



Historical Association

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By Maya Hegarty

The Beginning of The End

Dramatic monologue from the perspective of Lady Jane Grey.

Today marks the day I die- I just know it. In fact, I think that everyone in the room is acutely aware of it. The maids are looking at me with pity in their eyes, shooting furtive glances when they think I'm not looking and hastily turning away before I can meet their eyes. Are they afraid? Afraid that I'll shrivel up and die right before their eyes? I smile and shake my head at the ludicrous idea, earning me a sharp jab with a hairpin from a servant girl who was attempting to fix my wild hair.

I've been sat in this rickety chair for what feels like several hours, staring blankly at my lap and fiddling with the ornate rings on my fingers. My back is beginning to ache from sitting straight for so long, and I'm becoming rather grumpy, snapping when the dress team poke or prod me too hard. Thankfully, fixing my hair, the task at hand, is the last step in the meticulous process of dressing me for the coronation, which begins in a few short hours. Can you imagine me as Queen- having to sit through tedious meetings with the most unfathomably boring people?

The girl that was fixing my hair steps back to admire her work, then, gently taking my gloved hand, she leads me to a tall mirror in the corner of my room. Upon seeing my reflection, I can't help but gasp- I look so unlike myself. My hair is pinned in an elegant knot behind my head and adorned with colourful ribbons and pins. My dress is a brilliant red, with a square neckline and long, patterned sleeves. An embellished bodice compliments the flowing skirt that bounces whenever I take a step. I feel a wave of nostalgia- as I spin around to admire the skirt from every angle imaginable, I'm reminded of rainy days spent dressing up and playing pretend. It strikes me that, for the first time since I was informed of King Edward's passing and my being proclaimed sovereign, I truly feel like a queen.

I walk over to my window and pull the curtains. Usually, a maid would do this for me, by way of waking me up in the morning, but they weren't pulled today, because I was woken at an ungodly hour to ensure I was ready on time. It feels quite refreshing to do it myself for once, and feel the light hit my face. But gazing out of the window, I'm filled with an unexpected sadness. Bradgate. My childhood home, and all the warm, endearing memories that come with it. I'm never going to see it again. Despite the giddiness I felt only moments ago, I suddenly feel as though I want to cry- as though I want to climb into my bed and huddle under the covers, letting them swallow me up. I know that's impossible- in a few short hours I will be the Queen of England- around 3 million people will be looking to me to lead them, to be their voice. I must act like I'm controlled and ready, even if I'm totally unprepared.

Taking care to keep my voice normal and steady, I ask the maid nearest to me if I may go outside, just for fifteen minutes before we leave for Westminster. She doesn't look terribly pleased, but she relents. I have a feeling she noticed my watery eyes.

Blinking back my tears to the best of my ability, I head downstairs and out into the gardens. As I walk, I run my hand along the walls, memorising every fissure and crack, I stare at the paintings, and try and picture

every brush stroke painted by long-dead artists. When I enter the gardens, I make sure to study each flower, each tree, each blade of grass. This is my last happy place- I don't want to forget a single detail. I dry my eyes with my sleeve, vaguely aware of how unladylike it is. I don't care, I think savagely. I don't care anymore.

I don't want to rule. I know I sound like a petulant child, stamping my foot when I don't get my way, but it's the truth. I don't want to be queen – I *can't* be queen. I'm sixteen years old! Throwing me into a corset and bodice and making me look grown-up won't change the fact that I'm not old enough, that I'm not the heir to the throne, that I'm just a girl of average class, average intelligence, average beauty, being thrust onto a throne against her will. The injustice of it all feels like a knife to the heart and hurts more than any corset ever could.

It's all I think about as I'm helped onto the carriage that will take me to my funeral.

My parents and Guildford, my husband, all left before me so they'd arrive on time, so there's no friendly face to welcome me as I step out of the carriage and am led into Westminster Abbey. I've seen it a million times before, what with my father being in the Royal Court, but never before, has it looked so grand and imposing. It only heightens my anxiety as I stand awkwardly, fidgeting with the strings on my bodice, waiting to be led inside.

Loitering outside the large, wooden doors, I nervously play with my hair and smooth it down, hoping it isn't completely ruined from the time I spent outside. I can hear the bustle, the hum of excitement on the other side of the door, and it's hard to image hundreds of people crammed in there, awaiting my entrance.

The guards stationed by the entrance to the picturesque church motion to each other abruptly, and they push open the doors. Hundreds of people lean forward in their seats to get a good look at me and mutter to those beside them. Meanwhile, I focus on making my way up the aisle as I was instructed to do, making sure I don't trip over my dress. My slow steps help give the illusion that I'm floating- it must be a truly delightful scene to anyone other than me- as I make my way to the altar and take my seat in the embellished chair there.

The ceremony begins, and the church falls silent. The Archbishop of Canterbury begins the ceremony, but I'm not really listening. I look around at all the faces peering up at me- some familiar, some not. The first face I spot is my father's. He's standing beside John Dudley, Guildford's father. I study them as they sit, watching me with arrogant little smirks because they got exactly what they wanted, and I'm filled with a hatred so raw, a loathing so deep that I want to stride over to them and shake them by the shoulders until they see how much pain they've caused me.

This was their doing. I was barely fourteen years old when my father was named Duke of Suffolk, when my entire life changed before I even realised it. It was in the Royal Court that he met John, the Duke of Northumberland. By the next year, I was married to Guildford. I must admit, I had expected Guildford to be a clone of his father- arrogant, selfish, and annoying, but he's exceeded my expectations, by not being a bad person. He's two years older than me, and while we don't exactly *like* each other, we've both accepted our fates and have reached an agreement to be civil to one another. I can picture us as friends- it doesn't seem like an entirely unattainable goal. From where I sit, I can see him. We make eye contact, and although he doesn't smile, he gives me a courteous nod, which will suffice for now.

My father and father-in-law don't take their eyes off the altar as the archbishop drones on and on. The more I watch them, the more I wish they'd stop smiling, stop staring. It's frustrating beyond belief to see them revel in my pain, my suffering. I wonder if they have any inkling at all as to how I feel. I doubt they could begin to fathom the extent of my hatred for them, my hatred for being a child, a woman, with my whole life

controlled by people older and more powerful than I. Do they see me as a person? A daughter, or a daughter-in-law? Or am I simply a pawn for them to play to make their way up in the world? To get closer to the royals? My chest threatens to burst with the rage that fuels me, filling me up like a helium balloon, but I force my face into a placid smile, the one that everyone wants to see. When the Archbishop calls upon me to swear my oath, I do so perfectly, my voice never wavering, my smile never faltering.

The service drones on for hours and hours. By the time the first *half* has ended, I'm already willing to sell my soul to leave. But still I sit contently, as solid and unmoving as a stone statue. I stand proudly as the sour-smelling oil is poured from the little ampulla onto my head. Every line, I utter flawlessly, just as I'd practiced in my room all those nights, long ago.

It is as they dress me in my robes- my funeral clothes, more like- that I begin to skim the crowd again. This time, however, I'm thinking not of my parents, or of anyone I know. I scan the sea of people, thinking of all the other, more deserving contenders for the crown. I've heard terrifying tales of Mary, her iron fist, what she does to her enemies...it dawns on me for the first time that I am just that. I wonder if she's here now, hiding unseen in the shadows, watching my every move. I wonder if, at this very minute, she's silently plotting all the ways in which she could kill me. Because I know she can. I know she *will*. Today is the day I die because it is the day I was thrust into the spotlight- into the throne- by the people around me, and consequently made enemy number one in her eyes. I wonder how she'll kill me- maybe poison, maybe guns, maybe hanging. Will I be locked up in the Tower of London? I wonder. I wonder so many things. I don't know if I'll live long enough to find all the answers to my queries. When I worked in her house, many years ago, Catherine Parr called me a "curious child"- she's long dead now, but perhaps she's here in spirit. She and Thomas Seymour, her husband. I loved working for them. They were kind. Kind to me when the world wasn't.

I think of Catherine, and Thomas, and Bradgate, and all the things that brought me joy as I swear my last oath and exit Westminster Abbey, feeling Mary's eyes burning holes in the back of my head, which she'd soon hang on a spike.

My hands are cold. The Tower is cold. I feel cold and hollow inside. I said my world had ended the day I was crowned. I was wrong. I was so wrong.

I was Queen for nine days. *Nine days*. It transpired that I wasn't the only person unhappy about my coronation. The people. The Parliament. There was outrage everywhere I looked. Not unpredictably, everyone looked to Mary, and...well, she certainly rose to the occasion. Guildford and I- former lords and ladies, thrown in the Towers, never spared a second glance. My own father even proclaimed Mary as queen, in a pathetic attempt to save himself.

I've never been so lonely in my life. I lie awake each night, listening to the wails of the other inmates. I used to cry myself to sleep, but I'm beyond the point of crying now. Mary's guards are just as heartless as her- they even separated Guildford and I. I thought my life had ended before, I thought I was past the point of caring about anything at all. It turns out I was nothing but naïve. Here, in the damp, dark, dingy prisons, I believe wholeheartedly that I'm in Hell, or somewhere even worse.

We were imprisoned in July, however, we had to wait until November for a trial. It was there I saw Guildford again. In the early days of my confinement, I'd longed for him. I'd imagined myself sprinting into his arms and feeling happy once again. Meeting him was nothing like that. Despite being seventeen and nineteen, our eyes displayed the weariness of much older people. Before, we were both healthy, young, and relatively good-looking, now, we looked frail, thin, and pale. We knew we didn't stand a chance against *Queen* Mary

and her court, and, of course, we were found guilty. *High treason*. A matter that we had no control over was deemed *high treason* on our part, treason worthy of the death penalty. Thoroughly defeated, we bid each other awkward, emotionless goodbyes, and we were led back to our cells to live out our last days.

It's been three months since our conviction. The February chill is seeping into the towers, making me look and feel even worse than before, and once again I find myself surviving on pure spite alone. This time directed not at my father, but at the new Queen of England. The stories of her cruelty, her wickedness...I know now that they weren't just myths, or rumours. I've been on the receiving end of her cruelty perhaps more than anyone else in the bloody country.

They came for Guildford first. They told me that I could see him one last time if I so wished. I refused. I doubt they were doing it out of the goodness of their hearts- more likely an attempt to mock me. I'm sure they expected me to throw myself at his feet, to cling to him and never let go. And I would've too. They can strip me of everything, but I won't let them steal my dignity. I don't know how he was killed, or how he presented himself on the day. If I know my own husband, I think he would, like me, try to act as dignified as possible. All I know is that he annoyed them greatly. How? Because they took their frustration out on me, being his wife- a mere extension of him in society's eyes. They carted his mangled body through the tower, making sure I was there to see...oh, I saw alright. It was absolutely vile. It made me sick. That was a couple days ago- I haven't eaten a single crumb since. Although, one of the other prisoners- a kindly old man- tells me that he apparently carved my name into the wall of his cell. I can't describe how freeing it feels, after months of psychological abuse, to receive even a small drop of hope.

Two days ago, they sent me a pastor. *A pastor*. To convert me to Catholicism. As if locking me up for months on end, convicting me of high treason, sentencing me to death, killing my husband, and parading his dead body around the whole prison wasn't enough? Late at night, I found myself wondering, *what was enough?*

I know the answer to that now. Nothing, except for my death, the ultimate price. As a rough hand blindfolds me, grips my arm, leads me to the block which, in a few minutes, will be stained with my blood. The ground is rough gravel, and I cry out more than once, as I feel myself trip. I begin to get more and more agitated, as I struggle to find the block with my eyes covered. Eventually those same rough hands push me down onto the ground, and my head smacks off the block.

There are still so many things I don't know the answer to, and never will. So many things I wanted to do, wanted to see, wanted to try. I'm seventeen, for goodness' sake! Don't they see what madness this is? I can't see the faces watching my execution, but I hope they realise what they've done. I hope it stays in the back of their mind for all eternity. I hear the woosh as the executioner does a couple of practice swings.

Swoosh I wonder what it's like to die. Will I see Catherine and Thomas? Guildford? Will there be new questions to ask, and answers to find?

Swoosh.

I'm proud of myself. Months of Hell, I didn't give in. Not once. I didn't break. And they tried so hard to make me!

Swoosh. It doesn't matter that I'm lying with my head on a block, about to be executed. I made it. I made it as far as I could. All of Marys guards- they were all so irritated! I almost giggle with the realisation.

Today is the day I die, but as far as I'm aware, I made it. I made it! I made i-

Swoosh.

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