



## Such Sweet Sorrow

A family friend died when I was six years old. It was my first encounter with death, and I panicked. The idea that our friend was gone and would never return was frightening. I wasn't ready for my first funeral. I was unsure how I was supposed to feel and what to do with unfamiliar emotions in public. Fortunately, my parents sympathized, and I was able to stay at home.

My next funeral was for George VI in 1952, when the British community in Montevideo bid farewell to a much-loved king and welcomed his daughter, our new queen. That death caused me none of the earlier panic or pain. It was so far away and was wrapped in the sort of pomp and pageantry that the British do so well, a welcome distraction. It was also a snapshot of the medieval times we were reading about in history class at the time, which was most illuminating. That was the dawning of the Age of Elizabeth II that has just now, in September 2022, come to an end. I am ambivalent about the monarchy as a system of government and question the role of the extended royal family that populates that system. But Queen Elizabeth was in a class of her own.

Her accession to the throne was never a foregone conclusion. Her uncle, Edward VIII, was first in the line of succession, and when George V died the crown automatically came to him, as the oldest son. He was never actually crowned, though, because he was in love with an American socialite, Mrs Wallis Simpson. At that time, the Church of England forbade marriage to a divorcée if the previous spouse was still living. As head of the Church, then, Edward, whose real name was David, could not marry the woman he loved and still be king. A constitutional crisis loomed. Edward eventually abdicated after about ten months on the job, and went into exile with Mrs Simpson, now the Duchess of Windsor. They proceeded to enjoy a flamboyant lifestyle as members of the international smart set, living in France on a pension from the crown and income from select

commercial ventures. Fade to black.

Following the abdication, the crown passed to David's younger brother, Bertie, who became George VI in 1936. Elizabeth, his oldest child, became the heir presumptive. She was ten at the time. The unexpected burden of the crown weighed heavily on the new king, drastically rearranging his life and taking a toll on his health. When he died, fifteen years later, the crown passed to his daughter. Destiny, working in mysterious ways, managed to place the crown on the most competent head in the family, where it then sat for seventy years. Despite not having been in the immediate line of succession, she was truly born for the role. On her 21st birthday, she publicly announced: "I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong." Her life turned out to be long, and after her coronation in 1953, she devoted all of it to her duty as queen, becoming a symbol of steadfast devotion to an ideal that is at the heart of British identity.

Now she is gone. Her passing brought me none of the emotional turmoil of my first experience with dying. I have attended many funerals since then and have learned that life and death are one. But her departure marks the end of an era. Elizabeth Alexandra Mary was born about six weeks before Marilyn Monroe; she was contemporary with rock & roll, my generation's soundtrack, having been crowned just months before Rock Around the Clock was recorded. My sadness at her loss is therefore intertwined with a sense of fond nostalgia for her time, which is also my time. Such was the impact of her presence for seventy of my seventy-seven years that, like all my departed loved ones, she remains present in my mind and will no doubt continue to do so until my last funeral.