

UNLIKELY ARROW

Mira is an island, just like the precisely trimmed Bonsai centered on the fireplace mantel in her living room. Its crooked tiny leafed peak is an oddity, made even odder by the absence of family photographs or other memory driven knickknacks. The plant draws light from a slight part in the window drapes that allows a glimpse of Lafayette Square Park. A place that Mira never goes to sit to touch the petals of flowers or to listen to the laughter of playing children. Until the present moment, like her surroundings, her life has been perfectly contained.

The piercing of Mira's heart creates an unexpected swell of emotion. With each narrow breath that follows, she feels the underpinning of her honed existence wobble like unevenly layered bricks teetering on the brink of collapse. "It's too late for this to be happening to me," she whispers, attempting to staunch her visceral reaction to Noah's offering.

At sixty-three, she doesn't want the rush of a sixteen-year old pulling away from her first kiss nor the rapid beat of her heart clawing against her breast nor the blush of desire spreading across her cheeks. She reaches for the full weight of her careful life to stave the sensation of standing naked inside a thunderous waterfall.

Noah's deeply veined hands shake with anticipation as he extends the open box with a diamond ring. She leans back in the chair across from him and closes her eyes against the intensity of Noah's stare. Crisp air, flowing from an open window behind her, propels her up and across the room to the front door. As she touches the knob, Noah says, "I love you Mira." The words force her to escape the undulating disturbance in the room and in her body.

She looks out at the open green fields, checkered with large green bundles, then sprints down the porch steps to regain her balance. Except for the occasional plop of lessening

raindrops, it is quiet. Mira cherishes every splash that strikes her. She feels her blood pressure going down and her pronounced cheekbones returning to their regular honey brown coloring. With each footfall forward, her mind spins backwards towards her journey to Noah.

“Mira, really he’s no trouble. I would do it, but I can’t make that trip and get back to pick the kids up from school in time. Please Mira,” begged Simon, her supervisor.

Mira got up from her desk knowing that he knew she would say yes because he knew she had nothing to rush home to, not even a purring cat or a nuzzling dog. Her office desk and walls, like her home, were empty of things that showed a bond between her and anyone or anything.

“My work load is already heavy. How far out is he? You know Baltimore traffic. I would have to time it just right not to get stuck in it,” she said, while busily shifting files on her desk.

“He’s on a farm out near Granite. A small town in the western part of the county. Shouldn’t take you long if you leave after rush hour and start back before afternoon rush. Just a couple of hours to make sure he is okay. I can take one or two of your cases closer to the city, if you want.”

“Well, I do have openings in the mornings a couple of days a week.” Mira replied.

“It’d be great if you could go out tomorrow or the day after. Whatever is good for you and Mr. Handy. Don’t forget to call him before you go - to see if he needs anything. You know the routine. I did his intake. Here is his file. Thank you so much Mira,” said Simon as he grabbed his jacket and waved good bye

That tomorrow was four months ago, muses Mira as she stops mid field to take her soaked sensible shoes off. The wet grass and moist dirt between her toes brings a stabilizing

effect to her racing mind. Somewhere in the distance farm machinery starts up and the consequent loud thrumming of the engines directs her thoughts to her first trip to Noah's home.

Traffic hadn't been a problem that day. From her apartment in West Baltimore to the tiny town of Granite, it had taken an hour. She'd crossed the border from the constant city buzz to the country calm with ease. As she neared her destination, she recalled her conversation with him the evening before.

"Hello Mr. Handy. My name is Mirabelle Simpson. I'm a patrol partner with the Rural Senior Patrol League and I've been assigned to you. I would like to start my weekly visit's tomorrow, if that's okay?" Mira said.

"You say your name is Mirabelle? That's an interesting name. What does it mean?" He asked in such a strong, sonorous voice that it made Mira wonder if his age, seventy-two, was recorded right.

"My momma told me it meant wondrous. I was the last of five children and the only girl. Please feel free to call me Mira, everybody does". She knew it was old fashioned, but when she was on official business she had to give her government name. However, the slight twinge when she said it came from knowing that her life had been anything but wondrous. After the age of nine, her life resembled the sparklers she'd lit up with her brothers on warm summer nights. An intense build-up. An incredible spray of light. And then nothing.

"Your momma must have been real happy. Sure you can come on by. I'm pretty much always here since my accident," he said with a mix of weariness and excitement.

"Great. I'll try to get there by 11am. Please forgive me if I am a little late since this is my first time out that way. Can I bring you anything you might need?"

“Nah, just the company will do just fine. Thank you, Miss Mira, for taking the time. See you tomorrow. Let me give you the way here from the highway. It’s pretty easy.” As she busily scribbled down the directions, Mira noted his articulations and his steady, uncomplicated, flow of words.

“Thank you, see you tomorrow Mr. Handy.”

“Noah, please.”

“See you in the morning, Noah.”

The physical files, on the passenger seat beside her, held everything tangible about Noah Handy. He lived alone. He had two sons who lived in California, one in San Diego and the other in Los Angeles. The son from San Diego had called the county looking for services for his father, since he nor his brother could leave their jobs and families to care for him after he broke his leg. The intake form said to check for depression. His son stated that Noah was a farmer, one of the oldest black farmers in the county and a very proud man, but could be difficult. Mira was to survey the state of his home, check his refrigerator and pantry for food, note his medication usage, and somehow lift his spirits. Since joining, RSPL, the routine was the same for all. She just needed to remember names and find some way to make them smile. It was a predictable fit for her regulated life. No sloppiness of attachment. No fear of surprise. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Noah had been peering out of the front window when she’d pulled up. He waved her into the updated farm house with two waiting rocking chairs on the porch. Mira opened the door and went in as Noah was trying to grab his crutches.

“Please don’t get up.”

After taking a seat on the couch, Mira looked over at Noah smiling and felt something inexplicable move inside of her. Although perplexed by her reaction, she didn't let it ruffle her business demeanor. He simply wasn't what she'd expected. The cast on his right leg seemed to elongate his lengthy frame. He had to be at least 6'3, she thought as she scanned over his massive shoulders and lean body. Noah looked as if he could plow a field with no problem. His tightly coiled full head of hair was salty gray. Mira thought that if they'd had a black Marlboro man, back in the day, Noah would have been that man. He was handsome and rugged with tender penetrating light brown eyes.

“Thanks for coming. Would you like something to drink or eat?”

“No thank you. I had my coffee and a bagel on the ride up. You have a beautiful home,” she said, as she took in the intoxicating lemony smell that seemed to emanate from everywhere.

“Thank you. I built this house and made most of the furniture you see. I'm sure you can smell the polish. I wipe each piece down once a week. Can't do much else with this bum leg. My sons had a contractor come and help me spruce the house up a bit a few years ago, after my wife, Doreen died. That's when they made a bedroom down here for me, because I was getting up in years. I guess they were right,” Noah said as he eased back into an over wide recliner.

“How are you feeling?”

“Physically I'm fine. I think my boy called you because he's worried about me being alone. Most everyone I knew is in the grave or in an old folk's home. I must admit I do get a little lonely and bored at times. Nothing much to do except watch the fella's work the fields without me and watch day turn to night and back again.”

“I read that you were a farmer all your life.”

“Well, to everything there is a season. This season I’m in has so much silence I sometimes pinch myself to make sure I’m still alive. I miss getting my hands dirty. Hard work keeps your mind clear. Now, I sit here, more often than not, with troubling thoughts and fading memories. Anyway, what’s your story Miss Mira?”

“Not much to tell. Pretty much a closed book.”

“Now, that just don’t sound right. Everyone has a story to tell.”

Mira knew it didn’t sound right. Wasn’t right. She looked away from him and then around the room. It had everything her home was missing, but she’d never missed. Walls of family portraits. Handmade doilies on every table. Thick weaved rugs positioned on the wide wooden planked floors in the living room, in the dining room and in the kitchen. The open floor plan was light and airy. Its homey character brought memories of her childhood home in Western Pennsylvania. A time she had carefully painted over until it was a milky white memory. She shivered.

“You cold, Miss Mira? It’s still spring and some mornings are a might chilly. I can start a fire or turn the heat up.”

“Oh, no. I’m just fine. Thank you. You are surrounded by memories, so I can understand how sad it can be sometimes. What kinds of things do you like to do, Noah? I mean, I know it’s hard to get around with the cast, but if you had some help where would you like to go?”

Mira learned much about what Noah Handy like to do and about the town of Granite during their twice a week visits over the next 3 months. They often drove to the town’s small central area for a late country style breakfast at a small diner. As his leg grew stronger and he was put into a walking boot, he took her on tours of his home town. A few old repurposed

buildings in the center of town, when it was at the height of its dedication to the activities of the quartz monzonite quarry, seemed misplaced and forlorn against the backdrop of modern mini mansions surrounding it. One day they visited the defunct quarry, Mira had laughed with Noah when he burst into laughter, as he told her how he would run, scream, and cry as a toddler when his father and grandfather came home from work covered in white quarry dust. It was like that, their time together. An easy ebb and flow of his past wrapped inside their present. It was as if they'd been two old friends meeting years later.

Mira had come to anticipate Tuesday and Thursday as much as some people waited for Sunday morning. The weighty sound of the organ wafted through his deep baritone voice. His words were reverent, yet joyous. His manner was caring and slow moving like a calm sea. She learned about the workings of a sod farm, about his high moments and his low ones, about his family here and gone. He had lived a full life, at least fuller than hers. A sense of belonging crept up on Mira as her closed existence widened with each visit to Noah. She'd even started wearing colorful clothes on her petite frame, in lieu of her usual greys, blues and black. In spite of herself, she realized she was smiling more, except when he asked about her family, where she came from, why she never married or had children. At those moments, she would lower her eyes and quietly shrug her shoulders. Eventually, he stopped asking and she wished she could find relief in his cessation.

Mira's recall of her journey to Noah ends as she sits down on an enormous tree stump. In the reality of the moment, she realizes the distance between her and the farm house is as looming as a needed response to Noah. Saying no meant they would part ways and the thought of that was as distressing as the arrow he'd placed in her heart. "Why now, when my mind for years has been free from wanting?" says Mira in response to the echo of Noah saying, "I love you".

Those three words mixing with the pungent odors from the surrounding soggy wood open her mind to the brisk black moment when solitude became her refuge.

The deacon's hands under her Sunday best dress. A door opening, then a quick zip back to priority. A small skinny wide eyed girl telling her mother what happened. What she touched and how she was told to touch it. The slaps that soiled and pummeled her heart. And the words...the words were the worst.

“Don't you dare say such things about the deacon. What's wrong with you? He's a man of God. You shut your mouth. He didn't do nothing to you. You better not say anything to your father or anyone else or I swear I will lay you in your grave. You hear me, Mirabelle?”

At the age of nine, Mira had been assaulted twice. Once by the deacon and once by her mother. No one marked the end of Mira's childhood. They forgot her laughter and the freedom of her movement. They didn't notice the stiffness of her walk or the loosening of her clothes or her perpetually downcast eyes. And no one noticed the way her shoulders hunched up when the deacon laid hands on her at the alter on Sunday mornings. Mira disappeared with no one looking for her.

Her tears fall in sync with the soft rain that has begun again. She bends over to quell a scream swirling inside of her, as she recalls the evil perpetrated upon her by two people mandated by God and nature to love and protect her. She remembers how hard she prayed for invisibility. She remembers the nastiness she'd tasted inside her mouth, as she sat on the pew. She remembers the taunts of how weird she was after she turned inside, where she vowed to move through life without touching it or being touched by it. Even through the taunts about her

strangeness in school on through to college, she maintained her oath. Now, her adherence feels like a straight-jacket instead of a protective coat.

Rising from the stump, she pulls her damp dress away from her body and walk towards the house. As she parts the trees, she sees Noah standing on the porch. Even from a distance she feels his love reaching for her. It is a warm love. A mature love. A to your grave love. As she gets closer to the house, Noah begins to walk down the steps. Before, he gets to the bottom, Mira fishes in her sweater pocket for her keys, then jumps in her car. She starts the engine before pressing down the window button and says, “Noah, it’s too late for me”.

Quietly, Noah says, “Never too late Mira. Give me a chance. I’ll show you.”

Mira gets to the end of the road and something in her makes her turn right instead of left towards home. Within minutes, she is standing at the precipice of the rock quarry where all is still and powdery white. She stares down into the sea of rocky earth and realizes this is the place where she can lay down the sorrow she’s been carrying for decades. A slight breeze surrounding her holds the whisper of Noah’s voice, “Never too late”.

She walks around gathering rocks of varying sizes to lay in a pile by the cliffs edge before sitting down by the stone mound. Her scream splits the quiet. She screams again and again, until she is gasping for air. Inside the echo of her own voice, she begins to hurl the rocks down into the quarry bed. With each pitch, she feels grace returning. The rain has stopped for the moment. A moment. It just takes one, Mira thinks. One to take away and perhaps one to give.

Noah is sitting in one of the rocking chairs when Mira pulls up. He stands and walks down towards her with his arms outstretched. Mira steps into his embrace as if he’s a dream she’d never had, but somehow had been waiting for her.

