

Saraí Ramirez

**Esther**

*Translated from the Spanish by Tyler Gebauer*

She was a wicked girl. At least that is what Uncle Felipe believed as he smashed Esther's head against the ground, forcing her to eat dirt until the evil thoughts left her infantile head. She was hardly four years old when, exploring her body, she discovered that from a light tickle between her legs there arose a sudden heat near her belly button that scampered around her heart and painted her cheeks an apple-red. Uncle caught her rolling around in the corner of the couch, and when the girl's hand ended up on the edge of her skirt, he took her by the ear and dragged her out to the vegetable patch. That marked the beginning of Esther's torture. In between the shouting, and responding to words like "Evil!" and "Filthy!" that rubbed her face into the exposed dirt, she yelled "Shameless!" and "Son of a...!", words whose meaning she couldn't have known yet still surged from her mouth at the time of the attack with total precision, unhampered by her stained teeth or the writhing of her tongue. A few seconds later uncle Felipe let her go, more tired than scared, his spotless cassock now stained from a kick the girl managed to land on his bottom.

Uncle Felipe had come to Mexico City after Holy Week. He had several vacation days at his disposal and no qualms with leaving the parish at San Martín de los Terreros behind. His sister Josefina was waiting for him in the capital. She and her family would care for and attend to him in a way that only he deserved. He had not counted on his sister's children testing his patience. The most dangerous one, according to him, was Esther: she lacked manners and behaved mischievously, went around laughing all day long, and even spoke when it was not asked of her. She did not know how to pray and did not understand why the statue of a tiny man, bathed in blood, with little clothing, arms outstretched and nailed to something resembling a tree, had to be hung over the headboard of her bed. All of this constituted blasphemy for Felipe, and he tried to put up with it until the afternoon he caught her on the edge of the couch. As Josefina's eldest brother, standing in for the authority of the girl's father, he felt it within his rights to properly educate this demon of mud and braids that passed itself off as his niece.

"Child! Do not slurp your soup." "Do not pick your nose!" "Esther, that is not how a lady talks." "You are not allowed to give your opinion, because you are just a little kid. You don't know anything." "Take your hand out of there!" Every naughty word, every inappropriate gesture, every behavior that could be seen as excessive, was punished with a handful of dirt in her mouth. She would kick out her legs and spit out small clumps of dirt that, touched by her tears, transformed into bits of mud on her dress. The punishment was effective for a few days: Esther remained quiet, stopped playing with her siblings, and ran off to hide behind her mother's legs whenever Uncle Felipe appeared in the kitchen or garden, or walked across the room to try and get close to her. If her behavior improved, the corrective measures would stop, but then she would sneak away to turn on the radio, look at herself for too long in the mirror, or put

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on lipstick like her mother. She would laugh again, muddy her shoes, play with her siblings, fight back when they hit her, and sometimes repeat the bad words they let slip, though she was the only one scolded for it. Sometimes, just for joyfulness' sake, she would spin herself around and around, her dress would rise up, and her underwear would show on accident. Again, her mother or the imposing figure of her uncle would drag her out to the vegetable patch, cover her mouth with dirt, and top it off with a spanking to increase the effectiveness of the punishment.

Soon enough the rainy season arrived: the garden gave its best chiles, tinged the tomatoes a carmine color, and turned seeds into new sprouts. And though Uncle's visit had lasted longer than anticipated, around that time he received a letter from San Martín: Felipe needed to take the first train back and return to the church as soon as possible; there were priestly obligations much more important than helping to raise three insufferable children. The morning Uncle Felipe was leaving, something in Esther's dreams disturbed her: she started rolling around in the sheets, her heart pounded faster and she felt a frozen current run down from her forehead to the tip of her toes. She opened her eyes with a start, and though she could hear the birds singing in the distance, realized the sky was still dark. She got out of bed, left the room and walked over to the kitchen as quietly as possible. From there she could watch as Felipe closed his suitcase, grabbed his umbrella like a cane and crossed the patio to the front door with the slight clicking of his heels that made him even more terrifying. She thought that Felipe had seen her enter the kitchen and that at any moment he would turn around and say something to frighten her, but her uncle decided not to look back. Just as he crossed the entryway, a down-pour descended upon the house. It wasn't that Esther enjoyed the rain, but when she saw the dirt in the garden getting wet she was so happy that she started to dance and spin. She was happy because the uncle who had tormented her wouldn't be around any longer.

It was still raining when, with a confident gait, she crossed the patio and stood in front of the vegetable patch. Standing there made her feel uneasy — there were many bad memories — but curiosity led her to kneel down between the plants. She thought that the scent of wet dirt was delightful, so much so that her hands went ahead and plunged into the mud. Her fingers wriggled between the newness of the fresh moisture and the roughness of the roots. She closed her fists and held a handful of earth, brought it to her nose and breathed in its scent without reservation. Esther knew that smells carried memories with them, like the perfume of her mother, or the smell of firewood that permeated her grandmother's apron. What was it that the dirt smelled like? Perhaps like punishment, but the idea of forbidden things was fading away. She didn't want to think about sad things: without hesitation she opened her hand and ate a clump of soil.

Her mouth flooded with saliva as the bits of earth caressed the top of her tongue. She didn't want to swallow the entire portion at once. As she ate the soil, she had time to discover what she felt or decipher the flavor. She closed her eyes and began to imagine the mystery of her mouth: small clumps that danced from one side to the other, to the inside of her cheeks, hanging from the roof of her mouth or playing hide and seek between her canine teeth. A thought came to her head and she opened her eyes straight

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away: she remembered her grandmother at the grinding stone, arms tired but strong, crushing chiles and seeds. Esther was first to sample the resulting *mole* whenever her grandmother allowed it. The little clumps on her tongue had a similar feel to that mixture, but were not spicy. The flavor was similar to dark chocolate, but without the sweet aftertaste of sugar.

She swallowed dirt because she wished to do so, and almost out of instinct, she grabbed another handful from the garden plot, brought it up to her mouth and started eating again. A paste began to form with the mixture of her saliva that, bit by bit, stuck to the roof of her mouth. Her tongue did not suffice, so she made use of her fingers and, once removed, she observed the paste for some time. Esther thought of the bits of raw dough she always stole from the kitchen when lunch was being prepared. She could pretend to make tortillas made out of dark *masa*, or make mud chocolates — she could play, of course — but all she wanted to do was continue with her discoveries. Without wretching or gagging, she swallowed the rest of the dirt that was still in her mouth and imagined a black rain falling on her belly. She didn't have to close her eyes to feel how this downpour turned into warmth, traveled up her arms, her legs, settled on her chest and made her heart jump. The earth did not taste like the scolding or insults of that man, the flavor of the earth was far more loving: it tasted of play, of laughter, of memories of grandmother, but most especially it carried the taste of all that was forbidden to her.