

Mildred Davis always dreamt of being a performer. She wanted to create art and move people in a way that could only be achieved through song, dance, music, art.

Throughout her childhood, she would sneak out, after her not-so-biological parents went to bed, to see the town shows with the little money she could save from walking dogs, helping her classmates in school, or simply through the little allowance she was given.

People began to take notice of little Mildred, walking into the shows each week, all alone. Each actor could see her sitting front and center, without fail, week after week, never losing the look of pure awe which painted her face as she gleefully stared up at the stage. The way the actors moved effortlessly like those wacky arm flailing inflatable tube men blowing in the breeze outside dealerships; the way they captivate their audience and hold the power in the room, challenging anyone to challenge them in their production. That's what Mildred wanted—her own sense of power. Her own name. A challenge.

Mildred was abandoned after she was born. Her biological parents claimed to “not be ready” for a kid—for that responsibility—so they left her. She was found in a child drop box one night by a couple stumbling by, braving the storm brewing outside. Through the wisping winds and thrashing rains, the couple heard the cry of baby Mildred. Following the sound, they aimlessly wandered until they reached a box—one of those drop your baby, no questions asked boxes. Opening the cold, metal door, they revealed the most beautiful baby girl with bright green eyes and a full head of midnight black hair. Being unable to have children themselves, they decided to take the girl and raise her as their own. While living in fear of someone coming to strip their newborn from their grasp, they sheltered the girl from the world, always watching, always waiting, always expecting someone to ask who she is, where she came from, if she was the

“stolen child.” But no one came. The only one itching for answers, for freedom, was Mildred as she never understood why her parents were so harsh and strict with her all the time. Mildred’s only escape was going to the theatre and envisioning herself on that stage. This was all she had, until the day her dream was handed to her.

After one of her many nights going early and staying late in the theatre, the director of her favorite show, *Much Ado About Nothing*, approached her. At this time, Mildred was a fifteen-year-old girl with big dreams, dreams about to come true. Director Stanley Lee approached Mildred after his biggest success yet. It was late one Saturday night and Mildred sat outside the theatre, waiting to have one last look inside before they closed the doors for the night. As she stood, looking like a lost soul at the door, she was so engrossed in her own thoughts, her own dreams, that she didn't hear Mr. Lee come up behind her, let alone begin to talk.

“You come here quite a bit.” No response. “You must really like the theatre.” Again, no response. “Hello? May I ask your name, little friend?”

At this moment, Mildred turned to leave her sanctuary until the next evening, keeping her head down, she continued to be oblivious to the man standing behind her, until she walked square into his legs.

“Oh, sorry. Excuse me,” Mildred mumbled looking up to see the eyes of the man who makes her dreams come to life on a stage.

“You must have quite the imagination.” As he looked into the eyes of a lost soul, he realized he wouldn’t get much response out of her, so he did the only thing he knew to do, continued talking, now quite curious about the story behind this mysterious little girl.

“Where are your parents? Do they know you come out here all alone? Did they drop you off here?”

“They’re home. I’m going back to see them now.”

With hesitation, Mildred turned to leave, suppressing the feeling that she may be missing out on an opportunity of a lifetime. Why else would *the* Stanley Lee have come up to her? Maybe, she thought, he was just going to kick her off the property and tell her she could no longer stay later after the shows. That would be the worst news possible. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that this was a situation about to turn around in her favor. This was an opportunity she needed to take. So, with a deep breath, she slowly, cautiously, turned around and made her way back to the man standing outside the tall double doors that hold the secret to happiness behind them.

Stanley saw in the girl something he hadn’t seen in an actor in a long time. He saw promise in her dedication to the arts. He saw ferocity behind her dull eyes, a sparkle waiting to ignite the fire hidden in her soul. He knew he was her only hope at helping her traverse this world. He felt a pull to the girl, as if he knew of her unwelcoming, sheltering, structured home-life, as he was much like her when he was a boy. As he stood there, watching her walk off, he waited. He waited for the moment when realization would touch the girl and she would turn, as he sees her doing now, and come back to hear him out. He watched as she stopped, contemplated, and, slowly, turned to make her way back to him. He saw her take small cautious steps in his direction, one step at a time, until she was standing right in front of him. Stanley remained silent, waiting for her to say what was on her mind.

“You’re Stanley Lee...”

“I am. And you are?”

Stanley didn't know what she meant by saying his name. Where was she going with that? She had to know who he was with the amount of time she spends in his theatre.

"Look, I'm sorry I come early and stay late. I'm most likely overstaying my welcome here. I know it's meant for productions, but your shows feel so freeing... and now I'm blabbing. I apologize, I won't stay much longer anymore, sometimes I just like to... dream." Mildred didn't know what came over her and her sudden need to apologize. She wanted to make a point, that if he really was going to tell her the worst news she could have heard in that moment, then she would beat him to it, taking control of the situation.

Stanley was amused by the frantic chattering of the girl before him.

"Look," he said, "I'm not kicking you out."

Mildred's head snapped up to meet Stanley's ocean blue eyes. Stanley Lee was a twenty-five-year-old, dirty-blond-haired, former athlete who took up theatre as a form of rebellion against his own set of controlling parents, only to find that he had a knack for the arts and made it into his lifestyle. As Mildred stared, she began to wonder what he could possibly want if it wasn't to kick her out. She started to dig herself into a hole when his voice snapped her back to reality.

"What's your name?" Mildred realized he had asked this question, multiple times earlier, but she didn't know why she couldn't bring herself to speak her name out loud. Maybe because it felt foreign to her, as if it wasn't who she was, but rather who her parents wanted her to be. She closed her eyes, and with a deep breath, muttered her name. "It's M-Mildred."

"Well Mildred, I'd like to make you an offer."

“An offer?”

“Yes, an offer. You’re interested in theatre, no?”

Mildred, feeling a wave of nausea, didn’t have a reply. Of course, she was interested in theatre, but why would he—does he—she couldn’t formulate a coherent thought, so she simply nodded her head.

“I thought so. I can see the performer in you. What strikes you most about the productions?”

The words came out of Mildred’s mouth so quickly she doesn’t even remember saying them. “The way the actors control the room. They glide up and down on that stage and demand respect from the audience. They hold the power and are now held at a higher regard. They accomplish change with each show that is put on. How could anyone *not* want that or to be a part of that?”

Stanley was impressed, and relatively taken aback, by the insightfulness of a girl so young. “May I ask, how old are you?”

“I’m fifteen...”

Stanley Lee stood there, looking at the child before him. Nodding his head, he knew he’d made the right decision to stop her and feel out the potential he saw from backstage week after week. Without hesitation, Stanley looked young Mildred in the eyes and asked if she’d like to become part of the team. He explained to her that there is housing and pay involved, as well as acting lessons. All she would have to do was say the word, go pack up some things, and start a new life, all for herself.

At first, Mildred was skeptical. Here was this man, standing in front of her, offering her a new life, one she dreamt of ever since she found out about the theatre. So, before she could ponder anymore and talk herself out of any rash decisions, she

agreed. That night, Stanley Lee walked Mildred home, waited for her to pack some clothes, and took her to a new beginning.

Over the years, Mildred grew as an actor and as a young woman. She held the power in any room and all heads turned to look at her when she walked by. Mildred loved her new life; she learned many skills and how to mask emotions in any situation. She learned how to remove herself from reality and let her body take control. It was the most freeing feeling, but as time went on, Mildred felt as if she was missing something in her life, as if she was meant for something more. Something where she could help people, save people, make a difference, no matter how big or small.

Mildred was 23 when she left her theatre family and found herself stuck in a limbo of what to do next. She didn't have a plan, but she knew she couldn't hide behind masks and make up anymore; that if she wanted to make her own name and do good in the world, it would be in the light of day, not hidden on a stage. Since she joined Stanley's gang as a young girl, she dropped out of school and lacked the higher education many young adults her age were achieving at this time. With her desire to help but lack of opportunity from not furthering her education, Mildred found herself enlisting in the Army. This, to Mildred, was a place where she could exert her power, help people, make a difference, and make a name for herself. She could grow within herself and within her squad.

After a year of working her way through the military, she was placed on a squad run by another woman, something Mildred didn't see much here. If the Army has shown her anything so far, it's that women need to work twice as hard as men do, but they all understand each other in the same way. Maybe this is why Mildred began taking an interest in the women in the military. She's dated men before, she's been with men

before, but nothing gave her the same thrill, the same joy, the same comfort as being with a woman. And now, here standing before her is her new colonel, one of the most beautiful women she has ever seen. She stood tall, poised, commanding. She held herself high, with a grace around her that encapsulated Mildred and those around her. Mildred found herself getting lost in her deep grey eyes, her long, thick, dark brown hair trickled with red highlights. She was slim, but strong, anyone could see that. Her face was the perfect oval shape, the face that could go with any hairstyle, never seeing a blemish. Her face glistened with sweat, making her shine in this Afghanistan heat.

Mildred watched as her new colonel took center stage. She watched her plump pink lips open and heard the voice of an angel begin to speak.

“Welcome comrades. My name is Lilianna Graceman, your new commanding officer. You will report to me and me only. You will not go behind me, around me, or through me thinking it will give you leverage. In my squad, we treat each other with respect and nothing less. We listen to each other and have each other's backs. Out on the field, there is no more you and only you, there is a team. Look around you, this is your new family. You will treat each other as such. No questions asked.”

*Lilianna.* Mildred thought that to be quite a fitting name for someone so beautiful, so graceful, so eloquent to captivate her soldiers. Mildred knew what she was doing as she made her way over to her new colonel. Mildred felt butterflies like she never felt before. The closer she got, the louder her heart pumped, the less she could hear, the less she could see. Mildred was never one to believe in love at first sight, until today, until this moment when she was standing face to face with the woman she knew to be made for her. It took her a minute, but Mildred finally came through and realized Lilianna was speaking to her.

“Hi soldier, what can I do for you?”

“Ma’am. My name is Mildred Davis. I’m new to your team and wanted to introduce myself personally.”

Lilianna stared at Mildred for a moment, unable to pinpoint, let alone suppress this unfamiliar feeling warming up inside of her. She saw the woman with bright green eyes and jet-black hair standing before her and didn’t see someone she was going to boss around, but rather someone she could love. This was new to Lilianna. These feelings, these feelings toward a *woman*, were all new to her. She didn’t know what to make of them, but she did know one thing, she wanted Ms. Davis to continue talking. There was something in her voice that sounded melodic, captivating. Lilianna stood there, waiting for a response from Mildred, until she realized that she was the one who was supposed to be talking. By the time she came to her senses, she saw Mildred had already walked away and she missed her chance to explore these new feelings.

Mildred felt embarrassed. Why did she go over there? Why did she speak to Lilianna? The colonel most likely sees her as a fool now. Who does that? Who speaks to their commanding officer when they have nothing to say?

Mildred was in the hall, sitting, eating, losing herself in her thoughts, when someone sat down across from her. Paying no mind, Mildred continued to eat and think, until she once again heard the voice of her angel.

“Soldier. Miley, right?”

“Mildred.”

“Right, right. I want to apologize for my earlier behavior. I was taken aback as no one has ever introduced themselves to me or made a note to approach me after an informational briefing.”



“That’s okay boss. I was probably out of line in my behavior anyway.”

Lilianna didn’t know what to say. She wanted to tell Mildred that she wasn’t out of line. She wanted to tell Mildred that she loved having someone come up and talk to her, especially someone like Mildred. But she knew if she did that, the conversation would end, and that’s not what she wanted to happen. She wanted to sit and talk with Mildred for hours and hours until they’d exhausted all the topics possible. But how could she bring this up without sounding like a freak? She found herself tongue tied again and thought by the time she had something to say, Mildred would once again be gone, but when she looked up, Mildred was staring intently at her.

As Mildred stared, she could tell: Lilianna felt it too. That pull, that electricity between them growing strong the longer they stayed near each other. The more Mildred stared, the harder it became for Lilianna to suppress the blush creeping up her neck and onto her cheeks. Mildred saw this too and was thrilled. That was the final straw. That was all Mildred needed to take a chance, to jump into something new, something exciting. She knew it would be a bad idea. She knew it could get both of them into a lot of trouble, but the scenario could not be more exhilarating in Mildred’s eyes. She had to ask, but just as she was about to open her mouth, Lilianna beat her to it.

“This is going to be the dumbest decision I’ve ever made, but would you want to hang out sometime? Off the books of course.”

Mildred couldn’t contain her excitement as a bright white smile stretched across her face. Fearing her voice may betray her, she slowly nodded her head, up and down up and down. With that, and not wanting to draw too much attention as she was supposed to be on duty, Lilianna rose, and with one final look in Mildred’s direction, walked out of the hall and back to her post.

The next two years for the secret Army lovers were a blur. They did their duty, came when called, answered when spoken to, but found each other's embrace when the night called. Everything seemed to be perfect for Mildred, as if she was floating through life, but instead, floating through the military. No matter what foes they faced or quests they conquered, nothing seemed to destroy the couple. Nothing seemed to destroy Mildred's spirits, until the day she and Lilianna were forced to make a choice: speak or stay silent. Lilianna spoke, Mildred didn't. That's when she knew she had to get out. With whatever support she could find, Mildred made her way out of the Army and back to civilization without so much as a goodbye to her love.