

# *The Story Jar: The Hair Ribbons*

By Deborah Bedford

## *Prologue*

September 1964

Theia Harkin hadn't gotten a wink of sleep all night. She'd tossed and turned so much that the covers had wound themselves around and around her legs until she felt like she was a sea creature in a shell.

She lay in bed and pretended she was a butterfly wrapped in a cocoon, in desperate need of breaking out.

She stared at the three-quarter moon, which beamed in through her window, and pretended she could see the man there smiling and frowning, smiling and frowning, moving his face.

Tomorrow, when the sun came up, maybe she'd be too old for pretending anymore.

When morning came, her mother shook her shoulder. "Theia." She said her name soft and melodic, like a song. "Time to wake up."

Theia sat up so fast she got dizzy. She swung her feet to the floor. She could smell bacon frying. Her mother sat beside her, wearing her red polka-dot apron and wielding a spatula, which meant pancakes.

Mother and daughter gave each other a little sideways hug

"Ready for your first day of first grade?"

Theia nodded. "Yep."

"Breakfast is almost read~ Come downstairs in ten minutes. I've made something that's just right for sending you off into the world"

Theia didn't want to get dressed too early; she didn't want to get syrup on her new clothes. Her new dress from Lesters waited on a hanger at the front of her closet. Two new Mary Jane shoes sat buckle-to-buckle on the floor beside the bureau, one white bobby sock rolled up inside each toe.

She padded barefoot down the hallway, brushed her hair in the mirror, washed her face, and donned her pink quilted robe. Downstairs, after she slid into her place at the kitchen table, her mother set before her a feast of bacon, a tower of pancakes, and a glass of orange juice as tall and beaming as the sun.

Her mother switched on the AM radio beside the sink as she washed up the dishes. Petula Clark came on singing "Downtown!" Theia giggled as her mother sang right along beside Petula, spreading sudsy circles in rhythm with a sponge. Once the song had ended, the disc jockey announced, "Played that on purpose this morning for all you kids out there who are getting up and getting ready! Morns, rest assured that the buses are running on schedule. And remember, kids, you can always tell your parents that you are sick and climb light back in bed. "

The bad feeling started right then in the pit of Theia's belly. She couldn't eat anymore. She swigged some of the orange juice, then carried the plate, with most of the bacon and pancakes still on it, to the counter

"You didn't eat very much."

"I'm not hungry."

"You'd better go get ready. Bus will be here in twenty minutes."

Theia padded to the bathroom, stood on the toilet beside her father, and brushed her teeth. She loved looking at their faces together in the mirror.

"Better hurry up," her daddy said, giving Theia a love pat on the small of her back "Bus will be here in fifteen minutes."

She pulled on her socks and carefully turned the tops down, buckled her shoes, and checked her reflection again. She decided to braid her hair; it made her look more grown up. Her mother handed her a brown paper sack, and she peeked inside. It contained a cheese sandwich, an apple, a package of chocolate Hostess cupcakes, and milk money

"Thanks, Mama."

"Can you see the road? Is the bus here yet?"

"Nope. Not yet.. "You got everything in your satchel?"

You've got your new ruler and your scissors? The paste? The box of crayons?"

"I've got everything."

"Well, that's it then. Nothing to do but wait."

The awful feeling grew bigger and bigger in the pit of Theia's stomach. She felt like something was growling down there, whispering frightening things. *What if I have to sit by Larry Wells? What if I get on the wrong bus coming home? What if my new teacher doesn't like me?* Finally, she admitted the truth out loud.

"Mama, I'm scared."

"You are?"

"Yes."

Her mother winked at her as if she knew the answer to some secret. "I'll tell you what.. Mama went to pull her sewing box from behind the old tattered easy chair. She flipped open the cover, rummaged through pin cushions and an assortment of thimbles and a jumble of threads. "Ah, here it is!" She pulled out a curl of blue, satin ribbon. Next came a pair of pinking shears, and Mama snipped off two perfectly matching lengths.

Theia wrinkled her nose. "What's that?"

"You just wait and see. Come here."

Theia stepped dutifully across the room and stood still while Mama tied a ribbon on first one braid, and then the other.

Mama straightened each bow with a flourish. "From now on, these are your magic hair ribbons. Whenever you feel afraid of something, we'll tie them into your hair. Every time you've got these on, let them remind you that I am praying for you. That my heart is right beside you. That God is right beside you. And when God's right beside you, you never have to worry about a thing."

"Look, Mama! Here comes the bus. I gotta go."

"Okay. You go. Have a good day Be careful crossing the street!"

"I will. I promise."

"Love you!"

Theia climbed on the bus, and she didn't have to sit by Larry Wells. She got a seat beside Barbie Middlebrook and Cindy Peterson instead. The whole time, they compared tissue boxes and names of crayon colors and how the handles on left-handed scissors were different from the handles on right-handed scissors.

When the bus driver let them off at Colter Elementary, Theia heard a car honk. She turned around. There was Mama's beige Chevrolet Impala. She'd followed the bus all the way to school.

Theia waved.

Mama waved back.

Theia walked through the glass front doors of Colter School thinking she'd never have to be afraid of anything again.