

## Outliers – Stories from the edge of history

Season Two, Episode Nine

### Scullion Daydreams

By Steven Camden (Polarbear)

*We exist in the kitchens, thumping guts of the court,  
Our stories are quiet and too common to tell,  
What those above us do, it does not concern us,  
We know our roles, and we do them well.*

July.

**Robert:**

They are here.

Hundreds of them. Thousands perhaps. A legion of servants following their precious prince.

They say he does not speak a word of English. That he and the queen have never but met.

Now he is to be King of England, with the blessing of Rome. The old religion returns, gilded in gold.

The ground rumbled as their procession rolled into court yesterday. I could not get out to see. I would be scolded for trying, but pans danced on their hooks from the trampling of feet.



He brought them with him as though we were not already here, already good enough, as though we did not even exist. Now all these new mouths will need feeding, like this staff was not already stretched to its limits. Spaniards.

"What those above us do, does not concern us, Robert. Know your role and do it well".

I hear Father's voice more these past months. His phrases repeat in my mind as I sweep, scrape and stack like a good scullion should. Two years since his passing and I cannot help but wonder, would his words be the same if he could see what has happened?

All change for Hampton Court. All change for England.

The good King is gone a year now. Edward, his majesty, lost to infection only half way through life, fifteen in years, the same age as myself. Gone with him the good sense of his father's reforms. The greatness of god and the Bible's authority.

Now he lays in the ground, replaced by a Catholic. The half-sister he himself tried to keep from the throne. Crowned last October, Mary has brought back the mass. Though I could never get close, of course, to the chapel, but in the hours after service the faint scent of their Catholic rituals hangs in the air, the strange perfume of some sinister other worldly flower.

"Never trust a Catholic". Father said, "No man is greater than the good book. All that gold serves to cover up sinister plans".

So what plans has Mary, the first Queen in her own right? My mind races to dark corners. There are already stories of



protestant ministers removed and imprisoned, replaced in their beds by loyal Catholic counterparts, and now, she means to marry a foreigner, sealing a union with Spain and the church.

Did her supporters know this was the plan? What will be surrendered to sweeten the bond? What price will be paid once the consort has power? Who can know?

Me? Kitchen rat? Scrapper of plates, who sleeps where he sweeps and keeps his mouth shut?

I think not.

But, I listen.

I hear.

That's the thing about being the lowest one down. No one watches their mouth in the presence of nothing.

Last night I heard the kitchen sergeants squabbling, after the chaos of supper had dimmed, amidst the fire's lazy crackle, their whispers grew louder with every swig of their ales.

"Lady Jane Grey, the privy council failed her". "Mary's plans will undo the country. It means trouble for any true Protestant". "She has never even met him. Now he's to be king".

They hushed when the Lord Steward came in with news of fresh deliveries of venison tomorrow, then reached for more jugs as he left. "Her majesty is keen to impress Phillip and his nobles". "Their tastes are SO much more refined than our crude staples".



I lay still, by the barley sacks, my thoughts racing, mouth burning to speak up, to ask my superiors, Will the Spanish replace us? Will we be forced to swear allegiance to the church, or be locked up as heretics?

But the only answer I'd get would come as a beating, and I've taken enough of those to know to keep my tongue locked behind my teeth.

I would speak to John, but he is only concerned with the spit and the flames. Older brother. Obedient apprentice, his dreams end at overseeing the roast and, but for our names, truth be told, we have little in common.

"Know your role, Robert, and do it well".

Yes, Father. I understand, Father.

I am sweeping. I am scraping, but, I cannot stop my thoughts as I do.

Thank the heavens for Alice.

My light in the darkness, a place my mind can run to as I peel or pluck. Sun beam through the serving hatches once a day in the morning.

Timing my movements I cross the great kitchen through the madness of dinner service, carrying bread that has not been asked for or transporting plates that do not need to move, just for a glimpse of her. The chance of a smile as she brings clean



linen to the kitchens and for use in the grand hall. A place I have never seen, but pictured in daydreams of the pair of us dining together, servants pouring us wine.

On my bravest of days, I will stray to the corridors, pretending an errand, for the chance I may speak to her briefly, perhaps pose a question or offer a compliment, but in all honesty, words are not my strong suit. If only the female heart could be wooed with a broom.

"We cannot change our station in life, son".

Yes, Father. I know, Father.

But what if that station is changed for me? For all of us? Change is upon us, and so much, so fast, surely cannot end well.

All these things will be decided beyond my boundaries. In the plush velvet rooms where royalty resides. I must just carry on my duties, the scraping and sweeping and wait to find out where my small fate lies.

September.

I think I caught the smallest sight of her yesterday. The Queen herself, returning from mass.

Her procession passed by the window, as I handed a ledger to Master Ambrose, the kitchen head.



I think it was her, in the centre of the crowd, although I could be, yes, no, of course, I must be mistaken. What a fool. It could not have been her. There was no procession or feast, and her highness would never come down to our level. What was I thinking? Why would she ever get this close to us? She would not. No. No. The idea itself is completely absurd.

In my defence, a gaggle of ladies in waiting, in all their finery, can be misleading, but the slap I received for not paying attention was a sharp reminder that anything but my duties should be of little concern.

"Yes sir, of course sir", as I backed out of the door, feeling the sting on my cheek from his hand.

Now,

as any man or boy who has spent more than half a day in the storm of flesh and metal that is Hampton Court kitchens will tell you, walking backwards is not the most intelligent strategy for survival. Especially when dinner service is starting to run. Yet, there I was, back to the world, feet moving with purpose, my mind still on the queen.

The noise that followed made my heart drop into the pit of my stomach as my elbows hit something at first soft, then much harder, a scream as a tangling of fabric and our bodies fell further and slammed into a server sending food flying and plates crashing, and us sitting on a bloodied battlefield of linen and food. The Kitchen Sergeant shouting had started before I got to my feet to see Alice's face, pale with fright, smudged with dinner, staring at me as her superior scolded her for wasting good food. I tried to explain that it was my foolish bungling, not Alice's fault, babbling sorries as I bent down to pick up the soiled linen, when Master Ambrose came out to see



what the noise was, and not noticing me crouched, fell hip over chin into the puddle of stew on the serving place floor. Everything froze.

I looked at Alice. Alice looked at me. And somehow the whole world seemed to fall into silence. Like a painting of foaming mouths and waving fingers and for the briefest of moments we exchanged a smile.

Rest assured, that moment evaporated in less than a blink, and the noise rushed back in, accompanied by pain as my body was lifted by the hairs on my neck. Master Ambrose's hand like a hook in a carcass, dragging me along through a forest of legs, past the fire and the pans and the buckets and blades.

Hours later as I stood sweeping the dry larder, I found I could see Alice's face whenever I closed my eyes. The curve of her lips. Those few strands of hair that fall loose from her cap to be swept gently back up by the tips of her fingers. And rubbing the red raw skin at the nape of my neck, I acknowledged that this gift was worth every second of pain.

Then it happened. An apparition. A figure in the doorway, slipping inside, moving into the shadows. Alice. There. In the larder with me. My gift had appeared in its full human form.

Then she spoke. One word, and she was real. I checked around, to be sure it was me she was addressing. The room was empty but for us. I squeezed the broom handle to steady myself, she smiled and repeated the word. "Sorry".

And just as quick as she appeared, she was gone.

I thought to run through to the kitchen, to John at the fire, exclaim what had happened and hear his response. Then the reality of what that response would be hit me like a mule kick. John would beat me for stirring trouble and risking his station.



He doesn't know my feelings for Alice. Tow the line, little brother. Make no fuss.

They say that she is with child, the queen.

Swollen and glowing, praising the lord.

Master cook George revealed she has a taste for cooked pears, hence why so many stacked up on the board.

I have tried to picture her, standing up high in one of the windows, looking down on us common folk, scurrying round, smiling as she holds her hands over her stomach and welcomes new life. It is strange, is it not, that she is merely a woman, when rich layers are removed and status melted away? A woman whose choices and actions can shape us, bestow us with riches or bring our last day.

Some are calling it a miracle, since the king is so hardly ever here. He takes lengthy hunting trips and leaves the country on business for weeks at a time. They say he shows no interest in her, barely speaks, and that his ends are self-serving. Worming his way round the jewels of the crown. Nevertheless, he has given an heir and her highness is happy, despite the nobles fear of foreign powers and the glare of the church.

And, it may just be coincidence, but there was bacon in our pottage today, like some unexpected blessing, as though sentiment trickles down from power to us.

It is cold outside, days growing shorter, the wind howling round corners, whipping through fish court, and I am grateful, no matter how menial my work, that I am in here and not one of the poor fools outside, dragging a broom across cobbles with freezing fingers.





"Know your role, and do it well".

Yes, father. I am, Father.

"What those above us do, does not concern us, Robert".

No, Father. I suppose it does not.

February.

She is burning them.

Bishops. Clergymen. Prominent protestants strapped to the stake.

Rumours are spreading, like the flames that consume them. The Queen's melancholy is driving our fates. The baby thought growing, was revealed as a phantom, a falsified fruit and Phillip nowhere to be seen.

Dark times at the court. Dark times for us all.

This morning while lugging the sacks off from the wagon, I heard master cook George tell a Yeoman, "She believes it God's punishment, for suffering non-believers, she means to burn all heretics regardless of status".

What qualifies as heretic, I do not understand. Being protestant born, am I wrong from within? What if her commands extend down to those of us dealing with scraps? If I do not convert, will I burn for my sin?

My mind runs to dark corners.

Stacking plates in the servery. Will they come in the night?



Fetching onions and leeks. Are we all of us heretics?

Cleaning the knives. What if I burn?

Lost in these thoughts, I slip with a cleaver and slice a gash into the back of my hand. The sharp bite of pain. The cold on my skin. I watch the blood dripping as though the flesh is not mine.

There is death on the air. Black clouds approaching. All is fearful.

All is fear.

I conceal my wound quickly before anyone sees me, wrapping my tattered sleeve around my wrist. If the sergeants find out, I am sure to be scolded.

I see John across the crowded room, at the hearth.

Spit boy proper now. Turning the meat. Proud of his station. All day on his feet.

He says I could follow, if I keep my head down, show my obedience, one day I too might be given a task as lofty. He doesn't seem worried about what is happening outside the kitchens. A country being forced back to mass and confessions. He ignores all conversations that do not relate to the roast. It is as though the fire somehow protects him, guarding him from the world beyond these charred walls. I am sure his mind never runs as mine does, that he does not stare at the flames and imagine burning, or ever think of what fire does flesh and would do to ours.

"What those above us do, does not concern us, Robert".



Father's words, his mouth. And I nodded, as I should, but he is wrong. As are you, Father. Forgive me my tongue, but these times are not safe.

My hand throbs as I scurry out into the larder and tear a strip from a grain sack to dress my wound. It must be an omen, forewarning of sorts. A scare to signal our impending doom.

What to do? What can be done? Me?

I could run. Leave the court. Find some place in the fields. And where is that? What do I know of what lies outside the court walls? And what if I were caught? What punishment then?

Madness. Pure madness.

Or is it madness to do nothing? To bury our heads and just wait till we are sent for, marched to the stake, scorched into dust?

"Know your role, Robert".

I could convince Alice to come with me. "Know your role". Steal out, late at night. "Know your role". Be my wife. Start a life. "Know your role".

"Know your role".

Please, Father. Please.

Later, I hide, squatting behind the saucery door. I feel weak. Exhausted, but I cannot sleep. Nightmarish visions of being surrounded by flames. I am burning. Burning. Am I running a fever, or is it heat from the fire? I cannot tell.

Hidden in my shirt, my hand throbs through its dressing, now heavy as lead, soaked in blood.



And still the kitchen does not stop. Boiling. Carving. I am meat.  
I am meat.

I am meat for the queen.

I must tell John. He will help me. It is an older brother's duty,  
but I do not want to bring trouble for him. Risk his position. No,  
I must not cause a scene. I am no longer a child, I am old than  
King Edward ever was.

I push myself up and use the wall, slide along the narrow  
corridor, head for the larder where it will be cooler. Sleep for a  
while. Yes. Sleep calls me.

It is empty, thankfully. I close the door behind me and stand in  
the darkness. A square of pale moonlight seems to float on the  
floor.

Then my head spins and I stumble, falling forward, crash into  
the table, the thud of barley bags echoed by the thud of my  
body on the cold stone.

And all goes black.

Blurred at first, as my eyes crack open, adjusting to the ghostly  
light cast by the moon, then forming into focus, right there,  
standing at the door, how?

Mary.

Our Queen.

I try to move, but my body is limp. Limbs heavy, head groggy.  
This cannot be real.

"Your, majesty?"



She steps forward. Into the moonlight and there is a sadness in her eyes.

As I try to get up I start to see spots. Tiny circles of light hovering round her like flies.

"My Lady?"

She brings her hands together.

"Rest, Robert".

Her voice runs over me, through me. I cannot know it, but I know it. I do not feel my hands.

"I, I, do not understand".

She leans over me, reaching out as though offering me something. Our Queen, knows my name?

Then she is fading. Dissolving in front of my eyes, a faint smile on her lips as she blends with thin air.

"Mary" I say, but it is too late. She is gone.

And it is just me.

Alone in the larder. Staring into the darkness. No noise. No commotion. Just the slow sound of breathing.

In, and out.

I am falling.

My body feels lighter, Father.

Wait for me.

I am closing my eyes.

