

*The Little Yellow House*  
by Paula Tully Gold  
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The quiet and stillness of Merrillville was such that the hum and drone of an approaching plane could be heard inside our house. Planes flying over our neighborhood were rare and when one passed overhead, Mom would rush us out to the yard and we'd watch it inch toward some destination. "Maybe Europe," she would say with a hint of something in her voice I didn't quite understand. We'd crane back our heads until the white trail of vapor, hanging absolutely motionless against the vast blue sky, broke into tiny cloud pebbles, disappeared, and the hush returned to the Indiana summer day, hot and breathy with wildflowers. The quiet, the clover, the hopeful sound of Mom's voice — that is the Merrillville of the little yellow house.

The house wasn't always yellow. One year, sometime after the snapdragons bloomed but before the sunflowers sprouted their giant heads, droopy and exhausted with August ennui, Dad painted over the bland white clapboards, splashing them in vibrant sunshine with redwood accents here and there. He laid a flagstone patio between the side door that opened into our doll-sized kitchen and the equally humble detached garage that housed a lawn mower, our bikes, paint and solvents, a gas can, two dented saucer sleds, a pointy lawn edging tool we weren't allowed to touch, a chipped blue enamel bicycle pump, and all the usual garage junk save Bonnie and Clyde, the two white lab rats from Dad's biology classroom who we were hosting for the summer, and an unassuming earthenware jug containing mercury. The how and why of the mercury remains a collective head scratcher within our family, but the assumption being it landed in our garage via the Merrillville Junior High School science department. While it was Dad who first demonstrated the magic in that jug to us, it was my younger brother, Guy, who kept pulling it out from

underneath the folding card table that supported Bonnie and Clyde's cage. Together, we'd crouch on our hinds, uncork it and coax a vibrating ribbon of silver onto the cement floor, mesmerized as it morphed into a breathtaking reflective puddle, glistening against the grime. We'd roll it around with our bare hands, break it apart and then glob it back together before smashing it into what seemed like a million tiny pellets. Dazzling shrapnel that, I guess, just scattered to the far corners of the garage. Mercurial. Self-possessed.

That was before our parents knew any better, before anyone's parents knew any better.

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The sense of things going significantly awry weighed heavily on my 6-year-old psyche. On April 16, 1968 just 12 days after the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., Bobby Kennedy brought his presidential primary campaign to neighboring Gary, a once bustling city built on thousands of jobs provided by the hulking steel mills that lined Lake Michigan. By this time, the American steel industry was buckling under its own inefficient weight, and white flight out of Gary was in full migration formation. The election of Richard Hatcher as one of the first black mayors in America exacerbated this exodus. His campaign promises of ending the segregation and neighborhood colonization of Gary's significant black population sent flailing US Steel's white welders and big wigs alike scurrying to Merrillville, a still sleepy town located eight miles straight down Broadway, due south. Crossing into Merrillville, the landscape itself changed, ill-defined and unsure of its purpose. The urban grid and hustle bustle of Gary faded. In its place grew wild fields with lumpy clay-laden soil. Then, out of nowhere, the Y&W drive-in loomed

into view, followed by Turkey Creek Pharmacy and then more feral fields, bulldozed and dug up with the promise of future homes. After that came the little strip of businesses that included Bonnie's Grocery and the Merri-Bowl, before it all gave way, with a sigh of relief, to farmland.

On that April day, Mom and Dad hurriedly loaded us into our black and chrome Chevy station wagon with great excitement to see Bobby Kennedy's motorcade trundle through downtown Gary. We were to meet up with the Wilsons, new friends of Mom and Dad's who they didn't want to keep waiting. As Michelle and Guy and I argued over the window seats, Mom sternly shushed us making it clear we could not be late. The Wilsons' familial makeup, like our own, consisted of two girls and two boys almost the same ages as us, with the girls, like me and my sister, leading the birth order. The exotic nature of this new friendship traveled like an electric current through us all. For starters, Dr. and Mrs. Wilson weren't teachers like all my parents' other friends. Jim Wilson was a family physician and Carrie, a striking tall brunette with spectacular bone structure, had been his nurse. At that young age even I understood they were hipper, more worldly, and aspirational. They lived in Devonshire Woods, which was the upscale subdivision about as north as you could live in Merrillville before bumping into Glen Park, the tony Gary neighborhood where the steel executives and professors from Indiana University Northwest lived. The Wilsons' brick and clapboard house was a two-story affair that held heady amenities I didn't know existed outside of 1960s sitcoms like *Bewitched*. A smooth concrete driveway led to a tidy garage that opened up into the house, which wasn't tidy but possessed a good natured disarray that felt comfortable and, well, lived-in. They had a chaotic playroom cram jammed with seemingly every toy I'd ever set my heart's desire on when thumbing obsessively through the Sears Christmas catalog — including the play kitchen I ached for with

an unbridled domestic passion. There it was, sitting unloved, next to a flaccid, inflatable clown punching bag.

The Wilsons' real kitchen boasted two ovens set into the wall and an exposed brick breakfast nook. The girls, Adair and Paige, shared an upstairs bedroom padded with plush pink carpeting and twin bedspreads made from a quilted, flower power fabric and yellow organza skirting. The backyard held the pièce de résistance: a swimming pool. This veritable wonderland was all I needed to embrace our new family alliance, which ultimately led to joint vacations and shared Sunday suppers. Not until later would I understand that my parents' giddy connection with the Wilsons sprouted not from luxuriating in the ambiance of their abundant home, but from a shared ideology not common in their circle. The Wilsons spoke loudly for racial equality and Dr. Wilson unabashedly stood up for freedom of speech. During his tenure on the town board, he endured a smear and hate mail campaign stemming from him having publicly defended the right for a Communist Party candidate to be on the ballot. The Wilsons gave my parents a voice.

That April day we did meet the Wilsons on time and, in broken daisy chain formation, we all wriggled through the crowd and got close to Ethel Kennedy who sat atop a convertible, tempting fate. Dad snapped a Polaroid, impatiently waiting for it to develop, fanning it furiously and urging it to dry before he shoved it into my sister Michelle's hands. She ran up to Ethel, perched on that convertible, and asked for — and got — her autograph. Afterward, at the behest of the Wilsons, we went to the low-ceilinged basement of some church that was elbow-to-elbow jammed with a jumpy, raucous crush of impassioned humanity. Dad, all wound up, baptized and imbued with the Holy Spirit of activism, disappeared into the crowd with Dr. Wilson. I got

separated from Mom, who was balancing my youngest brother, Carl, on one hip and busy shining the full wattage of her attention on Carrie Wilson whose own youngest, Brian, clung to her leg like a wide-eyed barnacle. The dimly lit space turned all atilt and a panicky feeling of sinking underfoot rushed through me as the noise and sweat and haze of cigarette smoke swallowed me whole. The flow of tears that shook my body proved unstoppable, gaining its own torrential strength no matter how tightly I squeezed my eyes. Suddenly, a woman touched my head and asked me in a very matter of fact tone, “Did you lose your mother, child?” She took my hand and again called me child in a way I’d never heard the word used before. “We’ll find her.”

On the quiet ride home, I sat tangled up in anger, my forehead pressed against the backseat window with Guy slumped sideways, spilling into my space, his mouth agape in sleep. Michelle, bright-eyed and erect, stared out the other window watching the sun surrender its last tendrils of spring light to the April night. Mom’s eyes were closed, though not in sleep, her head leaning against the front seat window as she held a squirming Carl in her lap, while Dad fiddled with the crackling radio, trying to get a better signal on WBBM 780AM, the news radio station out of Chicago. I was furious. Furious at being abandoned, furious at getting in trouble for “wandering off,” furious at my parents for caring about something other than us, something — whatever it was — that loomed with magnitude. And furious, simply furious, that the Wilson-driven detour to the church basement had completely derailed Mom and Dad’s promised stop at Dairy Queen on the way home.

A little less than two months later, Sirhan Sirhan shot and killed Bobby Kennedy. Life in the little yellow house shifted, not imperceptibly and not dramatically. The Democratic primary

pressed on undeterred, as it had to, and Dad hammered a McGovern sign into our front lawn. He grew a bushy mustache and let his hair touch the top of his collared shirts. He started an ecology club at school and, much to our giggly amusement and embarrassment, bought a pair of tire tread sandals with a leather peace sign whip-stitched onto the toe thong. Mom seemed to take it all in stride, slightly engaged and palpably exhausted from keeping the six of us sorted out and attended to in our 900-square-foot home. But when Hubert Humphrey took the nomination it was Mom I turned to, quizzically asking, “Now who’s going to win?”

“Probably that Nixon,” she sighed.

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**Paula Tully Gold** enjoyed a long career writing for a diverse clientele in marketing communications and public relations. She has two sons and has lived in Marblehead for nearly 30 years, never taking for granted the inspiration she finds in the town’s inherent beauty and historic charm.