

Maria's Beads

by Charles Markee

Third Place

Chapter 1 – The Gift

Verónica pushes through the other eighth grade kids in our breezeway, speaking over the noise, “María! What’s wrong with Hannah?”

What does *she* want? Like she suddenly cares about Hannah, cares that the nurse sent her home, cares that her eyes were glassy, her face swollen and her whole body sagged. I told Hannah to stay home, but she wouldn’t listen.

I jam my history book for homework into my pack and glare up at Verónica, my back against the lockers. “I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“She looks really bad!” Verónica says it like it’s my fault and I wince.

I turn to lock my locker, hoping she’ll go away. She hangs with girls that gossip about us. She’s probably gathering stuff about Hannah to impress them.

“Like . . . you’re Hannah’s friend, right?” Verónica says with her irritating voice. “Why don’t you text her?”

More like sisters than friends. She’s lived next door since we were five, but I just say, “She *is* my friend and she doesn’t have a cell phone,” hoping she gets the hint to leave me alone. She doesn’t.

“She looked bad all week.”

I don't need Verónica to tell me that. Hannah's at my house every afternoon, doing homework. I know how ill she's been. She could hardly stay awake, let alone concentrate.

When Verónica still doesn't leave, I say, "Why do *you* care? Maybe Hannah doesn't like your friends bugging her."

She frowns. "Hannah helped me with my homework a couple of times."

I don't believe her. Hannah would have told me about it. Besides, she didn't come over to talk to me when I was sitting alone at lunch, so why is she sticking her nose in now. "It's probably just the flu," I say.

"Maybe." Verónica brushes a hand through her hair. "You like my new bracelet?" she says, like any thought of Hannah is gone and all that matters are the shiny black beads on her wrist that match her hair.

"No!" I answer, as she walks away with a smug toss of her head. I wish I had a bracelet more beautiful than hers.

It's a sunny afternoon and my street is busy with kids out of school, preschoolers on trikes riding around old people sitting on chairs in driveways and a few moms pushing babies in strollers decorated with bright plastic toys.

I stop in front of Hannah's house. Like ours, their front door is one step up and two steps from the sidewalk. Their car is gone and the shades are all pulled down, like they don't want visitors. I hesitate. Her father, Mr. Van Dyke, is strange and scares me. He's a minister, but not the kind with a church. I decide to knock anyway. When no one comes, I knock again and Hannah opens the door a crack. I think she must be better, but

then she says, “Hi, María,” in a voice so soft it’s hard to hear and I know she feels terrible.

Her light blue eyes are only slightly darker than the faded flower pattern on her pajamas. As the only white, blonde-haired girl in our Latino neighborhood she stands out, and now, her pasty skin makes her look even more like a bleached doll.

“How do you feel?”

“Bad.”

“Your face is swollen. What’s wrong?”

“I dunno. Mom told me I have to rest.” Her voice is weak.

“Can I come in?”

“I don’t feel so good, maybe tomorrow.”

“I hope so.”

“I have to lie down before Mom comes home from the store.”

“Oh.” There’s a click and I stare at the door that just shut. A bad feeling hangs over me, like a dark cloud full of rain.

As I walk through the vegetable garden in our side yard, Nana leans out of an open kitchen window. She does food prep for the cook in the local *taqueria* during weekdays, but is always here when I get home from school. “*Buenas tardes, María. Tráeme tres tomates y un chile verde para la salsa, por favor.*”

“*Sí, Nana.*” If she wants me to pick vegetables, her knees must be hurting. I set my backpack on the back step and slide between the rows of plants. I usually enjoy the smell of fresh dirt, but today I’m more worried about Hannah. I sniff the purple flowers

like little trumpets that twist up the fence, then the roses that climb the trellis on the side of the house. The petals are pinkish-red, kind of flat and gentle. They're not like the three thorny bush roses that stand guard at the front of the vegetable garden with big proud blossoms that look like magazine pictures. Their scent is delicate and beautiful.

I pick three bright-red tomatoes, breathing in their rich fruit smell that reminds me of family dinners. Next I get a chili. Two fat gray birds swoop to the roof and skitter across the patches and torn shingles that Papá never has time to fix. The bird feet make a ticking sound like rain on a tin shed. Our outside walls were once white, but the paint's chipped and faded like most of the houses on our street. I watch the birds and wonder why Verónica asked me about Hannah.

Nana yells out the window, "*¡María! ¿Dónde estás?*"

"Coming." Yes, her knees hurt and she's grouchy. I scoop up my backpack, trying not to squash the tomatoes and open the screen door. Inside, Nana stands with her back to me, filling a large pot under the faucet. Her hair is silvery against her skin, like a bright moon against a dark sky.

She rolls up the sleeves of a man's khaki shirt and lifts the heavy pot of water onto the stove. Her shirt and pants are left over from the time she worked in the fields like Mamá and Papá.

Nana turns her head. "*¡Caramba! ¿Dónde has estado?* Where have you been?"

“I was only a minute and I was thinking about Hannah. She went home today, really sick.”

“*Sí* . . . you should pray for her. She has been sick too long.”

I take my backpack to the front room, thinking about Verónica and her friends. I don't know why she was suddenly interested in Hannah, and I hate the way she showed off her bracelet. I'm not supposed to say, “*puta*,” because it means prostitute. But in the bathroom with the door closed, Nana can't hear me. I make a face in the mirror, pretend it's Verónica, and say, “*¡puta—puta—puta!*”

Hannah and I would stop every Friday after school at the Taqueria where Nana works and the owners would give us free *churros*. This Friday I'm walking home alone, and I don't want to explain Hannah's absence, so no *churros*.

A truck bringing *campesinos* home from the Salinas farms rattles by. Chilled fall air leaks through my sweater; I shiver and fold my arms. That bad cloud hangs in my mind.

Ahead at the corner of Hebborn Street, two older boys stand with their hands in baggy pockets next to a little old woman, leaning on a cane, waiting to cross. She's dressed all in black with a shawl over her head. I hang back so the boys can't tease me.

When the light turns green, they slouch across, but the woman waits, shifting her purple bag with a bead picture of a deer to the other shoulder.

When I reach her, I ask if I can help, “*¿Puedo ayudarle en algo?*”

She greets me with her eyes like she knows me. “*¡Ay, aquí estás! Te estaba esperando.*”

How could she be waiting for me? Maybe she has Alzheimer’s and is confused.

I’m sure I’ve never seen her before. She has high cheekbones like Mamá, but her skin is a darker brown and her neck has lots of wrinkles. I say, “Do you know me?”

“*Los espíritus te conocen.*”

The Spirits know me? Her dark eyes pierce mine like she is looking straight inside me and the back of my neck tingles like ants are walking there. I get a cold feeling in my stomach because as weird as this is, she doesn’t seem crazy. I want to ask her what’s she talking about, but the light turns green. She slips her arm in mine. “*Vamos.*”

We slowly cross Hebbbron. On the corner, she reaches in her bag, pulls out a small cloth pouch and presses it into my hand. “*Hazte cargo de esto.*”

Before I can ask why I’m supposed to take care of it, she lets go of my arm. “*Ve con Dios.*”

The pouch is warm like it has been in an oven, and I suddenly feel comfortable. My dark cloud is gone!

I pull the pouch open. Inside, blue-green beads seem to glow. It must be the sunlight doing it. “Wow! Are these really for me?” I ask, but she’s gone.

At Hannah's house the shades are still drawn. I knock and wait, but no one comes. The Van Dykes' old dented car sits in the driveway, so someone must be home, although I can't hear anyone inside. I'm not surprised. Hannah's family is different—sometimes they just won't answer. I'm just about to knock again when Mrs. Van Dyke opens the door. Holding her bible, she pulls a ribbon across the page to hold her place. "Hello, María."

"Hello, Mrs. Van Dyke. I have homework for Hannah."

"Thank you for bringing it. Why don't you take it to her and visit quickly. Then she must rest."

She's always nicer when Mr. Van Dyke is not here. Hannah lies on their old brown sofa in the front room. Her house is made just like ours, but with the shades drawn, the room is dark and dull. A clock and a small lamp with a crooked pink shade sit on the only table, and there is only one chair. No TV. With the shades drawn, the room is dim.

"Hi. How do you feel?"

"Still sick."

In fact she looks worse. Her face is pale and puffy like white dough. I kneel on the floor next to her. As soon as Mrs. Van Dyke leaves the room, I open the pouch so Hannah can see inside. "Can you believe this? An old lady gave me these beads."

"What old lady?" Her voice is a whisper.

"I never saw her before and she just gave these to me as a gift. They're perfect to make the kind of bracelet I just wished for."

“They’re unusual and really pretty.” She picks a bead out, fingers it and closes her palms around it. She peeks into the darkened space. “Look! They make their own light!”

“What?” I grab another bead and cup my hand around it. “You’re right! It glows and the light changes like it’s going off and on. And they’re warm to the touch.” I say, rolling it across my cheek.

“Do you have to give them back?”

“I don’t think so. She asked me to take care of them.”

Hannah cocks her head to one side, holding the bead up. “Funny. I don’t feel so tired.”

“Maybe it’s just because we’re talking and you’re excited.”

“No. I definitely feel better inside.” She frowns. “But that can’t be true, can it?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

Hannah rolls the bead around in her palm. “I wish I could have it.”

“Keep it.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t.” She looks past me to where her mother went and puts the bead back in the pouch.

“It’s only a bead,” I say, but Hannah won’t take it. Her parents don’t allow jewelry. “Have you seen a doctor?”

She shakes her head again.

I just finish telling her I saw Sebastián, the boy I like, when Mrs. Van Dyke comes in. “Hannah must rest now.”

It’s almost dinnertime and Mamá and Papá are not home yet. They work every day they can, including Saturdays and Sundays, at the huge farm sheds where they pack-

age lettuce for supermarkets. Once, even though it was totally unlikely, I asked for a smart phone and Mamá gave me her hard staring look. “You know better than that, *m’ijita*. We work every day so we can buy enough food, let alone a smart phone. You have a perfectly good cell phone!”

Mamá and Papá hope to have their own house someday. This tiny two-bedroom house belongs to Nana. The houses on our street are like Nana’s, a few fixed up and painted, but most run down. When I graduate from college, I won’t live here.

After I finish my homework, I open the pouch on the floor next to our faded blue sofa in the front room, where I sleep. The beads are still warm. I roll one around in my hand. It isn’t exactly round, and it glows a beautiful blue-green color that sparkles.

When I empty the pouch into my hand, all the beads flash, like tiny fireworks and they stay warm. I decide to keep these beads as my secret. Mamá, Papá and Nana would want to know where they came from, and if I told them they would say I should not have accepted them and now I should give them back. Besides, the spirit lady told me to take care of them. I count twenty beads back into the pouch, pull the drawstring closed and hide it under the front room sofa cushions. “Nana?” I call as I walk into the kitchen.

She stands at the sink counter, chopping peppers, tomatoes, and chilies, so she doesn’t turn around. “*¿Qué pasó, m’ijita?*”

“Did you have beads when you were a girl?”

“Yes, made of clay.”

“Did anybody have pretty ones?”

“There was a man who sewed pictures using hundreds of beautiful beads, but that was a long time ago.”

Before I can ask about the pictures, she glances over her shoulder. “I thought you had homework.”

“I finished it.”

With a grimace she turns, leaning on the counter. “Since you’ve finished, you can set the table for dinner. Your Mamá and Papá will be home soon. My bones hurt today. I’m going to lie down.”

As I take dinner plates from their shelf, I see the lights from the beads in my mind. I think about Verónica showing off her bracelet. Wait until she sees the really cool bracelet I make with these beads! But I need to put it together when nobody can see me. Mamá and Papá will be home soon and Saturday morning I shop for Nana. I close my eyes and imagine the beads as a bracelet, sparkling with that strange light, and I know that it will be the most beautiful bracelet in our whole school, and a lot better than Verónica’s.