

## Chapter 4: **The Tennis Racket**

We were astonished at how little the two new TV sets cost us.

What's more, divided by three, it hardly hurt at all.

What had hurt, though, had been the Girls repeatedly referring to our so-called failings. They visibly gloated on them in a thoughtless and positively unhealthy manner.

The fact that the events had not been *failings* made it even more challenging to put up with. Our evaluation of the occurrences being due to mere accidents was, needless to say, rejected out of hand.

'You're to blame anyway,' grumbled Alun, 'that's what happens when you trick an innocent amateur into doing a professional's job.'

'Exactly,' I agreed, 'and when he can't master the job, he feels inadequate. He becomes overstressed, loses his patience and throws televisions off roofs.'

'And into ponds,' added Alun.

'I did nothing of the sort,' cried Mike. 'And I am certainly not inadequate, although you two certainly appear to be.'

At this point, Mike paused to think, something which always takes a little time. He then went on, 'I'll slightly correct that statement,' he sneered unpleasantly. 'You two are inadequate except when it comes to talking the most utter rubbish, then I admit you're both highly competent practitioners.'

'You usually employ the term "Gibberish", Mike,' I said.

'Yes. Gibberish is perhaps a better term,' nodded Mike, 'thank you.'

'My pleasure.'

'Well, I didn't throw it,' said Alun ignoring this and turning to me. 'Did you?'

'No.'

'There you are then. It must have been you, Mike.'

'I did *not* throw it. It slipped.'

'And then threw itself into the pond.'

'Televisions do not throw themselves. They're inert objects,' he sighed.

'Possibly. But you pointed it in the right direction,' continued Alun.

'And any amount of sighing loudly can't change that,' I added.

'Don't talk rot, you two.'

'Gibberish would again fit nicely there,' I suggested, 'or possibly "drivel".'

Mike sighed again, 'Anyway, who was supposed to be holding the damn thing? Tell me that,' he smirked, feeling that here he had marked a decisive point.

'That's a nice way to talk of a deceased being,' I frowned.

'For god's sake, you idiots. It was not a being; it was a pile of semi-obsolete electronics. I repeat, who was supposed to be holding it?'

'You were,' I smiled and wiggled my eyebrows.

This was a lie, of course. However, Mike's memory is never excellent, even at the best of times. Consequently, I felt it was an excellent evasive tactic.

'Ah!' he frowned. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'Hum.'

Margaux nodded, 'that's as may be, Alun? But, all the same, Mike didn't pour the vase of stagnant water down the back of the other TV, did he? That was your

contribution to the evening's entertainment, wasn't it, Alun?

'Exactly,' Mike brightened. 'I was in the kitchen.'

'Having set the timebomb ticking,' snarled Alun, 'anyway, it wasn't stagnant.'

'By the way, did you get all the bits of champagne bottle out of your hindquarters, Mike?' smiled Margaux.

Mike closed his eyes and sighed for the third time.

'You should be careful about all that sighing you're doing, Mike,' I said, 'It might become a habit.'

Alun nodded, 'People have been known to die of over-sighing,' he said. 'It weakens the rear tongue muscles.'

'And your tongue flops about limply and gets tangled up in things,' I contributed.

'Apparently, It can trigger strangulation of the goal bladder,' nodded Alun.

'As discovered by president De Goal?' I said.

'Exactly.'

'A nasty way to go,' I nodded, frowning.

'Shut up,' growled Mike.

Anyway, we realised that the sooner the screens were glowing and flickering anew, the better. So off we went as soon as breakfast had been satisfactorily completed.

To be more truthful, we went as soon as we were ordered out of the house, which equates to the same thing. More or less, that is.

Once the TVs were selected, paid for and safely loaded into the car boot, we decide to have a wander around the big sports shop across the way.

We thence spent an agreeable hour fiddling with mountain climbing equipment, trekking gear, windsurfing boards and an array of highly desirable but totally unnecessary technical articles.

On the way out, though, I spotted an interesting looking bin at the end of the tennis section.

This particular bin was full to overflowing with the previous season's test rackets.

Naturally, they were all badly scratched and dented, but one in particular caught my eye. I snatched it up.

'Hell!' I whistled.

Well, on reflection, I'm not sure that one can whistle while saying "Hell," but we'll let it go at that for the present.

'What now?' sighed Mike, 'What rubbish are you going to vomit forth this time?'

'Or Gibberish,' suggested Alun.

'See the price?' I pointed at the red sticker, and they leant over.

'Thirty euros. So?'

I swished the racket through the air above my head, then spun it in my hand, 'This just happens to be one of the most expensive rackets around. High carbon fibre content.'

'So?' said Alun.

'So, I'm having it. It would cost four hundred euros new and strung like this one is.'

'But it isn't new. It's a damaged wreck.'

I made an impatient noise and swished the racket again, this time decapitating a clothes dummy propped behind me.

'Oops. 'Put its head back, Mike.'

'Please...'

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'Please, Mike.'

'So that if a salesman comes around, I'll get the blame.'

'That's it,' I admitted.

'Quick thinking,' smiled Alun.

'Mind you,' I added, 'If it happened to be a salesgirl, one of the sporty ones, we could let her put it back. Then we could ogle a bit.'

'That's a point worth meditating,' agreed Alun.

'But you don't need a racket,' said Mike easing the head into place and deliberately leaving it looking in the wrong direction.'

'And you haven't played for twenty years,' added Alun.

'I'll start playing again.'

'I wonder what your better half will say,' mused Alun.

'I'll say it'll keep me out of the pubs.'

'There aren't any pubs here in France,' pointed out Mike.

'Can you lend me thirty euros, Mike?'

'No,' said Mike resolutely.

'Oh, come on. That way, I would be able to say that you gave me the racket for my birthday.'

'Lending means that the money would be repaid,'

'Naturally.'

'But you wouldn't repay me.'

'Hell! That's bad form, Mike.'

'No. That's the pure and simple truth.'

'What do you take me for.'

'You. I take you for You.'

'You're not very sporting, Mike.'

'That's why I'm so rich with an Aston-Martin in the garage and a house full of valuable paintings.'

'I'm disappointed in you, Mike. What about you, Alun?'

'See you later,' said Alun striding away.

Once home, we set up the TVs and, that being done, sat down for the midday meal.

I bore the inevitable snide remarks about my new racket with dignity, 'you'll see,' I contented myself as a closing sally, 'You'll see.'

As the Girls left to do the shopping, Margaux made what she clearly considered a clever quip. I'll avoid mentioning it as it is simply not worth the ink.

Well, as soon as the front door had slammed, we took our places on the sofa and diligently set about testing out the TV remote control.

While Alun zapped, I picked up my new wonder racket and spun it.

'Won't you need a press?' asked Mike.

We stared at him.

'You haven't played much tennis recently then, Mike,' said Alun.

'Why do you say that?'

'Simply because no one uses racket presses these days.'

'I don't see why not,' said Mike.

'Because rackets don't use wood anymore.'

'Ah!'

'They don't warp, you see.'

'Mind you,' said Alun, 'warped rackets did spice up the game a bit. One was never quite sure which direction the ball would take.'

'When you play Alun,' smirked Mike, 'even with modern technology, that's still the case.'

'Very amusing.'

'I was always particularly impressed by his tactics,' I added, 'especially the trick of placing the ball on the adjoining court.'

'Yep. That really spiced things up. Especially if the other game was an important one played by seriously competitive players,' smiled Mike.

'Mind you,' I added, 'Mike has an excuse in not knowing about modern tennis racket technology. It's quite a recent evolution after all.'

Mike sat up and nodded happily as I continued.

'Yes. The new technology has only been around for fifty years or so.'

'Very funny,' he snorted.

'This new carbon fibre structure is ultra-light,' I smiled as I swished about.

'Mind the telly,' warned Alun.

'My head too,' added Mike, ducking.

'They're a bit fragile though,' continued Alun. 'That's no doubt why they're selling them off cheap.'

'That's no doubt why Wimbledon champions use them,' I retorted.

'Nice colour though,' said Mike, 'I like the logo too.'

'That's not a Logo Mike,' said Alun, 'It's a scratch.'

'The addition of the carbon makes them light, extremely rigid and exceptionally responsive,' I quoted from the advertisement I had read earlier.

'You still have to hit the ball though,' said Alun.

'In the right direction,' added Mike.

'Mind you, there are only three hundred and sixty degrees in a circle,' smiled Alun. 'So, if you keep at it

long enough, you're certain to hit the place your aiming for sooner or later.'

I stood up, spinning the racket and swished it about in the sitting room.

'Watch out for the telly,' repeated Alun.

'This thing is a marvel,' I smiled. 'I can't wait to get out on the court.'

'We usually seem to end up *In* rather than *On* court,' chuckled Alun.

We all had a good laugh, and as we did, I tried out a service, with a flurry and a swish.

As I threw the racket backwards for the second trial, Alun jumped, 'watch out!'

There was a crash and a grating noise.

The racket hit the overhanging mezzanine, splintered, and drooped limply.

'I told you carbon fibre was fragile,' laughed Alun from the floor onto which he had rolled, holding his sides.

'You won't need a press now,' smirked Mike...

'Oh hell!'

'Only thirty euros down the drain,' shrugged Mike. 'It would have been four hundred if it had been new. So, look on the bright side.'

I looked down at the shattered and drooping remains of the racket.

'It hasn't got any sides at all now, let alone a bright one.'

Alun was, as usual, in contortions of laughter on the floor. However, even in his present condition, he managed to lift his arm and point.

'Look,' he roared.

'Oh hell!' I groaned, raising my eyes.

'Oops,' Added Mike.



Across the ceiling, a thick black mark traced out the trajectory of the racket head.

I drew over a chair and jumped up to have a closer look. However, I was still holding my drooping racket, and this was assuredly a bad move.

As I jumped up, the drooping head caught the underneath of the seat and yanked it backwards. Then, as I landed in the place where the centre should have been, my feet only found the outer edge. My downward movement flipped the chair backwards and upwards. I fell forwards, snatching the racket with me and the combined actions sent the chair spinning through the air toward the brand new television screen.

'No,' I screamed.

However, the chair listened not.

With a dull thud, the back legs hit the screen and disappeared through it.

'Oh hell!' cried Mike.

Alun said nothing because he was rolling about spluttering with laughter as usual.

He is a man one simply cannot rely on in times of strife.

There was the tiniest wisp of smoke, a metallic clicking sound, then all the electricity went off.

As for me, I continued in approximately the same direction. Luckily, I was headed towards the sofa, which was good news. However, the bad news was that the tennis racket had preceded me thence.

My head came down on it with a crunch, and I leapt to my feet, clutching my forehead.

'Oh, God!'

'The circuit breaker's tripped,' volunteered Mike.

'Really?!' I sighed.

'Yep.'

'My head,' I groaned.

Mike inspected it. 'Lovely. You'll have a nice moon-shaped bruise.'

'Brilliant.'

Alun had by now got to his knees, 'Oh god! Look what you've done.'

We turned and gazed at the chair sticking through the new TV screen.

'What time does the next plane leave Alun?' I asked.

'We're too late.'

'Quick then. Back to the TV shop, before the Girls get back.'

'We'll each draw some cash out so they won't spot the expenditure on the bank card data,' said Alun.

'Each?' cried Mike, 'It was entirely his fault.'

'Come on, Mike. This is a moment for solidarity,' I frowned. 'You're not going to let a friend down in his moment of need.'

'Yes, I am.'

'I'll make up some terrible incriminating story about you if you fail me,' I threatened. 'The girls will believe it, and you'll be shunned forever.'

'You're a disgusting menacing thug,' he cried.

'This is a simple business arrangement,' I countered as he blew out his angry red cheeks.

Alun pointed at the ceiling, 'what do we do about that?'

'Oh, that'll come off with a soapy sponge,' said Mike. 'I'll do it while you're loading the ruins in the boot.'

'We'll dump it at the tip on the way,' said Alun.

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It should be remembered that we all had a great deal of experience concerning "tips", which those who have followed our previous adventures will by now recognise.

However, when we returned to fetch Mike, he stood, hands on hips, staring at the ceiling.

We followed his gaze.

'Oh Hell,' I cried.

'The old sponge trick didn't work as expected then,' suggested Alun.

In place of the narrow black track, we now discovered a wide brown one.

'What time did you say the plane left? Any plane, any destination....' I asked.

'Look,' said Mike, 'the only solution is to repaint the ceiling. That'll only take an hour.'

'Brilliant.' I said, raising my eyebrows.

'I'm the only one competent enough to get the job done quickly without damaging something else. I'll do it while you two get the new TV. Come on.'

Alun and I exchanged worried glances. We had no choice but to hope for the best.

When we got back, we were amazed to find the ceiling painted and nothing damaged at all.

'Brilliant Mike.'

'I told you that you can always count on me.'

'I know you told us that, but it has not always proved to be reliable.'

'Shut up.'

'I think we deserve a beer, don't you,' smiled Alun.

We agreed.

As we sat with our legs stretched out, sipping our drinks, I suddenly started. 'Hell!'

'Now what?' sighed Alun.

'How do we explain away the smell of fresh paint?'

'Ah!'

'Exactly.'

Mike sighed. 'You two have absolutely no imagination or forethought, have you.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning that when I said you can always count on me in times of strife, you can.'

'Can we?'

'Yes.'

'And pray how have you solved this insoluble smell problem, professor?'

'Have you smelt a solution,' I smiled.

Mike stood and slid open the main patio windows. He stepped outside and returned carrying a one-meter square panel of wood.

'Voila.'

We looked from the panel back to each other. We were at a loss for words.

Mike smiled, 'clever, eh?'

I rubbed my chin and pulled a face, 'You might like to explain, as, for the moment, your solution leaves us a bit in the dark.'

'Well, this is the present that the three of us made for your sister-in-law this afternoon.'

'We did what?'

'We painted a picture for her, in thanks of her putting us up.'

He spun the board to exhibit an incredibly gaudy childlike painting of a field, a line of trees and mountains.

'My God!' cried Alun.

'Good, eh. You recognise the view from the windows, of course.'

'And all done in the same smelly paint,' cried Alun.

'Brilliant.' I clapped my hands. 'I had no idea you could paint.'

'He can't,' said Alun.

'No,' laughed Mike. 'I agree with you for once. But they won't dare to get rid of it while we're here, will they.'

'Which will explain the smell.' I laughed.

'We all deserve another beer,' laughed Alun. So we propped the horrible painting up on the sideboard and went in search of the desired refreshment.

Half an hour later, the three women stood in front of the panel as if transformed into pillars of salt.

After a long silence, Margaux found her tongue.

'Honestly, it's impossible to find words capable of expressing the intensity of my feelings,' she said.

'Likewise,' agreed my wife.

The Sis-in-L nodded and made a low mumbling noise.

She was clearly under the influence of a profoundly stirring emotion.

'I'm pleased you like it,' smiled Mike. 'We hoped you would, didn't we?'

'Exactly,' nodded Alun.

'Don't touch it, though. The paint's still wet,' I said

'Best not to move it to its permanent position for a day or two,' added Mike.

The three women exchanged glances. We guessed where that permanent position would be. Indeed, we had left the other TV there only an hour or so earlier.

'The smell will have faded by tomorrow, I expect,'  
Mike smiled. 'We enjoyed doing it, didn't we.'

Alun and I nodded enthusiastically.

'Would you like us to put up a hook on the wall for it?'

The sis-in-L shook herself out of the salt-pillar state and almost jumped, 'Oh no. No. Don't worry.'

'It'll be no trouble. Where's the drill?'

'Alun...' said Margaux, 'Why not let her get used to the painting first. Then she can decide the best place for it.'

'Oh, OK. What about an aperitif?'

This provided momentary relief from the shock of seeing the painting for the first time.

'What's that bruise on your forehead,' asked my wife as she sipped her Martini.

'Bruise?' My hand involuntarily caressed the swollen moon-shaped bump.

Margaux came over and inspected it. 'How did you manage that?'

With a mischievous smile, Mike piped up, 'Wouldn't it be wise to ask Mrs Yamamoto to have a look at it? It might get infected.'

Alun, always one to push a sinking man under the water, nodded, 'A very wise precaution. Shall I pop around and ask?'

'Shut up, you two.'

'So?' said my wife, 'explain.'

I hesitated. In the euphoria of solving the problems, I had neglected to think up a convincing excuse for that part of our adventure. Luckily, however, Alun can always be counted on in times of need.

'Mike hit him,' he volunteered.

'What?'

'He wanted to add a hot air balloon to the picture, and Mike didn't.'

Mike, for once, simply opened his eyes wider than seem humanly possible and gurgled.

'He wanted it straight in front of the bit Mike considered to be his masterpiece. That mountain peak there,' he pointed.

'And?' asked Margaux.

'They came to brushes.'

'Did they?' mused my wife.

'Yes. They had a fencing match.'

My wife smiled, 'And Mike won...'

'Yes, but I think it was a little unfair because he used his forbears deadly family thrust. They call it a "botte" here in France.'

'An odd-shaped mark for a paintbrush to make,' mused Margaux.

'That's why that thrust was so dangerous and has been kept a dead secret all these years,' nodded Alun.

'I didn't know Mike had buccaneers in his family,' said my wife. 'Perhaps you could tell us all about their history, Mike.'

Mike pulled a face and gazed at us for assistance. Getting none, he floundered on, 'Well. In fact...'

'Yes...'

Suddenly a bright idea struck him, 'Well, it's all on the family website. I'll show you later. It's all very, very interesting, you know. You'll be surprised.'

'I'm sure we will,' nodded my wife. 'Later on then?'

'Yes. I'll just have to remember the title of the website.'

'And that has slipped your mind for the moment?'

'Yes.'

'But, you'll remember, of course.'

'Naturally. One can't forget one's family history, can one. What about another glass of aperitif.'

'Good thinking Mike,' cried Alun, 'come and help Mike.'

Mike didn't require any spurring and was out of the room in a fraction of a second.

The girls exchanged amused looks but shuddered as their eyes involuntarily crossed the painting once more.

A little later, as the Sis-in-L was handing around the entrée, Alun leant forward.

'Did you know,' he smiled, 'that the term "Sister-in-law" is a deformation of an extremely ancient French term?'

'No,' said Mike, 'we don't, and we don't want to hear any more rubbish from your twisted mind Alun.'

'Well, I'm sure the Girls are interested.'

'Why are you sure of that?' asked Margaux.

Alun ignored this, 'Well, it comes from the period of the medieval Anglo-French wars in Nimes....'

'Oh hell! sighed Mike, 'here he goes again.'

In fact, 'It originated from a letter sent home by an injured officer who had been made captive.' He nodded and picked up his fork. 'As was the practice in those days, his release was being negotiated. The going price for nobles was laid down in "Ye Olde international Ransome hande-booke", as it was then called.



'Now, this is extremely informative, Alun,' frowned my wife. 'Do go on.'

'No. Just shut up, Alun,' squawked Mike.

'Well, in his letter requesting the allotted sum to be transferred via the "westerner Unione" of the period, he mentioned the high quality of the health-care system.'

'Even in those days, the cost of the workforce was a critical factor. However, by far the cheapest labour available was that provided by members of the monasteries. The nuns worked for free. So, hospital directors hung up cheap wooden crosses and a few holy pictures so that the Nuns would feel at home. They then sat back as real directors should and raked in the pieces of gold.'

'SO!' sighed Mike. 'I suppose you're going to get to the point so that we can get on with our food.'

'Well, in his request for funds, the officer, a noble and just man, said he was looked after by a Nun.'

'And that's that, is it?' Mike cast his eyes upward at the ceiling and quickly away again.

'Don't be so impatient, Mike,' scolded Margaux. 'We're interested.'

'No, you aren't. You're just pretending.'

'Anyway, the noble officer mentioned that the nun was exceptionally talented. So he wrote using the French way of expressing the idea that she was; "Une bonne-soeur en or".' In other words, "a nun worth her weight in gold".

'And then he died,' scoffed Mike, 'and they all lived happily ever after.'

Alun ignored this interruption, 'This message got messed about by incompetent translation and sharing

from person to person and first became The Sister and the Oar, and finally the Sister-in-Law.'

I laughed, 'And that's how present hospital ward tyrants are now called Sister. Otherwise, they eat you....'

'Interesting No?' nodded Alun. 'I bet you didn't know that.'

'No. that's absolute rubbish as usual,' sighed Mike

That reminds me of the medieval children's story...'  
'Oh no!' groaned Mike, 'no more rubbish.'

'Well, we now know it as; "The chicken who laid a golden egg."

In medieval times, however...'

'For god's sake Alun,' cried Mike.

'In medieval time, as I said, it was a totally different tale altogether.

The original title was not "The chicken who laid a golden egg" but "The chick, the hen and old Ben Neg."

'Oh god!' sighed Mike.

'We already warned you about over-sighing, Mike,' I said.

'Would you like to hear what it was about?'

'No...'

This interested me, 'Who was Old Ben Neg, Alun? Sounds a nice sort of chap.'

'It's odd you should say that because he was completely the opposite.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. He even tricked the hen into thinking the same.'

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'And the little chick saved the day?'

'Exactly.'

'Oh hell...' sighed Mike.

'That's where Old Ben Neg ended up. Would you like to hear the story?'

'No, we wouldn't,' Cried Mike, 'We want to eat.'

'Oh well. It'll keep.'

'Will it? Oh, God...'