

## Outliers – Stories from the edge of history

Season Two, Episode Two

### Secrets of the Bedchamber

By SEVAN

**Catalina:**

Gentlemen.

Have a seat. If you will indeed behave as gentlemen and not as inquisitors come to interfere with my widowhood. Apparently, I am not to live my later years in peace. Or what peace I rightfully gained through my years of service.

Wine? Fruit? Not even a cup of water? It is a hot day after all and many hours are sure to pass before you walk out my door. No?

I shall sit then and begin.

Can I tell you a secret? Perhaps it is not the one you have come here to collect, but it is a secret nonetheless as I am the only one to keep it. I knew you would be here. Maybe not you and you specifically, but others like you. I knew you come to disturb my peace. To ask me questions better left to the gossipy corners of kitchen girls. Nonetheless. You are here. Disturbing me.

I shall begin at the beginning.

Motril is my birthplace. It is why I brought my daughters here after my dear husband, Oviedo, may he rest in peace, died. I wanted them to know their roots.



To see where their heritage comes from – their true heritage. To understand their mother better. Along this beautiful coast of Southern Spain is where I was born and then later kidnapped. Spiritually kidnapped, I should say, with all thanks and praise going to their highnesses Ferdinand and Isabella, who couldn't stand the sight of Moors tainting their land. And, really, when you're given the option between slavery and death, which would you choose? But you two young men wouldn't understand, would you? How could you? You've been born into the shadow of the church. I was sold into it. All my people were. Those who decided to live and in their quiet way – fight.

You'll have to excuse an ageing woman and her free tongue. It's one of the benefits of ageing I remember my grandmother telling me about. Or is it that I've gone too far back and it is not condemnation but impatience flaring in your eyes?

If you want to know about the past I must start at the beginning or you'll just have more questions. And with my daughters married, I find few people willing to listen to my stories anymore. Those who know I have any. The important ones. So when given a chance I'm afraid my tongue runs freely. You have grandmothers, yes? Then you should understand.

In Motril, I am just a woman approaching her later years who is a former slave of the royals. To you I am – more. You think me a key. Or – evidence? Maybe even leverage. A pawn on a chess table. Or maybe the Queen?

Ah, the Queen, now the looks in your eyes become clear. You want to know about the Queen. What can I say about the Queen?

She is a Queen.

What? You want more?



I was named for her: Catalina. My real name is no longer important and only the waves on this coast remember what I was called before I was sold. Before I chose to be sold. But this is still common is not? For the servants to be named after the royals they serve. I always found this strange. We are common and invisible, no longer able to live the lives we once did, often denied our heritage, but made to feel like a royal simply by naming us after them. I suppose not all stations are as high as they imagine themselves to be if even one as low as myself can reach them through a simple name change.

Would it alarm you to know that we were the same age? Two 15-year-olds embarking on an adventure of their lifetimes. Two 15-year-old girls named Catalina. Though who would ever confuse us. Her skin glowed with radiant daylight; her hair blazing like the rays of a sun. And I was bathed in shadow's blackness, though not too black so as to be wholly foreign. In truth, I have always believed my skin to be more sun-kissed than burnt.

Our meeting was more chance than providence. But who can know the secrets of Heaven? I never thought I would leave this coast, but leave I did. In service of the Catholic royals, no longer a Moor but a Catholic. Sworn to serve the church and the empire – such as it was. Slavery or death – which would you have chosen? Though, I will freely confess that I questioned that decision on the long journey to the port of Corona on the other side of the country crossing through dusty plains and deep mountain passes.

And she was there waiting for us. For all the servants who would take care of her as she embarked on her own journey. She was plain to look at, but even in that plainness I could see a fire – a strength. She knew how to keep it quiet. To use it when she needed to. Katharine she would be known. Katharine of Aragon. My mistress. My Queen. My Saviour.

Does she know you're here? Did she send you? I don't imagine she did. Or what she would say – or do – if she knew you were here.



Four months to reach England. Four months fighting against thunder, and lightning, and rain, and winds. Four months of clinging to one another in the night for comfort. Combing her hair when the ship found moments to be still. Singing to her. Letting her pour her heart's words into the bottomless well of my ears. Not too many words, of course. I was, after all, a servant. But two 15-year-old girls can share so much more than their positions might allow them to. To others on the ship, I and my kind were wonders – novelties. Savages, plainly speaking. But I never saw that in her eyes. And I never showed her the fear of oppression in mine. We understood one another – as much as a Moorish girl from the coast and a royal princess from the court could. But it was enough.

I loved her. Truly. I still do. I loved her the moment we left that ship and she paraded through the city showing off her Spanish heritage. Encouraging us to show off our own heritage. And though I didn't yet understand the tongue, I could tell from the tones that the English didn't find me and my kind – palatable. But I was far from the first in their land and I would be far from the last. To them we were like caged animals. But not to her. She wasn't like the rest of them. She didn't force us to be something that we weren't. No, that honour goes to her parents. To her church. Maybe it was because of our sex. She valued women. Understood their potential. She lost no time teaching us – me – everything she could. And all those months on the ship – tossing and praying for relief – placed me squarely at her side. In her bedchamber. The guardian of a thousand female secrets that only women can decipher.

But most of all she made me feel welcome. A stranger in a very strange land. With customs even she found strange. She made me feel I had a home in a place that would never come to feel like a home. Even here on this beautiful coast, I am not sure what home means. The mountains have not changed. The ocean still comes and goes. The breeze forever smells of salt and sand. But, home? I am no longer sure. I am too changed. Too – transformed.

Your eyes glaze. My mind wanders. It travels the stormy waves of my past as I cling to a mast made of nothing more than paper.



My life with Katharine was fairly simple. Making and unmaking the bed. Warming the bed at night to ensure a restful sleep. I had never known such biting cold and freezing winds. It explained so much about the English temperament. Not everything, of course, but much. I was the keeper of all her female activities. The kinds of which you men would never want to know or you would remove us all from this pedestal you think we want to stand on. Untouchable. Unknowable. Would it shock you to know that our bodies operate in the same way as yours? With some differences of course. Differences that would - confuse you. As you are now. Don't worry. I won't ruin the fantasy for you. It is only for us women to know and share with one another.

Scenting her sheets became my favourite duty. I would use dried lavender to ensure peaceful dreams. She would need them. Married at 15 with the weight of two kingdoms on her shoulders. My struggles paled next to hers. They would continue to pale. Married as soon as she stepped off the boat. What a ceremony it was. So much opulence. So many riches. So many hours spent standing for the service to finish. Listening to the boring singing of children making believe they were a choir of angels. Is this what being Catholic meant? She looked heavenly in her dress. He looked handsome and polished. The cheers sounded. Flowers fell. Horses danced. And then we were taken further north -to Ludlow -until it was her husband's time to rule the kingdom.

Arthur? What can be said? I did not know him well or enough. Though he seemed a kind man with sad eyes. Those first four months were - I feel guilty saying this because it feels like a betrayal to the very ground I now stand on - they were happy. We wanted for nothing. Though I missed the mountains and coast of Motril, I fell in love with the enormous green forests north of us and the clear blue river south of us. The sounds of birds - such singing. Such voices. Even the people with their strange accents made me smile on occasion. They got as used to seeing me as I did to seeing them.

Anyway, I still had trees and water, so I pretended, as much as was possible, that I was in a reflection of my homeland.



They seemed happy enough, though what is happiness to the arranged marriages of royals? I doubt very much any notions of love and romance ever creep into the bedchambers. Duty and servitude. Such odd bedfellows. And I understood them as well as she had. Two people not of this world bound to the rules they weren't asked to live by.

At least she seemed happy enough. And then he died. They were both stricken ill. I did not leave her side. She lived. He did not. A 16-year-old childless widowed princess. What more could be said about that. . .

A silent part of us had hoped we would return home. I could plant my feet in Spanish soil and she would be – unburdened of responsibility. She was sad. Not for the reasons many assumed. But she shouldered that sadness. And did so bravely.

And did so bravely for the next 7 miserable and discontented years we spent in London waiting in a purgatory of political machinations and games. Purgatory is quite the Catholic tradition isn't it? I would have rather [?] spent another four months on the stormy oceans rather than sitting becalmed in that festering city of smells, diseases, dirt, and noise. Our futures were suspended in nothingness. I won't bore you with the details of dowries and debts. They likely don't matter much in the facts you are looking for. But they matter in the life of a woman taken from her home and forced to live under harsh conditions while she waited for someone else to determine her future and her fate. In this, we understood one another even more.

And in the 7 years, as she struggled to make ends meet, as servants were let go or ran away – I would like it understood that I refused to leave – as she prayed that her father-in-law, the old king, wouldn't marry her himself [?] to avoid repaying the dowry given, as she pleaded with her parents to pay off the rest of the dowry owed so she could return, as we wondered how we would be used next, in those years we – survived. We waited for a possible marriage to



Arthur's younger brother. Younger than Katharine by 5 years. Not unknown to her. But not familiar enough.

And after 7 years they were bored with the game they played with one another and in order to save their economical faces they agreed to let Katharine and Henry marry. Not that they asked her if she minded.

Standing in the Tower of London - a still young woman of 23 - readying herself to marry the 18-year-old soon-to-be king What nervousness she had allowed herself to show when we were 15 on her first wedding day was nowhere to be found now. She was almost - relieved. But it was relief mixed with a tiredness that this is what her life amounted to. I would often remind her that she could easily have been born into my life as a dark-skinned foreigner made to forget her true nature and taken to a strange land to be a slave. That hurt her - that I considered myself her slave. Perhaps I spoke too freely - too honestly. Perhaps that is why she eventually let me go. But it was what she taught me. What I learned from watching her. To know the power in my place no matter my station.

I wish I could tell you of the hundreds of plans she had as she prepared to walk out and marry Henry. But she only had one: To survive. A basic human need, is it not? It's why you're here. It's why I'm talking. Though you may not like what I have to say. I can tell as you move from side to side in your chairs, passing glances at one another, at the sun passing outside.

I had forgotten what the riches and palaces of the Tower and Hampton Court were like. The long hours of entertainment. The endless parade of food. The rich fabrics, jewels, and gilded statues. How they so overshadowed our simple luxuries in Ludlow. And in truth, I preferred the latter. It was - simpler. It hid less. The walls didn't try to hoard or bury secrets like they did in London.

I wanted her to be happy. And their marriage seemed happy enough. I think Henry was less kind and warm than Arthur. But given what was placed on his



shoulders, I suppose I can understand why. But I did not see happiness for Katharine. Or any life of ease. At least in our 7 years of purgatory we were allowed to be the masters of our decisions. Such as they were.

And she did her duty. Becoming the pregnant mare in the royal stable. How I hated watching her subject herself to be nothing more than housing for the next heir. I knew she was worth more than that. She knew it as well. And how my heart broke for her with every birth and every death. With each pregnancy she showed less and less happiness and anticipation. With each child that succeeded in emerging breathing she became less attached until she knew for sure it would live. And I suffered with her. In those halls with their walls and floors covered in gold and heavenly cherubs, I held those babies. I watched over her pains as they came into the world and dried her tears as they left it. I swallowed her sorrow and tasted my own bitterness.

This was the God I was forced to bend my knees to. The one my people were subjected to death for. Perhaps that is the only thing that made this – your – our God happy: The abject misery and death of his followers. And what life is that then? How remarkable that it is deemed more holy than those of the savages who were put to death so easily at the whim of those who are as miserable as the lowliest beggar in the street.

Shall the inquisitor pay me a visit next for my heresy this afternoon? I suppose that depends on what truths I can give for you to use, no?

Katharine was remarkable. Equally hated and adored by many. Educating women, freeing rebels, relieving the poor, befriending scholars. She made such an impression that even her enemies couldn't help but admire her. That – young gentlemen – is a queen – is a woman of consequence and power. And even when Henry was off in France, she refused to sit back. For 6 months she ruled with polish – with vigour – and at the Battle of Flodden there she was – a queen – a woman – heavily pregnant – standing in front of 40,000 soldiers every inch a warrior herself and put all her courage into their spines. All her years of





education as a child – all the hours with her tutors – watching her parents – listening to the machinations of the courts – practicing the secrets of women – all of it she pushed into them as she shouted: Remember that the English courage excels that of all other nations upon Earth!

So much was given on that day that not enough was left for the soon-to-be stillborn child inside her.

English courage indeed. If only Henry had been there to hear her speech. He might have learned something. But men have their own secrets as well. Perhaps less mysterious than of women, but have them they must. What respect could Katharine gain as a woman? As a queen? Her strength was not of this earth. And they were not worthy of her. They still aren't. Those are secrets I keep. Her worthiness. Her strength. The things gentlemen like you could never understand.

And you come here asking me about wedding night bedsheets as if those were evidence of any holiness – of any legitimacy. She was and is – and always will be – the king's true wife – the Queen.

She continues to find endless water in the well of her courage, while Henry prefers to play the games of little boys to satisfy his urges. So what if she never bore him a son? Ask the 40,000 soldiers at Flodden who won the day in her name how strong a Queen can be. And Henry wishes to destroy her by finding the soiled bedsheets of her marriage to Arthur.

You think I will give you any evidence of that evening. But even I, her closest, lack answers. Ask the Queen yourself why she dismissed me. Why after years of friendship, devotion, and service she finally let me go? Did I live out the terms of my service? Did I repay my servitude? Was it to protect me? Herself? Was it because she looked into eyes of slave and saw her own reflection?



You ask the wrong woman your questions because you do not like the answers you have already received. You asked me and my people to convert to a faith – to a God who asks for obedience, truth, and unquestionable faith. Yet you question the woman who swears on all these things when she tells you she never consummated her first marriage. All while you support the man who would use your faith to cast her out in favour of a younger woman still in her birthing years. And then you come here seeking to wield me like a Sword of Damocles to strike the Queen down.

You came here wanting to know about me, but the truth is you care little for me. As many did. As many do. And, I think, it is what I prefer. I have lived such a life that I prefer to spend what is left of it in peace. I am sorry that you may not have gotten what you wished for in coming here. I am sorry that I could not give you any clearer answers than the ones you already have. I am sorry that men continue to play these games with one another thinking little of the consequence to the people around them. Katharine and I have both loved and lost – so much. Perhaps her loss is more greatly felt in her kingdom while few care for how it feels in her heart. But I do. I understand it and know it. Even though time and distance has kept us apart I feel it deeply. She is a Queen. Now. Forever. That can never be taken away from her at the whim of politicians and husbands with wandering eyes. Not even by two young men who stand before me.

But I thank you gentlemen. And I do hope you go on to live long and extraordinary lives. To reach an age when you can finally look back and wonder if any part of it was truly worth it. To see what role you played in the making and breaking of kingdoms. To consider what the easier choice truly is between slavery and death. And then to wonder if a quiet life of anonymity on a coastline is an answer.

I don't think you'll ever find me again. I don't think I shall be seen again. It is likely I will never be heard of again. And I think I like that. I was there. I am here. I shall always be. Waiting. Keeping the secrets. And waiting.

