

# **VERSAILLES TO VLADIVOSTOK**

**Tenacity Nicole Chadbourne**

*Phoenix College*

*Second Place, Fiction*

---

**I** REMEMBER A FRIGID, BLASTING TRAIN RIDE, strapped to the top of a cargo car and sailing like a monster through the night, over icy Russian fields more vast and fierce with every mile. We were a howling wail slicing through the ferocious cold. In this circumstance, I was a toy of a thing, a carven chair strapped tight to the top of a huge metal boxcar, carried to Siberia along with the freezing, dying men inside. Here was only the wicked black of the arctic nothingness, the occlusive coal smoke, and thin cries from inside the train.

I was one of only a few items spared demolition on that journey. My thick legs became tangled in the rough canvas straps as the piercing wind swept like a mindless hammer over the cars, carrying away boxes, containers of food and clothing, and the two remaining likenesses of me, ineffectively lashed to the tops of the boxcars. The wind and cold collaborated to shred those straps, smash and scatter those things on the tundra. By the time we arrived at the Gulag in Vladivostock, deep stress fractures threaded my frame like lace, and the force of the wind competing with the straps had left dull bands of rubbed-raw marks across my legs.

I am not there now, however; I am years away. This little storage space is smaller, more peaceful, though less safe; instead of hearing the scream of a hasty dark wind, I am listening to flames wander toward me through soft warm air. Heat accumulates quickly in this small area, and the fluttering light turns everything around me gold; it reminds me of Versailles, before those days of revolution and revolt when the world's face changed forever. No grand court of Louis XIV this, no gleaming halls and luscious satin skirts falling heavily around me in blazing gold, garnet, and peacock blue. Ever since that incredible midnight train ride under the quarter-moon, across the bare Russian ice fields, I have looked back on my glowing days in the vast opulent palace as a time divided and singular. It was a flawed yet brilliantly gleaming era, an instant in my existence and the history of the world that stood shining, as nothing would again.

I was such a pampered thing, so massive yet delicate, my high finish and fine fabric so vulnerable to wear. Two men were needed to move me, and I had five likenesses, each of us constructed of dark stained walnut, our cushions and backings fashioned of bright blue French damask, stuffed tight with horsehair. Of this set of huge gorgeous chairs, I alone remain.

Heavy scents of lavender and jasmine filled the rooms of the vast palace in those decades as the courtiers, kings, and courtesans from every continent came in resplendent, fantastic dress to court the Sun King. They arrived heavy with gifts and schemes to kneel, to gossip, to stab and slice with words and blades over the riches under that roof. Voices, the chime of blown glass and clink of heavy coin, the rattle

of sabers and hiss of virulent rumor filled the air of every room and hallway. Nobody of that time would recognize me now, even if they were not all dead, two hundred years of craftsmen, sovereigns, and thieves.

Had I not been such a treasure, so well made, I would have been destroyed long ago—as it is, I have survived many small catastrophes and been repaired; though this approaching fire will not be dissuaded, and no craftsman can repair what it will make of me.

Three decades after my presentation to the King, I was spirited out of Versailles by an enterprising thief, the husband of a palace maid. I left the palace in a huge cart, pulled away from the city by a massive yellow Percheron mare. It was a heavy summer evening, laced with the whine of insects and the hollow clangs of the draft horse's hooves on cobblestones. Hay stems covered my ice-blue fabric and heavy red wood in three feet of gold, and my polish was marred with a million tiny scratches as the massive wooden wheels rumbled out into the French countryside.

On a serene hillside farm sprinkled with cattle, I sat gleaming in the sitting-room of a dairyman's family for fifty-three years as three generations of that family grew, married, and raised children. Eventually, I was moved again, to the home of the last male heir of the family in Moscow. He brought his family to France to visit distant cousins, and my set journeyed with them to their Russian home when they left, piled in their carts, years before the great Trans-Siberian railroads were built. By then there were only three of us left; the other chairs had been fed to fires or used in construction projects after damage to the individual chair took place. History sent this family to its end in labor camps, and me to my next adventure.

That wild train sliced my past and carved it into my future. My miraculous integrity at the end of that bizarre brutal trip Moscow to the Northern Wastes strapped to the top of a pitted metal freight car earned me a place of dubious honor in the officer's receiving room as a foot-stool and occasional door-stop. My tattered appearance was something of a sour joke for the men who policed the labor camp, for like everything at these isolated outposts, what delicacy and beauty remained of my once sumptuous materials was blasted away by the wind and ice. This happened to me, and to the men, and the buildings as the seasons of a year ground on in that implacable landscape.

Only once was there any form of life in that dismal camp other than the guards, prisoners, and rats. One night, deep in the darkness, thousands of caribou crossed the camp in their annual migration across the plains. A mass of snorting, grunting beasts warmed the air with their massive bodies and hot breath, each one weighing hundreds of pounds with huge plate like hooves. All the men in the compound stood silently gazing at the huge animals as they lumbered past. The living river rolled through the camp, four times wider across than the camp property, between the grey buildings, shoving items left outside out of their way or

trampling them underfoot unnoticed. I had been propping open a shed door, and was tossed across the yard like a toy at an errant blow from one vast flat hoof as the teeming herd passed by. In two hours the huge animals with their clattering antlers and heels were gone, following their hard wired migration, and the silent night closed in behind them.

By the time I was being shuffled out of the officer's quarters, past the prisoner's cabins that stank even in the deepest cold and onto an inland-bound train a year later, I was a sorry wreck, not anyone's charming relic but a flame's easy fuel. Two enterprising and desperate inmates escaped by enacting a fictitious order to load up and dispose of construction debris and other trash. They carried me and several other rough refuse items from the camp right into one of the open railcars of the train that had arrived. Instead of returning to their cabins, they took advantage of the noise and chaos of the situation, with men and prisoners namelessly moving on and off the train namelessly. They remained there, crouched in the clutter in an uncovered freight car as the train lurched away from the grey camp and lunged back toward Moscow. One died on the journey; his stiff body was left behind on the tundra, tangled and frozen. The last survivor shoved him out of the car onto the cold hard ground while the train sped south.

When we reached Moscow, each railcar was emptied. The escapee was discovered by the station manager, who had been summoned to inspect a load of rubbish that no-one seemed to remember ordering the delivery or disposal of. A glance bounced from the conductor to the inspector, with the wretched man in shredded inmate's canvas clothing seated shaking in front of them, with a bizarre, disorganized pile of rubbish and furniture behind him. The inspector lay his coat upon the prisoner's shoulders and led him limping away as the boxcar was unloaded and the contents spread across the yard.

Taken by the beauty of my basic construction, the conductor claimed me, and presented me as a gift to his wife. Though revolted by my dirty condition and the horrible smell of rotting hair and moldy old fabric, she was delighted by the challenge of renovating me.

I was completely dismantled and refurbished. My fractured old frame was painstakingly repaired and varnished, each shred and seared crack filled and smoothed with putty or fine sheaths and shims of wood, glued and sanded smooth. My rotting horsehair stuffing and dissolving silk coverlet were replaced with dense cotton batting housed in panels of raw East Indian silk in a lush sky blue. A niece's' approaching wedding required a gift, and my renovation continued with this in mind. Once complete, I was set aside in storage to await shipping to her home.

The greatest treasure of all, a deed to five hundred acres of rich French farmland on the banks of the Seine, was found during the renovation where it had been hidden deep in my cushions in intrigues a century passed. The woman

repairing me could not read its faded ink, so she tossed it aside, and it was put to use lining the cardboard whelping-box of their mongrel dog and their six new puppies.

Repaired, reclaimed, and once again beautiful, I sit in a quiet storage closet, as flames roll through the room. I am surrounded by of weathered old treasures, paint varnishes, staining, scraps of wood and sawdust, and woodworking tools. There is no night air, no hasty hands or stomping horses to carry me away. There is nothing here but my newly beautiful self, and the soft murmur of the flames.

