

The Love at Breakfast

Here is a story of Urquiza, the capital and only city of Ñancay, a frozen moonlet in the Anillo Be. It was Christmastime and the Urquizanas wanted a king. Ñancay was a democratic republic so city officials organized an election. Many politicians campaigned and remnants of the forgotten royal family made speeches, but after poll workers counted the votes, they found that the Urquizanas had unanimously elected a little girl named Real Ulpiana to be king. She had no family; she slept in snow tunnels she carved in City Hall Park on the Zócalo. The morning after election day, city officials crawled on their bellies through the tunnels for hours, unable to find her. They were crying in the snow when she finally appeared, her hands full of Christmas cookies.

“We’ve been looking for you!” wept the Mayor Pro Tem.

“We thought we’d never find you!” groaned the City Clerk.

“I didn’t know anyone was looking for me,” said Real. “Would you like a cookie?”

After she’d shared a Santa and a snowflake each with the whole City Council, they explained the election to her.

“So I’m supposed to be king?” Real Ulpiana asked.

“Who wouldn’t want to be king?” they said, not really asking.

At the coronation seven days later, the Cabinet Chief led Real Ulpiana from the sacred tapestries in the Zócalo to the old royal family’s castle; the Sleep Monja walked with them. Both

women entranced Real. The Cabinet Chief, Aparicia Regules, wore traditional three-color government attire: a red and pink collared blouse with long sleeves, black cuffed trousers, and field shoes. Tessellations of belugas, narwhals, and fairy penguins covered the blouse. Thick gold hoops peeked out of her long, straight black hair, which she wore loose and large; her pale businesslike face emerged from it like an iceberg. The Sleep Monja was a large woman enfolded in soft brown robes and a small pointed hat. Not much of her was visible: her hair was short, her eyes were often shut, her hands were clasped inside her sleeves, and only the half-moons of her soft brown shoes peeked out from her robes. Her face was kind, patient, and at rest. Her skin was a darker brown than anyone on Ñancay.

The Mayor had ordered the castle thoroughly refurbished in the modern style, which in those days on Ñancay meant Plateresque Gothic. When they arrived at the castle, Regules opened the doors and they entered a long hall. At the end was a diamond-encrusted throne shaped like an oversized stellar dendrite. It looked terribly uncomfortable to Real, even though she'd been sleeping in snow anyway.

When they finally reached the throne, Real Ulpiana saw the crown: diamonds and silver vines decorated it. She felt questions in her ribcage. The flashbulbs had nearly blinded her, and she couldn't hear anything except for the roar of the crowds, but she looked up at her Cabinet Chief and asked, "Why should I be king?" "I'm only a child."

Regules looked at the Sleep Monja. The Sleep Monja gave a little smile. The girl had brown skin and wore a plain black dress to match her curly black hair; she was a Ñancayana. Who else could be king if not this girl?

“The question you ask reveals that you are the one true king,” whispered Regules as she placed the crown on Real’s head. The Urquizanas roared with jubilation. Regules put a ring in Real’s nose and the Sleep Monja passed her a handful of liquorice allsorts.

The city feasted for three days. On the first day, the King got tired of feasting and went down to the beach. She sat on the iced-over rocks, took off her royal boots, and dipped her feet in the water. It was a small ocean because Ñancay was a small moonlet, but in it lived plenty of belugas and narwhals. Real Ulpiana’s feet drew their attention now and they swam to her. A colony of fairy penguins came to her as well, the guardería first with the parents following. Since she’d always stayed near the Zócalo, this was her first time meeting them; she’d never had a friend before. Her ribcage warmed. She went back the next day and the next.

Over breakfast on the fourth day, Regules asked Real what her first decree would be. “The City Council wants to know.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never made a decree before. Can I have a few days to think about it?”

“Of course, my King.”

The Mayor came for lunch that day and asked Real Ulpiana, “What is your first decree?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

The Mayor made her lips a hard, thin line. “One thousand year ago, it was customary for the newly crowned to announce their first decree immediately after the feast.”

“Nobody told me that,” said Real. “I’m thinking about it.”

“It is your duty, King. Sleep Monja, tell her the tapestries say that.”

“The tapestries say different words to each of us,” said the Sleep Monja.

The Mayor raised her voice. “Your job is to tell the King and all the rest of us what the tapestries say.”

“I contemplate creation, of which the tapestries are one part.”

The Mayor left in the middle of soup. Later, Real Ulpiana asked Regules about the Sleep Monja.

“Her name is Mosquera Isidra Héctor and she belongs to the order of Saint Mauricia. In ancient times, the first Sleep Monja wove the Zócalo tapestries while dreaming; when she woke, she said that the tapestries were revelations from God. Later Sleep Monjas advised the kings and the City Council. Now everyone thinks that’s what Sleep Monjas do, but that’s not so. They contemplate, as she said at lunch, and they try to speak wisdom, but they don’t know the divine will any more than you or me. I’ve known Isidra for many years and she’s told me that the only thing she knows for sure is that she doesn’t know for sure. If you want to speak with her, she’ll always listen and sometimes she may offer you wisdom.”

Real thanked Regules and went down to the beach again. Her new friends came to her. She patted their heads.

“They want me to tell them what my first decree is, but I don’t know. What do you think it should be?”

The King shifted on the rock and pushed her boots into the water. “Oops!”

Her friends lunged towards them. They started tossing the boots back and forth to each other. Real laughed. As she watched, they seemed to move in a pattern. A memory came into her ribcage.

It was November, two weeks before the coronation. She'd been at Eusebia's Bakery downtown, where Eusebia and her five daughters gave Real Ulpiana free treats. The day of the memory, five-year-old Illescas passed her handfuls of pan de jengibre and one big pink concha. She said, "Did you see the new display at Beatriz Toy Shop?"

"No, the last time I looked, it was decorated for summer."

Eusebia came in from the kitchen and gave a little wave to Real.

"It has something called a maíz—"

"A *maze*, baby," Eusebia offered.

"A *maze*—I keep getting them mixed up!" Illescas laughed.

"What's a *maze*?" asked Real Ulpiana.

"It's like a tunnel but without the roof!" Illescas shouted, jumping up and down.

Real walked over to Avenida Beatriz. The buildings here were much taller than those on the Zócalo. To see the top of Beatriz Toy Shop, she had to crane her neck all the way back; even then she couldn't see it because today it was hidden in a snow cloud.

The owners had decorated the window for Christmastime: Green wool hung along the back of the display and wild silk pooled on the bottom to resemble snow. Rubies, silver crystals, and native gold lay in piles on the silk. In the center were carved interlocking stones that formed a series of roofless, branching tunnels, the thing Illescas had called a *maze*. It reminded Real Ulpiana of her snow tunnels in City Hall Park. She imagined herself tiny enough to fit in the

tunnels and she began navigating the *maze* in her mind. The wish to own it never came into her ribcage; she had no money and was used to not wishing.

Real returned to Beatriz Toy Shop every day after that, each time learning a little bit more of the *maze* until she'd almost mastered it. That was where she'd been on the day the City Council came to tell her the election results.

Now as she watched her friends playing with her boots, she recognized their pattern as the one she'd taken through the toy *maze*. Her ribcage warmed.

"My friends!" she called. "Is this your answer?"

They squeaked at her and continued to play. Real Ulpiana took that as a yes.

"For my first decree, I'll build the people a *maze*."

When Real told Regules her plan, she was surprised but said, "I'll form the crew immediately. Where should they build?"

"I'll build it myself," said Real Ulpiana.

"But my King, this is not done. Kings give decrees and the kingdom carries them out."

"I want to give the *maze* as a gift to the people. I'll build it myself and I'll begin tomorrow."

"Very well, my King," said Regules. She sent for workers to deliver clay, silt, sand, straw, water, and limestone to the forecourt of the castle.

The King built the *maze* for 160 days. The adobe bricks rose higher until it was as tall as she was. One day she looked closely at it. Something was wrong. The shape was confused. All she could say was, "But is it getting any *taller*?" She began to despair.

Real returned every day to build the *maze* but never accomplished any work on it. She formed bricks and moved them around, but her creation stopped growing. One day before breakfast, she went to see Regules.

“What should I do?” the King asked.

“Let’s go look at it together.”

They went, and though Regules tried to help by placing bricks on top of each other, she couldn’t build anything either. They returned to the castle to drink chocolate.

“I don’t know what to do,” said Real Ulpiana.

“I’m sorry, my King. Some things even Ibarra can’t fix. Maybe you should rest from this.”

Real took her advice and went to the beach that day. Her friends played as before but they gave her no answers.

The next day she tried but again built nothing.

One afternoon, she went to see the Sleep Monja.

“What should I do?” the King asked.

“Sometimes the holiest thing you can do is get a good night’s sleep.”

Real Ulpiana took her advice and went to bed early. In the morning she tried to build again, but nothing happened.

It was summertime now, the time of the year in Ñancay when it snows only from midnight until dawn, and the days are so sunny that the snow melts each afternoon by 5. That was when she came.

As the King stood with tools in her hands after building nothing for hours, she noticed a tiny dark figure far off in the western foothills. As it approached the castle and the half-finished *maze*, Real could see that it was a woman wearing a milked Tyrian purple robe, high-necked and trimmed with frost. She wore icicle jewelry set with amethysts. The woman, both round and compact, was shorter than the adults of Ñancay: she was the same height as Real.

The woman reached her and spoke.

“I am the Afternoon Woman. I abandon the hydrangeas to tell you a vainilla bean story.” Her voice smelled like the blackberry in a sunset.

Real held out her hand and said “Welcome. I’m king of Ñancay. Would you join me for dinner?”

“What is reality using math?”¹ said the Afternoon Woman.

They went into the castle and the King introduced her to Regules and the Sleep Monja.

“Ah, the Professors of Miracles,” she said, “I hear the birds singing at night.” Then, “Isidra,” nodding to the Sleep Monja.

Regules observed the Afternoon Woman from across the table. Her hands were strong and knucky with short fingernails. It was clear that her soul lived in her hands, not in her ribcage as it was with the Ñancayanas. She had dark brown skin. Her face was wide and open, friendly-

looking, but her mouth seemed to hide many secrets. Her eyebrows were like black woolly bear caterpillars, almost kissing each other. She wore her hair in a bun, and her thick bangs stood along her forehead, dusting the woolly bears like curtains. She had fine terminal hairs across her upper lip. Obviously she was very beautiful.

All of these things told Regules that the Afternoon Woman was from farther away than the ice mountains in the west; she may have come from Tiempa, Ñancay's mother planet, or from another planet entirely. Regules acknowledged all this but spoke none of it to Real Ulpiana; it didn't really matter. She didn't need to know where the Afternoon Woman came from to know why she was here. Regules had heard about her in fairy tales.

“How's the building going, my King?” she asked.

“Not well, Regules. I'm still stuck. I don't know where to go from here.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. What do you think, Afternoon Woman?”

“Let's talk about the love at breakfast,” she answered. “In the breakfast garden, naught is heard but the tender, soothing flute. The bonny Damask-rose is known as Patience.”ⁱⁱ

That night they had Christmas cookies with milk, talking and laughing so late that they had to bring out more cookies. Regules told stories—of Urquiza's founding, of the ridiculous City Councilors, and of her student days—and the Sleep Monja even told a joke. The Afternoon Woman said little but smiled her wide beautiful smile all night. Real had never had a night like that. It felt like something to her, but she couldn't name it.

When Real Ulpiana woke the next morning, she heard a flute playing and smelled a Damask-rose. At breakfast, as promised, the Afternoon Woman led a spirited conversation about the love. Things were beginning to move in Real's ribcage.

Instead of performing any official duties, they all spent the day at the beach. Real Ulpiana took them to meet her friends, and later they ran barefoot and played in the sand. The Sleep Monja dug the deepest hole in the world and reached water, while the others built. Regules made Poeh Museum and the Afternoon Woman made the Great Mosque of Djenné. Real made something from one of Regules' stories the night before: Cuarenta Casas. As she puddled the sand, she heard the Afternoon Woman quietly say to Regules, "A blessed mother thou shalt be, most highly favored lady."ⁱⁱⁱ

When they got hungry, they walked back to the castle. From afar, they saw someone knocking on the door; she wore a blue and turquoise collared blouse with long sleeves, black cuffed trousers, and field shoes. Tessellations of belugas, narwhals, and fairy penguins covered the blouse.

"It's the Mayor!" hissed Regules, and they ducked behind a stand of holly trees. They tried to hold back their laughter. Peeking out, they could tell that the Mayor had heard something, but hadn't seen them.

"How long is she going to stand there?" whispered Real Ulpiana. "We're obviously not home!"

They decided to go around the back and sneak through the kitchen door. When they got there, the door was locked.

“But look, the window’s open,” Real said. The Sleep Monja gave her a hand and the King scrambled through. Quickly she grabbed handfuls of mazapán de cacahuete and threw them into a mixing bowl. She passed the bowl out the window and scrambled back out.

The Mayor seemed to have gotten tired of waiting because she was gone when the women passed by, but there was a note on the castle door. The Afternoon Woman read it and chuckled; she passed it to Regules.

“‘King, when will the building project be complete? The City Council and I are concerned because it is behind schedule. Please advise, The Mayor.’ Ha! There was never a schedule! She just doesn’t like when things don’t go her way,” said Regules.

They sat on the sand eating mazapánes for the rest of the day.

The next morning, Real Ulpiana woke up and began building before the sun rose. As she mixed the adobe and laid the bricks, she thought of the day before; she thought of joyful, strong, helpful Regules, she thought of the humble, quiet, smiling Sleep Monja. Every laugh, every story, every sandcastle, and every treat were coming together in her ribcage. The Afternoon Woman had been building something in there. She thought she might know the name for it now.

Real finished the *maze* that day. It was twice her height and filled the castle’s forecourt. She sat down and looked at it. The Sleep Monja came up from the direction of the beach and sat down next to her. She took her hands from her sleeves, which was such an unusual motion for her that Real watched her do it. If she hadn’t been looking, she wouldn’t have seen where the helado came from. “Coco paleta?” the Sleep Monja asked.

“Yes, thank you!” said the King.

“It’s the perfect summer treat,” said the Sleep Monja as they sat in the snow and gazed up at the *maze*.

That night Regules sent word throughout Urquiza that the King’s *maze* would open the following morning for all who wanted to see it.

In the middle of breakfast, the City Council arrived at the castle and seated themselves without an invitation.

“King,” said the Mayor, “thank you for completing this project only a few days late.”

“No worries,” responded Real Ulpiana. She wasn’t really listening; she was eating her panqueque and thinking about the *maze*.

The City Treasurer whispered something to the Mayor Pro Tem, who whispered to the Mayor. “King,” she said again, “I am sure you realize that no one knows the *maze*’s shape. You should have published that when the Cabinet Chief made her announcement yesterday.”

Regules said, “Esteemed Mayor, the people will ascend the castle’s highest tower to view the *maze* from above. Please excuse us—we should greet the people as they arrive.”

Urquizanas had formed a line in the forecourt. They’d brought their coffee mugs, their joy, and all their babies. There was talking and laughing and singing; children ran freely around the *maze*. Eusebia and her five daughters were there. They bowed their heads when they reached Real, even Illescas, but the King hugged them all fiercely.

The City Council bolted into the forecourt, flustered and horrified.

Real Ulpiana and her family greeted the people happily and directed them to enter the castle and ascend the grand staircase. The City Council stared angrily as the people climbed out of the earth; and, still climbing, rose above it.^{iv}

“This is not appropriate,” panicked the Mayor. “Sleep Monja, tell them this is not what the tapestries say! Tell them they’ve lost all decorum!”

“Why should normal people not have beautiful things? They’re just trying to live their lives,” answered the Sleep Monja.

“They’re poor!”

“They’re rich. I think it’s you who’s poor,” said the Sleep Monja, and she began ascending, too.

When all of the people had ascended and only the Afternoon Woman and the City Council remained in the forecourt, Regules hugged Real. She said, “We always knew you were a king.”

“Thank you, Mama,” said the King. They turned to the City Council. “Please go up,” she said. “It’s in the shape of a Damask-rose and I know you will like it.” They sulked their way back inside the castle.

The Afternoon Woman touched Regules and Real on the shoulders. “I’m never gone. I’m just in my garden.”

“Thank you, Afternoon Woman,” said the little girl. “You made us a family.”

“She didn’t build it, mija. She just helped it along,” said Regules.

The Afternoon Woman smiled her beautiful open smile and nodded. Then she walked away toward the western foothills.

Real Ulpiana looked up at the tower. The first Urquizanas had reached the top and were hanging out the windows waving to her and shouting with joy at the glory of the adobe Damask-rose *maze*. With her people at the top and herself at the bottom, Real realized her calling. "Now," she said to her mother, "I'm ready to be king."

ⁱ "What is reality using math?" is a quote from Mike McHargue, *The Bible for Normal People* podcast, April 16, 2017.

ⁱⁱ The phrases "naught is heard but . . . the tender, soothing flute" and "The bonny Damask-rose is known as Patience" are from "King Jesus Hath a Garden," translated by George R. Woodward (1908).

ⁱⁱⁱ "A blessed mother thou shalt be" and "most highly favored lady" are from "Gabriel's Message," translated by Sabine Baring-Gould.

^{iv} The phrase "climbed out of the earth; and, still climbing, rose above it" is a quote from George MacDonald's *The Golden Key* (1867).