Strands

As always, Imelda sat on her cushioned stool in front of the window, perfectly framed as if the house had been built with her at its center. Long ago, the room had been decorated with gold and velvet, but all of this was now faded and frayed. Vines climbed the walls and shoved their way through the floors and ceiling. Imelda still wore embroidered dresses that spilled over her knees and extended to her wrists, their shapes held together by the strongest of stitches. The dresses were hemmed up so that they hovered above her ankles and the porcelain bowl of water in which her roots drifted.

She was a woman except for her feet, but still she called him “gardener.” It sounded more elegant than “attendant,” or “helper,” and most especially better than “servant.” On this particular morning he wore rubber gloves and weeded her hair with a silver comb. The old strands came out reluctantly as he worked the comb from her scalp down to the tips of her locks that came to rest in the middle of her back. His hand was steady, but the longer he stood behind her as she stared out the window onto the empty street, the quicker and more uneven his movements became. The comb caught in her tangles and jerked her head back. She stiffened her neck and cried out, “Don’t pull my gaze from the window! The children are coming to see me!”

The gardener paused, holding the comb midair.

“Is it so important that they see you fixated on an abandoned road?”

Bringing her fingers to her lips, she leaned forward and rested her elbows on the windowsill. The color drained from her face, moved down through her body, her legs, and out from her roots, turning the water a rose-tinted brown. The street had once been filled with shining steeds, men in leather boots, women in lace twisting their parasols around. From this same window she had looked down at Juan Carlos Figuerra who sat on his horse, his left hand high in the air, waving farewell as he led the other men on the westward path towards The Grand War. The sun was behind him and burned her eyes so that he became the shape of a man blocking a patch of light. It was on this shape that she stayed fixated. Every step of his horse stamped its sound on her brain as his hand cut through the sky and blazed a trail as clearly as if the sky were made of paper and his hand were a flame.
“When the story ends, Juan Carlos Figuerra with his gold canine tooth and sword that spears apples, will return by that abandoned road.”

This was always her answer. The gardener returned the comb to her hair, moving it slowly once again. She resumed her upright position so that the color could seep back to her face.

“There’s no greater honor than waiting for intimacy.”

They continued in silence, the gardener and the lady. He had tended to her ever since he found her five decades ago, slumped over the windowsill, dead except for one fluttering finger. He knew how best to care for her. When he was finished combing, he knelt down to rub her roots that curled out as long as his thumb, as long as his forearm. Some roots were thin as pencil lead, others as thick as a hog’s limb, and out of each one grew minuscule hairs. They sighed and breathed as the gardener massaged the thickest and most gnarled of the roots.

Imelda stared outside. On a clear day, Juan Carlos Figuerra would return to the edge of the wheat field where the western end of Mount Royal Avenue began. Closing her eyes, she imagined it was him kneeling beside her. If it were him rubbing her roots, she would wrap them around him. She would consume him.

“You’re gloves are still on,” she whispered.

How tempted she was to curl her roots between his fingers and around his hands. How he would pulsate if she were to tighten herself across his palms and around his wrists. Then it would be only natural to slide her smooth bellied roots up his arms to his shoulders and neck. Her thinner roots would curl up in the coves of his face. Slowly then, she would move down against his torso, press against the muscles and the veins. She would know the gardener intimately.

But the children. Abruptly, she pulled her roots from the gardener’s caresses. The children were coming to look for her. They were going to find her and discover that she wasn’t a myth but fact: Imelda in the window, as dazzling as the sun. Their innocence and joy would be the fertilizer she needed to continue her vigilance, to continue stretching her arms outward and upward.

*****
The previous morning the gardener had been in town to conduct his weekly observations. Mayor Jones was standing on a box in the center of town inaugurating its bicentennial.

“Children! Remember our loveliest patron saint, Imelda!” He pointed to the City Hall mural that showcased fleeting glimpses of the town’s history. A loin-clothed hunter aimed at the sky with a bow and arrow. A gatherer looked fondly at the nuts in her basket. A sweet faced factory worker held up a round tortilla: the perfect exemplar of hard work. A bear rose up on its hind legs, and pigeons flew from the bottom right corner of the wall making a diagonal arc across the mural. In the center of it all was a window, Imelda’s window. Her hair was painted as a black waterfall. Her face was featureless, an oval filled with pale light.

“Children, you know the story of Imelda whose General left to fight in the Grand War. She was so lovely that when she wiped the perspiration from her face with a silk handkerchief, she left an imprint of a swan. She waited beside her open window. Did she lose hope? No! Did she cry? Yes! Salty tears that fell in a pool around her pale feet and turned them, because of her immeasurable depth of passion and fidelity, into roots. Did she bemoan this metamorphosis? No! She rejoiced in her evolution from mere woman to a woman with the capacities of a living plant. Ginseng! Dandelion! Rhubarb! More than any other individual of the 18th century, Imelda exemplifies the importance of romance and keeping a staked eye on the dusty road. Children, as we enter this new phase of war let us remember to be inspired by her: a bright gem in the mud of our history!”

The children cheered, and the mayor tossed sparkly pencils against the sky. Down they came and the eager children caught them between their teeth and spindly fingers until the click clack of a whirling projector hushed them. A movie screen hung where the mayor had been standing. Against it flashed reenactments of life on Mount Royal Avenue in 1796, when it was at the peak of its elegance. The children saw a street so wide that it fit eight carriages parked side by side. There were two rows of sixteen houses each. Each house was decorated with columns, balconies, marble statues, and doors carved with cherubs, mockingbirds, and cherries. The houses were gallant beasts and they faced one another like proud sentries on this street that connected to no other street, but instead was intentionally removed from the
rest of town. It lay nestled between an apple orchard to the east and a field of wheat to the west. It was a strip of glamour hidden in the frontier. Here, once upon a time, lived the successful miners, the capitalists, the adept explorers, the skilled dog breeders, the graceful dancers, the most generous benefactors to the church. The women had smooth foreheads and bright teeth. They wore hats with feathers that drooped to their shoulders and grazed the silk that covered them. They sewed with long, silver needles and picked blackberries to carry in dainty baskets. The men braided their beards and proudly patted the rippling haunches of their horses just before they mounted and shot their guns in the air. Ducks fell from the sky and the children felt as if they were there, really there in the ancient annals of their town’s history.

The camera focused in on a white house with Greek columns. It closed in on a second-story window as a rising symphony of violins began to play. All the children lifted their chins, strained their necks until finally, they exhaled in unison, “Imelda! Sooo… beautiful.” Hair cascaded out the window, a delicate elbow rested on the windowsill, and where the face and upper torso should have been was a flickering orb. The children swooned as they had seen the adults do: “She was lovely! Lovelier than we could ever hope to be!”

Only three children did not echo these words. They sat in the very back row where the most raggedy children sat, hidden by rows of other children. The three of them huddled together: a chubby boy, a bossy girl, and a girl with black ringlets. From time to time, they glanced up, but immediately they hunched back down again. The gardener drew closer so that he could listen to their plotting. As the final sepia images of the street, complete with accordion players and spinning lovers, flashed across the screen, the three children nodded at each other. Their lips mouthed, Imelda. Tomorrow.

Their words chilled him. If the children found Imelda, they would tell the rest of the townspeople, and if the townspeople knew she was still alive after two hundred years, they would lay her on a table, dissect her roots, and cut open her legs. He felt the danger, just as he had that day in 1978 when the hoodlums came to Mount Royal Avenue looking for trouble. The street had long been abandoned. The townspeople knew it had existed at some point, but that point was far in the past. It was not in their nature or agenda to wander. When they had a free moment, they were content to
stay beside the river. Then came the hoodlums, young and briefly brave, feeding on the energy of the times, giving them the courage to push out past the apple orchard onto the abandoned street.

When the gardener saw them, he quickly pulled Imelda away from the window even though she fought him. It was the one time he gagged her, fearful that she would call out to the hoodlums. They threw bricks through all the windows, smashing the glass. They scrawled their names and figures of naked women on the walls, set fire to the trees, kicked the locked doors. It was the gardener who had years ago locked all the doors and crawled out the basement windows whispering to himself that only Mother Nature should enter, only Mother Nature and he should enter. The locks deterred the hoodlums from entering, but they would have succeeded eventually if it hadn’t been for the heavy heat of the summer and the lazifying effects of beer and burgers. Hot and dehydrated, the hoodlums slumped to the ground, scratched themselves, then moved down the street towards the apple orchards looking for water.

When they were gone, the gardener untied the cloth from around Imelda’s mouth. She had wilted. It took him a year to nurse her back to health.

Prior to and since that day, nobody but the gardener had been to Mount Royal Avenue. He made sure of that, taking great pains to monitor the townspeople’s movements towards the street. He beheaded cats and strewed their decapitated bodies around the perimeter. When anyone came near the edge of the apple orchard, their feet caught in traps and they fell into deep pits. His campaign was successful. Nobody dared go near. Eventually they forgot why and simply preferred to remember through reenactments the way Mount Royal Avenue had been before the Grand War.

Now, the three children were plotting to undermine what the gardener saw as a perfectly distant relationship between the people and the street, the people and Imelda.

*****

“The dry spell must end, ” Imelda said in response to the news of the three children.

“But the last time…” he began to argue, preparing to bring up the 1978 incident.
“Gardener,” she interrupted him, anticipating his next words and refusing to hear that year spoken into existence. “Juan Carlos will come. When we are reunited, we deserve the presence of all the townspeople as witnesses.”

The wind blew the curtain in and Imelda pressed her face against it. How badly she wanted the children to find her. Once they knew and fell in love with her, it would not be long before the entire town walked the several miles through the apple orchards to come and honor her.

“Clean up the dead animals. Take away the traps.” She turned her head away, but not before seeing the surprise on the gardener’s face. She had always known what he’d been up to guarding the perimeter of the road. The gardener didn’t realize how sharp her eyesight was, how far reaching her sense of smell and hearing. The 1978 incident had frightened her badly, so she’d let him indulge in his fantasies as caretaker and protector, but it was time to let the world in, time to shine again before an audience, time for events to culminate as they were wont to do in the natural ebb and flow of history of which she was a part, of which she was a pinnacle.

*****

The children were still in the orchard but she could hear them singing and laughing. Already she loved them: the bossy girl with her fuchsia ribbon, the boy with his ripe red hair, and the one with her long, pretty locks just like—Imelda stroked her own hair. Who better than these three to spread the tale not only of her legacy, but of her continued existence? She was ready to become flesh and inspiration to the townspeople.

When the children finally reached the border between the apple orchard and Mount Royal Avenue, their singing and giggles died out. They carefully parked their bikes, positioning them to face the orchard with enough space between them that they wouldn’t knock each other over if they had to make a quick escape. They stared down the shadowed street and its row of parallel mansions. If they looked hard enough and squinted their eyes, they might have guessed that she was there, on the south side of the street, the third house from the east end, but they were too entrenched in their plotting. The bossy one declared that they should search each house one by one and that as soon as they found something
good they should leave. All they needed was one historical relic to make them heroes, but it had to be a good one, like Imelda’s diary or her bones.

“Should we take weapons?” asked the pretty one.

“It is wise,” they said nodding to one another as they somberly gathered stones and put them in their pockets. This gesture startled Imelda. Unwillingly, her mind flashed to the 1978 incident, but she calmed herself. How surprised the children were going to be to find not her bones, but her living, growing self.

“Gardener, perhaps you should go down to greet them. Let them know there’s nothing to be afraid of.” She folded her hands expectantly and sat without moving until he left the room.

Imelda was eager to make contact with the children, but their first encounter had to be under the correct light, the precise angle, the perfect sliding together of moments. The pigeons always flew past her window. If she waited patiently she could lean out just as they passed. The birds would rise higher and higher and the children would follow the flapping of their wings moving in unison across the house and past her window. As the birds swooped up, the children’s eyes would trail off the tails and fall onto her. They would immediately recognize her as the one whom they sought; she was the one who waited, the one of everlasting beauty who requested only a small cup of water because she knew that with infinite patience intimacy would come. It would. Come into her arms. Rise up from the street.

The sound of footsteps startled her. The gardener was running towards the children. What was he doing? She had told him to greet the children, not chase them away. Even after he had spent so much time with her, he was still a wild card. Such unpredictable behavior infuriated her. There he was, a mad bull charging at the children. They screamed and pulled out their rocks, but even though a shower of stones rained down on him, he was able to grab the dog by its neck and run back inside the house. The children stood with their arms raised and cried out after the dog, “Punto Final!”

Imelda balled the curtain up in her hands. It was all ruined. The children would leave before she even spoke to them. A touch to her elbow made her jerk. Swiftly, the gardener had crept up behind her. He pointed outside to
where the children were bunched together, moving towards the house.

“Where’s the dog?”
“Sitting by the door, tied to the doorknob. See, how quickly the children are coming now to get him? They will see you soon. Remember? That’s what you wanted?”
She clamped her lips shut.
“Show yourself to them.” His lips were warm and flat against her ear. She hated how his words fell precisely into the folds, but he spoke the truth. Even if the children did not see her when the pigeons flew past, the important thing was that they saw her and understood that she was real. They needed to learn what truths of history survived and extended beyond the past and which ones flared up only once, then died.

Once again, Imelda leaned forward. Her arms fell into their chronic positions: one folded across the windowsill and the other one upright, so that she could rest her chin on the back of her hand. As the children came closer, she gazed at the road, not directly below, but at a point in the distance. She knew at what angle to tilt her head so that part of her face was brilliantly exposed, and part of it was hidden as she visualized the return of Juan Carlos.

He stands at the end of Mount Royal Avenue. The fields of wheat behind him dance in the late summer wind. His gold canine tooth flashes in the sun. The apple he spears with his sword releases a sweet aroma. The sun is grandiose and fat. It moves down the sky, dragging behind it a canopy of colors. It’s the end of the day and the sky is streaked and miraculous, and there stands Juan Carlos with his hand on the hilt of his sword, his boots weary from travel. His moustache is bold, his eyes kind, his hair is black oil rolling on the sea. Time dissolves as he walks, and she is a glacier cracking deep in the pit of itself, and she is the spilling of leaves to the ground on which he moves while gazing up at her, a gloved hand reaching.

“Huuuuuuuhh!” the pretty one screamed. “She’s still waiting!”

Imelda opened her eyes and stared at the children standing in the shadows below her. The pretty one pointed in horror at her. Imelda’s gaze traced the tip of the girl’s finger, moved up the hand, wrist, arm, and shoulder, all the way up to the ear of the pretty one. She wanted to tell her, she wanted to tell all three of the children to not be afraid, to come upstairs
and give her water. She wanted them to know that he was coming soon, if they would only be patient.

Her jaw popped as she opened her mouth to speak, but her mouth was not mouth. Soundless. It was cavern. Time and distance scrambled inside of it. The children were so close. Which was her gaze and which was theirs? Who was who? Why was why? Everything was tangled and what did one see and what did the other saw and then she looked down at her spotted hands. She reached up and felt the sparseness of her hair, felt the brittleness of her bones and roots. She touched the roughness of her skin, and at last saw herself as the children saw her. Rotted.

“Run,” the bossy one shouted as she untied Punto Final, who scampered away towards the road that led back to town. The boy and the pretty one followed, flinging one last glance at Imelda. Their faces were as pale and bloodless as roots twisting underground. They ran and the sun kept slipping until it was lower than the sky, lower than the trees, lower than the road. They slipped away with the light, slid away from Mount Royal Avenue, leapt onto their bikes and pedaled away into the apple orchards. The sun was gone and all the shadows and all the light.

“I wanted them to know me in a beautiful way,” she said.

“I know,” said the gardener and began to wipe her limbs with a moistened cloth.

Imelda rested her forehead on the windowsill. She remembered, of course. All of the men except for Juan Carlos had returned, but not in the way they were supposed to, which was riding in the same parallel rows that they had left in, the horses lifting up their hooves and clopping them solidly to the ground. Instead, the men returned one by one with missing limbs and carved up faces. They plodded slowly down the street to their homes as their women watched from behind scalloped curtains. Once they reached their front doors, they were dragged in by their collars and the doors slammed shut. The exhausted horses collapsed on broken ankles and lay on the ground heaving. Flies infested the parched orifices. The people left the horses where they’d fallen, packed up, and moved to anonymous cities where they could hide the scars and missing parts, where nobody would know how far they’d fallen from prancing around on their private street of luxury. The women carried the dead men away. Imelda stayed. She
watched and waited, and now she stared into the bowl where her roots twitched. The gardener slowly filled the bowl with cool water. Watered now, watered later, left to wither, or left to blossom, it did not matter when the children screamed. What would they tell the others? Brusquely, she ran her fingers through her hair pulling out dead strands that the gardener had missed. Holding them up, she examined their languid form before dropping them in the water. They sank and became tangled in her roots. She stared at the lines of the decrepit houses. The window framed her perfectly as if it had been built around her as she sat on her frayed stool, looking out.