

Dancing with *El Diablo*

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A good friend of mine was doing her doctoral research in the middle of nowhere in the Mexican desert, and she invited me down for a visit. I couldn't say no, because I love the desert and wanted to see where her work on the conservation of conversation was being done... The annual festival to help bring the reserve and local community together was coming up.

On the road down, I got the first warnings. "*Oh, by the way. Be careful what you say to the guitar player, he has a very bad temper... and he is quick with a knife.*" A little later, talk turned to the town and the challenge of getting supplies here in the heart of the desert. She casually mentioned that she had barely avoided a shootout between the *Federales* and *narcos*. And that after two *Federales* were killed they were left in the streets for more than two weeks... That's ok, I wasn't planning on going to town anyway.

The fiesta began with horse races in the afternoon, beer, talk. A beautiful day with groups of ranchers and reserve scientists and workers laughing, talking, catching up on life around dusty pickups. Horse races started far off in the desert and each hoof strike raised a small cloud of dust as the "jockeys" as they approached. What a great way to bring the community into the reserve.

The evening feast was modest, with simple foods and beer; but as night fell and the stars came out the feeling of community grew. Finally *el guitarrista* emerged from the shadows and started to sing. His strong clear tone complemented his playing perfectly during a very long *corrida* about the reserve. The ant person... the lizard people, people who crawled on their bellies, researchers stuck in the mesquite thorns, a few stuck up scientists... and more than a few researchers stuck in the mud. The fire blazed, a few bottles of tequila worked their way around the crowd, now 40-50 people.

Then *El Diablo* arrived, with flashing lights on a monster pickup, radio blaring, and the smell of sulfur. The local *narco* boss and his bodyguard got out, drunk, armed and ready to play. *El Diablo* swaggered over to the fire, gold teeth and pistol gleaming in the firelight. Loathed by everyone, the women showed courage as one by one they declined his offer to dance. *El Diablo* grew increasingly angry, *Why won't you dance with me?* and tempers were rising. The potential for mayhem was palpable, and here and there ranchers were reaching into their pickups for their rifles just in case.

Then *El Diablo* spotted me. I stood out, despite my best attempt to melt into the crowd and shrink into the ground. He glared at me and asked, "*Will you dance with me?*" I froze, then in crisis mode my brain found the Spanish to weakly reply, "*Excuse me, but my wife would not permit it.*" He paused, fingering his pistol and swigging more tequila. Would it turn into my last dance, a general shootout, or worse. With a snort and curse he rounded up his body guard, got back into his truck, revved the engine, and tore off into the night.

Knees quaking, *por favor!* another drink!