

Up With God! Down With the Devil!

Laura Esquivel*



Everything below is as it is above.” From the time I heard these words fall from the lips of Don Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora, my convent chaplain, the natural balance of my mind was altered. I felt that they entered my brain, painfully and violently, as though they were a tearing girdle of bristles incrusting themselves between the delicate membranes in perpetuity. This constant violation of my peace of mind became unspeakable torment; at every attempt to cast the idea from my thoughts, it penetrated deeper, torturous and tormenting, as though advancing through quicksand, quicksand that killed the hope that one day it would leave me, stop afflicting me, clouding my mind.

No matter how hard Don Carlos tried to explain to me that “Everything above is as it is below” refers to a law of the universe which establishes that the same conditions and phenomena seen in this world are simultaneously reproduced in the other—superior—plane, I still did not understand. If everything on the Earth has its equal in Heaven, then logically, everything under the Earth is the same as what is above, on the Earth, and therefore, in Heaven. This seemed absolutely monstrous, since it meant that Hell was the same as Heaven and that Indians were the same as Spaniards; and that simply could not be.

Indians are plebeian, ugly, sacrilegious, vile sinners, dark-skinned dirty heretics. When they die, therefore, they fully deserve the kingdom of Satan. They are the complete opposite of ourselves: high-caste Spaniards,

white, Catholic, virtuous and well bred. What had I, the daughter of one of the finest families in New Spain, to do with the Indian pagans buried under my house? What had my beautiful convent of La Concepción—which proudly opened this year in the city the first dome built without a drum and boasting half-moon shaped windows—to do with the cruel, bloody architecture of Tenochtitlan? And what did the stately home of my parents have to do with the remnants of the temple underneath it and the savage, wanton rites that the Indians used to perform there? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

God made us Spaniards in his image. The Indians were made in the horrible image of Satan. But a terrible doubt actually began to make me ill: What if those cunning Indian devils really wanted to put themselves on the same level with us, and used their good offices with Lucifer to try with his evil aid to make us lose our ineffable gift of grace by tempting us in the most appetizing way with the food grown in this land that they covered with iniquity by staining it with their blood? In Eden, sinister Beelzebub had already tempted the father of humanity once with an apple, and he could very well try a repetition of his feat.

I began to be obsessed with the idea that all the food grown in this malignant land was bedeviled and that all those who ate it entered into communion with the world of horror and darkness, condemning their souls to Hell. I began to refuse everything originating in Mexico, from the most beautiful flower to the most succulent fruit. I would only partake of food that was 100 percent Spanish and under no circumstances would I admit of a gastronomical mix. This decision was not easy to sustain

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for someone with as fickle an appetite as mine. Fully aware of my weaknesses, when I went by the canal along the palace and the central plaza where the Indian canoes glided heaped with fruit, legumes, grain and flowers, I endeavored not to look or smell—or even to imagine—the corn, beans, *chía*, tomatoes, squash, pineapple, anona and papaya; the *capulines*, avocado, mamee, sapodilla; the *chicozapote* and guava; the *jocotes*, crab apples and prickly pears; the *chayotes*, bottle gourds and plums. In general I was able to avoid them without difficulty, just as I avoided the stands where they sold frogs, ducks, *chichicuilotes*, *acoziles* and fly eggs. But, how could I not smell the cacao? How could I return to the cold humid convent without drinking a frothy cup of chocolate? How could I, overnight, leave behind that delicious vice? I had already subjugated my will and flagellated my stomach for a whole month, touching nothing forbidden. A month without tasting *atole*,¹ tamales, *tortillas*, fruit preserves and, above all, without enjoying the marvel of chocolate! So, without regard for the consequences, I drank a large tasty cup in one continuous gulp and then, overwhelmed by repentance, readied myself to go back into my retreat.

Attempting to put my guilt behind me, I went through the merchants portal where they sold boots, shoes, dresses, shirts, daggers, swords, silks, large china jars from Castile, all the things that I would never be able to buy or have for my personal use. But not being able to have them was no impediment to always dreaming of wearing a beautiful Manila shawl and even occasionally imagining myself attired like a gentleman with cape and sword. But that day my imagination was distorted by the chocolate foam which rose from my stomach up to my head flooding my eyes, making them hallucinate thousands of circles shot through with chocolate coloring.

In one of those tiny circles, I could see myself leaving the belly of the city, from the middle of the central plaza, from inside an interminable throng of ragged Indians and a procession of monks and nuns, with my hair hanging loose, moving my hips lasciviously, dressed

in a skirt of common, transparent cloth like the mulatto girls wear. Before me was the main temple of Tenochtitlan, and on its steep steps, Spanish nuns and priests ascended to the 13 celestial levels. I tried to go up just like them, but the Indians did not let me. They tore my dress off in handfuls, leaving me naked and bewildered by the incessant sound of criers, the deafening noise of the bells and the tumultuous clatter of the Viceroy's carriage on its way to the palace. And I ran through a dark tunnel, descending little by little toward Mictlán,² to the deepest part of the underworld. But Our Blessed Lord, as always benign and merciful, did not want to withdraw all his succor amid the chaos of my mind; He illuminated my conscience with a ray of his light so it might rule my destiny and I might turn toward his Truth. I was able then to run toward the entrance of the cathedral, where I flung myself face down on the flagstones and licked them; and I licked them as I advanced toward the central portal until my tongue was dry and scraped, retaining neither saliva nor traces of the accursed chocolate.

I asked forgiveness a thousand times while I destroyed and threw down the images of the saints covering the church's central nave. The Supreme Being heard me and gave me absolution because He knows the whole Truth and knows that, in truth, Indians and Spaniards are the same; the priests of the Holy Inquisition are the very Aztec priests sacrificing lives to venerate Him. He knows that, in truth, each of the Aztec idols is the same as each of the saints' images and that, in truth, Lucifer was also made in his image; that, in truth, just as the Aztec priests drank the blood and devoured the body of their sacrifices, the Spanish priests drank the blood and ate the body of Christ; that, in truth, by drinking chocolate you enter into communion with Mictlán, but at the same time and for that very reason, also with the highest spheres of Heaven, since "Everything below is as it is above."

Now, the only thing I must do is convince the inquisitors of the Holy Office tribunal of all this when they come to judge me tomorrow. ❧

¹ A flavored beverage made from cornstarch and drunk warm. [Translator's Note.]

² The Aztec underworld. [Translator's note.]