

Now

by Donal Thompson

It was raining horizontally up Gran Via as a gale howled through the streets of Zarautz. Umbrellas had become satellite dishes picking up their owners' curses. I clung to the buildings, moving like an SAS man, soggy and saturated, taking advantage of the shelter of the balconies. Nemesis arrived in the stocky shape of an old woman. She too was claiming the dry side of the pavement and when we met she stopped and looked right at me. With all that water it was more high tide than *High Noon* but she was in earnest.

'Let me past, young man'

'But Señora...'

'Let me past'

'You have an umbrella!'

She planted herself.

I manoeuvred round her with my heavy hard guitar-case banging into my knees and my bodhrán case slipping off my shoulder. She walked on about five metres before stopping at a doorway, shaking off the little rain on her umbrella with two rough jolts and entering.

The music from the Wise Maid, 'Zarautz's First Irish Pub', splashed out onto the street as a group of students came out. It was 'acid-techno-house-jazz-punk' or some other creation of the Devil. The grating stridency of a car factory turned up full. Chunga-chunga-chunga. The Wise Maid was one of the city's principal gay bars but tonight, thanks to Sheila, it was to be the venue of an Irish Music Session. Chunga-Chunga-Chunga was what Miguel the barman thought of the idea.

Sheila was married to Paco, a Riojan wide boy whose early career as a shoe-salesman had blossomed into the ownership of the Zarautz's pinkest pub.

'They have no kids, you see, ' he explained in one his light-bulb moments, 'Lots of spare cash.'

The pub had been *The Green Light* (la Luz Verde) when he took it over. It became *The Wise Maid* thanks to a rumour that the hated

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Fontana De Oro was about to become *Molly Malones*. The clientele hardly noticed. Apart from Miguel Chunga-Chunga who had scowled like a scalded Joan Crawford at the prospect.

I banged and bustled through the door. Along the left of the bar couples and groups sat at small white marble tables drinking dinky coffees and liqueurs. At the end, in the ill-lit lounge area, three chairs shared a table and a single microphone hung down from the ceiling. All the familiar faces were there. Fraggie, Mad Mary and Joe and Billy the Bollox. There had never been a 'trad' session in the city before and so the ex-pat Paddies were out in force. Guinness where once there was gin. Too-ra-loo-ra-loo edging out chung-a-chunga as Sheila slotted Seán Keane into the CD player.

'Miguel! A pint of Guinness, please!'

I might as well have asked for his mother's immortal soul. A smile as benign as a stiletto. But he served a clean and tidy pint.

Sheila was chatting to Alan the flute and fiddler Liam. I went to the musician's table and unpacked my guitar and tightened the skin on the bodhrán with a small Allen key. Like all drums the bodhrán lost interest in humid weather. I thought up a mild curse against Basque rain, old women and critical barmen. Then I collected my pint and joined Sheila and the boys.

'Now' said Sheila.

'Now' said I.

An Irish 'now' can mean many things. It can mean 'What do you think of that?' or 'Let's not talk about that'. On this occasion it meant 'Isn't this nice?' Sheila gave me that wide grin that defined her family. You always knew when she had relatives over. An unknown face split by that grin was information enough. She hadn't always smiled at me. I'm 'clotted cream', 'a plastic Paddy'. I was born in England of Irish parents. We got off on the wrong foot. No brogue, you see.

'Sheila' said Imelda, 'This is Dónal. Just arrived. Teaching up in Hernani with Joe'

'Hello Sheila. Nice to meet you.' I said.

'Speak to me in Irish!' she snapped

'I can only say "kiss me arse" in Irish'

'Speak to me in an Irish accent!'

'Go fuck yourself!'

When it turned out that I knew more about the 'Troubles' than she did and that I was right about Wolfe Tone, the Irish patriot , being a protestant, I was grudgingly given Irish nationality.

'Here's to the Basque Irish sessions!' said Sheila raising her Baileys to the three of us.

'And since when did Englishmen sing in your bar, Sheila?' I teased.

She grinned.

'Now.'

