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Outliers – Stories from the edge of history

Season Two, Episode Five

Faithfully yours, Louise Lezhen

By Lettie Precious

Louise Lezhen: Clink clank, clink clank, clearing throats, halting conversations. Silverware making more chatter with the dinner ware.

Clink clank, clickity clank.

Throats clearing, halting conversations full of 'So'

clink

'Well'

clank

Mmmhh

clink.

Heavy sighs, polite questions, polite answers, stretches of silence, quiet.

Quiet where pin drops can be heard.

It is in those times, I say nothing, my voice, no longer holding the power it once had, but missing it greatly.

There's a new chill in the air, a new cold snaking its way up and down the corridors of Kensington Palace, making its presence felt for a while now. Things have changed...different now, even the birds are nervous in their songs. The sun peeks through the windows with great caution, even I, once governess to the princess walk the floors of this Palace differently, cautiously....



After years and years, holding Victoria's hand, her little hand fitting so perfectly in mine; her little feet following so gracefully behind my footprints. Oh, the privilege I had, a power that once roared in me, no one could tell me anything. She was mine to keep, to teach, to protect....

(sigh)

But things are different now, even the walls seem to protest, drawing closer together each day, encouraging the ceilings to drop too, a force that threatens to crush me at any given moment.

Devilish ambition lives here now, greed lives here now...

Wolves that roam the corridors of the Palace even in daylight, unafraid to show their determined claws and sharp teeth. I shake my head, as if doing so will erase all those memories.

I hear the chiming of the clock, chiming and ticking away like a clock does.

tick toc tick tock.

I hear footsteps.

I could recognise them anywhere, the way they hit the stone floors, the sound of confidence and greed dancing in each tread.

They carry the man who is making my life unpleasant in this very Palace, my home, a place that used to give me the greatest feeling of security.

Oh, good Lord, here he comes, Sir John Conroy, (mocking tone) Briiitish Army Officer, what an impressive title given to a reprobate. Oh, but it doesn't stop there, Sir John Conroy, let's call him Conroy shall we because I loathe him and frankly speaking, calling him Sir John feels odd and reverent. Not only is he an army officer, he is the comptroller to the Duchess of Kent, Victoria's mother.

How infuriating! My disdain for him is perfectly justified, he is a man who lives up to his authority, his reputation, unkind to the servants and anybody who comes his way. He controls the household with an iron grip, unrelenting, uncaring, manipulating everyone for his own gain.



It is almost as if he is a spider weaving a web of fear and tension, trapping his prey.

The Duchess is a different story of course, he seems to have a soft spot for her, or her for him. She hangs on his every word and takes it as scripture or so it seems. She is walking beside him as they approach me in the corridor. I never hear her footsteps when she walks besides him...no...nothing at all, nothing but whispered echoes of nothing, or so it seems.

Conroy is immaculate as usual, dressed in a tailored black and red collared military coat, covered by silver medals on his chest and gold epaulettes, his hat tucked firmly under his arm. He truly looks like a man fit to serve our England. However, if he were to suffer an unfortunate death and I had the ability to reincarnate him, I would surely resurrect him as an insect, so I could have the pleasure of stepping on him.

As he and the duchess walk in my direction, unguarded, the back of their hands touch. They touch with a familiarity I can only describe as I've often wondered...

Well never mind.

When they finally notice my presence, their guilty hands separate leaving a respectable distance, but I am sure it is a blush I see on the Duchess's cheeks. Our contact is brief, I can only take Sir John in small doses I'm afraid, I excuse myself as quickly as possible.

When I walk off, my thoughts still linger on Conroy, how a sinister shadow seems to follow him everywhere he goes, leaving the Palace dark. I start to feel anxious as I always do, about how helpless I am against him. Now that I am no longer governess, he has more influence on Victoria's affairs than I.

I only take comfort in that Victoria values me and my duty to her, so much so, she has kept me on as her very close companion.

She is as fond of me as I am of her. I feel a great responsibility toward the princess, she must be protected at all costs, so I do what I must.



I stand guard, guarding her from the wolves that roam the corridors of the Palace even in daylight, unafraid to show their determined claws and sharp teeth. I feel an overwhelming sense of duty to mould, to sculpt, to nurture. I feel it in my core, my sole purpose in this life is to travel this path, a path that has led me here.

I knock on her door three times, something we do, a little secret we share, something that amuses her. Playing with her dolls, she doesn't look at me when I sit on the floor next to her.

I watch her put dresses on them, dresses we have made together in private.

For a moment, I think, what a special girl she is, destined for greatness by the way she carries herself. It is in her stride, in her shoulders, in how she turns her head, her speech, her intellect.

At 15 years old she already embodies the essence and strength of a leader and yet she presents an air of loneliness, perhaps only I can see.

I see it, I see it, the irony of it all, a girl surrounded by many and yet feels alone.

Who else would seek the company of lifeless dolls for friendship?

The next Queen of England I suppose, both a curse and an honour.

So, I watch, I watch as I often do on days like this. I smile at how she dresses them, very particular in their fashion; how she speaks to them, commanding and stern as if she already sits on the throne commanding her subjects.

She's losing her German accent; I can hear it.

The elocution lessons are working, she is beginning to sound very English. There, in the silence of the world, she is but a little girl, playing with no care in the world, no burden on her shoulders, no him, no her...

We get ready for our late morning walk, feet hitting the green grass through the park, the grounds neat and pleasing to the eye.

It is chilly, I reach out and pull her shawl tighter around her shoulders, but still the sun is kind today, it still shines through the heavy clouds.

Our strides match as we follow on our usual footpath, arms linking, finding warmth and comfort in each other. This is our routine, our ritual, our private



time; a time for us and us alone to share private thoughts and feelings. This is where Victoria lets her guard down, where the mask falls, and I see the young girl behind it. She confides in me her inner most secrets, her needs, her wants, what she truly thinks of her mother. Apparently, she paints her mother as the 'wicked step-mother' as ambitious as the slimy Conroy. She tells me she feels throttled by the relentless pushing and pulling from the wolves that lurk in the night, by all of it, the strict regime set, the rules, the games, all orchestrated by Conroy and her mother.

It is clear to me, she is wiser and stronger than they realise and in these moments my heart swells with pride.

I have done well in raising her. But I do tell her it is for her own good and I am there to protect her through it, to walk the tight rope that has been put before her by destiny.

I never have the courage to confess my feelings for her, how very fond of her I am, how I love her, as if she were my own kin, my own child.

I unlink our arms and hold her hand in mine, like I used too when she was a tiny girl, it still fits me perfectly. Perhaps this is why Conroy hates me, my bond with Victoria must drive him mad and this pleases me greatly.

(chuckles)

It is obvious he finds me a threat to his plans through his never-ending attempts to keep us separate, and the man will not allow her to meet other people, he keeps her isolated so he can be her only advisor.

He is ruthless in his ambition and this kind of drive is somewhat desperate, and when a man is desperate, he is dangerous. Fortunately, young Victoria is wise to it, and this is why she keeps me close...

Good lord, we've been walking for nearly an hour, my calves are beginning to ache. Before we reach the Palace, I tell her not to worry,

I comfort her as best as one is capable.

She takes consolation in that, in having an ally in a cold, cold home.



Lunch! and as always, Clink clank, clickity clank. Clearing of throats, halting conversations full of

‘So’

clink

‘Well’

clank

Mmmhh

clink,

heavy sighs, polite questions, polite answers, stretches of silence, I do not say much, my voice no longer holds power.

After lunch we visit her mother and sit with her while her portrait is being painted. Victoria decides to work on her own painting of her dog Dash lying on the rug slightly snoring with little care in the world.

I observe silently, frozen in time, watching her pale hands hold the paint brush, laying brush strokes, stroke after stroke, stroke after stroke on the white, white canvas. We sit in the room until five.

At seven, we sit at the dinner table, again, halting conversations with the silverware making more chatter with the dinner ware, long stretches of silence. Conroy sits confidently, chest puffed, back straight, chin high as if he is the head of the table.

How different things would be if young Victoria’s father were still live. The poor servants stand nearby nervous, on edge in his presence.

At quarter to nine we go to the princess’s quarters and get her ready for bed. When the time comes, I excuse myself as she goes to lie in bed with her mother, sharing it as they always do.

I am not fond of this, who know what she whispers in her daughter’s ears when I am not there...If I am to be frank, the less time she spends with her mother the better.



Honestly, it's like a never-ending cycle, predictable like the seasons and Conroy is the Winter.

A chill in the air, a cold snaking its way up and down the corridors of Kensington Palace. I still, run into him in hallways, hear the chiming of the clock first, chiming and ticking away like a clock does, tick toc tick tock, then I hear footsteps. The feeling thankfully doesn't last long.

When I enter Victoria's room, the Winter slowly fades and Summer comes. Today, I sit with her while she studies, after, we go riding.

We lunch, we dine, we do it all over again the next day.

Some days, I listen to her play the Concordia, her fingers effortless on the keys, she feels the music and today is no exception. Music is her in these moments; then she sings, encouraging the melodies to float in the air. I tell her, 'Again! Again!' And so, she plays, she sings, she plays my favourite songs and her favourite songs. I enjoy these moments spent together, we laugh and laugh and dance and dance and spin and spin and then like always.

Our mood is interrupted when we hear Conroy coming, imposing, invading our sanctuary with his rules and demands of young Victoria's time.

The music stops, I am frustrated, my anger continues to run rampant inside me. Conroy, the repugnant rodent stands before us.

How dare he? That ridiculous excuse of a man!

How dare he stop Victoria's one moment of enjoyment in the day.

How dare he come in here, smug and triumphant, like a cat who got the cream or a spider who got his prey. Lord forgive me, but I hate the Conroy with the greatest of passions. Let it be known, were I a man, he wouldn't dare behave in this manner with me, for I would draw my sword, or fist, or whatever barbaric things men do when they fight!

But I am not a man, there is precious little I can do except make sure the man knows I despise him through harsh looks and annoyed harrumphs at any given opportunity.



Oh lord, if only I could do half of the things I dream about when he behaves this way. My one fantasy is to grab him by the ear and twist it as if he is a delinquent boy not wanting anyone to play with his toy, Victoria. Of course, he wastes no time in letting it be known the feeling is mutual, It's in the way he looks at me like I am an annoying fly.

It's in his tone when he addressing me, patronising and curt.

As he is leaving the music room, he trips over his own foot, his face instantly turning a reddish colour, matching the collar of his jacket.

It takes every-thing I have not to dissolve into fits of giggles.

He clears his throat, straightens his military jacket, and makes what he thinks is a dignified exit. Victoria and I, no longer able to control ourselves, burst out in cackles; we laugh and laugh until tears run down our cheeks, and unladylike snorts come out to play. This makes us laugh even more. Then, suddenly, the door opens slightly, Conroy pokes his head through it like a peeping Tom.

We immediately stop laughing and try to hold it in by biting down on our lips. When he is sure, we are not laughing at him, he leaves. As soon as he does, we laugh again, this time quietly, with our hands over our mouths. (chuckles)

God, how I live for these moments, when (mocking voice) SIR JOHN CONROY, BRIIIITISH ARMY OFFICER, makes a fool of himself. (chuckles)

The more the days pass the more determined Conroy is to have a firmer grip on the princess. If only he knew what she calls him behind his back, 'the monster and demon incarnate'. I must admit it amuses me slightly. His cunning ways stretch to how he influences the duchess in her private quarters.

If those walls could talk, they would divulge all the gossip and tell us what the duchess and Conroy do in her bedroom, what they say, what they want, what their intentions are.

More days go by and I continue to support the princess through Conroy's regime. Music, walks, riding, breakfast, lunch, supper, lessons, painting, visits...



Music, walks, riding, breakfast, lunch, supper, lessons, painting, visits. This is how we spend most days, with me by her side and her by mine.

I enjoy days like this. I must admit, even though their motives are selfish, they are doing well by the princess.

Conroy and the duchess have begun taking Victoria to the historic sites of her country and showcasing her before the public eye, getting her used to her people and her people used to her.

I begrudgingly commend their actions for they are working. Large crowds have been gathering to see the princess wherever she is presented.

This indeed asserts her position as the heir to the throne.

But she must learn that with her title as the queen, there will be times where unhappiness and exhaustion cannot be helped, and she has to be strong and soldier on.

Visits, history, crowds.... visits, history, crowds...we do what we must,

I do what I must...but as time goes by, I start to see unhappiness carved in her eyes, exhausted by the relentless antics of Sir John and the duchess but it cannot be helped for now. We do what we must.

I do what I must. I stand guard and keep encouraging her to remain confident in her strength and her destiny, and that one day she will be the Queen of England and they will answer to her, her Majesty.

I say this as I brush her hair, when we sit and make her dolls' clothes, when we take our walks, I say these things to her when we are alone, I instil in her obligation and duty, I reinforce discipline and help her see the positive side of Sir John's selfish motives.

And so, we carry on in the chilly corridors of Kensington Palace.



We carry on at dinner tables, now used to the clink clanks of the dinnerware disguising the tension in dining rooms; we gallop on the finest horses, we listen to the finest music, we do what we must.

We do what we must. I do what I must...

