

Wendy Chirikos

What If You Knew Her

Just after dinner, you get your Sunday night call from Mom and Dad. Stay safe. Yes, Ma'am. Stay away from that mess, you hear? Yes, Sir. It's all over the news, the ROTC burning to the ground, the governor pounding his fists, the students out of control. You are not that type, anyway, you think. You think. You don't know what to think.

An hour later there's a knock on your door. It's Allison. She is that type. And she's stranded. The protestors were pushed back and a curfew slapped on — she can't make it back to her room across campus. She's agitated, irritated about the helicopters, the National Guard outside, but in your heart, you feel relief as she plops down on your bed, you getting to keep her all to yourself for the night. Just like it used to be. She talks about marching with Barry that evening, about meeting the kind guardsman with the lilac in the barrel of his gun — Myers was his name — and how she'd stood up to his commander. She grabs the patchwork pillow your great-grandmother made and hugs it to her chest, sighs and then smiles. What about *you*, she asks. What's going on with *you*?

What a difference a few months makes. From that first day you both arrived at Kent State, when she knocked on your door in search of a screwdriver and a pint of ice cream, there was never a need to tell her what was going on — she knew. She was always there, more than a sister, really, a right arm, a part of your hip, your heart. The two of you cut out roses from magazines and taped them to your doors. You gained ten pounds. You talked about classes, you talked about boys from back home. You curled up like cats and fell asleep on her bed.

But Allison was outgoing. She was involved. She worked, she volunteered, she joined, she marched. Her circle just grew larger and larger. In December she met Barry at an anti-war rally and fell madly, deeply in love. In January she moved across campus to be closer to her classes. You stayed put. You studied, you wrote your letters home, you took a job in the library. And somewhere along the way your heart stepped back and quietly let her go. It's not that you felt replaced by her growing world, not exactly. It's just that yours felt suddenly smaller, was all.

You hand her a note from Jamie. She smiles. Allison knows Jamie. He's the boy from back home you want to marry. He writes you long letters and poems and calls late at night. One night after two beers you confessed to her that you would TOTALLY let him take your virginity. But he has never tried, not even once, to kiss you. You point to the paragraph at the bottom of page 4 and take a step back as she reads. She looks at you, you stare back, her eyes fill. He got his draft notice, she says, and waits for you to react. You can only nod. You have read this note twenty times since you opened it on Saturday night, but it's her face that guts you. You can't breathe. Nixon has just sent troops into Cambodia.

The thing is, you've always supported the war — you supported it by default. Spread democracy, destroy communism. Simple. Support your president, support your country. Easy. Before Allison you'd never met anyone who'd questioned the government, who'd voiced any other opinion. You listened and you obeyed, and you agreed without even asking yourself why.

What if they take him, you ask finally, dumbly, uselessly.

The rest of the night you sit on your bed, talking about Jamie and the war and the unrest outside your window. And then you talk about classes. And boys. You curl up like cats and wonder if you can find any ice cream.

The next morning Allison is up before you. Her face is bright. She asks if you want to join her and Barry for lunch, and then the protest at noon. Yes, you think, but no, you say. You need to study. You feel you should. You have a European History test, the War of Austrian Succession, y'know, Maria Theresa and her dad eating the poisonous mushrooms. Changed the course of the world, those mushrooms. She squints a little, smiles as if she can read your doubt. Maybe this is the way you could stand up for Jamie, she offers evenly, and you half nod and stare at your bedspread, scared of your own budding dissension.

Okay, she nods as your stomach turns, Come on down if you change your mind.

You do — study. First you look out the window to watch Allison and Barry crossing the field, ignoring the soldiers as they head to lunch. Then you read Jamie's note three more times, searching for confessions of love between the lines. When you finally walk over to your desk you find a note from Allison: *Thanks for last night, and thank you for you. Never change. Never let anyone change you.*

And again you can't breathe, again you are gutted. What a fool you are. A selfish, stupid fool. And Allison sees only your good.

A million years later, you'll still be able to hear the first two pops. Followed by thirteen seconds of gunfire. You can still see the smoke rising from the right, the scattering and dropping of students to the left. You will think you remember seeing Allison fall in the parking lot beneath your window, you will think you remember her favorite blue sneakers on the pavement. Maybe, though, your brain will have made it up, a way to hold onto her, a way to be included.

Jamie got a medical deferment. You never, ever even kissed him.

But you're lucky to be alive, you think. You think. You don't know what you think.

Wendy Chirikos' fiction has appeared in *Portland Review*, *The Big Ugly Review* and *Taste*, and she is a past recipient of UCLA's James Kirkwood Prize in Creative Writing. She currently resides in Boulder, CO.