First Communion

By Gloria Marthai

As seen from the high, curving highway, the village seems a quaint, appealing place where women launder in the lake and kids splash and skip stones. Mosaic fields are orderly. Changing crop colors and textures please the eye.

But seen from within, the view is dim. It is a poor farming community with broken down cobbled streets so rutted that even Coca Cola trucks barely make it. The gray cement-block building that serves as a church has neither resident priest nor belfry. The bell that calls the faithful and tolls the dead hangs from a tree laced with red bougainvillea vines.

But today the village seems like heaven to two young girls, and for good reason. Lolita, 9, and Rosita, 10, finally will make their first communion. Their brothers, working in the States, have kept their promise to send money.

Giggles, laughter and chatter rock the adobe home today as the girls, with rolled up hair, take turns bathing in a galvanized tub. Ranchero music filters in from down the street and makes one

want to dance. Lacy finery fit for princesses is laid out neatly in the bedroom. Three tiny tots in tattered dresses sit in mute awe on one of the rough beds, mesmerized by all that's going on.

Lolita and Rosita revel in the focus which is all theirs today as the family fusses over them. An older sister applies liner and shadow to their long-lashed eyes. Lolita blinks coquettishly and puckers her full lips. Their jet black hair is brushed and pulled until it gleams like obsidian, then combed and sprayed until it is just so. The girls cavort and exclaim as they see themselves in the long cracked mirror.

The church bell clangs its 30 minute warning and the girls hurry from the bedroom to pirouette before their father for inspection. Pearly coronas circle their long, lustrous curls. Looking like two frothy desserts, they whirl and twirl. Their father whistles and winks at them, then grabs Lolita, lifts her and hugs her tight. The hoop of her skirt bends and presses against his hefty chest, rising high exposing her curvy bottom.

A brother just arriving from milking gives a wolf call. Lolita screams and struggles as the family laughs raucously. Rosita escapes into the yard. When things quiet down, everyone grins happily as the father's calloused hands proudly cup the face of each of his two youngest daughters.

On their way to the church Lolita and Rosita pick their way nimbly, hopping from stone to stone, over little rivulets from recent rain, mindful of their long skirts and frills.

A small congregation has gathered in the churchyard. Some are already seated inside. Impish, chattering tots spin tops in the aisle. A young boy wearing a white shirt and new tie, also making his first communion, joins the girls. The priest is handsome in a purple, hand embroidered vestment. He leads the little procession down the aisle dodging the playing children.

With lighted candles in one hand, prayer book and rosary in the other, the trio seat themselves at the altar on wooden, uncompromising benches. A fly buzzes erratically, then lands on Lolita's nose. As she reaches to brush it off hot wax drips onto her shimmering satin skirt. The sun emerges briefly through a window, reflecting the shiny gold crosses around the girls' necks. Swallows dart back and forth building nests and tending their young.

Jars of garden flowers adorn the altar. No two of the six candles lean the same way. A statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the village patroness, presides in a niche above the tabernacle. Around the figure, Christmas tree lights blink on and off. One tiny light placed exactly at the tip of Guadalupe's folded hands winks at the congregation. The altar cloths are starched, pressed and neatly patched.

Three men have come from another village; the priest, an altar-man dressed in khaki, and a third man wearing jeans whose resonant voice of perfect pitch leads the singing. In this humble church, the only musical instrument is the human voice. Plaintive coarse voices fill the church and overflow into churchyard puddles.

Kneeling on little red satin pillows, the trio solemnly receives their first communion. They savor the host with wonder, thinking it could use a little salsa. The mass ends. *Abrazos* and *felicidades* abound. Cameras click. Lolita and Rosita are radiant. Their smiles illuminate the cloudy day and they think of the special breakfast party of
atole, tamales,
and
empanadas
that awaits them!