**Tears and Laughter in the Desert**

I crossed the border at Santa Teresa to the west of Ciudad Juárez, the car loaded with candy for the mental patients at Vision in Action, beans and rice for Elvira and her grandchildren, Hector and Yeira, and used clothing to give to the Mixteca Indians who gather on the Mexican side and try to make a living selling snacks, plastic horses and other toys, crosses with Jesus on them and statuettes of the Virgen of Guadalupe.

I park between the border fence and the Mexican customs line, place the clothing in the sand and step back as the Mixtecas rush for it. They migrated north from Oaxaca together and they all live near each other but when it comes to sharing the clothing, it’s a free-for-all. But survival here is an ongoing struggle.

Then I accelerate south down the narrow two-lane road, desert on both sides. Mesquite bushes, old tires, a burned-out car, in the distance a man on a horse. My heart lifts; I feel lucky to be here. It’s a sense that no matter how well prepared you are, something unexpected will happen. Juárez may be one of the world’s most dangerous cities but when my wife, Julie died, fear died too, leaving expectation, excitement.

First, I go to the new home of Elvira , Hector and Yeira, the green cinder block home that was built with funds donated by friends in Julie’s memory, the home that I hope will give them a foundation for a decent life.

After they moved in, I said that I was going to put a plaque in the house with a photo of Julie and an inscription. Instead, they insisted on a shrine or “capilla” that would be located outside their home where the neighbors could pay tribute to it. This seemed completely out of character for Julie and me, two life -long non-churchgoers but maybe it would have a calming influence on a neighborhood full of drug cartel members, including Elvira’s young neighbor “El Bohemio”.

Four of us spoke at the dedication – Pastor Galván, the founder of Vision in Action, the mental asylum I would visit next, two friends from Juárez and me. I was shaking, my notes rattling in my hand.

Then Hector and Yeira led matachine dances in the dirt street in front of the house. As a wiry man pounded relentlessly on a drum, they danced back and forth; I realized that this was their way of paying tribute to someone whose death, in a way, brought new life to them.

Finally it was over, the weeks of repeated trips to Juárez to meet with Oscar and Ángel, the builders of the house and shrine; the meetings out in the desert with me handing them cash; selecting an excerpt from a Federico García Lorca poem for the plaque. I found it in a book of his poetry that Julie had given me in 1966 when we made our first trip to Spain. I would continue bringing the beans and rice and a little cash on my monthly trips but the next steps were up to Hector and Yeira.

I then drove to the asylum for the wedding of two patients. Benito Torres was the groom, a powerful man who for years had suffered from bi-polar outbreaks so severe that the other patients would have to force him into a cell and keep him locked up until he calmed down. Then Galván put him in charge of the animals – chickens, pigs and goats – and the outbursts stopped. “Chicken therapy,” I called it.

 His bride, Viridiana or “Viri,” also a patient, was all smiles and excitement but Benito waited solemnly with a sheen of sweat on his upper lip. She was the optimist, the one who would make this work.

Guests came from Juárez, mostly family members. Then a pickup appeared, its radiator boiling over from the strain of pulling a horse trailer with two horses for Benito and Viri to ride to the ceremony and two ponies for kids to ride.

Did I expect to see a wedding like many other weddings I’ve seen? There was the bridal gowns blowing in the wind, the men looking sharp with cowboy hats, boots and bolo ties, a huge cake, a ceremony led by Pastor Galván, the exchange of rings, music and food, little kids laughing and playing, the pony rides. To what extent does treating mental patients like they are normal actually make them more normal?

My tears came again but then laughter. Elvira, Hector and Yeira would no longer have to live in a hovel made of cardboard and chunks of plywood. Benito and Viri would watch over each other. I would make my way home.