

The Girl in the Yellow Shirt
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About 2,700 words

After bumping her head on the low slant of the attic ceiling for the third time and cursing, Mrs. Wilma Harrison pushed her heavy horn-rimmed glasses up her nose and lugged the last of a half-dozen crusty cardboard boxes full of western pulp magazines into the hallway of her quiet two story home.

Letting her burden fall to the beige carpet runner with a thud, she leaned against her painted bedroom doorjamb and caught her breath, the acrid smell of old paper and dust filling her nose.

She sneezed and mopped away a curl of limp straw-colored hair.

Outside, the gray day left spots of drizzle and oak leaves of burnt umber plastered against her bedroom window, while the kitchen radio clock downstairs sputtered through the second game of the World Series.

The Yankees and the Dodgers.

She'd seen them play each other before.

She and Mac both had seen them.

Decades before. When they were young.

Before the writing.

Before Mac's sordid affair.

Wiping her nose on her tan apron, Wilma turned to close the attic door and saw one of the damned magazines laying loose on the threshold where it had fallen.

Like it didn't want to leave.

Like it knew the fiery fate Wilma had planned for it now that Mac was dead and she could put everything to rest at last.

Street and Smith's Western Story.

A 20-year-old issue from the 30s complete with a full-color cover.

A grinning cowboy dressed in red atop a saddled roan stallion. He looked a little like Mac did back in those days—blonde, carefree, losing his hat to the wind. Ramrod straight, one arm ending in a silver revolver spitting fire, the other arm circling the petite waist of a girl.

The girl in the yellow shirt.

Wilma kicked the old pulp magazine away and slammed the attic door shut with a bang.

After today, she'd never have to look at that damn painted hussy again.

Careful not to trip, taking the steps one at a time, Wilma started hauling the boxes full of monthly titles down the steps.

Six boxes, six trips to the front door.

Six trips to the Ford waiting in the driveway.

Then, after lunch with her girlfriend, to the dump at the edge of town.

With each step, she carried Mac's feverish prose to its final resting place.

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William Mackenzie Harrison wrote his first story for Street and Smith in 1929.

A newlywed with no formal schooling, Mac was willing to try anything once.

When the editor of Western Tales bought "A Devil's Night in El Paso," Mac took Wilma to the best restaurant in Cheyenne to celebrate.

The food was fine. The story was terrible, full of stereotypes and bad grammar.

Sure he'd never sell another word, Wilma encouraged Mac to put his name in with the power and light company.

But against all hope, the stories kept selling.

Even after her father got him an upstanding job at the water plant, she'd find Mac with

his typewriter on the kitchen table, churning out pubescent fantasies full of doltish range riders, toothless old codgers, and hairy road agents.

Western Story

Ace High Western

Mammoth Western

Dime Western Magazine

Mac eventually sold to all the popular pulp titles, his work often featured prominently on the covers, his heroes wrapped in their usual garb: the heroic cowboy in red, her in yellow chamois.

"The names are different, but it seems to me you're writing the same people over and over again," Wilma once said as, just before bed, she packed her head with curlers. "The least you could do is come up with something less childish. Something new and original."

She lit a fresh cigarette hoping he would discuss it.

Instead, he leapt from the bed and ran for his typewriter.

She sighed and rolled her eyes, a western story widow.

Things only got worse between them.

Trips like the one they took to the World Series or the weekends hiking across the open range became a thing of the past.

And the girl in the yellow shirt showed up on the covers more often than ever.

At some point during their thirty years together, Wilma realized the girl in the yellow shirt wasn't just in Mac's mind.

At some point, Wilma realized that girl was real.

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"Well, naturally I added two and two," she told her girlfriend Claire later that day at Dimple's Tea Room on 3rd. "The girl in these stories was everything I wasn't. Perfectly

poised, lascivious..."

"Thick in the head?" Claire laughed around a crustless pimento cheese finger sandwich, her voice slightly raised to compete with the clicks and clinks of fine dining around them.

"Exactly," agreed Wilma, upturned hands in surrender on a white linen table cloth.

She wrinkled her nose at the chamomile tea Claire poured from a silver serving pot. Then, glancing around at the tables to either side, making sure none of the other ladies were paying attention, she lowered her voice. "A few years ago, Mac started disappearing at nights and on weekends."

"Disappearing?" Claire reached across the table to touch Wilma's hand. "Oh my poor dear. Wherever did he go?"

Wilma wagged her head with exaggerated sorrow. "I only wish I knew."

"You suspect he was...was with her?"

"That much I'm sure of."

"How do you know?"

"A married woman can tell these things," said Wilma. "He'd say he was going on a fishing trip. Or that the boys down at the plant needed him in Laramie for a meet up. But I knew better."

Wilma sipped daintily from her tea cup.

"He'd come home happy and full of vigor. And always a new story out in the post a day or so later. A story about her."

"And you never knew her name?"

"In the stories he called her Rachel and Maude, Olivia or Meg. But there were clues to her true identity."

"Like what?"

"Naturally I didn't read many of Mac's stories." Wilma sniffed. "But what I read was

evidence enough."

She nibbled at some cabbage slaw, then continued. "For one thing, this yellow girl, this hussy, this Rachel or Meg, always ended up in the water, swimming."

"Swimming?"

"She must have been a tremendous klutz, forever falling in a pond or a lake. She nearly drowned ten times over."

"So she's not much of a swimmer."

"Or maybe she is."

"Either way, there's a connection," said Claire.

"And a lush. Always appearing in a tavern scene or with a brown bottle," said Wilma.

"Oh, my."

Wilma nodded gravely. "It gets worse."

"Worse?"

"She's an unrepentant heathen. I remember several stories where the cowboy is literally dragging that woman to a church."

"To the altar?"

"I don't know about that."

"So you have no idea where this homewrecker lives, or lived? In real life?"

"I suspect somewhere around Centennial. More than once Mac would return from his travels with an odd story or piece of gossip that I could trace back."

"But you never looked into it? Never tried to find her?"

Wilma bit her lip.

"Land's sakes, girl. Why not?" said Claire. "Centennial's less than two hours away. Why not drive over? Poke around?"

Wilma saw the little Wyoming settlement in her mind's eye, remembered the gas station

at the foot of the mountain, the cheerful mercantile on the road back to Laramie.

Claire was right. On a sunny day, it was an easy drive from Cheyenne.

"Maybe," said Wilma, her eyes narrow and half-closed, but her mind opening to the possibilities.

If she found the girl in the yellow shirt, what would she say? What would she do?

Only one way to know.

"I'll do it," she said, putting her fist on the table.

"Let me pour you some more tea," said Claire.

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The drive from Cheyenne to Laramie went well enough, Wilma piloting Mac's '51 Buick with grim determination.

The autumn sky was a summer's rich blue, and the gold leaves and silver bark of aspens along the road did their best to bring a smile to Wilma's wan lips, but she wasn't having it.

She was on a mission.

The kind of mission no married woman should have to endure.

Finding her husband's concubine, coming face to face with the tramp who, piece by piece had slowly dismantled her marriage--like Claire said, it would be the final nail in Mac's coffin.

It was worth the effort.

Steering the car southwest down the long narrow road between Laramie and Centennial, the brown grass of the hardpan opened up around her and the foothills of the Snowy Range mountains filled her windshield.

A few antelopes ran from her car and Wilma imagined what she would do when she found the girl in the yellow shirt.

Violence was out.

Unlike her ungodly rival, Wilma wouldn't resort to anything physical.

Rather, she'd look the woman in the eye and, in a calm, cool voice, tell her about all the lonely nights she'd spent while Mac sat in the kitchen pining away at the keyboard.

She'd try to relate the years of suppers she'd eaten alone, the weekends she'd spent puttering around the house, while Mac was off in some dream land, real or imagined, with somebody else.

She'd make sure the girl in the yellow shirt took responsibility for Wilma's pain.

Then satisfied with her triumph, Wilma would turn and walk away, cool as a cucumber, putting the past firmly and finally in its grave as sure as she'd dropped the boxes full of pulp magazines into a smoldering landfill the day before.

Then she saw a slash of red and white in the distance, the friendly cafe on the outskirts of town, the big EAT HERE sign that would blink orange at night.

The memory took her with surprise, making her hold momentarily hold her breath.

She and Mac had stopped at the place once.

They shared a hamburger, a cold drink.

When Wilma pulled into the dirt parking lot, the man who greeted her might've been the same fellow who greeted them then, decades before, short and skinny with a white shirt and a worn leather string tie.

His smile was broad and inviting. "Welcome to Centennial," he said, the sunlight reflecting off the goose-grease in his hair.

Goose-grease.

What Mac used to call his hair tonic.

She hadn't thought of that in years.

"C'mon on. Have a cup of coffee," said the man.

Wilma stayed behind the wheel and cocked her head out the side window. "Thank you,

no," she said. "I happen to be looking for someone, and I hoped you might be able to help me."

"I can try. Name's Pete, by the way."

He walked over to the Buick and propped himself against the door. Wilma described the girl in the yellow shirt.

The wind picked up, spattering the windshield with grit.

Pete shook his head.

"Nobody like that around here," he said. "But it's funny you up here with that car looking for somebody."

"Funny how?"

"Recognized the car and thought you were that writer fella."

"Oh?" Wilma sat up straighter. "What writer fellow is that?"

Pete shrugged. "Not much to tell. This old boy used to come for a weekend now and then. Rented a cabin up by Lake Marie where he'd write cowboy stories."

Wilma's heartbeat quickened.

Renting cabins for the weekend was he?

"He ain't been up for a few months now. Cabin's been empty. Just waiting for him."

"Can you tell me how to get there? To this cabin you're talking about?"

Pete gave adequate directions up the side of the mountain along with a phone number for the owner.

Wilma swallowed hard before asking the next question.

"Did this writer ever have anybody with him? Maybe a... a wife?"

"Nope," said Pete. "Nobody that I know of."

Nobody that you ever saw, thought Wilma.

She pushed her glasses up her nose and wiped windblown hair from her forehead.

Gripping the steering wheel and moving back onto the road, her right eyelid twitched with anger.

Imagine! Renting a cabin to sneak off to.

To write?

"Ha!" Wilma said out loud, and her voice sounded strained.

Even to herself she sounded desperate.

Or scared.

There's only one reason a man rented a cabin in the mountains without telling his wife, and it sure wasn't to write.

The road curved up, up, past acres of hardwood forest and then above the tree line where fog set in and snow lined the ditches.

The Buick continued on, past the gravel parking area around Lake Marie and then abruptly left as Wilma followed Pete's directions.

It was all seemed oddly familiar.

And then she saw it. The cabin, at the end of a dirt cul-de-sac, nestled between two snow crusted hills, an ancient square iron grill standing out front beside a dilapidated wooden picnic table, a high granite peak in the background.

Built from rough-hewn, square cut logs, chinked with red mud the cabin had two rooms and a small fireplace. A rock chimney rose just above the cheap cedar shingles in back.

A flood of memories.

She could almost taste the wood smoke in the air.

She'd completely forgotten.

She and Mac spent two nights here. Right after they were married.

Now the cabin was dark and lifeless.

In the distance she heard the trickle of running water and a bird she couldn't identify.

There was a stream behind the cabin. She remembered washing her feet there. Mac washing her feet.

Mac would know the bird, she thought.

Birds. Trees. Flowers. She stepped out of the car and walked to the cabin.

He used to know all that stuff.

She stepped on the porch and the pine boards squeaked. A stranger, but not a stranger.

But not an old friend either.

Then Wilma remembered why she was there.

The thought of Mac philandering with the girl in the yellow shirt here—here of all places!

A special place Wilma and Mac had shared!

It made her jaw clench and she bounded forward, pushing in the front door.

Inside there'd surely be a clue.

She sucked in her breath and almost fell back.

It was just as they'd left it.

As it had been that day more than 30 years before, on a Sunday when they'd skipped church.

The woven floor rug on the hardwood floor, the quilt tossed over the red upholstered daybed. Beside the rock fireplace was a big table. Besides that, an iron sink with a pump.

Wilma remembered fixing a salad there. Bringing it to the table. Mac grilling fish out front.

They sat at the table. Drinking beer.

How could she have forgotten?

She wore her hair long in those days. She reached up, twisted a curl around her finger.

On the table, the typewriter waited.

And beside it, a ream of paper and a glass covered photograph propped up in a cardboard frame.

Wilma marched to the table, stoically picked up the hand-colored photo.

Of course it was her, the girl in the yellow shirt.

Young, smiling, full of life with her hair glistening in the sun.

Wearing the shirt and cropped off shorts, bare legs dipping into the stream, a bottle of beer beside her, she was everything Mac had always dreamed of.

He told her that once.

“Wilma, honey, you’re everything I’ve ever dreamed of.”

Wilma felt the tears ball up behind her eyes, felt her throat swell as she stifled a sob.

She had forgotten that photo of herself, just as she had forgotten the cabin.

She had lost sight of those days, just as she’d lost sight of Mac.

And somewhere along the way, she’d lost the girl in the yellow shirt forever.

Wilma brushed at her eyes and took a deep breath.

Then she turned the photo face down on the table, and just as she knew she would, she walked away from her rival—cool as a cucumber, putting the past firmly and finally in its grave.