

Nada

A NOVEL

CARMEN LAFORET

A NEW TRANSLATION BY
EDITH GROSSMAN

INTRODUCTION BY MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

"Remarkable . . . After six decades, [*Nada*]
has lost none of its power and originality, and we are
fortunate to have it in this fine translation."

—*The Washington Post Book Review*

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INTRODUCTION

TWO GIRLS

Mario Vargas Llosa

Until I came to Spain in 1958, I don't think I had read any contemporary Spanish writers living in the Iberian Peninsula because of a prejudice as widespread in the Latin America of those years as it was unjust. Everything published *over there* reeked of fustiness, sacristy, and Francoism. Which is why I didn't know until now the tender, asphyxiating story of Andrea, the small-town adolescent who arrives, full of hopes, in the grayish Barcelona of the early 1940s to study literature, a story that Carmen Laforet narrates in prose both exalted and icy, in which what is unspoken is more important than what is said, keeping the reader of the novel submerged in indescribable anguish from beginning to end. In this detailed autopsy of a girl imprisoned in a hungry, half-crazed family on Calle de Aribau, there is not the slightest political allusion except, perhaps, a passing reference to churches burned during the Civil War. And yet, politics weighs on the entire story like an ominous silence, like a spreading cancer that devours and destroys everything: the university purged of life and fresh air, the bourgeois families calcified in good manners and visceral putrefaction, the confused youngsters who don't know what to do or where to look to escape the rar-

efied atmosphere in which they languish from boredom, privations, prejudices, fears, provincialism, and a limitless confusion.

With admirable mastery, on the basis of sketchy anecdotal notes and very brief descriptive touches, an overwhelmingly depressing landscape emerges that appears to be a conspiracy of the entire universe to frustrate Andrea and keep her, and almost everyone around her, from being happy.

In the world of *Nada*—the unsurpassable title says everything about the novel and the city where it takes place—there are only the rich and the poor, and like a third-world country, the middle class is a thin, shrinking membrane and, like Andrea's family, has half its being sunk into that plebian jumble where workers, beggars, vagabonds, the unemployed, and the marginalized commingle, a world that horrifies the middle class and that it tries to keep at bay by means of fierce prejudices and delirious fantasies. Nothing exists beyond the small larval world that surrounds the characters; even the little bohemian enclave that Andrea sometimes visits, created in the old district by young painters who would like to be rebellious, insolent, and modern but don't know how, is parochial and something of a caricature.

But it is, above all, in the area of love and sex where the characters in *Nada* seem to live outside reality in a mysterious galaxy in which desires do not exist or have been repressed and channeled into compensatory activities. If in almost every aspect of life the world of the novel reveals an inhumanly prudish morality that alienates men and women and impoverishes them, it is in the area of sexuality that the distortion reaches incredible proportions and, in many cases, is surely the hidden explanation of the neuroses, the bitterness, the uneasiness, the vital disquiet of which almost all the characters are victims, including Ena, the vivacious and emancipated friend whom Andrea admires and envies.

Did Carmen Laforet, a girl in her twenties when she wrote this, her first novel, suspect that in it she portrayed, implacably and lucidly, a society brutalized by lack of freedom, censorship, preju-

dices, hypocrisy, and isolation, and that in the story of her poignant creation, Andrea, the ingenuous girl who is scandalized when “a kiss is stolen” from her, she exemplified a case of desperate, heroic resistance to oppression? Perhaps not—perhaps all of that was the result, as so often happens in good novels, of intuition, divination, and the authenticity with which she tried, as she wrote, to capture an elusive, dangerous truth that could be expressed only in the labyrinths and symbols of fiction. She achieved this, and half a century after it was published, her beautiful, terrible novel still lives.

—translated by Edith Grossman

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

A few historical clarifications may be in order, since the period evoked by Carmen Laforet is now some seventy years in the past.

The war referred to throughout the novel is the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), often called a dress rehearsal for World War II, in part because it allowed Germany, Italy, and the USSR the opportunity to test and improve weapons and battle tactics.

The background to the conflict is, very briefly, this: King Alfonso XIII gave up the throne and a republic was voted into power in Spain in 1931. The liberal-left government provoked the enmity of the right, which included the Spanish Church (an especially reactionary institution within worldwide Roman Catholicism), monarchists, landowners, and supporters of the Falange, the Spanish Fascist party founded on the Italian model in 1933 by the charismatic José Antonio Primo de Rivera, son of Miguel Primo de Rivera, military dictator under the monarchy from 1923 to 1930. The republic was torn by factional strife among liberal republicans, socialists, communists (Stalinists and Trotskyists), and anarchists (a significant political movement in Spain, and particularly powerful in Barcelona).

In 1936, General Francisco Franco, commander of Spanish forces in Morocco, invaded Spain from Africa in collaboration with three other generals, in a military insurgency aimed at overthrowing the republic. The country divided, often on the basis of the loyalties of the local military commanders. The ensuing violence reached savage proportions and took on international ramifications when Franco's forces received assistance from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union used its aid to the republic to manipulate the domestic situation in favor of the Spanish Communist Party. With the exception of Mexico and France, which provided limited support to the Spanish Republic, the western powers maintained a deadly neutrality. Finally, in 1939, the last remnants of the republican forces were defeated, and Franco took power and held it until his death in 1975.

Supporters of the legitimate government were called Republicans, Loyalists, or Reds; supporters of Franco were called Nationalists, Rebels, Falangists, or Fascists. It has been claimed that a million Spaniards died in the Civil War. Vicious atrocities were committed against both civilians and combatants. The destruction of property, including the bombing of cities and other civilian targets by the Germans and Italians and the burning of churches on the ground by Loyalist soldiers, was catastrophic. Fighting and reprisals were notably ferocious in Barcelona, where Republican factions seemed to despise one another more passionately than they hated the enemy.

George Orwell wrote unforgettably about the conflict in Barcelona in *Homage to Catalonia*. Hugh Thomas's *The Spanish Civil War* is a fascinating, beautifully researched history of the war. Ernest Hemingway's fictional account, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, has become an American classic.

EDITH GROSSMAN

New York, 2006



TO MY FRIENDS

LINKA BABECKA DE BORRELL

AND

THE PAINTER PEDRO BORRELL

NADA

(*fragment*)

Sometimes a bitter taste,
A foul smell, a strange
Light, a discordant tone,
A disinterested touch
Come to our five senses
Like fixed realities
And they seem to us to be
The unsuspected truth . . .

JUAN RAMÓN JIMÉNEZ

PART ONE

I

Because of last-minute difficulties in buying tickets, I arrived in Barcelona at midnight on a train different from the one I had announced, and nobody was waiting for me.

It was the first time I had traveled alone, but I wasn't frightened; on the contrary, this profound freedom at night seemed like an agreeable and exciting adventure to me. Blood was beginning to circulate in my stiff legs after the long, tedious trip, and with an astonished smile I looked around at the huge Francia Station and the groups forming of those who were waiting for the express and those of us who had arrived three hours late.

The special smell, the loud noise of the crowd, the invariably sad lights, held great charm for me, since all my impressions were enveloped in the wonder of having come, at last, to a big city, adored in my daydreams because it was unknown.

I began to follow—a drop in the current—the human mass that, loaded down with suitcases, was hurrying toward the exit. My luggage consisted of a large bag, extremely heavy because it was packed full of books, which I carried myself with all the strength of my youth and eager anticipation.

An ocean breeze, heavy and cool, entered my lungs along with my first confused impression of the city: a mass of sleeping houses, of closed establishments, of streetlights like drunken sentinels of solitude. Heavy, labored breathing came with the whispering of dawn. Close by, behind me, facing the mysterious narrow streets that led to the Borne, above my excited heart, was the ocean.

I must have seemed a strange figure with my smiling face and my old coat blown by the wind and whipping around my legs as I guarded my suitcase, distrustful of the obsequious "porters."

I remember that in a very few minutes I was alone on the broad sidewalk because people ran to catch one of the few taxis or struggled to crowd onto the streetcar.

One of those old horse-drawn carriages that have reappeared since the war stopped in front of me, and I took it without thinking twice, arousing the envy of a desperate man who raced after it, waving his hat.

That night I rode in the dilapidated vehicle along wide deserted streets and crossed the heart of the city, full of light at all hours, just as I wanted it to be, on a trip that to me seemed short and charged with beauty.

The carriage circled the university plaza, and I remember that the beautiful building moved me as if it were a solemn gesture of welcome.

We rode down Calle de Aribau, where my relatives lived, its plane trees full of dense green that October, and its silence vivid with the respiration of a thousand souls behind darkened balconies. The carriage wheels raised a wake of noise that reverberated in my brain. Suddenly I felt the entire contraption creaking and swaying. Then it was motionless.

"Here it is," said the driver.

I looked up at the house where we had stopped. Rows of identical balconies with their dark wrought iron, keeping the secrets of the apartments. I looked at them and couldn't guess which ones I'd

be looking out of from now on. With a somewhat tremulous hand I gave a few coins to the watchman, and when he closed the building door behind me, with a great rattling of wrought iron and glass, I began to climb the stairs very slowly, carrying my suitcase.

Everything felt unfamiliar in my imagination; the narrow, worn mosaic steps, lit by an electric light, found no place in my memory.

In front of the apartment door I was overcome by a sudden fear of waking those people, my relatives, who were, after all, like strangers to me, and I hesitated for a while before I gave the bell a timid ring that no one responded to. My heart began to beat faster, and I rang the bell again. I heard a quavering voice:

“Coming! Coming!”

Shuffling feet and clumsy hands sliding bolts open.

Then it all seemed like a nightmare.

In front of me was a foyer illuminated by the single weak light-bulb in one of the arms of the magnificent lamp, dirty with cobwebs, that hung from the ceiling. A dark background of articles of furniture piled one on top of the other as if the household were in the middle of moving. And in the foreground the black-white blotch of a decrepit little old woman in a nightgown, a shawl thrown around her shoulders. I wanted to believe I’d come to the wrong apartment, but the good-natured old woman wore a smile of such sweet kindness that I was certain she was my grandmother.

“Is that you, Gloria?” she said in a whisper.

I shook my head, incapable of speaking, but she couldn’t see me in the gloom.

“Come in, come in, my child. What are you doing there? My God! I hope Angustias doesn’t find out you’ve come home at this hour!”

Intrigued, I dragged in my suitcase and closed the door behind me. Then the poor old woman began to stammer something, disconcerted.

“Don’t you know me, Grandmother? I’m Andrea.”

“Andrea?”

She hesitated. She was making an effort to remember. It was pitiful.

“Yes, dear, your granddaughter. . . . I couldn’t get here this morning the way I wrote I would.”

The old woman still couldn’t understand very much, and then through one of the doors to the foyer came a tall, skinny man in pajamas who took charge of the situation. This was Juan, one of my uncles. His face was full of hollows, like a skull in the light of the single bulb in the lamp.

As soon as he patted me on the shoulder and called me niece, my grandmother threw her arms around my neck, her light-colored eyes full of tears, and saying “poor thing” over and over again. . . .

There was something agonizing in the entire scene, and in the apartment the heat was suffocating, as if the air were stagnant and rotting. When I looked up I saw that several ghostly women had appeared. I almost felt my skin crawl when I caught a glimpse of one of them in a black dress that had the look of a nightgown. Everything about that woman seemed awful, wretched, even the greenish teeth she showed when she smiled at me. A dog followed her, yawning noisily, and the animal was also black, like an extension of her mourning. They told me she was the maid, and no other creature has ever made a more disagreeable impression on me.

Behind Uncle Juan appeared another woman who was thin and young, her disheveled red hair falling over her sharp white face and over the languor that clung to the sheets, which increased the painful impression made by the group.

I was still standing, feeling my grandmother’s head on my shoulder, held by her embrace, and all those figures seemed equally elongated and somber. Elongated, quiet, and sad, like the lights at a village wake.

“All right, that’s enough, Mamá, that’s enough,” said a dry, resentful-sounding voice.

Then I realized there was yet another woman behind me. I felt a