

# Abrasion

Andrés Pérez wheeled his bicycle slowly through the sunlight streaming down between the apartment blocks. It was a heavy contraption with a double-rimmed back wheel above which was anchored what appeared to be an unusually solid metal carrier, in reality a squarish stand that slid back over the wheel to anchor the frame solidly on the road. There was a carrier also, a small one with a trim brown toolbox fastened to it, tucked away under a wide saddle. What seemed from a distance a great-crested bird or the distorted silhouette of a child perched on the bar, on closer inspection, turned out to be a carborundum wheel. To the curious onlooker it then became clear why the man progressed with such deliberation and why his eyes were constantly searching the windows on either side of the street and why he announced his presence blowing on a pan flute made of metal. He was an *afilador*, a sharpener of knives and other cutting tools.

First acquaintance with Pérez was made not by sight but by hearing. Those who could afford to rise late in the mornings of these still Francoist times of 1968 wondered what the singular notes on the pipes meant amid the clamour and clamour of the busy San Sebastián street-life. Those in the streets, pursuing their occupations, found themselves arrested by the strange sounds pitched above the din of the passing traffic and looked around mystified, trying to pinpoint the source. The notes didn't belong in the city. They were rather the plaintive echoes of some lone shepherd of the *Pirineos* or some Grecian Pan high in his sacred mountain. Andrés had chosen them well to draw down custom from the apartments. There was a sensuous quality about the short melody, scarcely more than a couple of chords yet expressive of a philosophy. But if the knife-grinder was a philosopher he didn't advertise it. He spoke little to his customers, no more than common courtesy demanded. This reserve maintained *criadas* and housewives at a distance. Two or three or more collected around him could chat among themselves, one alone had to be content with watching his strong deep-tanned hands gracefully manipulating the blades. The sharpener was not a tall man but his medium-sized body was well-formed. His features were clear and strong, particularly the jaw and nose, and the eyes that swept the facades of the buildings were dark and private under short black hair.

He had a regular business round. Today he did one part of the city, tomorrow another, while yesterday he would have done a third. He had as many districts to cover as there were workdays in a week and stops that varied with demand. There was, however, one small place, a junction where three *barrios* met, at which he was accustomed to starting his day's work three times a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. It was here that Isabel Saizar found herself summering in a penthouse apartment.

Home for the beautiful young woman, a daughter among six siblings, was Madrid where she was accustomed to enduring much under autocratic parents and interfering brothers. She had experienced first love in her early teens and had seen that delicate relationship, which was very dear to her, shattered by the family's opposition to the boy whose background did not meet their social and financial expectations. She maintained little contact with her brothers all of whom, with the possible exception of one, were arrogant clones of the parents. She had more time for her two sisters, older than her and married with children of their own which kept them preoccupied with their affairs. If nothing else, her unusually fair hair set her apart from the others in the family. The world in which she had grown up forever fluctuated around the themes of family fortune, family honour and family love. The Saizars were rich in the first, had no idea what the second meant although they were highly exercised by it, and were devoid of the third. Only the vague intimations of the umbilical chord kept the kinship knot from sundering. Ten months earlier she had become engaged to the son of General Juan Antemil, a leading *Falangista*. She had chosen her stiff-backed fiancé for a number of conflicting reasons, principally out of a fervent desire to rid herself of parental meddling in her life. Her father and mother, on their part, were reasonably happy with her choice. After all the General, while not the most brilliant of tacticians, was a dedicated officer, a man of discipline who had instilled the military code of honour in the son who had followed him willingly into the Army, and he had connections at the highest level of the *Falange*.

During these months preceding the wedding Isabel had been taken to her cousins in San Sebastián so that she could prepare for the event in the more pleasant climate and surroundings of the beautiful

Basque seaside city to which General Franco was accustomed to removing himself and his Government during the summer months in preference to staying in the stifling Capital. Her parents would have preferred that she stayed with them in their holiday apartment overlooking the Concha beach but, fortunately for her, her eldest brother and his family had seen to it that they took over the available guest rooms there. Her fiancé stayed behind to pursue his budding career as a staff officer in line for preferment.

The young woman's first days in the town had been uneventful - trips to the beach, a little water-skiing, drinks in the fashionable bars, a *corrida* or two - nothing that was new to her. She was bored, glad to go to bed at night and sullen when she woke up in the morning. It did not occur to her to try and fill some of her hours with useful housework of any kind - a young lady in her social position was accustomed to having everything done for her by lowly-paid *criadas*. Nor did it occur to her to spend time in the company of good literature or in some other artistic pursuit - a woman in her position seldom paid more than lip-service to the arts. And it certainly did not cross her mind to take a lover because a woman reared in the narrow religious confines of her environment did not dare do that. So she just lay on her bed and sulked. And sulked.

'There it is again!' She jumped off the bed and slipped out onto the balcony. It was the fifth time since her arrival that she had heard those strange pipes. On first hearing the melody some days earlier she had risen lazily and failed to notice anything remarkable in the street below. Today, however, the sheer boredom of the past few days encouraged her to greater effort. The short melody carried the echo of high hills and remote places. It sparkled like the ripple of a mountain stream and was as pure and fresh as its highborn water. Isabel was lively and such music appealed to a romantic spirit that had been all but wrung out of her by her domineering elders. In this she was no different than hundreds of rich or upper-class young women in her country but, at least, she had some sense of the shallowness of her pampered existence. She had plenty of courage too but no one had ever taught her how to fight her own corner. Resistance to her family's humbling of her first love had been too outspoken. That had got her nowhere and thereafter her only weapon was sheer indifference. She

was on the point of looking down into the street when she thought, 'Why spoil a sweet mystery? I shall be wholly disappointed.' And she refrained.

Three days later her curiosity finally got the better of her. From the airy balcony, bathed in morning sunlight, she surveyed the street below. At first she could not tell where the notes were coming from. There weren't many people moving about at that particular time - two street cleaners, a woman carrying fruit and vegetables home from the market, a man laboriously rolling a heavy bicycle, a nondescript passer-by. Then she saw the cyclist stop and raise something to his lips. At once the familiar notes floated up again, as if their rightful place was in the clouds. A *criada* ran across to the man with something in her hand that glittered. The man propped his bike on its stand and took the knives from her. Isabel could pick up no hint of conversation, only the faint steady whine of the carborundum wheel as it ground into the hard steel, raising sparks. Soon the knives were ready. The *criada* paid the man and went back into the apartment block. The passer-by, emerging from the *panadería* on the corner with a baguette under his arm, turned spontaneously and handed the man a pocket knife for sharpening. Unlike the *criada* he seemingly managed to engage the knife-grinder in a brief conversation. Then he was gone. There being no further business in the vicinity the sharpener lifted the rear wheel of the bicycle and flipped the stand back into place behind the saddle. He moved on, raising the pipes to his lips. Isabel watched him pacing slowly down the street until he was out of sight and his piping out of earshot.

She plonked herself down on a cushioned seat and called for breakfast to be brought out to her. While it was being prepared she was asking herself questions about the young man whose curious notes so attracted her. Which region did he come from? Galicia sprang to mind. It seemed to her that someone somewhere had said that all *afiladores* came from Galicia. How was it that she had never seen a knife-grinder in her life before? Someone had to sharpen knives she supposed. Did all grinders employ pan pipes to advertise their presence? She had no idea. Though eloquent on these, this particular artisan appeared to be a rather solitary person. Yet one would have expected conversational ability to be a necessary adjunct to, certainly an advantage in, such a calling. On the other hand, perhaps the man considered it demeaning to give his customers a lot of worthless and

unnecessary sales talk when the quality of his work could speak for itself? Maybe he wasn't a Galician? There was more of Castile in the way he carried himself. The *criada* interrupted her with coffee. Isabel broke off her train of thought, chiding herself on being a hopeless romantic.

Over the succeeding days she continued breakfasting on the balcony when Andrés began his round. There did not appear to be much work for him in an area where people possessed only expensive cutlery and scarcely an edged tool of any kind but he started out there just the same. As she leant over the balcony she wondered if he noticed her at all. Not once did his eyes seem to rest on her. The knife-grinder, on his part, noticed her every gesture. Never did he fail to catch any face or the slightest movement of a curtain that suggested one was lurking behind it. He was a little curious but no more than that. A pretty head with honeyed hair. 'A *ganche* perhaps? More likely one of those idle *Madriñas*,' he muttered to himself. But he welcomed the unexpected surge in business that kept him occupied for a quarter of an hour one morning when a *criada* ran out from the apartment block and handed him an expensive set of English kitchen knives for honing. The knives were already sharp enough to slice a sheet of paper but that did not concern him - if the customer felt they required sharpening that was her business. But his carborundum was too crude an instrument to which to apply them. He pointed this out to the *criada* but she insisted that her mistress wanted them sharpened so he went through the motions, merely ghosting the blades over the wheel. He was well-paid for this superfluous endeavour, too well in fact.

Things might have rested there had not Isabel's fiancé at the last minute telephoned from Madrid to cancel a second promised weekend in succession. Out of sheer pique at being abandoned again she had feigned a bad headache and retired to her room to be alone. But staying indoors on a stiflingly hot evening when everyone else had gone to the Concha to enjoy a firework display proved too much for her. She slipped out of the house after dark without a *señora de compañía* and went for a stroll through a part of the town that she had never visited before, the artisan *barrio* of Gros. Scarcely a pedestrian was to be seen in the dimly lit streets as people were either off milling about at the Concha or indoors preparing supper. Later after the *cena* the small bars, now quiet except for an individual or two, would echo with male conversation. The small shops and *talleres* were securely locked. Then

Isabel came across a building that was immediately familiar, the elegant Plaza de Toros, to which she had been taken by car twice the previous week. She only needed to prick up her ears to catch the sound of the surf breaking on the rocks at the foot of Monte Ulía to negotiate her way from there down to the seafront. The nearby beach of Gros, unlike the fashionable Concha and Ondarreta on the other side of the town, was a preserve of the working class, she had understood. She wandered across the roadway and down the slipway onto the heavy sand where she took off her sandals. At the water's edge she paddled in up to her knees to cool her feet. Suddenly she lost her balance in an unexpectedly strong undertow. She cried out in alarm as the ground slipped from under her feet threatening to swallow her up. A strong arm caught hold of her elbow and pulled her clear.

'*Cuidado, señorita!*' the man said, 'There's a dangerous *resaca* here. Are you okay?'

Isabel, as startled by the sudden appearance of the man from nowhere as by the unexpected suction of the sand, murmured, 'Yes, thank you.'

'Forgive me for grabbing you like that but you can't be too careful on this beach, especially when the tide is on the turn,' he said, releasing her.

She thought there was something familiar about the man but it wasn't until his face caught the dull gleam of the street lights from above that she recognised the *afilador*.

'I was sitting on the sand by the wall listening to the waves when I saw you going to the water's edge. I thought you were a local girl who knew this beach. It was only when I noticed how well dressed you were I could see you were not. I looked around for your chaperone and saw none. Then I feared you might be thinking of doing away with yourself.'

'Doing away with myself!' Isabel laughed.

'Don't laugh, *señorita*. Such things happen,' he said gravely. Then he smiled. 'But I see you are only out for a *paseo*. By the way, put on your sandals. This beach is not very clean.'

'Oh!'

'Don't worry. Nothing that won't wash off.'

'Do you live in Gros?' she asked, leaning on his arm to steady herself as she pulled on her footwear.

'Yes, I rent a room there.'

She appraised his fine features in the light. 'I recognise you. You're the *afilador* who comes down our street.'

He seemed taken aback then peered at her closely. 'Ah, of course, the kind young lady who sends me knives that don't need sharpening.'

The dull light spared Isabel's blushes. 'How could you recognise me from the street? I live on the sixth floor.'

'*Rubia*,' he smiled. 'Not many about in these parts.'

Suddenly there was a loud crack and light danced across their faces.

'Ah, the fireworks,' he pointed across the bay to the Concha where the display was just beginning.

'Want to watch? I like to see Donostia in festive mood.'

'Donostia?' she queried.

'Have you never heard of Donostia?' he grinned, 'It's the Basque name for San Sebastián.'

'Oh.'

He pointed. 'Let's sit up on the wall. We can see it better from there.'

Behind them on the seafront apartments people started to appear at their balconies.

'Have you come out here on your own?' he asked solicitously.

'Yes.'

'You shouldn't go unaccompanied, you know. Specially not at night.'

'I know. But I don't care. I wanted to do something for myself without reference to anyone.'

He grinned. He was younger than she expected, perhaps no more than four or five years older than she was and just a little taller. 'Good for you,' he said approvingly, then pointed. 'Watch the sea. Notice how the reflections skip across the waves.'

In no time it seemed they had introduced themselves and were talking about the simple things that gave them pleasure in life and the music they enjoyed. He went on to tell her about the work of an *afilador*. She was surprised at how articulate and well spoken he was. It was clear he had a more profound knowledge of their country's geography than she had in spite of her advantages for travel. He in turn was fascinated by her accounts of her trips to neighbouring countries and confessed that he had never been beyond the borders of their native land himself. She learned that he was single and she told him, guardedly and unconvincingly, that she was about to marry. Knowing her family connections, of which she wasn't particularly proud and those of her future in-laws of which she was even less enamoured, she didn't elaborate on her home life and he didn't press her on it. He spoke to

her very gently and while nothing that he said was openly critical of her lifestyle, or so it seemed to her, she felt a growing tension about her restricted horizons. Before they realized how much they were enjoying one another's company two hours had slipped by, and lights began to be extinguished in the apartment blocks along the front.

"It's late. You'd better get back or you'll be in trouble," he said. "I'll accompany you home."

She bit her lip.

'Don't worry,' he said reassuringly, 'I'll leave you a street away from yours. Come. I know a discreet shortcut.'

He was as good as his word and halted in the street parallel to hers. 'You'll know your way from here,' he pointed.

'*Sí*, she said, and proffered a hand, '*Adiós!*'

'*Adiós!*' he smiled, shaking it warmly, 'We have had an evening to remember, haven't we? I thank you with all my heart.'

"We will never meet again, you know," she said gravely.

'I know.'

'Thank you for a beautiful time. I will not forget you.' Against the rigid code of her upbringing, she kissed him impulsively on the cheek.

'*Muchísimas gracias, señorita*,' he kissed her hand. '*Adiós.*'

Before she let him go she tried to lighten their parting with a last remark. 'Oh, by the way, are you from Galicia? I have heard that all *afiladores* come from there?'

He laughed, 'Many sure, but not me. *Yo soy de Castilla.*'

She looked at him in wonder. 'That's what I thought. I knew you had that air about you.'

At the corner she turned. He was still there waiting to see her disappear. She waved and he waved back. Then, with troubled countenance, he retraced his steps to Gros.

She returned to a furious and distasteful row with her brother whom her cousins, on returning to find her gone, had contacted in panic at the Concha apartment to see if she was there. In no mood to put up with it she stormed off to her room and slammed the door behind her, threatening to call off her marriage if the family did not leave her in peace.

Unaccustomedly, it was a full week before Andrés Pérez returned to the junction again. Isabel fretted that he had gone away, unable to bear the indignity of never being allowed to see her again. Or that he was ill. Then to an overwhelming sense of joy she heard the pipes calling her to the balcony once more. That morning the *criada* took a pair of scissors to the sharpener. The job done, Andrés took from her what he considered a fair amount in payment and refused to keep the change. Over the few succeeding weeks some item of cutlery or other bladed instrument from that source was always found that 'needed' his skilled attention. And so, three people - socialite, *criada* and *afilador* - played out a quiet ritual. The inescapable reality for Isabel was that, due to their different stations, there was no way that she and the *afilador* could meet again, however much she desired it. It would expose him to all sorts of indignities in the mean-spirited society in which they lived. She could not know his mind but she would dearly have loved to spend more time with him. On the other hand, confused as she was, she had no intention of not marrying her officer.

Too soon it was time for her to think of returning to the Capital. The wedding was to be in October and there were many things to be arranged. She would not be sorry to leave her boring cousins behind. Her fiancé had rung to cancel yet another weekend, this time pleading urgent business of state as he had been put in charge of some aspect of the execution of the infamous revolutionary Martín Ibarra, about whom she had seen a brief bulletin on television. This time, unlike the previous occasion, she felt greatly relieved. This time too, her parents ensured that she was not left unaccompanied.

The last week arrived and Isabel decided to speak to the knife-grinder again. She could not go away without seeing him face to face for a final moment. She came with a special request. Would he sell her the pipes he played? She would pay well for them. She stood there in confusion when his response was a polite but firm 'no'. The pipes were a part of him, he explained, handing them to her so that she could get the feel of them. He could make or buy himself another set, yes, but these particular ones held a very special value for him. They had been given to him by a great friend; a person now dead who had changed the course of his whole existence. Isabel understood and didn't understand. She just stood there mute, watching the skilful hands lightly honing the already well-edged blade that was her excuse to approach him. When he had finished she paid him. As always he took only what he felt was his due. Then they parted.

*'Buena suerte! Isabel Saizar,'* he called after her softly, his sensitive face shrouded in regret.

Isabel turned, *'A tí también, Andrés Pérez,'* she said, showing her esteem by addressing him for the first time in the familiar form.

She couldn't go out on the balcony again and when she heard the sound of the pipes for the last time tears came to her eyes. A deep, inexplicable sadness enveloped her. She returned to Madrid morose and before she knew it had morosely married and accepted her husband's perfunctory love-making on their wedding night. *'Donostia,'* she breathed afterwards, falling asleep.

Three months later she read in the *diario, Ya*, that the *afilador* who had lived under a number of aliases, one of which was Andrés Pérez, and three others had been arrested in San Sebastián. His real name was Cayetano Rojas. A former engineering student, and known follower of Martín Ibarra, he had been sought by the authorities for some time. That idyllic evening by the beach at Gros, that was a constant memory, flashed before her eyes. She dashed to her room to hide her tears from her mother who was visiting at the time. Over the next two weeks she had to stand by helplessly as the inexorable quasi-judicial process ran its killing course. Did she imagine it that Maria Dolores, the sympathetic *criada* she had insisted on bringing back with her to the Capital, was aware of the reason for her pain and was especially protective of her? Neither spoke of the tragic events but a bond, already there, served to strengthen and empower them.

Isabel's father-in-law headed the military court that hastened Andrés and his *compañeros* to a quick death. The following morning her husband owned up with pride to having had direct responsibility for the execution detail and, in the evening after an impromptu dinner for his like-minded friends, boasted that the revolutionaries' remains had been buried anonymously in a cemetery for the destitute at the limits of the city where new high-rise social housing was being erected.

Not long afterwards a package was thrust into Isabel's hands while she was alone in a busy shopping street off the fashionable *Gran Vía*. She looked at the brown paper bag fearfully, thinking that someone, knowing she was the daughter-in-law of the brutal general Antemil, might have targeted her for assassination. But something told her to stay calm. Moving into an alcove she opened the packet. It contained the pan pipes that Andrés had let her handle in San Sebastián. She dissolved in tears and leant back against a wall for support. A woman passing by broke her stride solicitously but Isabel motioned her gently away, nodding that she was all right.

From that moment Isabel made it her business to devour all the information she could get hold of on Ibarra's revolutionary movement. What she read she did not always understand, or agree with, but it was sufficient to make her question the morality of her life until now and to see more clearly the hypocrisy of her wealthy family members and their friends who cared for little else but making money

and showing off their tawdry trappings of power. And she railed against herself for having entered into a marriage that had failed even before she left the altar and that now held promise of an offspring. But most of all she raged at herself for having lacked the courage to publicly profess her love for Andrés Pérez. Not once but twice she had let herself down in matters of the heart.

Her husband became increasingly tetchy at her questioning him about the rights and wrongs of the Franco regime. Politics was for men he stormed and when she asked why a simple *afilador* who had killed no one should have merited the death penalty he taunted her with the revelation that it was she who had drawn attention to the man in the first place. The *sereno* of her cousins' apartment had warned him that his fiancée was displaying a little too much interest in the humble artisan and plain-clothes officers had been posted to keep him under surveillance. Imagine their satisfaction on discovering that a suspected romantic captivation had turned up none other than the much-wanted terrorist Rojas! They had kept him under observation over a protracted period before netting the whole cell and aborting a public outrage.

Isobel felt icy cold but declined to satisfy him with the slightest reaction to the disclosure that she had been a capricious instrument of betrayal. She calmly took her leave, quietly closing the door of the lounge after her. Then she went to their bedroom and closed the door to this too. She sat down at her dressing table and opened the bottom drawer. From underneath her carefully pressed and folded silken underwear she took out the plain cardboard box in which she treasured the pipes. She held them to her breast, then blew softly on them. A susurrant of sacred places sent a shiver down her spine. '*Mí corazón,*' she whispered, 'I will raise a viper in this nest of Antemils. Yours will be my child's ideals'.

After a while she went back to her husband, on the way giving Maria Dolores a cryptic smile. She announced that she was pregnant, then told him they would enjoy separate sleeping arrangements from now on.