

MARÍA'S BEADS

by Charles Markee

Chapter 1 – Gift

Something's wrong, like when you hear the phone ring and you know it's going to be bad news. It's Thursday after school and I feel that way now, a bad feeling. My best friend Diane must have felt it, too, because her eyes looked funny in class today, kind of haunted. And she left early.

It's almost four o'clock and I'm walking home along East Alisal Street, next to four lanes filled with cars, all in a hurry, like they're pushing each other. A truck bringing *campesinos* home from the farming fields passes me.

I feel the boom-boom of loud rap and I know that it's boys in a car with a big stereo. If Diane were here she'd whisper, "Don't look." The sound passes by me and moves down the street as the warming sun slides behind a cloud. A bite of chill fall air sneaks through my sweater, a reminder we are only a few miles from California's coastal fog. I shiver and fold my arms in defense. At the corner of Hebbbron Street ahead, I see two boys standing with their hands in baggy pockets and a little old woman waiting to cross. The boys don't see me, so I slow down until the light turns green and they slouch across, but the woman doesn't move. She's dressed in black with a black shawl over her head, carrying a purple shoulder bag with a bead decoration, and she's leaning on a cane.

Next to her, I say, "*¿Puedo ayudarle en algo?* Can I help you?"

She looks at me, “*¡Ay, aquí estás! Te estaba esperando.* Here you are! I have been waiting for you.”

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

“*Los espíritus te conocen.* The spirits know you.”

Her dark eyes pierce mine like she is looking straight inside me and the back of my neck tingles like ants are walking there. It’s totally weird and a little scary. I get a cold feeling in my stomach. What’s she talking about and who’re these spirits who know me? I want to ask her, but when the light turns green again, she slips her arm in mine and says, “*Vamos.*”

We slowly cross Hebbbron toward the parking lot on the corner where she reaches in her bag, pulls out a small cloth pouch, presses it into my hand and says, “*Hazte cargo de esto.* Keep these in your care.” Then she lets go of my arm and says, “*Ve con Dios.* Go with God.”

The pouch feels warm like it has been in an oven, and for no reason, I feel like something good has happened. As she walks away, I pull it open. The beads inside glow like tiny lights. “Wow!” I look around, but no one heard me. These are cool, but why did she give them to me? I put the pouch in my pocket and watch her walk slowly down East Alisal before I turn and go a half block up Hebbbron to my house. Talking to her made me feel strange, but comfortable as soon as she gave me the beads. Maybe I’ll ask Diane about the spirits. Her family is very, very religious.

Diane Van Dyke lives next door and we usually walk home together. Today, I was sure she'd be waiting for me outside her house, but she isn't there. Why not, I wonder? The shades are all pulled down, but I decide to try anyway. They have no bell, so I knock. When no one comes, I knock again and Diane opens the door a crack.

Her eyes are pale blue and only slightly darker than the faded blue flower pattern on her pajamas. She's taller and thinner than I am, but the biggest difference between us is color. She has straight blonde hair that falls around her oval face with blonde eyebrows, blonde lashes and very white skin. It all makes her look like a china doll, like she could break, especially today.

"Hi, María," she says in a voice so soft it's hard to hear.

"Your face looks funny, like swollen. What are you sick of?"

"I dunno. Mom left, but she told me I have to sleep, so you can't come in." Her voice is weak and her eyes are glassy.

I open the pouch and hand it to Diane. "An old lady gave me these beads today."

"Geez." She says. They're really pretty and they kinda glow." Then, she frowns. "Funny. Holding the beads, I don't feel so tired."

"Really?"

"Yeah." She gives them back to me and says, "Sorry, María. I have to lie down before Mom comes home. Maybe I'll feel better tomorrow."

She closes the door and I close my eyes and wish for her to get better.

Entering our side yard, Nana sees me walking through our garden from an open kitchen window and says, "*Buenas tardes, María. Tráeme tres tomates y un chile verde*

para la salsa, por favor.” Nana likes to use fresh vegetables every day, but sometimes her arthritis keeps her from going to the garden.

“*Sí*, Nana . . . three tomatoes and a chile for salsa.” I set my backpack on the back step and slide along between rows of plants. I like being in the garden. The fresh dirt has a loamy smell and Nana has vines on the fence that blossom with a purple flower like a little trumpet. She also has roses that climb up a 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 at the front of the vegetable garden like guards with big proud blossoms that look like magazine pictures.

I pick three bright-red tomatoes, breathing in their rich fruit smell. Next I get a chile. Looking up, I see two fat gray birds swoop to the roof and skitter across the patches and torn shingles, making a ticking sound like rain on a tin roof. Our outside walls were painted white, but the paint’s chipped and faded and no one has time to repaint.

Mamá and Papá work every day they can at the huge farm sheds where they package lettuce for supermarkets. Nana is in charge of me while they work. While I’m in school, she walks to visit friends in our neighborhood and goes to a free yoga class at the senior center on Wednesdays. We all live in this tiny two-bedroom house that belongs to Nana. I know there’s very little money because when I asked for a cell phone, Mamá gave me that hard staring look and said, “*¿Seguramente, como si estuviera atando los perros con longaniza?* You think money grows on trees? We are working every day so we can buy enough food to feed ourselves. We have a perfectly good telephone in our house! I don’t want to hear about cell phones!” That’s when I decided I’d never work on

a farm. But Papá learned about me asking and the next day brought me a Go Phone to use for emergencies.

A gust of wind folds through the clothes on our backyard clothesline, making one black slip flutter. It reminds me of the old woman who said there were spirits who knew me. I've never seen this spirit lady before, and I wonder where she lives.

Nana yells out the window and breaks my daydream, “*¡María! ¿Dónde estás?* Where are you?”

“Coming.” I leave my backpack on the back step and open the screen door. Inside, Nana is standing by the sink holding a large pot under the faucet. She is only a little taller than I am. Her gray-white hair is pulled back and tied with a piece of aqua-blue ribbon. Her hair makes her skin look dark, like the bright full moon in a black sky. She wears old khaki work pants and a man's shirt that's too big, probably left over from the time she worked in the fields like Mamá and Papá.

Nana turns her head and says, “*¡Caramba! ¿Dónde has estado?* Where have you been?”

“Ahhh ... I was thinking about my homework.”

“Well ... *bueno*. And since you have been thinking about your homework, you should begin doing it while I make the salsa.”

I get my backpack and set it down on the floor next to our faded blue sofa. But instead of doing my homework, I take the pouch out to look at the beads. It's still warm. I roll a bead around in my hand. It isn't exactly round, but it glows a beautiful blue-green color that sparkles and changes shade as I roll it.

I stare at the bead and wonder why I have a feeling of being safe. When I empty the pouch into my hand, all the beads flash, like tiny Fourth of July fireworks. I've never seen beads like these. And how do they stay warm all by themselves? I decide to keep them a secret because 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, these beads are special and the spirit lady told me to take care of them. I count twenty beads back into the pouch, pull the drawstring closed, shove it in my pocket and walk into the kitchen, "Nana?"

She is standing at the sink counter, busy chopping the peppers, tomatoes, and chiles, so she doesn't turn around, but she answers, "*¿Qué pasó, m'ijita?*"

"Did you have beads when you were a girl?"

"Yes, but they were made of clay, María. We were very poor in Mexico."

"You never saw any pretty ones?"

"Well, yes, there was a man who had beautiful bead pictures, but that was a long time ago. I thought you were doing homework."

"Ahhh ... I was just about to start it."

"Since you're here, you can set the table for dinner."

I go to the shelf with dinner plates, but I'm not thinking about dinner. I keep seeing images of the lights from the beads. And there's something familiar about pictures made with beads, but I can't remember what it is. After dinner, I hide the pouch under the sofa cushions where I sleep.

The next day, Friday, Diane is not waiting for me outside her house to walk to school. She must still be sick, so I don't knock and I walk to school alone. My funny bad feeling is still hanging around, like a dark cloud that might rain. It makes me jittery. We're like sisters, and it makes me nervous when I don't know what's happening with her. Diane and I do everything together. It feels strange being in school without her, lonely because I don't have other friends.

I leave my last class for the day and walk down the hall to my locker where I switch books so I have the ones I need for homework. John Steinbeck is kind of a local hero because he's a famous author, so in seventh grade we're reading his book, *The Red Pony*. I push it in my backpack with my other books. When I stand up, Verónica from my class is leaning against the lockers watching me. I stare back, "Like ... what?"

She brushes one hand through her hair, and I notice the bronze-colored beads in her bracelet that match both her hair and the flower designs on her gold colored sweater. She is holding two books in her other hand, and she's got an identical bracelet on that wrist. She says, "Where's Diane?"

I close my locker, trying to ignore her. "I dunno."

"But, what's wrong with her?"

I look up because she's taller, and I'm only a little over five feet. "What do you mean?"

"Like . . . you're her friend, right?"

Her cold voice makes my brain hurt, but I say, "Yeah."

"She looked bad all week. And she's absent today. She was really nice to me and helped me with my homework, twice. I'd be worried about her, if I were you."

I feel like she's intruding, but I say, "Probably the flu."

"Maybe," she says, walking away with a smug toss of her head.

Verónica is a pain! And I hate the way she shows off. I have a couple of cheap old bracelets that I won't wear, while the other girls in 7th grade—Josie, Teresa, Lupe, Rafaela, Rosa, Verónica and Juanita—all have at least one expensive bracelet. Friends trade them or buy identical ones that match. Some are strung on a tiny silver chain and I know that some of the girls have several and wear them to match their clothes. And everybody since the sixth grade knows that beautiful bracelets are super cool, especially if they match your clothes.

I imagine how a new expensive bead bracelet would look on my wrist next to my brown skin. It would be perfect! Sometimes at home, I like to look in the mirror and pretend that I have them on both wrists. Then I twist my wrists to feel them move. I turn both ways, slowly and casually, looking at my arms just like Stephen would look at them. Stephen is cool. He's in the eighth grade, and plays on the basketball team. He's smart too. I pretend he looks at me and says, "Hey! Those bracelets are cool. They look good on you!" Then we start hanging out, and he gives me his ring so we're together, and like the other girls with boyfriends, I wear his ring on my bracelet like a charm.

My daydream pops away as I walk down the front steps of El Sausal Middle Grade School. Why am I the only one without a really nice bracelet? Maybe I shouldn't care so much, but I do. Then I remember the beads! They would make a cool bracelet! But I need to make it when nobody can see me, and tonight I have homework and Saturday morning I shop for Nana. Then I close my eyes and imagine the beads as a

bracelet, and I know that it will be the most beautiful bracelet in our whole school, and a lot better than Verónica's. I smile to myself because I know how jealous she'll be.

I wonder why Verónica asked about Diane. I'd better check on her. At her house, I knock on the front door and wait. No one comes. The shades are still all drawn and I can't hear anyone inside. It's happened before. Diane's family is funny about stuff ... sometimes they just won't answer the door.

At home, Nana is in the kitchen rattling pots, so I go in the bathroom and close the door. Verónica is the worst show off in school. Nana calls those people "*putas*." I'm not supposed to say it, because it means "prostitute." But no one can hear me in here, so I make a face in the mirror, pretend it's Verónica, and say, "*¡puta...puta...puta!*"

Nana interrupts me from the kitchen. "*¡María! Ven y ayúdame*. Come and help me." In the kitchen, steam rises from the pot of green chile stew, filling the kitchen with the sweet smell of vegetables. Nana points her chopping knife at our garden outside. "*Necesito papas*. Cut up six potatoes for tonight's green chile stew."

After peeling and cutting the potatoes, I stare at them, wondering about Diane and why she wasn't in school. She must be really sick. I can't phone her because her parents are very strict and only use the phone for emergencies. And they don't like me coming at dinnertime, so I have to wait until tomorrow.

"*¿Pasa algo malo, m'ijita?* Is something wrong?"

"No, just thinking."

"Well, don't just stand there in a trance, María. Put the potatoes in the stew and then go do your homework. I'll call you for dinner after your Mamá and Papá get home."

On the front room sofa that's also my bed, I sit staring out the front window at the growing dimness. Nana's right. I'm in a trance thinking about Diane, my strange bad feelings, and the spirit lady.

The beam from headlights parking in front of Diane's house blinds me. I squint against the glare. Car doors slam as half a dozen people get out of two cars and walk up to Diane's front door. They never have visitors. What's going on?