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## La Vida Loca

By FERNANDA EBERSTADT

I have to admit that, until a month ago, I had never heard of Carmen Laforet. The idea that there might be a lone woman in what seems the unrelievedly male pantheon of Spanish novelists of the post-Civil War era — an era which to outsiders, as Mario Vargas Llosa writes in his introduction to “Nada,” seems to reek of “fustiness, sacristy and Francoism” — was like discovering an extra story built in a house you thought you knew.

### NADA

By Carmen Laforet. Translated by Edith Grossman.

244 pp. The Modern Library. \$22.95.

“Nada” was Laforet’s first novel. It was originally published in 1945, when its author was 23, and it created a sensation in Barcelona. It has now been reissued in a new translation by Edith Grossman, and more than 60 years later the book’s odd charm is undiminished.

“Nada” recounts, in coolly understated first-person prose, the experiences of Andrea, an 18-year-old orphan from the provinces who arrives in Barcelona to stay with her dead mother’s relatives while she attends university.

Laforet makes us feel the force of this young woman’s long pent-up hunger to escape the oppressiveness of village life and her convent education. For years, Andrea has feasted on childhood memories of her maternal grandparents’ apartment in Barcelona, a haven of sophistication and ease from which she, because of her parents’ death and the war, has long been cut off.+

When Andrea re-enters the family home on the Calle de Aribau, though, she finds it nightmarishly transformed. The Civil War has reduced her once-prosperous bourgeois relatives to penury. They live crammed into one filthy, dimly lit, cobwebbed half of the apartment, which is crammed with a grand piano and gilt mirrors attached to candelabra — relics of their former wealth that they sell off in weekly installments to an itinerant ragman in order to survive.

The apartment’s decay reflects that of its owners. Even the bathroom, we learn, “seemed like a witches’ house. The stained walls had traces of hook-shaped hands, of screams of despair. Everywhere the scaling walls opened their toothless mouths, oozing dampness. Over the mirror, because it didn’t fit anywhere else, they’d hung a macabre still life of pale bream and onions against a black background. Madness smiled from the bent faucets.”

Haunting this house of horrors are Andrea’s grandmother — a shrunken innocent who prays to the Virgin Mary while her grown children threaten one another with razors and pistols; her Uncle Rom  n, a gifted musician and consummate intriguer who, during the war, was imprisoned and tortured by “the Reds” when he was discovered to be a Francoist spy; her Uncle Juan, who works as a night watchman and spends his days beating his wife, Gloria, a working-class beauty whom his family deems to be a whore, but

who in fact is supporting the entire household by moonlighting as a card shark in Barcelona's seedy Barrio Chino.

Most frightening of all is Andrea's dark, impassioned aunt Angustias. Angustias is a kind of grand inquisitorial figure out of the Spanish Counter-Reformation, rabid with faith. It is Angustias who assigns herself the task of breaking her niece's will and "molding" her into obedience.

Thus goes the first morning's catechism:

"Cities, my child, are hell. And in all of Spain no city resembles hell more than Barcelona. ... Total prudence in one's conduct is not enough, for the devil disguises himself in tempting ways. ... A young girl in Barcelona must be like a fortress. Do you understand?"

"No, Aunt."

Angustias looked at me.

"You're not very intelligent, my girl."

Again we were silent.

"I'll say it another way: You're my niece; therefore, you're a girl of good family, well behaved, Christian and innocent."

When Aunt Angustias finally concludes that Andrea is neither well behaved nor innocent but "a demon of rebellion," she declares with genuine regret: "If I'd gotten hold of you when you were younger, I'd have beaten you to death!"

"Nada" depicts on the one hand the sordid collapse of a family whose fratricidal hatreds mirror those of the Civil War, and on the other hand the struggle of its youngest member for simple freedom. What gives the novel its unlikely freshness is the contrast between the melodramas to which Andrea is witness and the humorous restraint of her narration.

While the old folks writhe in a hell of their own making, Andrea stalwartly goes about the business of being young: studying for exams, befriending a group of would-be Bohemian student-painters, attending her first dance, getting kissed by a boy she doesn't like. Yet Andrea's difference is painful: while her university friends, the children of rich industrialists, smell of "soft perfume," she reeks of "bleach and harsh kitchen soap"; while they drive their own cars and have summer houses on the Costa Brava, Andrea is quite literally starving, reduced to drinking the water in which her relatives's vegetables have been boiled. Like Orwell's "Road to Wigan Pier," this book forcibly shows what it means to be poor and hungry.

Politics hovers here like the weather. Laforet vividly conveys the strangeness of Barcelona in the 1940s, a city that has survived civil war only to find itself muted by Franco's dictatorship, riven by economic inequalities and ground down by a peculiarly punitive form of Catholicism. The climate is stultifying; Andrea's artist friends' efforts at youthful rebellion are stunted, doomed to futility.

Laforet died in 2004, having published five more novels and a book of short stories. The seedy, lugubrious Barcelona she evoked in "Nada" is now vanished, given way to a chic metropolis famed for its avant-garde chefs and bijou bars. But the spirit of sly resistance that Laforet's novel expresses, its heroine's

determination to escape provincial poverty and to immerse herself in “lights, noises, the entire tide of life,” has lost none of its power of persuasion.

*Fernanda Eberstadt's most recent book is “Little Money Street: In Search of Gypsies and Their Music in the South of France.”*

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