

*Ohio National Guardsmen kill
4 and wound 11 at Kent State
University ...
May 4, 1970*

WENDY – I – May 5

“... it is true that a wife has no rank, but she does have position created by her husband’s rank, which is respected and accepted by Army custom.”

“Mama, it’s me,” Wendy Johnson shouts into the telephone mouthpiece. “Nelson and I are at a gas station outside Ft. Knox. We’re just filling up and then we’re going to go see about finding a place to stay.”

She listens to her mother’s words of advice – “remember you’re in the white world now,” listens as she has always listened, then promises to call tomorrow and hangs up. She comes out of the phone booth and slides into the passenger side of the Mustang.

“What’d your mama say?” Nelson asks.

“The same as always. And we’re to call as often as we can.”

“She sure is a broken record, your mama.”

“She usually has good advice, advice we can’t afford to ignore.”

Nelson lifts one hand off the steering wheel and pats Wendy’s left arm. “Sweetie, it’s going to be fine. Heck, I’m an officer of the United States Army. I will be treated with respect and saluted and looked up to by the enlisted men and the rest of society.”

Wendy turns away from her husband for a moment so he can’t see her eyes. It isn’t his fault she’s from such a protected environment that she hasn’t been subjected to much racial prejudice. Now for the first time she might have to face what being a black in America really means. The thought terrifies her.

The night before they left South Carolina her papa called her into his study, the room that has always been the most comforting for Wendy, surrounded by his medical texts and medical school degrees and certificates. He sat behind his oversize mahogany desk in his red leather chair and she sat in a matching armchair facing him.

“Honey,” he said, “your mama and I have always tried to do the best for you. We’ve done some things right and I’m sure a whole lot of things wrong. And maybe some of those things we thought we did right were really wrong.”

What was he leading up to? She rubs her hands along the red leather armrests.

“We wanted you to be proud, proud of yourself and your race. And to do that we chose to protect

you as much as we could from the real world as you were growing up.”

He fiddled with papers on his desk, creating several small piles from a single large one as if laying bricks end to end, then returned his attention to her.

“Your mama and I kept as much as we could from you of the truth about the treatment of black people in America. We didn’t want you to know how bad it can be.”

He paused again and Wendy thought about her rudimentary school learning of the slaves in the South, the aftermath of Reconstruction, and the civil rights movement. It had all been pretty much book learning, because in her own black community – and then later at an all-black college in Texas – she led a rather sheltered life, not exposed to the rest of the world. This move to Ft. Knox would be her first time truly in the white world.

“When I was in the army in World War II,” her papa was saying, “it was strictly segregated units. It wasn’t until the Korean War – and that’s only 20 years ago – that there were integrated units. And I’m afraid,” he said, his speech slowing, “that the army may not have changed as much as we would like it to have.”

“Do you think Nelson will have problems?” Wendy asked, holding her breath to see how much

her papa would say now that he had started down this “truthful” path.

“It will depend on a lot of factors,” he said, “including how you both handle yourselves. You and Nelson will have to wait and see.”

Her father then stood and came around his desk to hug her. “Your mama and I wish you and Nelson all the best,” he said.

That night when she and Nelson got ready for bed, Nelson asked, “What did your papa want with you in private?”

Wendy stood with her nightgown still in her hands, her nude body outlined by the glow of the lamp behind her. She opened her mouth to tell her husband, then changed her mind. Nelson always chided her for her naiveté. And she was naive – why shouldn’t she be? As her mama once said, “Why hear bad news? It only makes you feel bad and you usually can’t do anything about it.”

In the same way Wendy hadn’t really thought about blacks in America, she had refused to think about Nelson’s army commitment. Why think of it ahead of time when she couldn’t do anything about it? And even if her father’s words had worried her, she wasn’t about to admit this to Nelson. He’d just say something like “You’re finally catching on.”

Instead she smiled and said, “He wanted to say good-bye and wish us luck.” Then she got into bed.

She knew the moment Nelson slid in beside her he’d forget the conversation, instantly immersed in his nightly exploration of the mysteries of her body. They had only been married four months.

Now here they are outside Ft. Knox, Kentucky, about to look for an apartment for themselves for the first time. They lived with her parents after their December graduation and wedding. Nelson worked in her papa’s office and she practiced cooking and keeping house with her mama while waiting for Nelson to go on active duty.

The minimal active duty information they received from the army lists a housing office. Nelson stops the car at the entrance to Ft. Knox – they are here! – and asks the soldier there for directions to the office.

“That’s an MP – a military policeman,” he explains to her as they drive onto the post.

Wendy nods, then watches out the window. Wooden buildings perch haphazardly on green lawns, trees shading the buildings. The overall effect reminds Wendy of her college campus, and she resists the impulse to twist her head around, searching for the campanile at the center of the college quadrangle.

They follow the signs to the post housing office, where Nelson introduces himself to the clerk: “I’m Lieutenant Johnson. I understand you have a list of available units.”

The clerk hands Nelson a manila envelope. “The list is inside. The ones with vacancies as of yesterday afternoon are marked,” she says. “The one over in Muldraugh north of the post – Hansen’s Apartments – is a good one. You should try there first.”

Back in the car, they study the list and the accompanying map. Then they drive to Muldraugh and pull into Hansen’s – a paved central parking lot surrounded on three sides by two-storey motel-like units. Sprinkled across the lot are a handful of cars, but no people.

The sun has already begun to fry the air, the moisture oozing onto their skin. Overgrown wild grass, edging the buildings, stands motionless. Food odors transmit signals from the closest units.

A hand-lettered OFFICE sign points to their right. Wendy fans herself with the housing list as they enter the office, where a man in a dirty t-shirt sits at a desk holding a bottle of beer.

“Hello,” Nelson says, not offering his hand. “I’m Lieutenant Johnson. This is my wife. We’ve come about the unit to rent.”

The man doesn’t stand. He just stares at them, then grins. Watching him, Wendy’s neck hairs itch.

“Sorry to say, that’s been rented. I was just about to call the housing office and tell ’em.”

Nelson says nothing. Wendy says “Thank you” as she follows Nelson out of the office.

“Damn!” Nelson says as they drive out of the parking lot.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m sure that unit’s not rented yet; he just wouldn’t rent to us.”

“Why not? He knows you’re an officer.”

Nelson turns his eyes on her, then swings his eyes back to the road. “An officer yes, but still a black man,” he says. “Hell, I don’t know if it’s going to be any different here than elsewhere. We’re still going to be treated like shit.”

Wendy stares out her side window while she wipes away the tears trapped in her eyes. “Can we go back to the housing office and complain?” she asks. “Maybe they can convince that man to let us rent from him.”

“I don’t think so. We should just try the trailer park on the list and not waste our time with the others.”

Wendy gasps. “Live in a trailer?” White trash does that back home. She isn’t going to live like they do.

And how can she tell her mama what kind of place she and Nelson rented? If her mama finds out, she and her papa might arrive on the trailer’s doorstep and demand Wendy pack up and return home with them.

“It’s our best bet. People will be more willing to rent to us if we’re not living right next to some white folk, sharing a common wall and everything. I’m

not up to taking a lot of this shit. It's only for a few weeks."

A few weeks! A few weeks of living in a tiny, dirty trailer with a little patch of gravel in front of a rickety metal doorstep? A few weeks of being totally isolated there, all alone, except when her husband comes home in the evenings! How will she ever survive?

As Wendy tries to decide what to say to Nelson, that little familiar flutter ripples through her. It's been there since the first time she laid eyes on Nelson.

She smiles to herself. She'll put up with whatever it takes to stay with her husband – she isn't going home.

"Where's the trailer park?" she asks.