweating, at the sparkling plane of water where a drowned rowboat foundered, when she saw the empty banks bordered by paths that ran on into the bushes, she was filled with a wondrous sense of freedom. Uniquely sensitive to the charms of these gardens that had been left to go wild, and completely unimpressed by the grandiose architecture of Power radiated by the palace itself, she took off her short-sleeved blouse and her culottes until she was standing in her bathing costume, walked down the steps that disappeared into the water, and dived in. It wasn't

so much that what she was doing was forbidden, and that she had to hurry before she was stopped in her tracks. It was more as though she were responding to an invitation to swim from the glimmering water itself. Rules, all rules, fell within the sphere of an order of reality that did not exist for her. In the spinney known as the Ballroom Bosquet, where she took her first steps, in the Orangery, where she used to play in the sun, by the Neptune fountain, where she liked to plunge her dolls' heads under the water, in every corner of the palace gardens, she felt entirely at home. And in the Grand Canal as well.

Jackie was no more concerned by the possible reactions of any guards who might be about than she was by all the objects that have, over the course of the centuries, been either dropped by accident or deliberately thrown into the water, and which now lie at the bottom of the canal. Locketts, snuffboxes, gold coins, wedding rings, hairpins, shoe buckles, inkwells, the remnants of fans which are now nothing but their armatures, silver platters from a hunting dinner cast into the water by some servant weary of the endless cleaning and polishing, religious statuettes gaily tossed away by an impious young nun, a portrait of Madame de Maintenon riddled with pinholes... Trifles, certainly, that could easily go unnoticed by an athletic young woman of the 20th century – but what of the important treasures, like the splendid Venetian gondolas that

once belonged to Louis XIV, which now lie sunken and rotting in the silt, the black figures on the prow all that remains, reaching up towards the surface – how was it possible to ignore them? Well, she seemed to manage. Just as she ignored the trembling silhouettes, the formless assemblage of petrified mummies who suddenly began to gather on different floors of the chateau and were pressing up against the windows, astonished at the extraordinary sight of a girl on a bicycle, a girl undressing in the open air and diving into the water. A girl swimming! Of course, there were those who had already seen a person swimming, indeed, some of them even knew how to swim. Men. For the women, it was clearly out of the question. Well-born women, well-brought-up women, do not swim! What's more there was the complicated and impossibly time-consuming matter of undressing. Swimming! The very idea! What madness! More and more were now gathering by the windows. Men, out of a long-standing, libertine habit. Women, driven by a reflex, purporting to be pious. Burning with indignation. At the same time – I know because one Bastille Day, as an extra in *Farewell, My Queen*, I had to wear the celebrated costume of the court (its dignified appearance offset by the weight of several kilos of velvet, a corset that cuts off your breathing, the incessant trickle of sweat down your back, your armpits, between your breasts and your thighs, muddying your make-up, and, underneath your

wig, pins and hair slides tugging at the roots of your hair, digging in and tearing your scalp) – they would have given every last thing they possessed, these women who had nothing left to give, to swap places with that girl who was swimming, to live in a world, even for just an hour, even *en passant*, where they were free to come and go without an escort, allowed to do as they pleased, to do what they wanted. It sometimes seemed to them, during the stagnant eternity of their living death, as they became lost in their reveries, thinking back over their lived existence, that they were nothing more than pedestals for displaying jewellery. It was as if their entire existence could be reduced to a sequence of assembling their coiffure, applying face paint and powder, clothes fittings, being dressed and undressed. Not a word remained, not even the slightest trace of gossip exchanged in front of the mirror as they were at their toilette, obsequious smiles imprinted in clouds of powder. Supererogatory mannequins. Decorative adornments. Did they exist only for their beauty? Absolutely not. Their primary purpose was the perpetuation of a name and hence their duty was to provide sons. They were celebrated for their ornamentation, complimented on their features, but really they were no more than cogs in a programme of reproduction... They were told again and again that water was unsanitary, that they must be wary of it and parsimonious in its use, but that must surely have been a lie told by the men

Memories of Low Tide

to keep them prisoner. Getting into the water, diving down, coming back up to the surface, floating, drifting... What must it be like, they wondered, their eyes fixed on the gamine young woman, to feel that caress insinuating itself into every part of you, that softness wrapping your back as gently as it strokes your thighs and plays around your lips? They stared out of the hollows of their eye sockets at the slender young girl, the creature moving with such lightness through water and air. Jealousy ravaged what was left of their features.

The swimmer of the Grand Canal revelled in the water, not a care in the world, euphoric with delight. Whatever might exist around, below, above her, she gave no thought to it.

She felt only the deliciousness of the water against her skin, its bracing, invigorating immersion.

I was wrong to say that somebody soon arrived to stop her. It was a time when there was little interest in the Palace of Versailles, few tourists and minimal surveillance, and so she was able to swim up and down the royal canal for a while before an old man noticed her. In the time it took him to hobble over to the water's edge Jackie had already got out, got dressed and got on her bicycle. In the breeze stirred up by its speed, with water saturating her bathing suit and soaking her clothes, she cycled the whole way home in a refreshing mist.