

Soul of Dog

Amy O'Toole

Dash died 24 December 1840, Buckingham Palace, Queen Victoria's beloved pet dog.

I awoke to the gentle stroke of sunlight peeking through the palace windows, casting a pool of warmth onto the left side of my face. My tongue lolled to the side. It was wet. Outside the window, small bodies were flying. Birds—it was morning. She should be awake by now. I rolled onto all fours, paws clicking on the marble tiles as I plodded to her bedroom.

When I arrived, the Queen was sleeping soundly in her bed. I jumped onto the covers and licked her face. She awoke, giggling, and enveloped me in a warm hug. She reached into her bedside table and grabbed a pen and what appeared to be a book. I know this because when I behaved, Mohammed would escort me to the library, and show me all the books. Of course, I never understood the strange scribbles inside, but she didn't seem to mind, and would often read to me. The Queen smiled as she scrawled into her notebook, whispering the date under her breath. December 24, 1840—Christmas Eve.

The sun was a shower of light as I bounded through the palace gardens. White daffodils tilted their bleached faces to the sun, and willow trees swayed in the breeze. My Queen always took me on a walk through the flowers and trees because she knew it was my favourite thing to do. As I rested under a shady tree, a small chirp came from above me. I glanced up and saw a small feathery body. I barked a friendly hello, but the bird was dismissive at first. She cocked her head to the side. 'Tell me, is she your owner? She looks awful young,' the bird chirped. I barked in reply. She started to chatter away, and I soon learnt that she used to be owned by an old lady who neglected her due to her dementia, when she was just a fledgeling. The bird had dreamed of being part of a flock, a family, and often watched the other birds through the glass window as they flew outside. The bird told me how she escaped when the lady had left the door to her cage open.

I stopped wagging my tail. 'But My Queen would do anything for me. She bathes me, feeds me, plays with me.'

The bird cooed, saying 'Oh silly dog, those are little things—that's not a true indicator of her loyalty to you. You are young and naïve. These humans, they will always put themselves first. We are merely an afterthought—free yourself while you still can.' And with that she leaped off the branch and soared into the sky, joining the flock. For a moment, I

longed for the taste of freedom I was so sheltered from—it was the only thing I didn't have. But that thought soon passed as my Queen came running to me, her cheeks flushed and eyes dancing. She knelt and ran her fingers through my fur, telling me I was a good boy. Why would I give up this? My Queen loved me and would never abandon me, and I did not doubt her.

I shook all thoughts of the bird from my head as I chased my own tail for fun. My Queen let me play in the garden by myself for a while, and when I returned to the palace, I could hear mumbled exchanges between Albert and my Queen. The corners of her mouth were downturned, lips pursed together tightly. I could tell this was her worried face. She started to pace backwards and forwards, shaking her head. 'This is troublesome, Dear. What shall we do?' I listened closely, and my ears perked up when I heard a name. Albert's nanny. My Queen despised Albert's nanny, and the nanny despised my Queen. She was possessive, domineering, and spiteful, and anyone who hated my Queen was hated by me.

The nanny showed up later that day. The sight of her alone was enough for me to snarl. Her upper lip curled into a sneer, and she picked up my toy, shoving it into her handbag. She smiled nastily, before kicking over my water bowl and walking away, her heels clacking on the marble. The water spilled onto the floor and crept around my paws. I growled. *How dare you.*

Later in the afternoon, Albert had left the castle for royal duties leaving the nanny, my Queen and I alone in the house together. I did not dare to leave my Queen alone, except for when she sent me to fetch her notebook for her. Whilst I was in her bedroom, I could hear harsh voices downstairs. There was a clutter of pots and pans. Drawers slammed and voices were raised. My ears perked up when I heard my Queen speak. I raced downstairs in an instant, tail flying behind me like a furry kite. When I reached the kitchen, I bared my teeth. Next to the stove was my beautiful Queen, her hands raised in surrender. Nanny was poised over her with a saucepan in her left arm, screaming profanities.

I began to bark. 'You have stolen all my son's love, you wretched being. You should never have been Queen,' she screeched, her face exploding red like dynamite.

My Queen locked eyes with me. We had set foot in dangerous territory; Nanny's anger simmered like a pot on the stove, threatening to boil over. My Queen called for Mohammed, but there was no answer. Nanny inched closer. I could not watch my Queen in distress and feared for her safety. After all, she would do anything for me. She often told me that. I owed her the biggest debt payable.

Nanny went to strike my Queen, and the saucepan connected with my ribs. I could feel the sting radiating through my body as I lay there motionless. I was awake, but I felt paralysed. My Queen was immediately at my side as Albert came bursting through the door, a look of shock on his face. He crouched next to Nanny, where her skin had been torn down her cheek, blood dripping onto her blouse. She clutched her face and scowled at me as her palm came away coated in red.

When we arrived, it was just Albert and me. Shadows danced on the cobblestone, illuminated by soft moonlight. A man with keys on a ring opened a door for us. He made me go inside. My head was pounding and I felt dizzy. The scent of kibble swept up my nostrils, and I began to question where I was. Unwillingly, I trudged forward and came face to face with what looked like twenty dogs. Saliva hung from the corners of their mouths like icicles. They watched me, beady eyes fixated on my small shaking body. *The pound. I was at the pound.* I had heard about this place once, in one of the stories Mohammed read to me. *Where are you, my Queen?* I swivelled my head back to Albert and the man as the door was shut behind me. *No Albert don't go, take me home.* I began to whimper, until my Queen's voice pierced the air. She ran up to the fence, face red from crying, tears streaking her face. She hit the gate, once, twice, wailing like a lost child looking for their mother. My Queen's constant pounding on the gate sent the other dogs into a chorused frenzy of barking and growling. I was fresh bait. The last thing I heard was her protesting, as Albert restrained her. *My Queen, my beautiful Queen. How could you let this happen to me?* Nanny, who arrived with My Queen leered at me, the scar down her cheek visible even from distance. Albert dragged my Queen away, despite her endless thrashing. Nanny followed. Horses' hooves clicked against the pavement. I barked loudly, my voice hardly heard over the cacophony of growling, desperate for my Queen to come and save me. But I knew she could not come.

A familiar chirp came from my left, as did the flapping of wings. 'Poor, silly dog,' the bird said. 'I warned you.'

Dash passed that night, succumbing to his injuries. On Christmas morning when the Queen heard of her beloved dog's death, she wept. She wept as if nothing could take away her sorrow, her grief immense. Days later, she sat at her desk to write, her sunken eyes and hollow cheekbones painted golden by a tender glow from her candle. His death had stolen her youthfulness. The words came easy, and required little thought:

Here lies

DASH

The favourite spaniel of Her Majesty Queen Victoria

In his 10th year

His attachment was without selfishness

His playfulness without malice

His fidelity without deceit

READER

If you would be beloved and die regretted

Profit by the example of

DASH