

Excerpt from short story "The Library" by Karen A. Wyle

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This story is set in the same afterlife as my novel *Wander Home*, and takes place before that novel begins.

Nobody was sure, any more, whose library it had been. Those who discovered it shared it with new friends, or with old friends newly arrived. The original owner might be the elegant lady perusing the bookshelves, or the child surrounded by precariously tall stacks of picture books, or anyone; might be looking on, inconspicuous, enjoying the delight of each new visitor.

Most came as children. The armchairs and sofas and window seats were just the right size for a child to curl up in. Of course, one need not choose the same age every time. The white-haired gentleman dozing over Dickens in a corner chair, his polished walking stick resting against the nearest bookcase, was more often seen lying on the floor with his heels in the air and his hair in his eyes, excitedly flipping the pages of an illustrated mechanical encyclopedia.

Outside might be mild summer, with the smell of sun-warmed grass carried through the windows on the breeze, along with now and then a dandelion seed or even a butterfly. Another day it would be winter, with the windows closed, snow gathering on the sills, and deep drifts of snow outside, and indoors the slightly bitter smell of the wood in the fireplace.

It was winter the day that Rachel first came, but she had not chosen the season, and barely noticed it. She came with Dana, her mother's sister. Dana had been there to greet Rachel when she awoke, or appeared, or found herself, in this strange new place. "I thought Lori -- your mother -- would come first," Dana had told her. "My poor baby. . . . Well, we'll get to know each other, this way." Rachel had been staying with Dana ever since.

Dana brought Rachel directly inside the library, to the smallest and coziest room. The room was shaped like some kind of flower, with connecting curved alcoves all the way around, lined with low wooden bookshelves in honey-warm wood. The room had a window seat and only one chair, an armchair upholstered in pale violet with large blue roses. Next to the chair stood a little wooden table.

The chair looked wonderfully comfortable – if only it had been a little larger. Dana saw Rachel's wistful expression, reached for her hand and patted it. "It's all right. Go a few years younger! Then you'll fit just fine."

Rachel shuddered. Younger and smaller meant more vulnerable.

Dana moved closer to the chair and pressed down gently on the seat, luring her with its softness. "Do you remember a time, maybe, before you were afraid?"

Rachel had taught herself not to reminisce. Memories could distract you at a dangerous moment; and sometimes they hurt, all by themselves. But she looked at the chair, clutched her elbows with her hands, and tried.

Nothing happened, at first. Dana came back toward her and gently pried Rachel's hands loose from their grip. Then she stepped behind Rachel and slowly placed her hands on Rachel's shoulders. "I'm going to give you a back rub. It might help you relax, and relaxing will help you remember. Once you start, it'll be easy – easier than it ever was before."

No one had ever probed and stretched her muscles like this. It felt wonderful. An unaccustomed smile crept across her face; she took a deep breath, and then another.

Remember.

Once, long ago, her mother had smiled, even laughed. She had noticed when Rachel wanted her, or even just that Rachel was in the room. Sometimes she had picked Rachel up and hugged her. And one special day, they had gone to a park, and Mommy had pushed Rachel on the swing --

"Wheeee!!!"

"Hold on tight, precious!"

Rachel held on tight. The wind chilled her hands, as it always did in the wintertime, but this time she didn't envy the other children with their bright fuzzy mittens. Mittens might make it harder to hold on, and she wanted to swing high, as high as she could go.

"And *up* in the air!" Mommy sounded so happy --

Rachel looked around, disoriented. She was back in the library. She was little, and the chair was big. So was Dana. Dana picked her up and hoisted her into the chair. It was just as soft and comfy as it had looked, but Rachel wanted to know what had happened.

"It's OK, honey. You just remembered a little harder than I thought you would." Dana was smiling. "You went all the way into the memory, didn't you? I hope it was nice there. You can do it again, you know -- any time you want. But for now, why don't you stay a while?"