

Private Life by Josep Maria de Sagarra, translated from the Catalan by Mary Ann Newman

FIRST PART

His eyelids opened with an almost imperceptible click, as if they had been stuck together by recent proximity to tears and smoke, or by the secretion produced by the irritation of a long time spent reading under a dim light.

With the pinky finger of his right hand he rubbed his eyelashes, as if with the quick flick of a comb, and his pupils struggled to make something out. What he saw was a panorama of vague, limp, semiliquid shadows: the view a man blinded by daylight would perceive on entering an aquarium. From the shadows, a sort of long vaporous knife the color of the juice of crushed oranges on the piers was becoming more and more prominent. It was a beam of light coming in through the slats of the shutters, and souring in the heavy atmosphere of the room.

It must be about four-thirty in the afternoon. Frederic de Lloberola, the man with the distressed eyelids, had awakened naturally. No one had called him, no sounds had startled him. His nerves were tired of sleeping; they had sapped to the dregs a colorless, absurd dream, the kind you have when nothing is going on in your life, that leave hardly a trace of their plot when you awaken.

Frederic didn't devote so much as eight seconds to surfacing into reality.

On the worn tiles lay items of his clothing, pained at their own disorder, entangled with gauzy stockings and a woman's cotton knit nightgown, deflated and, frankly, dirty.

All four chairs were piled with her things; the little vanity was fatigued with miniature bottles, powder cases, tweezers and scissors, and the open armoire resembled a funeral procession. The dresses and coats on the hangers, lively with bright colors and appliqués, brought to mind a series of too-thin carnival princesses who had been decapitated and pierced through the trachea with a hook. Atop the armoire rested empty hatboxes, coated in dust, keeping company with a stuffed dog. The dog had been entrusted to an inept taxidermist who had stuffed it deplorably,

leaving all the sutures visible between the hairs on the moth-eaten belly. His mistress had adorned the dog's neck with an old-fashioned garter from which three minuscule roses peeped out, like three drops of blood.

Frederic began to notice the smells in the close chamber. One single odor, of consumed tobacco, dominated like a hard-to-take medicine.

The accumulated smoke impregnated the sheets and Frederic's skin, mingling with traces of a store-bought cologne and all the vapors produced in the abandon of two bodies, which the night maliciously stores up to proffer mercilessly when the storm has passed and sleep has placed a wall of incomprehension between a somnolence of expectant contacts and a livid, skeptical, and unaroused awakening.

To combat the assault of the odors outside and the bad taste inside his mouth, Frederic stretched out his arm and picked up his cigarette lighter and a Camel from the night table. Only two draws were necessary; the experiment with a fresh cigarette was fruitless.

Frederic ran his fingers over the pink fabric of the pillow that lay beside his own, a slightly damp fabric impregnated with smelly oils. Frederic's fingers lingered over this fabric, reposing dumbly, his fingernails scratching out a slight sound over the relief of the embroidered initials: R... T... R... T... Indeed, Rosa Trènor. His lips said the name softly, repeating it mechanically... On her pillow remained a little grease, a little dampness. There was the impression of her head. But anything she might have left behind of her dreams had already died a cold death. Frozen, perhaps poisoned with the smoke and breathing of this man, Frederic, alone in bed since she had closed the door, sleeping his brutal, inconsiderate, insatiable sleep, turbulent with hydrochloric acid.

Frederic looked at the clock in fear. In this type of situation, verifying the exact time always provokes a certain panic; one needs a start to face reality. And, indeed, it was four-thirty in the afternoon.

Frederic asked himself why he had let himself go, why he had allowed this surrender. What had happened was understandable. Frederic had been biding his time for fifteen years. Ever since his breakup with Rosa, he had watched the woman's evolution from afar with disdain and apparent coldness. Their breakup had been

imposed on him at the time of his marriage; the truth is he had maintained his relationship with the woman out of vanity. It was not that Rosa was so terribly common, as Frederic's friends thought. Rather, he only saw in her an intimacy with a woman who had a certain history and who could not be classified in the same category as the other kept women.

What Frederic appreciated in Rosa was her "class"; he had never appreciated all the woman's personal characteristics while their bond lasted, before his marriage. Even worse, with absolute insensitivity, he had carried on affairs, as ephemeral as suited his needs, with other women, ladies of the trade. Never in his experience of love, whether the woman in question was Rosa or the others, had he perceived the slightest difference, or anything that might lend a touch of lyricism to the basic physiology of the act.

Perhaps the very vanity that led Frederic to maintain the scandalous friendship with Rosa Trènor contained a certain sense of anarchy, a feeling of rebellion against the conventions of his own class, even if such a feeling was baseless, because Frederic, like all the Lloberolas, was weak and cowardly, and his youth transpired without a hint of imagination.

If Frederic had taken for his lover a nameless woman of inadmissible extraction, he would have been no different from any other Lloberola; perhaps the only opportunity life had offered him to be a bit original was to become the lover of Rosa Trènor, a woman who had been on a first-name basis with his own cousins, who might even have prepared for first communion with them, and shared a dormitory with them at finishing school.

We have already said that in the period preceding his marriage Frederic's experiences of love did not go beyond the most elementary physiology. Frederic was the kind of man who, in the intimacy of love, does not show the least concern for the female element involved. A woman, for him, was just an inevitable accessory to the complete satisfaction of his instincts. Exceedingly selfish and lacking in the habit of reflection, incapable of the slightest critical thought, and never having observed the need to compare his own sensations with those of others, the truth is that, though he

had had dealings with and come to know quite a number of women, Frederic, in fact, did not have the slightest understanding of what a woman was.

With marriage, though, things changed completely. The very thing he could never have divined out of intuition, and would never have taken the trouble to discover, began to come into being as his married life progressed and little by little took shape in Frederic's consciousness. When single, Maria Carreres had been an exciting woman. Frederic became accustomed to her love, in those moments of tender and tearful rapture that are the domain of the most garden-variety egotists. In the midst of his banality and moral inconsistency, Frederic had a vague idea of what it was to be a gentleman, and even some, perhaps atavistic, genuine gentlemanly instincts. So with the façade of a gentleman accepted by everyone, Frederic reached the stage of marriage.

From the very first, though, there was a detachment, perhaps even a revulsion, on the woman's part, toward those moments of shadow and contact in which the nervous and angelic battle of the instincts, of shame and the beast, is engaged. Frederic had struck a bad sexual bargain. Maria Carreres was one of those insensitive and inhospitable physiologies that react with the chill of a cemetery and provoke virile dissatisfaction. Frederic bore his disappointment with dignity; he let days and months go by, hoping for a possible solution to his conjugal drama. But after their first son was born, the situation took a turn for the worse. It was then that Frederic realized that women's sexuality was a more heterogeneous article than he had imagined. Finding himself tied to a person insufficient to his needs, to whom he had intended to offer absolute fidelity, little by little the idea of such fidelity began to be odious to him. Frederic took to chancing afternoon adventures that could not compromise him or complicate his life in any way.

Frederic found himself again through these adventures; he found the lost taste for love as he understood it. And these small evasions brought him vague reminiscences--occasionally precise memories--of what had been his greatest happiness in erotic matters, his bond with Rosa Trènor.

After six years of marriage, Rosa had become an obsession for him, but if indeed Frederic was a man of extremely malleable conscience, he was no less timid. He

was afraid of his wife, afraid of her last name, afraid of her father's white moustaches, and even of the last button on his shirt that dug into the flesh on his neck. The thought of initiating the slightest negotiation with his former girlfriend produced an understandable alarm in him, because Rosa Trènor, even supposing she would have anything to do with Frederic, would not be one of those inconsequential afternoon trysts. Frederic feared, correctly, that taking up with her again would be his perdition. What's more, the years had also gone by for Rosa Trènor. Most likely the woman he had known would have undergone pronounced evolutions in the tenuous ramifications of her nervous system, and the fragrance of Rosa Trènor's heart would be for him like the disconcerting perfume of a boat that had sailed over many seas picking up the contradictory resonances of all the ports where it had berthed.

Frederic spent fifteen years mulling over these questions. Into what gullies must Frederic Lloberola's soul have plunged to have arrived at the spent air of that chamber, facing the glass eyes of a desiccated dog with a garter on its neck?

For months now Frederic and Rosa Trènor have been meeting at the bar of the Hotel Colón. Penetrating the discipline imposed by mascara, he had perceived a gaze that was neither indifferent nor ill-disposed. Seen from a distance, her make-up applied with severity, his former lover's skin still had its effect. Frederic knew from his friends that Rosa's situation was dire. She had lost any trace of regular patronage, and only through her art--praised by many of those who had had dealings with her--and the imperative of that air that a woman who has been very beautiful never quite loses entirely, could Rosa Trènor, approaching forty, still risk playing the role of a lady in the theater of love, and retain her dignity under the benign deference of the half-light.

Even if the habitués and professionals of the gay trade knew Rosa Trènor by heart, and her presence or her memory elicited merciless commentaries, from time to time, at these tables, in the wee hours of the night, or if you will in the first hours of the dawn, a gentleman of good intentions, fortified with a relative enthusiasm, would approach the florists of the most effervescent cabarets to choose and purchase, without haggling, the best bouquet of camellias for Rosa Trènor. One of those men who drink

in moderation and do not entirely lose all respect at the sight of painted lips; those admirable gentlemen, generally the object of ridicule in the view of rowdy and raucous youth, have the distinction of considering that a woman is never, not even in her saddest condition, a beast inferior to a man, nor can she be brutalized as if she had no soul.

One of Frederic's most loyal friends, Robert Xuclà, whom everyone knew as Bobby Xuclà--and this pretentious and somewhat gigoloesque name of Bobby was rather laughable as applied to a middle-aged bachelor, with thinning hair, short of leg and large of girth, in whom all the most inoffensive and homely Barcelona essences came together--was the kind soul who acted as the intermediary between Frederic and Rosa Trènor.

Not only because of her brilliant past, and a kind of cynical and offhanded way of behaving, proper to the aristocracy, but even more so because of her taste for reading and penchant for argument, Rosa had a recognized prestige as a superior woman among the vaporous clan of kept women who could flaunt their diamonds and even dump a five-star gent with relative impunity. One of these vamps was Mado, Bobby's erstwhile girlfriend. Not that Bobby had the exclusive; Mado was a girl whose hospitality was nibbling, inconstant, ephemeral and as absolutely lacking in intelligence as a branch of lilacs. Fidelity, for Mado, was just as impossible as wearing garters attached to a girdle. Whenever she had tried to put on this kind of garters she had had to give up in the attempt, because they made her feel faint. This is why Mado was constantly pulling up her stockings, a peculiarity that lent her a rather insouciant charm, of the kind enjoyed by sailors in the taverns of any port.

Though Mado devoted every evening to humiliating Bobby, he was an understanding fellow, and even when entering his girlfriend's apartment, he would often wear the polite and somewhat beleaguered air of a man who is afraid he's not welcome.

Mado's little apartment was the place Rosa Trènor favored when she felt the irresistible desire to exercise her spiritual ascendancy. Even though Mado loved to deflate, denigrate, and tell horrible stories about her, she held Rosa Trènor in great esteem. More than once the kindness and good heart of Mado or some other girl had

got Rosa out of a jam; and whenever she had received a favor from one of those young women, Rosa Trènor would put on such dignified airs and affect such grande dame smiles, that no one would ever have doubted that it was precisely Rosa Trènor who had done the favor and was enjoying her own generosity.

Through Mado and Bobby, Frederic was gathering ideas about Rosa Trènor's soft spots. Once Bobby had half-dragged him over to Rosa's table, but Frederic had resisted. Under no circumstances did he want the event to take place in public; one of the characteristics of Frederic's insignificance was that he thought of himself as a sort of central character on whom all eyes converged.

Other times Bobby had tried to bring them together, because Frederic was dying of anticipation, but the circumstances had not quite been ripe.

News had been reaching Bobby about Frederic's irregular situation and his family disasters, but even though their friendship was longstanding, he behaved with the most absolute discretion in this regard. Unwilling, in the way of the Lloberolas, to surrender his lordly airs, and despite the confidence Bobby had always inspired in him, Frederic had never said so much as half a word to his friend about what he called "unpleasant" things.

Frederic could tell Bobby about some despicable thing he had done, or reveal an intimate detail about his wife with the crudity, vulgarity or ferocity of a feudal lord; he could go on at length with the most boorish comments about certain things of a physiological nature pertaining to his own person; but never in all the sad confidences he entrusted to Bobby had Frederic told him that his father had mortgaged such-and-such a property or that he had been obliged to pawn his wife's jewels.

And, once Frederic had made up his mind, when the circumstances were ripe for the interview with Rosa Trènor to take place, he had also hidden from Bobby the "unpleasant" cause, the immediate and determining factor of his decision. Even though it was a question of an extremely unexceptional event. In the preceding years the economic disarray of Frederic and his wife had reached scandalous proportions. Everyone was aware of the situation faced by both Frederic and his father. Everyone knew that the Lloberolas had had to sell off a great deal, and limit their expenses. But Frederic was not about to relinquish his histrionic streak; he had covered things up

any way he could, and at the point where this story begins, he was facing the threat of a loan about to come due. It was a personal credit extended to Frederic without an underwriter. Frederic could not make the payment. There had been talk of an extension, but this would not be possible without certification from his father. Naturally, Frederic was incapable of disavowing his signature or risking the consequences of non-payment. But horrible as these things seemed to him, the interview with his father filled him with even greater dread. The amount in question was considerable enough to be the cause of scenes Frederic had no stomach for.

The irritant of money had been the dyspepsia of his entire life, but at that point it had become acute. Frederic had been holding on for a long time; for the first time the possibility arose of not holding on, of not wanting to hold on, of not making the slightest effort to hold on.

Frederic didn't blanch about adopting a heedless attitude, about plunging into the mud on one side now that he was sunk in the mud on the other, about mixing economic disgrace with a daring, glaring fling, or about resolving with weepy, theatrical cynicism what a genuine person would resolve with humility.

The circumstances were ripe. Frederic wanted twenty-four hours of oblivion, or twenty-four hours to hide his head in the sand like an ostrich. One day far from his family and from the overdue bill of exchange.

It was for all these reasons that Frederic asked Bobby to accompany him to Mado's house, where he was sure to run into Rosa Trènor.

And the day after that decision, stretched out between the sheets, mechanically interrogating the stuffed dog with his gaze and once again lightly running his nails over the initials on the pillow, he started reconstructing the scenes of the previous night.

At half past eleven, he and Bobby were going up the stairs. Mado herself opened the door; she was wearing colonial blue and silver striped pajamas and her breasts, over which the satin pajama fabric stretched, were reminiscent of two boxes of bonbons of the kind you would have seen at the turn of the century on top of the pianos of families of modest means. Frederic took more notice of Mado's pectoral ploy than of the explosive kiss the young woman planted on Bobby's lips, sending up his

nostrils the dregs of smoke that clung to her gums. Frederic ran the nail of Mado's pinky finger over his lips, and with an almost musical peal of laughter she pushed the two men into the dining room.

Mado's living room contained the expectation produced by sudden twists of fate; eyes dilated by gambling, mascara forgotten, producing stinging and natural tears. Tics, cold stomach or cold feet, and a sort of displacement of the jaw and of the nasal lines broke the equilibrium of the features. A rather atavistic simian air left its bold imprint on the faces in such a place when things were going badly for someone.

Among the players was Reina, a very young girl, with platinum hair, her back exposed to below her kidneys, exposing a stretch of bloodless whitish muscles molded into the casing of a more vegetal and decorative skin.

Reina was Mado's best friend, and there were those who attributed certain predilections to them, because Reina treated the young men who surrounded her as if she always had a fissure ready through which the eel of her soul could make its escape.

When it came time to play cards, Reina's concentration breached the limits of the most elementary manners: she allowed no jokes; her extremely forced smile revealed teeth with an excessive secretion of saliva, produced by her state of nerves, in a way not very different from that of a group of hyenas that have convened upon the cemetery. More superstitious than the others, when Reina was dealt a card, before looking at it she would press down on it with her index finger until it hurt, leaving behind the slight imprint of her nail. Suspicious minds attributed this to a wish to mark the cards, an entirely false accusation, because Reina had no intention of cheating when she did this. It was a quirk born of her superstition and she had to accompany it by lifting her gaze as if staring off into the distance; it was then that Reina's eyes took on the alluring artificial brilliance of false stones. And the first thing Frederic's eyes fell upon as he walked into the dining room, propelled by Mado's laughter, was that gaze. Frederic, who was acquainted with Mado and the other girls in the game, felt repelled by those eyes, which appeared to him as a new and hostile thing. His first reaction was to fall back, not to continue forward toward the encounter with Rosa Trènor. Reina's involuntary gaze, which bore no ill will toward Frederic, had cooled the temperature of his audacity, and Frederic had felt like a coward again; but before he could formulate

any kind of decision, the small, plump hand of Rosa Trènor was covering Frederic's lips, and he felt bound by the warm, dry silk of that hand.

In Mado's living room, Rosa abstained from any complicated *toilette*; she was wearing a simple dress topped by a cherry-colored sweater; the same clothes she would have worn at home, on a winter's night, with a migraine or the vague beginnings of a cold. Her lack of concern for her clothing was considered a characteristic of good taste; when the time came to say good-bye, Rosa enveloped her flesh and the worn clothing that covered it in a great beaver coat, a bit moth-eaten and the worse for wear, with the tender good humor of a person who was going off to rest with no intention of giving anyone cause for alarm.

When Rosa paid this kind of visit to the girls, she carried an enormous snakeskin bag, which she opened with the unctuous sigh of a philanthropist of popular lore disposed to hand out bread and cheese to a band of raggedy children. In point of fact, Rosa didn't hand out anything she carried in the bag; she would rummage around inside and take out skeins of multicolored wool and a sweater she had just started. Surrounding that bit of feminine handiwork Rosa had books, papers, notebooks, a little bottle of peppermint, the keys to her house, and an entire battery of rouges, mirrors, powder cases, and combs. Rosa Trènor's bag was one of her most personal belongings. She talked about "her" bag in the same way that a hairdresser with fantasies talks about "his" hair-growing elixir.