

The Finca

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THE FIRST NOTES OF FEDERICO FELLINI'S AMARCORD SOUNDTRACK EMANATE from the hifi. My uncle plays it loud, when the heat has diminished and a cool breeze sweeps through the house, carrying with it the salt of the Mediterranean and the pine of the mountains. The sound echoes in the cavernous high ceilings, spreading out through the arched windows and into the garden, where my mother is deadheading geraniums, inhaling the pungent scent of the broken stalks. As soon as we hear the music, my cousins and I leap into motion. I grab little Alicia, who giggles with giddiness as we glide across the tiled floors, other kids jumping and skipping and shimmying past us. Uncle Tony grabs Leonora by the waist and spins her around as she bats at him with a dish towel. My grandmother, who will be dead in two years, sits in her armchair, Mickey, the fat dachshund farting at her feet, which tap slightly under her long blue gown. Pepi and Joaquín come to the doorway and laugh, which makes me theatrically dip Alicia backwards and give her a swooping Rodolfo Valentino kiss.

Years later, I watch Fellini's film, and see the images that danced through the minds of my family members as we children danced to the music that summer of 1979. Set in a village that could be the one near our finca property, *Amarcord* affectionately portrays its inhabitants through the seasonal variations of a year in the 1930s, mixing fascist realities with adolescent daydreams, sexual initiations with death and departure. Remembering my teenage brother's overt fascination with his godmother's cleavage, Leonora and Tony's screaming fights when they both got drunk and threw plates at each other, and the sickening smell of incense mixed with cologne and body odour that permeated our local church as the priest droned his litany in Catalan, I now understand why my mother would say, "Our lives are like something out of a Fellini movie."

We are not, however, a family in a Fellini film. We never have been. We only lived

the fantasy version of it through Tony's curation of us. He, a British art dealer who moved to the Costa Brava in the 1960s, saw us through his ex-pat eyes, fetishizing the grand old mansion, the passionate anger, the simmering discontent, as components of a Spanish life that he wanted to live. So he made us paella and invited bohemian artists and scattered large stone and iron sculptures on the grounds of the estate. We liked this version of ourselves: a charming degenerate bourgeois family who summers in the decaying splendour of a villa decorated with taxidermied animals, larger-than-life oil studies of flamenco dancers, dark carved furniture, and Andalusian coloured tiles. Merchant Ivory meets Salvador Dalí, with Nino Rota music animating it all.

Take away the framing device, however, and we turn out to be a lot less flamboyant than we seemed that afternoon. Housewives scrutinizing Princess Stephanie of Monaco in *Hola* magazine, men reading the right-wing newspaper, kids watching too much badly-dubbed *Little House on the Prairie*—much of the time spent in that house did not live up to its grandeur. See the chubby girl, her rainbow-striped jeans and her uneven pony tails, arguing with bratty Marcos about whose turn it is on the bike? That's me. I'm doing a pretty good job of cussing in Spanish.

But really, I am just the American kid who lived her entire suburban fall, winter, and spring longing for the light and colour and beauty of another finca summer. Fluent in Spanish, I am not from a Spanish-speaking country. My mother tongue is very directly learned from my mother, who has not lived in Spain since 1956. I grew up immersed in a language that was private and intimate, that was connected to my mother's birthplace through the only location I knew: that mansion outside Barcelona.

My Spanish is not only geographically unrooted, it is also temporally anachronistic. Since it came from a

woman who was not living her language in the present, it is marked by the lingo of another era. The turns of phrase that I learned at home in Maryland were hilarious to my Spanish cousins, who said I sounded like someone out of a Franco-era radio novel. I spent my summers trying to take on intonations and slang that were more current. The most shameful thing to me was to be an American, known for being loud-mouthed, badly-dressed, and uncouth tourists abroad. The second most shameful was to be old-fashioned, to say the equivalent, in Spanish, of "gee whiz" when all the cool kids were saying "gnarly." I never fully managed to pass. In Madrid, people thought I was from Barcelona, but in Barcelona, people could never quite place me. My inability to speak Catalan, which was so politically urgent in the post-Franco years, marked me as an outsider, or, worse, as a Spanish nationalist.

One night, in my thirties, in Argentina, giddy on wine after having spent an evening gossiping with my friend Daniela, I took a taxi home and I finally managed to do it, I passed as a *porteña* as I talked to the driver. I felt like I was channeling the Argentine accent, the almost Italian lilt, the *vos* form of address. For that finite time of the cab ride, I played my role to perfection. In Spain, however, my long intimacy and history with my family make it so I can't just perform a part. I want to speak like they do so that my roots will be as deep as theirs in the soil of the arid mountains that surround the finca, so that I belonged to a place that, to this day, fills my dreams with its graceful arches, with its cool marble staircase. Dreams which, I've been told by roommates and lovers who hear me talk in my sleep, are always in Spanish.

With the Covid-19 crisis, my family in Spain and I are in touch daily. Much of the WhatsApp chats are taken up with memes and jokes. But the other day, there was a video that my cousin sent of my Aunt

Chichi. I visited her last year in the Canary Islands, where she now lives in an advanced state of dementia, and she was only able to say a word or two, seemingly incapable of verbal interaction. In this video, however, Chichi chatters as she sips her tea. I watch it over and over, mesmerized by the language. The way that she punctuates her short bursts with a brusque *sí, sí* makes me think of the staccato diction of war-time news announcers. Chichi speaks the Spanish now that I spoke as a child, full of dated mannerisms and sayings.

In the eight-minute video, she answers questions posed to her by a neighbour, whose thick Canary Island accent contrasts with Chichi's crisp continental tones. When asked if she wants to go visit the finca (a cruelly ironic question, since our family is embroiled in a lawsuit over the property and none of us will ever see it again), Chichi says dismissively, "*sí, sí*, we can go," but she's not interested in planning for the future. What she wants is to dwell in the past, the deep past of her own childhood, in which she and my mother would play hopscotch in the garden. In her mind, the masover's daughters, crowded into the 16th-century farmhouse, are waiting for the little señoritas who come every weekend to fill the big house with houseguests and lap dogs and maids in uniforms. The masover and his family have not lived there since he was imprisoned by Franco's troops, but in her mind there is no interruption of the civil war. The finca waits, unchanging, for her weekend visit.

Chichi's nostalgia is uncanny to me, because it so closely resembles my own. Until I listened to her reminisce, I had not known how much the finca pulled at us all, the heavy house a repository of history and memory into which we poured our different fantasies and yearnings. I had thought it was just me, on the other side of the Atlantic, who missed it, who had what we now call FOMO (fear of missing out). When I arrived in the summers, it felt like everyone

else had always already been there, living their exotic Latin lives and speaking their ever-evolving and shifting language. In reality, they had just gotten there a little before me, enough to take the white sheets off the furniture, and inspect the damage to the electrical wires made by the wintering mice. Enough to make the finca feel timelessly present, which is how we all liked it best.

It is, of course, not timeless, but very rooted in a geopolitical context of resource extraction and stark social inequality that spans the centuries of its existence. Even in the brief moment of the Second Republic, when it seemed that another political order was possible, the finca still imposed hierarchies. According to my mother, the only reason that the finca was passed over in the anarchist attacks that swept the area after the civil war erupted, was because people in the village respected my British grandfather. She says that, after they went into exile, her uncle arranged for a "Communist top official" to live in the finca, knowing that this would protect it from "vandals and wartime thieves." The life of leisure that we all got to live every summer was predicated on a class privilege that was brutally asserted throughout Franco's 40-year dictatorial regimen.

Listening to Chichi makes me, in the grey Toronto spring of isolation, rewatch *Amarcord*. Her anachronistic language returns me to Fellini's cinematic language of nostalgia. What strikes me the most this time around, is that in the year *Amarcord* depicts, some things change, but many don't. No one gets visibly wiser, or grows up into adulthood. There is no one central character. Instead, a full cast of characters animates the setting, a village which is, in its nostalgic evocation, the main attraction.

For years, I saw myself as the main character in a drama of seasonal exile. That is how we tell ourselves stories—we place ourselves in the centre and look for

the narrative arc. Fellini, at the height of his directorial prowess, knew how to narrate a story that didn't need to focus on one person, a story that could be a depiction—loving, critical, realist, tinged with nostalgia—of *a place* and those who inhabit it.

Watching the characters congregate in the central plaza of *Amarcord's* village, I see that I was just one member of the cast called family, all of us yearning to

be back on the set again so that we could, for the brief months of the summer, be larger-than-life. That set, with its dusty pink stucco and the cool shade of the linden tree, shaped each one of us, from my long-gone grandmother to my 95-year-old aunt to my own sons, who only got to go there once, but who still talk about it. We all dream of the finca, and of who we got to imagine ourselves to be within its gated walls.