

Mildred Elizabeth Wright

My name is Mildred Elizabeth Wright. I hate being called Millie, but it's been my nickname for as long as I can remember. I am seventeen years old and the youngest of twelve children. In all my life, I have never been more than ten miles outside my family's forty acre horse ranch. I can count all the people I know who are not my relatives on two hands. I've never had a friend, for there was too much work to do to spend time socializing, and even if there were time, I've never felt much of a connection to other people. The only real relationships I have are with my family, or at least before Ray knocked on the door last August.

It was a scorching summer day, even by Tennessee standards. Every day has had the same routine since I was a little girl, but due to the heat that day I had to take more breaks than usual. All my siblings had left by then to start new lives, so I was adjusting to working the ranch with only my parents. I have always been familiar with silence, so when I heard the unexpected rumble of a 1976 pickup truck coming up the long dirt driveway, I knew something strange was happening.

The first time I saw Ray, I got shivers down my spine. Even though the thermostat read 104 degrees, I felt an immediate rush of cold as he approached the front door. The old green screen door let out a hiss as I kicked it open to greet Ray. I heard the words "Hello?" come out of my mouth without really meaning to, but I have never really been able to perfect my manners.

"Um, yeah, hi Miss, um..."

"Mildred." I responded. "Mildred Wright."

"Right, well, Miss Wright, I um, I am looking for work and I noticed your barn needs painting.

While that may have been offensive to me on any other day, I was especially tired and he was right, the barn really did need painting. I agreed and without speaking, Ray squeezed

through that hissing screen door and into my family's creaking kitchen. We are not poor by any means, but we have never been materialistic. I love our run down farmhouse and the way it talks back when you walk across it. It was strange to see Ray sit down and look around my home. I mistakenly caught eye contact with his deep brown eyes, so brown they were almost black, and got that same shiver down my spine.

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Ray is odd. There is no other way to put it. I didn't dislike him, but I didn't especially like him either. The next few weeks passed by in a blur. Our old, run-down barn was starting to look like new, as Ray would painstakingly paint even the smallest crevasse of the hundred year old wood. As winter came and went, my parents and I grew quite used to Ray hanging around the ranch, but truthfully, we needed the extra hands after all my siblings had moved away.

After the year's biggest blizzard kept my siblings from returning home for the holidays, my parents and I were grateful to have Ray to lend a hand in return for food and shelter. In the long, lazy days that made up the time between Christmas and New Year's, I was sitting alone, pretending to read a book my mother suggested, when I saw dark storm clouds rolling over the mountains. It was unusual to see such black skies, even in winter, and it caught my attention immediately. It wasn't long before thunder and lightning began roaring across the property.

"Where's Ray?" I asked my parents, who were sitting in the front family room.

"Haven't seen him," answered my father as my mother shrugged.

There it was again, that same odd shiver down my spine.

I don't know what caused me to go looking for Ray that night, it was as if my body had taken control of itself and walked out the back door. I had a strange feeling building up inside of me as the thunder grew louder and the lighting came closer. Turning the corner to the barn that

Ray had been working on all these months, I saw something that still pierces through my eyelids to this day: the barn consumed in flames.

Paralyzed with fear, all I could do was shiver and stare. After a clasp of thunder snapped me out of my daze, I ran towards the barn, desperate to find a solution. The rain had now begun, but only slightly aided in the fire control. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ray, standing along the tree line, staring towards the barn with a look I can only describe as glee. As I screamed Ray's name, he looked over at me with a look of disdain and fled into the trees. There it was again, that shiver down my spine.

Sprinting in Ray's direction, he was nowhere to be seen. He had disappeared in the blink of an eye. Why is he running from the barn that he worked so hard to fix? Suddenly, as a gush of freezing wind pushed me onto the wet ground, I knew: Ray had set the fire.

Gothic Elements:

This short story was out of my comfort zone for numerous reasons. I very rarely write creatively and have never attempted to write in the Gothic genre, therefore I attempted this story tentatively. One of my personal favorite aspects of Gothic Literature is the inclusion of mystery and fear. I particularly love when an author leaves a text open for interpretation, almost allowing the reader to decide what they believe the author was attempting to convey. I attempted to portray mystery as much as possible within this short story, such as when the protagonist experienced a chill during her interactions with Ray. While writing this story, I originally intended for the reader to learn that Ray is a ghost, but during the editing process, I decided that never outwardly stating that he is a spirit evokes a stronger sense of mystery within the plot. This stylistic choice allowed for the reader to also experience supernatural components. Another

significant Gothic element that I incorporated into this text was a moderated version of the classic damsel in distress. Because this is a modern day story, I did not want to set unrealistic gender expectations on the protagonist. Instead, I decided to have Mildred be short handed after her siblings moved away from the family farm, therefore allowing her emotional distress to root from exhaustion.

The ending of my plot is intentionally vague and open for interpretation. I wanted to leave the readers wondering why Ray set the fire to the barn that he spent so long working on. I, of course, have my own explanation for this bizarre and spooky experience, but I wanted unexplained events that parallel supernatural experiences to be the driving factor of the plot.