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Elizabeth

AN INTIMATE PORTRAIT



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An intimate portrait

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EPILOGUE

September 2022

Wednesday 14 September 2022

She was alive a week ago. Last night, I stood in the drizzle outside Buckingham Palace and watched as the royal hearse brought her body back to the London headquarters of the Family Firm for the last time. Her oak coffin was draped in the Royal Standard and topped with white flowers. The interior of the hearse was a blaze of light. It was almost shocking how brightly lit it was. Even in death, she was on show. As she passed through the Palace gates, I took a photograph on my iPhone; the police officers bowed their heads in unison; the crowd applauded to make their feelings heard. Inside the quadrangle, a guard of honour from the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards gave the royal salute as the hearse came to a halt. At the steps of the Grand Entrance the new King and the Queen Consort were waiting.

When I watched Charles arriving earlier – the inside of his car lit up, too – he was sitting with his hands on his knees, staring blankly, bleakly ahead, puffy-eyed, visibly bereft. Camilla, seated on his right, was looking out of the car window and gently waving.

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I was watching with one of Charles's godchildren, India Hicks – we were standing opposite the Victoria memorial, sheltering under the same umbrella. 'You've got to keep waving,' she said. 'You must keep waving. My mother taught me that.' Her mother is Pamela Hicks, who, as Pamela Mountbatten, was with the Queen in Kenya on 6 February 1952 when George VI died. 'You know, the Queen was so calm when she heard the news. She simply said, "I am so sorry, this means we all have to go home." She was extraordinary. She was always thinking of other people.'

I said to India how strange it was that this naturally private person – inherently quite reticent and shy – had, by accident of fate, been obliged to live her life in public, on constant show. 'Even now,' I said, 'when she is dead.' 'On constant show,' repeated India – and then she told me a hilarious story about the time her mother had been accompanying the Queen on her post-Coronation Commonwealth tour. They were in Tonga, in the South Pacific, and it was late at night, and Pamela bumped into the Queen when they were both stumbling around the Governor's house, or whatever it was, looking for the bathroom. When they found it, they turned on the light – only to discover that on the other side of the bathroom a second door was wide open and looking out onto the garden where 400 men were sitting by their campfires staring at them. The next morning was a Sunday and the royal party had been hoping for a lie-in. Instead, the Queen and Prince Philip were woken at dawn by four men at their bedroom door blowing nose flutes in their honour.

One day, I hope, we will be able to read the Queen's own account of that trip to Tonga. She kept a diary. She wrote it up every night, in pencil, sitting up in bed after she had said her prayers. The pencil usually had a rubber attached so she could erase anything if she had second thoughts.

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Last night at Westminster Hall I watched as the Queen's four children stood in silence, heads bowed, keeping their vigil at the four sides of their mother's coffin. Strange to witness this private grieving in a public place. As they stood there, totally still, members of the public continued to file past – silently, steadily, some stopping briefly to salute or bow or curtsy, some genuflecting or making a sign of the cross. David Beckham wiped away a tear as he paid his respects to the Queen after queueing for more than twelve hours. When he reached the coffin, the footballer slowly bowed his head and stared at the ground. He told a reporter afterwards that the atmosphere in the queue had been 'really friendly, really lovely'. That seems to be the general verdict.

I was watching with Valerie Amos – Baroness Amos, Labour peer and the first Black member of the Order of the Garter since its foundation in the 1340s. She was only installed a matter of months ago, on 13 June. The Queen was not well enough to walk in the traditional Garter Day procession, but she helped Lady Amos into her robes. 'Lord Butler was trying to help, but the Queen said, "I'm not sure he knows what he's doing," and came to the rescue. She was extraordinary.'

She was extraordinary. And her position was extraordinary, too – bizarre, if you stop to think about. Being a queen, wearing a crown, sitting on a throne, having people address you as 'Your Majesty' – how weird is that in 2022? Especially for your children and grandchildren. I have talked with several of her grandchildren and they were all conscious of her being as much their Queen as their grandmother.

Tonight, it is their turn to stand vigil in Westminster Hall. Earlier Prince William, the new Prince of Wales, told someone in the crowd that walking behind the Queen's coffin had taken

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