

Miranda's Garden | Prologue

Sidebar

Harvest Moon, September 10, 1965

Full Moon (hand-drawn illustration)

Corn (hand-drawn illustration)

Miranda knows she is magic.

On this new Fall afternoon, she runs through the rows of corn, her yellow dress flouncing with every small trot, its waistband sash undone and trailing behind her. She's still small enough to fit under the green canopy of leaves, and she knows by the sweet smell of the kernels it will be harvesttime soon. A few days before, she had helped her father check the ends of the ears for roundness. "Still too pointy," he had said.

She feels the *thumpthump thumpthump thumpthump* of the earth's heartbeat, and she's propelled to the back of the cornfield, out the other side to the plateau of hard-packed earth where she had been earlier this afternoon. The fat stick with the pointed end she had used to carve the beginnings of a circle around the smooth river rock, surrounded by a few acorns that had fallen early this year, is still in place, leaning against the side of the freshly-painted rust-red barn. With her small hand, she envelops the stick—first the palm, then one finger at a time, from pinkie to pointer, and lastly, thumb, to ensure a firm grip—to which she has tied a feather with corn silks, and resumes her earlier task of carving a furrow around the acorn-encircled rock. *Round and round and round. Thumpthump thumpthump thumpthump*. Her plan: to create a small reservoir for rain collection to enhance the chances of growing her own oak tree with

the help of the impending full moon. Her father has taught her to plant when the moon is full and has the greatest gravitational pull downward.

“Miranda!” Her mother’s voice rings through the air with urgency. “Miranda, we’re leaving!”

She stops, looks toward the house, then back at her project. *Is the furrow deep enough?* She wants to go with them. She always goes with her father when he takes their farm produce to town for trade with Hank Swanson, the owner of the local market. The weekly trade is a system Miranda’s father arranged when he first started farming in Andusville, Illinois, when life was lean and he needed a way to feed his wife and young, growing family.

Every Sunday evening, they swap their produce, milk, and eggs for Hank’s meat, cheese, and other staples, like flour and rice. Because she spends so much time helping her father plant and keep a watchful eye on their small crops, cows, and chickens, Miranda likes being there when the exchange is made. In a way, it’s like saying goodbye, as she feels connected to—even a part of—every egg, every gallon of milk, every bushel basket full of produce. And she loves riding in the back of their beat-up blue Studebaker pickup, wedged amidst gently rattling bottles of fresh milk, buckets of dusty potatoes, crates of leafy lettuce, and baskets of peas, carrots, and onions, the wind blowing her dark bobbed hair, wild around her head and face.

But this time, they’re going on a Friday, and her mother is going in her place. Miranda doesn’t fully understand but thinks she may be able to convince them to let her

go, anyway, even though they already had the talk about changing her sleep schedule to get her primed for her first day of kindergarten a little over a week away.

And then there's the moon.

It's a Full Moon. A Harvest Moon. She can't wait to sit with her father, as she's done for as many full moons as she can remember, and watch it slowly materialize from a hint—faint and lacey at dusk—to a vivid, bright orb, sparing them from the sky's absolute darkness.

Now her father calls. “Miranda, honey! C'mon! They'll be here soon! We have to go!”

She digs harder and faster, kicking up dirt into her eyes, which she bravely endures to get the job done sooner and get back to the truck before her parents leave, believing she might still be able to convince them to let her go after all. *Round and round and round. Fasterfasterfaster.* Satisfied with her progress, she lines the trough with several small pebbles salvaged from the fishing trip she took with her father a few weeks prior. Job done, Miranda stands and assesses the sky for possible rain. She wets her index finger with her own spit and holds it up to check, like she had seen someone do on television once. But maybe that had something to do with the wind and not the rain now that she thinks about it. Either way, it seems like a wise thing to do: let the rain gods know she is here, paying attention, and in need.

Her parents call again. Miranda takes one last look at her creation, which resembles a Native American altar, wishes it well with a bow, and dashes back into the

corn, back into the musky smelling milieu where she has begged to sleep some nights, but her parents have yet to allow this. She has held tea parties in here: fed her friends corn biscuits she made with her mother and hot black tea lightened with cream from their cows. She has held performances in here: plays she has written and cast to have them acted out by her friends under her direction, and sunset dances to music from her transistor radio. And she's played tag in here: deftly running then laying low with the mist of mid-western humidity clinging to her skin, listening like a soldier in a fox hole to discern how close the "it" person was until she set herself in motion again dodging and weaving to safety. For Miranda, this is more than a cornfield. It is another world. It's *her* world and she reigns supreme.

She bursts out the other side, nearest the house, to find her mother and father in the driveway, truck loaded, and her baby brother, David, straddling her mother's hip, chewing on what looks like a dog biscuit, the wet, brown mush caught in the corners of his plump little lips.

"Please, *please* let me go with you," she chimes and runs into the side of her father's leg with a body hug.

"Not this time," he says. "Next time."

She moves to her mother's side, tugs at David's dirty, bare foot. "But, why?! I always go with Daddy! Why are you going this time?"

Her mother reaches down to smooth her hair. "Remember what we said..."

"But momma, listen, please." She grasps her mother's hand and hugs it to her cheek. "I don't need a new roo-ting."

“Routine,” says her mother. “And yes you do. We made a deal. Didn’t we make a deal? We said two weeks before your first day of kindergarten.”

Miranda squints one eye, crinkles her nose, and holds up one chubby little index finger right in front of her own face. “One. More. Day. That’s all. One more. Please!”

“Sweetness, no.” Her mother says with finality. “This is what we’re doing.”

“I’ll rest in the truck.”

“Miranda,” says her father, more sternly. “Not this time. We’re runnin’ late.”

A white Buick pulls in and parks next to the truck. Aunt Minna, Uncle Frank, and Elizabeth, Miranda’s older sister, pile out. Elizabeth had spent a couple of nights at their place in nearby Farmington that week and is returning home to prepare for the beginning of a new school year, set to start the following Monday.

“Bout damn time,” says Miranda’s father, under his breath.

Aunt Minna exits the car, explanations tumbling from her mouth. “Good gawd!” she says, “Truck hit a cow on 116 near Middlegrove... And Elizabeth had to stop and pee twice since we left the house.”

Uncle Frank interjects. “Gave her an empty coffee can for the back seat, but she wouldn’t go for that,” He chuckles and messes Elizabeth’s hair and calls her “Miss Priss.”

Elizabeth frowns and goes toward the house.

Miranda’s mother passes David off to Aunt Minna and runs around to her side of the truck, listing off orders about dinner and bedtime rituals. Miranda rides her father’s leg to his already-open door and gives one last plea.

“I said next time,” he says firmly.

Miranda lets go, slowly, as if to savor the feel of his warm denim leg against her cheek for as long as possible. She pushes out her bottom lip and looks up at him.

He softens, kneels down to her level, and takes her face in his hands. “Sweetness, we were supposed to leave an hour ago. We won’t get back until past your bedtime.”

“But why couldn’t momma stay like she always does, then we would already be there and you wouldn’t be late.”

“That’s some mighty fine logic,” her father said, softening more. For as long as she could say words and string together thoughts, Miranda had consistently presented him with sound arguments and thought-provoking ideas, which had cemented a growing friendship between them rarely seen between fathers and daughters, especially daughters as young as she.

“But to answer your question... because your momma and I both have to go this time to take care of some other business after we see Hank.”

“What business?”

“Grown-up stuff. Farm business.” Adding, with a wink and lowering his voice, “I’ll bring you back some taffy.”

“You’re gonna miss the moon,” she says, concerned.

“I’ll get a good look at it on our way back. I’ll be able to see it shining bright in the sky. And I’ll think about you the whole time.”

“But I want to look at it with you.”

Her father looks over his shoulder at Miranda's mother, then back at Miranda. In a whisper, he says, "Tell you what. I'll wake you up when we get back, and we'll look at it together."

She brightens, makes several miniature claps with her palms flat together, and grins with an elation that makes her father take her face in his hands again. "You are a special girl," he says. "My sweet, magical girl."

He plants a kiss on her cheek, promises to be back soon, and climbs into the truck. Miranda squeezes in one last wave to her mother before the door shuts, and her mother blows a kiss.. The truck starts, kicks into gear, and leaves the driveway. Miranda stays to watch the truck move further and further away from her, until it's no longer in sight and the brown dust from the gravel road that leads to their house has dissipated.

She looks back to the cornfield and bolts that direction. She runs and runs, faster than usual, working her breathing to a hurried pace, so she can get to the backside in time.

She makes it with a few minutes to spare and stands, looking west, watching the sun make its predictable dip beneath the horizon. In these moments, when she shuts out all else except herself and the ground she stands on, the sky over her head, and all the wonders they both possess, she feels she is part of something. That she matters. That she is somehow taken care of. On this particular evening, she is so enthralled with the feeling of wonderment that surrounds her, she doesn't hear Aunt Minna calling her from the back door to come inside, so she stays there, behind the cornfield, her small silhouette a cut-out against the twilight sky.

The Harvest Moon forms and turns brilliant. It's bigger than most full moons she has witnessed. A giant bonfire-orange ball against opaque black. She puts her arms out to her sides, fingers spread, and tips her face up. She makes a request for her oak tree to grow and stays like that until something shakes her from her trance. Like an earthquake, not outside her, but within her. A deep-seated rattle that shakes her to hyperawareness. She wants her parents. Suddenly and urgently, she wants her parents. She turns toward the cornfield and plunges her tiny body into its damp, earthy darkness.

She races, zigzagging between the stalks, never fearing she will lose her way because her sense of direction is keen, and the light of the Harvest Moon overhead lights her way with intermittent blips of light, like a strobe, as she sprints beneath the thick, green leaves.

When she gets back to the house, David is in his crib sleeping, and Aunt Minna is brushing Elizabeth's hair at the big, round oak table in the dining room, the architectural and emotional heart of the house. Static sparkles and cracks through Elizabeth's long, dark locks and she lets out an "ouch" with a grimace, ducking her head in painful surrender. Aunt Minna continues brushing as if on a mission, without any notice of Elizabeth's hunched body, and Uncle Frank walks out of the bathroom, the sound of the toilet flushing behind him.

"Don't go in there for a while," he says.

"Where on earth have you been?" Aunt Minna snaps with a tone that makes Miranda feel even smaller than she is. "You missed supper."

“Behind the corn.”

“It’s eight o’clock, and you need a bath. What were you doing?” Aunt Minna stops brushing, giving Elizabeth a brief reprieve, and looks at Miranda.

“Nothing,” she says.

“What do you mean, ‘nothing’? You had to be doing something.” Aunt Minna looks Miranda up and down. “Look at that dress. It’s filthy. Is that any way to treat a dress your momma made you? You might as well spit in her face. Why on earth would you wear it to play in the dirt?”

“It was for Easter,” says Miranda. “And Easter’s over.”

“Wear your tomboy clothes when you do that, for God’s sake.”

“I like to wear this.”

“Go get in the tub. The water’s probably cold by now.”

Andusville is small, so news travels fast. Skip Watson, Andusville’s volunteer Sheriff, shows up on the front doorstep just as Miranda is putting on her pajamas after her tepid bath. The voices of Gomez and Morticia Addams, mingled with intermittent bursts of canned laughter, followed by Lurch’s deep, dark “You rang?” trail in from the living room. Elizabeth stands in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room eating a cookie. Miranda, wanting one herself, walks over to her sister, shivering slightly, water droplets falling off the tips of her hair. Skip walks all the way in, the screen door slapping against the doorframe, and removes his hat. He talks in muffled tones.

The blue truck had moved down the country road and turned right onto Highway 16 to head into town. Miranda's father must not have seen the approaching semi-truck, and by the time the driver honked and began to skid, it was too late. Impact sent Miranda's parents spinning. The pick-up overturned twice—lettuce leaves airborne, apples bouncing—then came to rest on its roof. The screeching semi-truck left a long, black skid mark down the center of the highway then veered off to the right, onto the shoulder and into the ditch, where it came to rest with a last-gasp hiss several yards from the up-ended pick-up truck. Smashed produce and the bright, yellow yolks and crushed shells of broken eggs—the livelihood, the lifeline, of Miranda's family—lay in a smear across the asphalt. A peculiar silence followed, the only audible sound being one spinning tire and gurgling milk from a few intact glass bottles.

Aunt Minna screams and falls to the floor. Uncle Frank darts in from the living room. "What the hell...?"

"What's the matter? What happened?" asks Elizabeth, tears forming in her eyes.

Uncle Frank rushes to Aunt Minna. The two men hoist her to her feet and carry her into the living room as she wails.

Miranda and Elizabeth stand side-by-side, crying, for the first time and before knowing why, over a grief that will follow them for life.