

84 Ribbons Background Chapter

The Day Marta's World Changed

Marta loved her walk home from school, especially when she had no homework like today. That meant she didn't have to read or write again until tomorrow. She could play and dance and help her mom make dinner.

She skipped along the gravel path by the school then ran past the grocery store. Marta slowed when the sidewalk reached the stucco apartments. She liked to imagine a variety of people living beyond the stubby bushes that separated her from their pocket-sized front yards.

Further along the walk she inhaled the fragrance from the flowering cherry trees planted in the parking strips. In a few days she'd walk through a snowstorm of their pink petals; her favorite kind of storm.

Marta turned the corner and noticed two cars parked by her fence; one was a police car. Was her mom in trouble? Did the police come because Marta had crossed the street in the middle of the block yesterday? She hurried up the back steps and opened the kitchen door.

The quietness of her house surprised her. Mom usually had the radio on and greeted her with a smile and a plate of fresh-baked cookies. She tiptoed to the doorway to the living room and saw her mom sitting on the couch. Two men in uniforms and a woman sat nearby.

"Mom?"

Her mom looked up. Marta saw her red eyes and tears running down her face.

The three strangers stood.

Marta dropped her Roy Rogers lunch pail and rushed to her mom. "Why are you crying?"

"There's been an accident. Your dad fell at work."

"Where is he?"

Her mom shook her head and began crying.

The woman stepped toward Marta. "We're sorry, Marta."

"Mom?"

Mom whispered, "Your father died. He---"

"No! You're wrong," Marta screamed. "Where's my dad?"

Her mother reached out her hand. "It will be okay, Honey."

Marta felt a giant space open inside her as if a balloon expanded then collapsed. She ran through the house. "Dad? Where are you? Dad!" When she couldn't find him, rushed back to the living room. "Where's my dad?"

Her mom reached out, gesturing for Marta to come to her.

Tears streamed down Marta's face as she raced into her mother's arms. She felt her mother's arm encircle her; felt their bodies shaking against each other. She couldn't breathe.

One policeman put on his cap and opened the front door to leave. The second, a tall man, stood and moved toward the door. "We'll call you tomorrow," he said. "There's paperwork to finalize."

Marta felt her mom nod, then stand without releasing her. The men let themselves out, but the woman stayed and moved to sit in Marta's dad's chair. "I know this is hard---"

Marta pulled away from her mom and rushed toward the woman, tugging on her arm. "Get out of my dad's chair. You're in my dad's chair. Get out!"

"It's okay, Marta," her mom said.

"No! Make her get out!"

The woman stood then knelt beside Marta. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. I'll remember the next time I come."

Marta backed up and returned to her mom's outstretched arms. She pressed her face against her mom's body and cried.

"Judy is here to help us, Marta," Mom said.

Marta spoke without looking up. "I don't want to talk to her. I want my dad."

"I know and I'm sorry." Judy stood, walked to the front door and opened it. "I'll contact you after his body reaches our funeral home. We'll help you make the service arrangements."

The door closed with a soft click.

Marta felt Mom's arms tighten. They sat together on the couch slowly rocking and crying until long after the room became dark.

After Marta went to bed she heard Mom talking with someone. She got up, tiptoed to the kitchen door, and listened. Her mom sat in the kitchen crying and calling the relatives, followed by more crying.

Marta went to the kitchen closet and pulled down dad's backyard jacket; the one he wore when they pulled weeds and mowed the lawn. She put it on, returned to her room, and crawled under her covers next to her favorite teddy bear. Within minutes she fell asleep.

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The next morning after breakfast Marta's favorite aunt, Lulu, arrived from Seattle. She hugged and kissed Marta and wiped her eyes. "So, what do you want to wear to school today, Marta?"

"I'm not going to school."

"But won't it be good to be with your friends?" Lulu said.

Marta shook her head. "I need to stay home with Mom. She needs me."

Aunt Lulu smiled. "That sounds like a wonderful plan. Now, what do you want to wear today?"

Marta put on her play clothes and went to find her mom. She kept her mother in sight, only allowing her to move into the bathroom unaccompanied. Aunt Lulu took charge of phone calls, lunch, and talking with mom. All the while Marta sat in her dad's chair and rocked.

A flood of neighbors stopped in with covered dishes of food, garden flowers and cards. Everyone spoke in whispers. When the telephone rang, Lulu answered each call allowing only relatives time to speak with her mom. All the while Marta sat and rocked.

Judy returned with a folder of papers for Mom. While they filled out forms, Marta wandered in and out; listening, never speaking. Judy smiled when she saw Marta standing in the doorway. "Marta? Would you like to help write the obituary?"

"What's that?"

"That's what we tell people about your father to remind them of who he was."

Marta shrugged and disappeared outside to her playhouse in the side yard. She sat at her tiny wooden table for a long time. When she returned to the house, she handed her mother a piece of tablet paper. "I wrote this."

"Thank you, honey." Her mom read the paper aloud:

My Dad was a grate dad. He liket musik. We lis-end together.

He tole me stores at bedtime. I mis him.

Mom wiped away a tear, "This is wonderful, honey. Do you want to read this at the service?"

Marta shook her head and went back to rocking in her dad's chair.

"We need to use this," Mom said. "She doesn't like to read or write so this is special. Jonas would be proud of her efforts."

"I agree," Judy said. "Let's add it to the announcement in the newspaper as well."

That night Mom and Marta slept together, holding hands. Marta held her teddy bear and once again wore her dad's backyard jacket.

On the second morning the phone rang early. Marta hurried to listen at the kitchen doorway.

"Yes," her mom said. "No, he didn't. Um-m. Of course. Eleven will be fine."

Marta stood in the alcove watching her mom and Aunt Lulu seated at the kitchen table. Mom sat with her face on her arms; Aunt Lulu patted her back.

"What am I going to do, Lulu?"

"Something will pop up. You could get out the word that you sew. Prom is coming up; girls will need fussy dresses. What about contacting the dance studio. Maybe they need costumes made."

After a few minutes mom straightened and brushed back her hair. She disappeared then brought Dad's dark blue suit, church shirt and tie to the kitchen, took out the ironing board and plugged in the iron. While she waited for the steam to build, she ran her hand over the suit coat, stroking it like she did their cat. When she finished ironing, she hung the clothes by the front door.

Judy returned, took the clothes and left, leaving Marta to wonder where she was taking them.

The tall man from yesterday returned and sat with Marta's mom. Marta noticed wasn't a police man; he wore a Navy uniform and wore a white hat with gold braid. He handed Mom paper after paper to sign and left a folder which Mom set aside until he left. Then she sat with Lulu and began crying once again.

The relatives arrived in waves. Marta watched them hug her mom and head toward her. She backed away not wanting them to touch her; only mom could touch her today. She hurried into her mother's bedroom, crawled under the covers and buried her face in her stuffed bear to hide the sound of her crying.

"Marta?" Her mom came into the room, closed the door and sat on the bed. Her hand traced circles on Marta's back. "We can see your father today. Do you want to go?"

Marta sat up and looked up at her mother. "Is he alive?"

"No, honey, he's not. We're going to see him before he is buried."

"They're going to put him in the ground?"

"Yes"

"But he won't be able to breathe, Mom."

"He doesn't need to breathe, honey. He's gone to heaven."

"Will he be in the ground next to Kinger?"

"No, he'll be in a person cemetery. Do you want to see him?"

"Do I have to?"

"No, of course not. One of the neighbors can stay with you."

"Then I don't want to go." She buried her face against her stuffed bear and closed her eyes. The bed lifted. Marta heard her mom's slippers scuff along the wooden floor. Then the bedroom door closed and leaving Marta alone.

When the relatives returned from the viewing, Marta sat rocking in her dad's chair. They stood around the dining room table, filling their plates from the many casseroles and trays of food that had arrived yesterday and continued to arrive today. Marta heard their forks scrape against her mom's good china plates. Everyone talked and nodded and talked some more.

"He looked peaceful, don't you think?" said one aunt.

"The funeral parlor did a lovely job," said another.

"Too bad about having no insurance. What will she do? She's never worked outside her home."

"Elle must be beside herself trying to figure her next steps." The woman who spoke looked at Marta. "Raising a child alone will be difficult." The woman moved into the kitchen with her plate of food.

Marta rocked, covered her ears, and hummed to block out the conversations. How could they talk about her dad? He was gone forever and why would her mom need to work outside? She already cared for their garden. What else could they want her to do outside? As the people moved around the living room and into the kitchen Marta sat and rocked.

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The morning of the funeral Marta wore her Sunday school dress, her white patent leather shoes and her white gloves. Mom brushed Marta's hair slowly, following each brush stroke with her hand sliding down to the tips of Marta's shoulder-length hair. Marta enjoyed the rhythm of the brushing and began to sway side to side.

"Mom, where are we going?"

"To the funeral home. People are coming to hear what you wrote and what other people have to say about your dad."

"Will they tell about how he worked in the garden and how he gave me rides in the wheelbarrow?"

"Probably not." Mom finished brushing Marta's hair, added a small clip on one side, and set the brush back on her vanity."

"Good. I don't want them to talk about that."

Mom kissed her. Then they walked out to the waiting car.

The drive to the Walters Funeral Home took five minutes. Marta and her family entered the building through a back door and sat on long church pews behind a gauze-curtained opening off to one side of the funeral home. The quiet in the room continued on and on.

Marta watched the outlines of neighbors, friends, dancer's parents, teachers and strangers enter the main room and sit in long pews. Organ music covered their conversations. What did they say to each other? How did they know her dad?

When the organ music stopped the tall Navy man who'd visited her home stepped forward. "Jonas Selbryth enlisted in the Navy in 1932 and continued to serve his country by working in the shipyard until his untimely death. He distinguished himself by his courage during an explosion on a battleship under repair in the shipyard when he pulled several men to safety at great personal risk to himself. Today we honor his day-to-day life as a family man as well as his earlier heroism. Our condolences go out to his family."

Several other grown-ups spoke. Instead of listening to what they said, Marta took out the picture of dad she'd put in the pocket of her dress. It was the one of her standing next to him in the backyard last summer. He had one arm around her shoulder and held a rake with his free hand. They both smiled toward the camera.

When the organ music began again, the people filed out of the chapel. Marta slid the photo back into her pocket, walked out the back door with her relatives, and stepped into a long, black car with her mother, Aunt Lulu and a handful of other relatives.

The people who attended the funeral drove their cars behind the black car and now stood with Marta, her mom, and her relatives beside an open grave. Her father was in the wooden box just inches from her feet. Flowers covered the top of the box making the air smell spicy and the area look like a party was about to begin. But this was not a party.

More words were spoken. More tears wiped away. Then the Navy man handed Marta a handful of dirt.

She looked up. Her mother also held a handful of dirt. Marta dug her fingers into the dirt and watched as her mother dropped the dirt onto the box that had been lowered

into the ground. That's when she knew inside her bones that her dad was never coming back. She closed her eyes and released her handful of dirt.

On the drive home she sat with her nose pressed against the window. The cherry blossoms were blowing around the car and down the sidewalks. She cried. She'd missed her chance to walk in the pink petal storm.

The rest of the day blurred as wave after wave of people moved through her house talking and eating. Marta's cousins wanted to play, but she shook her head and walked away. Uncle Charles found her sitting on the bench under the grape arbor.

"Hey. How's my favorite dancer?" he said.

Marta shrugged.

"Do you want something to eat or do you want to dance or, how about a walk to the bay?"

"The bay," she said as she stood up and followed him out the back gate.

The two of them walked down Rhododendron Road kicking stones into the ditch. Neither spoke until they'd skirted the guard rail and stepped onto the rocky beach. Marta picked up a flat rock, held it like a coin and tossed it onto the water. It skipped three times.

"Hey! Where did you learn to do that, Marta?"

"Dad taught me," she said as she bent to pick up two more flat rocks.

Uncle Charles picked up two rocks and tossed them. Ker-plunk. Both rocks sunk.

"That wasn't very good, Uncle Charles." Marta handed him a flat rock and showed him how to place the rock between his thumb and index finger. On this try he skipped it twice.

"Hey! Look at that. You taught me how to skip rocks!"

Marta handed him six more flat rocks then searched for some for herself. They skipped rocks until their arms grew tired; then they began the walk home.

"Do you think my dad watched us skip rocks?"

"Maybe. I believe he'll watch over you, your mom and the rest of us forever."

"How long is that?"

Uncle Charles stopped walking and looked down at Marta. "I have no idea. I just know it is a very long time." He reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze.

When they opened the back gate Marta's cousins were playing on the sidewalk. They'd taken out all her balls and yard toys. Her playhouse door was open and her dolls were seated in a row on the threshold. The older cousins were swinging, stretching their feet out to tap the roof of her playhouse. Marta sat on the back steps and watched them play and swing.

Hannah, Marta's five year-old cousin, grabbed her hand and tugged. "Can we get out your scarves and dress-up clothes to play princess?"

"Okay. Or, you can dance in the garage."

"Dance, dance," Hannah said as she pulled Marta toward the garage.

Since the Selbryth's had no car, the garage became a dance studio a couple of years ago when her parents realized that Marta love to dance. Mom walked her to tap lessons every Wednesday afternoon and dad took her to ballet Saturday mornings.

One Saturday on the walk home she stopped in the second-hand store with Dad where he found a mirror and carried it home over his shoulder. Marta carried the can of gold paint they bought. Dad repaired the damaged corners of the mirror by backing them with tin foil patches. They painted the frame and, once it was dry, they hung it on the wall behind the garage door.

Mom let Marta rummage through her fabric bin to pick out material for a gathered curtain to cover the door window and 'create privacy'. An old rake handle, attached to the wall across from dad's work bench became her practice *barre*.

Each day she didn't have dance lessons, Marta came home from school, ate a snack and raced in her garage studio. She used scarves and sticks as wands and collected hats and shawls from the second-hand store to wear as costumes.

When dad built a hi-fi stereo several years ago, she inherited his old record player which she took into the studio. Mom bought the records for her dance routines allowing Marta to practice her dances every day.

Today Hannah wanted to dance. Marta handed her a scarf and put a record on the turntable. Then she sat down on a folding chair and listened to the music. Hannah danced and danced, twirling around and around until she was so dizzy she staggered against Marta.

"Show me your dance, Marta. I want to see your dance."

Marta shook her head. "Not today. Come on, Hannah. It's time to go outside." She turned off the record player and the garage lights and walked Hannah outside to play with the other kids. Marta went into the house to sit and rock.

* * *

One week. It had been one week since her dad died. Aunt Lulu was the last of the relatives; she left an hour ago. The quiet in the house felt unreal after so much commotion. Tomorrow, Monday, she's go back to school. There'd be no reason for her to sit and wait for her dad to step off the worker's bus. No Dad to say 'How was school, my dancing daughter?' No Dad to give her piggyback rides into the house while she carried his black metal lunch box to the kitchen.

Sure, mom fixed her meals, made snacks, sewed her costumes and pretty clothes, and tucked her in each night with a dozen kisses, but her dad rocked with her as he read the bedtime stories and he was gone, forever.

Just then, the worker's bus stopped outside their gate. Marta's chest tightened. She ran into the garage so she wouldn't see the people get off. She wandered around the garage, touching the tools spread out on Dad's work bench, turning the handle on the vise grip, watching it open and close.

She opened the coffee cans lined up at one end of the work bench and ran her fingers through the polished stones inside each can. She liked the way they slid through her fingers and landed on each other making little tapping sounds like when she hit her toe taps on the floor. She'd miss finding rocks for Dad to polish.

Suddenly, she got an idea. She rummaged through the drawer under the work bench, pushing aside old hinges, jars of tiny nails, a box of keys, a handful of carpenter pencils and bags of assorted hooks. She picked out a small leather pouch. Her dad had saved it from when he got a new lighter last Christmas. The lighter had gotten lost, but the pouch was saved. Now it was hers.

Marta poured piles of stones onto the work bench and ran her hands over them, picking up any that interested her. Within a few minutes she'd selected an opaque agate, a red stone that resembled a heart, two green rocks, a black rock with a white stripe running

through it and two round-ish yellow rocks. She placed all of them in the leather pouch, pulled the drawstring closed, and slipped the pouch into her dress pocket.

From then on, Marta kept the stones in her pocket during the daytime and by her bed each night. On occasion at recess or when she felt lonely she opened the bag to touch the smoothness of each rock; mostly she remembered how each felt without touching.