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## The Life She Left Behind

By *Angie Walls*

I stand at our favorite spot under the dogwood tree. There are day-old cigarette nubs piled underneath, but none of them are hers. I keep walking around to the edge of the cliff, searching for signs that Marie was here, but there's not a single trace of her. For as long as I can remember, the sky has never been so clear. The stars are lighting up the pitch-black sky, and I can see out into the distance, where the lake houses are scattered down the southern shore. As the town sleeps, there's a deep calm that is spreading out like a blanket over the lake tonight, with not even a whisper from the wind. The world as I know it in Redmonton looks beautiful, for once. I bet she wishes she were here.

I light a clove cigarette I found from a used pack in her room, mostly just for the smell. Mom doesn't sleep anymore. She keeps asking where I go at night, afraid every time I walk out the door that I'll disappear like my sister. I still sneak out my window every night after midnight, to our secret spot, expecting to see Marie stretched out in the grass, staring into the infinite Midwestern sky. She'll turn her head and smile tenderly up at me as I walk closer, like she's been waiting for me. She'll lie close, clasping my delicate hand between both of hers, so I can feel safe again. The burn scars never quite healed, but I forget they're there when I squeeze as tight as I can. Days become months before I begin to realize she is never coming back.

It's Tuesday, nearly noon. In the front window of the decrepit bookstore, I see the big crack that covers the name Wendell's Books. I'd memorized the bus route days before, so I could sneak out between first and second period and catch the eleven o'clock. I walk around the block a few times at first, unsure if this is the place. There's no one else in the back alleyway, where, oddly enough, the front entrance is. I hold my breath as long as I can bear because it smells like rotten milk and beets. The building is ancient, the front of it crusty and peeling away, an undesirable scar in a row of antique shops and clothing boutiques, which are painted with pastel flowers by the windows. As soon as I walk in, I let out a sigh, but the air in here is no better. It's stale and humid like an attic, a place intended for all the unwanted things that people couldn't be bothered to keep. Even the bookshelves are dusty, untouched. I loop through the aisles, just star-

ing at my feet, unsure what comes next. I know I should act as if I were looking for a book, although it doesn't occur to me at first. The cashier with lumberjack hands and an untamed beard sees me. I had missed the opportunity to escape, to pretend I'd only stumbled in here by chance.

"You're Marie's little sister; I'd spot you a mile off," he says, sporting a smirk. He's mocking me. My face gets all flushed. "Yeah, figured as much."

He puts a rusty, old hardbound copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* in my hand. I feel the worn, olive-green cover scratching my fingertips. "She left this here. You should take it. Doubt she'll be coming back. Finally did it. Can't blame her." I don't hide my feelings very well. The heat rises into my cheeks, somewhere between shame and anger, for all the private things she must have shared with him. I would've remembered him if she'd ever talked about him.

"Sure don't talk much. Don't be so scared." He laughs heartedly at his own joke. He has the hands of a brute, heavy and calloused like Jimmy, only the way he's slouching over the counter, his gut hanging out and bread crumbs stuck in his thick mane, makes me pity him. Was my sister in love with him? It was too sickening to imagine Marie, a beautiful and elegant creature, in his grasp. I recognize the look in his eye that he's lost something important too.

"Hey, kid. Come on." He shakes me by the arm. I must have been standing at his counter for a while; I don't know how long.

"Do you know where she is?" I finally work up the nerve to ask. He shrugs but cannot find the right words, so he returns to the stack of books waiting by the register.

That night I have the same dream again, about the fire. Only the details are all mixed up. Jimmy, our stepdad, is half passed out in his favorite armchair, the one with brown and red stripes and the cigarette holes in the arm rest. He wakes up raging, more than usual. The bottle of cheap tequila is tight between his knees. He holds onto the neck with his right hand—he's expecting someone might steal it from him. Mom is at the back of the room, unnoticed, standing so strangely silent and unaffected. I can't seem to sort out what's real anymore. This time, Mom is the one who starts the fire, and it spreads in a circle around us, growing hotter as Jimmy pins Marie, who is helpless, to the floor.

I wake up in a cold sweat.

The house is empty while Mom is at church for a few hours praying for Marie to come home, as it is every Wednesday night. I sit on Marie's bed, putting her worn black leather jacket down around my legs for the extra

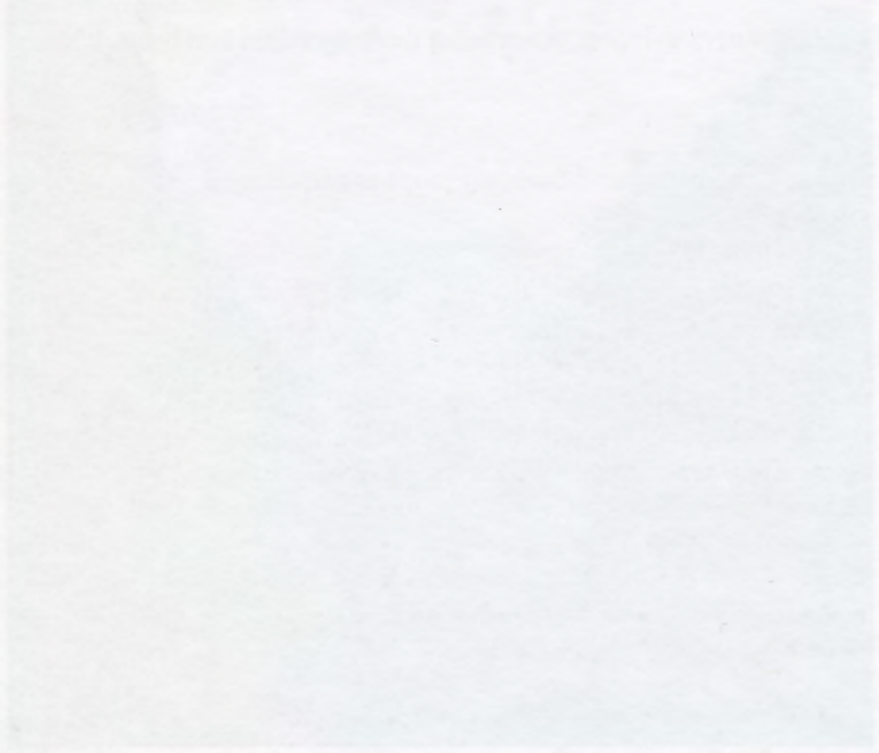
warmth. I pull out her red-and-gold jeweled box that's stashed underneath a loose floorboard, holding it with my icy-cold hands. We'd dreamed of a life far from here and from Jimmy, the summer I turned fifteen. As I grew into my own skin, being around Jimmy had the worst effect on me. His cruelty was the fire that made Marie strong, but it molded me into delicate glass. I was shrinking, almost into nothing, afraid of the things that could happen. She said we'd save our money in her box, stashed in the floor until we had enough to leave together. And leaving would be for me; she'd always remind me of that. Now the money is gone, and all that remains are the little pieces of Marie, of the life she left behind. I place the book on top, and I notice, inside the front, there's a Polaroid of a tall, thin man in a musty-yellow bowling shirt and jeans, leaning against a restored '91 Cadillac.

On Main Street I find a deli she worked at for a while. The manager, a short guy named Jeff, tells me she slept on a small mattress in the back storage room. I linger for a minute, sizing him up, wondering how all these men fit into Marie's life—the one I evidently knew nothing about. His eyes are kind, and he seems like the type of guy who would show up at Marie's door, holding a handful of daisies pulled up from Mom's box garden. Jeff smiles at me, and I imagine him with Marie, holding her hand as they run barefoot on a hot summer day. His hands are soft, and he is quiet like he's thinking of the most perfect, sweet thing to say. In the room he lets me take any of her things I want, though there isn't much. I find a golden-flowered dress, something I can't believe she ever wore. It was soft satin, too expensive and delicate to wear down the street in a town so grimy around the edges. I roll onto the ratty old mattress, falling toward the middle where her body left its mark. There's a box full of receipts, one with an address in Kansas City I don't recognize. I don't know what any of it means.

I clumsily try to piece that night together and why she left without a second thought, but nothing really fits together. I remember how the hot flames scorched my skin, the smoke clouding my eyes. I'm backed against the corner and can't find my way out, but Marie towers over Jimmy in his chair, daring him. The details are getting even more blurred together, and I wish I could ask my sister and find out who really started the fire. Marie stayed, despite everything since the day Jimmy first invaded our lives. All the times he came home stoned out of his head, throwing empty beer bottles at her back or burning his cigarette out on her arm. She stayed for me and held on a little longer. When I used to meet her by the old tree, it was clear we didn't talk as much as we used to. We sat in comfortable silence,

listening to the whispering wind and feeling grateful for this rare moment of peace we'd afforded ourselves. It was surely not to last. When I laid my head on her chest, I could feel the resilient and solid beat that reminded me that not everything is lost.

I sit on her bed, surrounded by everything I have left of her: a few of her shirts, her leather jacket, her last smokes, and her secret box. I call her old cell phone, the one with the broken antenna, for the hundredth time, even though I know she won't be there. I grip the phone tighter each time I hear her voicemail recording. Her voice is strong and unbreakable, just as I remember, and it gives me courage.



ANGIE WALLS THE LIFE SHE LEFT BEHIND