

Wilt in Nowhere

By Tom Sharpe

Published by Arrow

Chapter 1

'God, what a day,' said Wilt as he and Peter Braintree sat in the garden of the Duck and Dragon with their beers and watched a lone oarsman scull down the river. It was summer and the evening sun glinted on the water. 'After that bloody Entitlement meeting I had to tell Johnson and Miss Flour they've been made redundant because of the financial cuts, and then after that I was told that the Computer Department is going to do next year's timetable and I don't have to bother, the Vice-Principal sends a memo to say there's a glitch in the programme or something and I've had to do it myself.'

'You'd think the one thing a computer would be good at was sorting classes and putting them in the right rooms. All it requires is logic,' said Braintree, Head of English.

'Logic, my foot. Try using logic with Mrs Robbins who won't teach in Room 156 because Laurence Seaforth is next door in 155 and she can't make herself heard for the din his drama class makes. And Seaforth won't move because he's used 155 for ten solid years and the acoustics are just right for declaiming 'To be or not to be' or Henry V's speech at Agincourt in multi-decibels. Try getting a computer to take that into account.'

'It's the human factor. I've had the same sort of trouble with Jackson and Ian Wesley. They're supposed to grade the same exam papers and if Jackson marks a paper high, Wesley invariably says it's lousy. Human factor every time.'

'Inhuman factor in my case,' said Wilt. 'I've been dragooned into taking Ms Lashskirt's class in Gender Assertiveness because the Sociology Department refuse to have her and she has been off sick for a month. You want to try coping with fifteen mature women who are determined to assert their assertiveness and don't need to learn how to. I come out of that class a broken man. Last week I was fool enough to say women were more successful on committees than men because they never stop talking. I might just as well have stuck a stick into a hornet's nest. And when I get home Eva gives me

hell. Why does everyone feel the need to be so bloody aggressive these days' Look at that.'

A motor launch had come round the bend in the river and swamped the lone oarsman's boat. He pulled in to the bank to bale it out.

'There's a speed limit on the river and that bastard was exceeding it,' said Braintree.

'There's a time limit in our house and I'm exceeding it,' said Wilt. 'Tonight we've got people coming as well. All the same if I'm going to be late I may as well have another pint to soften the blow.'

He got up and went into the pub.

'Who's coming tonight' Braintree asked when Wilt came back with two pints.

'The usual. Mavis and Patrick Mottram and Elsa Ramsden with yet another acolyte who writes and recites poetry, I expect. Not that I'm going to be around. I get enough hell during the day.'

Braintree nodded.

'I had La Lashskirt and Ronnie Lann at me the other day in the Staff Room about raising student consciousness multisexually. I told them the students I have are far more multisexually conscious than I am or ever was and besides I object to this emphasis on sexuality for eleven-year-olds. Lashskirt wants to run a course on oral sex and clitoral stimulation for Nursery Nurses. I said to hell with that.'

'I can't see that going down with Mrs Routledge. She'll blow her top.'

'Blown it already. With the Principal no less at the Recruitment Meeting,' said Braintree. 'Told him she would raise the matter with the Education Authority and see how they liked it.'

'What did the Principal have to say about that' asked Wilt.

'Said we had to keep up with modern attitudes and practices and how we needed to attract students. Numbers are all that count these days. Old Major Millfield then joined in and said sodomy was sodomy and since it was strictly forbidden in the Old Testament he couldn't see how it could possibly be described as 'a modern practice'. There was a right old barney.'

Wilt sipped his beer and shook his head.

'What beats me is why anyone should think that sort of stuff is going to attract the sort of students we need. Wait till I tell Eva. She'd go out of her mind if she thought the quads were getting lessons about clitoral stimulation and oral sex. That's one reason she sent them to the Convent.'

'I thought she did it out of religious conviction,' said Braintree. 'Didn't she have some sort of religious experience a year ago''

'She had something. With a creature who claimed to be a New Age Pentecostalist. I prefer not to think what that something was. Religious conversion it wasn't.'

'A New Age Pentecostalist' Don't Pentecostalists speak with tongues''

'That's not the only thing this one did with her tongue. In the shower. Yes, I know, you want to know, what were they doing in the shower together' Well, as a matter of fact this mad cow ' her name was Erin Moore by the way ' well, Erin said it was a necessary part of the rebirth or baptismal process, a form of total immersion so that the spirit could enter the body. I think there was some confusion about spirits and tongues. I wasn't in the house at the time, thank heaven, and Eva wouldn't tell me afterwards. Said it was too disgusting. The long and the short of it was Eva came off Pentecostalism like a shot and so did the mad cow with the tongue. Eva half killed her and the damage in the bathroom had to be seen to be believed. The shower rail came down and the shower head. Eva used it as a battleaxe.

And the wall cabinet. There was glass from broken bottles everywhere and of course the shower pipe went berserk and writhed all over the place. Eva was too intent on murdering the bloody woman to think of turning the water off. She chased the creature round the house and out into the street, naked of course and bleeding. By that time the bathroom was flooded and water was stacking up above the kitchen ceiling.

Naturally that came down and burst. Half a ton of water cascaded down on to the top of the fridge. I suppose it's warm and if there's one thing Tibby doesn't like it's water. Got a phobia about the stuff ever since the girls tried to give her swimming lessons in the garden pond and damned near drowned the poor beast. The consequence of the downpour from the bathroom was that she went up the wall, literally, and round it. Eva's very proud of the ornamental plates she's collected on the Welsh dresser.

They weren't there by the time that cat had finished. The electric kettle went for a burton, and the Magimix machine. Both on the floor. And just to round things off the lights blew. In fact the entire electricity failed. Looked like the place had been hit by a bomb and it certainly cost a bomb to repair. As if that

wasn't bad enough the insurance people wouldn't cough up because Eva refused to tell the bloke who came round what had actually happened. Said it had been an accident. He didn't believe that for a moment. Shower heads don't get ripped off by accident and the insurance company wasn't going to be ripped off either. The only good thing to come out of the ghastly business was that it got Eva off the God trot and no mistake.'

'And what happened to the tongue lady''

'Went back into the loony bin she'd come out of. That is, when she was well enough to leave hospital. Turned out she was a card-carrying schizophrenic with religious mania. Fortunately she explained her injuries by saying she had been wrestling with an angel or a devil though she had no idea why she'd been wearing a shower cap.'

'Yes, but I still don't understand why Eva sent the quads to the Convent if she's gone off religion. The whole point about the Convent is that it's religious and Catholic at that.'

'Ah, but that's because you don't understand how her mind works. Eva goes from one extreme to another. She's not having the girls go to a state school because at the primary school they went to in Newhall the teacher had the entire class sit in cardboard boxes all morning one day ' they were six at the time ' because this was supposed to make them 'aware'. Yes I know how you feel about 'awareness', it's the same as 'consciousness-raising', but they had to learn what it felt like to sleep rough in a cardboard box in the street in London. That finished Eva. She told the Headmistress her daughters weren't going to end up sleeping rough and she'd sent them to school to learn to read and write and do arithmetic, not to play silly games in cardboard boxes. She made the same point at the Parent'Teacher Association meeting and wanted to know when the school was going to issue the six-year-olds with leather miniskirts and boots so they could become 'aware' what it was like to be a teenage whore. And you know what the people in Newhall are like.'

'Don't I just. Betty's mother lives over there and the house is always full of Gucci socialists with incomes up in the six figures who still think Lenin had his heart in the right place.'

'After that and the tongue lady Eva went to the other end of the spectrum. Costs a small fortune at the Convent but at least they teach them properly and believe in authority. Which reminds me, I'd better be getting back. Eva's in a nasty temper these days because I won't go hillwalking in the Lake District for the fifth year running. Says she wants a family holiday.'

He finished his beer and cycled back to Oakhurst Avenue to find Eva in a surprisingly good mood.

‘Oh, Henry, isn’t it wonderful. We’re going to America,’ she said excitedly. ‘Uncle Wally has sent us free tickets. Auntie Joan’s ever so pleased. She phoned to see if we’d got the tickets and they arrived this morning. Isn’t it’”

‘Wonderful,’ said Wilt and went into the lavatory to rid himself of the beer and hide from the jubilation.