

News From Home 11

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A glorious sunny day at the Trellises, as we make our way down to Concord Street for the Mayor's Parade. Every possible lamppost, telephone pole, shop window and rooftop has been gaily festooned with bunting, flags and streamers in the good old red, white and blue. Rather wittily, I've brought along a flag of St. Andrew to wave, just to show solidarity and sow a bit of confusion. The parade is its usual mixture of amateurish and impressive; I am amused by Mr. Trewell's float, although I can't tell, beneath the 'oven-ready' radiation suit, which one he is, but Trewell and Eldridge (Funeral Directors) have done a great job with Godzilla, presumably manned by another undertaker – the latex assemblage is a winner, as are the sound effects, suitably spine-chilling – they obviously have some time on their hands, and some free space down in the mortuary to build all this stuff. I'm less impressed by the wheelchair section, featuring war veterans and members of one of those lodges that wear fezzes – and also featuring for some unknown reason, for he is neither war vet nor mason – my dear friend and neighbour, Mr. Alphonso. Mr. A is showing off again, winking at the septuagenarian crumpet, doing the occasional twirl, and insisting on self-propulsion. The Mayor is potentially a bit of a letdown; last year we had Anthony Hopkins, but this year it's some B-list TV celeb, game show host, newsreader, whatever, sadly unknown to me; but I like him instantly on seeing him waving from an open-top '59 Cadillac, hair perfectly coiffed like a dessert

topping, teeth Liberace-perfect, tan immaculate – who could not love this eloquent symbol of American success?

I was a little put out to knock on the guest house door, and hearing no reply, walk in to find Mavis lying on top of Georgio on the bed. What was more disturbing was that they didn't exactly spring apart as if caught in a guilty act. Mavis explained that she was helping Georgio get something out of his eye, and this was the most comfortable position. "Ay, ay, I get fly in eye", said Georgio, to an inaudible samba rhythm, "She help me oil my pecs for the big show." The big show, it turns out, is the Muscle Beach Open Senior Body-Building Tournament, later that afternoon, to which we are all invited. Mavis insists we all go – "It'll be a bloody good laugh, that," she says, missing the point, perhaps. Dutifully we turn up at about 3pm, and things are in full flow. Honourable Number One Son says the whole thing reminds him of freshly-skinned chickens at the butchers - muscles are rippling, oil is dripping, and pulses are racing, especially for one contestant, for – there in the crowd, just about front row centre, is Martina, Georgio's soon-to-be-ex, and her beau, the current Mr. Poland, 29-ish, and looking in terrific shape. Georgio deflates as if punctured, and only manages a disappointing fourth place. I try to restore his fragile emotional equilibrium afterwards, by giving him the good news that Arnold Schwarzenegger is the new Governor of California, but that seems to send him deeper into despond. Georgio said all Arnie knew about was muscle, especially the one between his legs, and he feared he would bring shame and humiliation down onto the world of oil and grunt. He asked me if I had ever met the Governor-Elect, and I said that I had seen him a couple of times on the touchline at under-12 soccer games, shouting encouragement in German to his son, but that was as close as I had managed. Georgio promised he would introduce me some time, for it was surely a tight-knit fraternity of gym-habitues and steroid-ingesters.

Took Mr. A to see the interminable and mawkish 'Seabiscuit', an equine biopic of the worst order, but of course he loved it, and rattled on for hours afterwards about racehorses he had known and loved...I personally thought the horse was a bad actor, and looked nothing like a winner – for much as I am indifferent to the four-legged world,

my grandfather was a serious punter in his dotage, and would point out good breeding and race-winning clues – to the extent that, on seeing a horse outside a pub in London one day in the seventies (it was rented for an opening ceremony), I remarked to my friend that it was the finest piece of horseflesh I had ever seen, and could only be one horse – Red Rum – and indeed it was. When I told this story to Mr. A, hoping it would shut him up, his eyes took on a new glow, he said he always knew deep down I was one of the ‘brethren’, and now we could go to some serious horsy events together. He droned on for another hour on the same subject while I made the Yoruba Mate tea, and then I thought he had nodded off. I was about to creep out of the room when he said, “Now I tell you, boyo, about Mrs. Wasserman.” I was back to my chair faster than Sheba to her throne, and he continued; it seems Herb Wasserman (brother of Hollywood Svengali Lew) got Mr. A his first big studio job, and so he was indebted – they became friends in a rather master-servant way, Mr. A doing odd jobs around the Wasserman spread, even chaperoning Mrs. W to the odd Spade Cooley show when needed. The trouble was, he fairly fell for her, and she was not indifferent to him, but he knew he’d be in trouble if he got any closer to her, what with Herb’s mob connections and all. So then Herb, getting a faint scent of this, did a mean thing – he hired Mr. A’s nephew to work at the studio, Mr. A’s only nephew, him not having children, the apple of his eye – and Herb says one day, very casually, Alphonso, I’d hate anything to happen to young Jorge, your nephew, he’s a bright boy, so I look out for him, just the way you look out for Felicity (the wife), I’d hate anything to happen to her too. You get my meaning? – so Mr. A gets the meaning, and has to keep it platonic with Mrs. W; and even after the death of Herb, Mr. A is still looking over his shoulder for the mob coming after his nephew, who works to this day as a Key Grip at the studio. “ I know she was loose woman”, says Mr. A, “what you call in England – a slapper? Still, to me she was beautiful, I remember her as she was when I first saw her – with the stately bosoms.” Tears well up in Mr. A’s eyes at this point, and he goes very quiet, so I tiptoe out.

Back home, I distractedly sort through the mail, and find a few wrongly delivered items that should go next door. I suddenly realize that Mr. Alphonso has another name. It comes as something of a shock to read an envelope addressed to Alphonso

Contepomi. I suppose he had to have another name, everyone does – I just assumed Alphonso was the last name, and everyone called him that out of respect. I also never realized that, like us, Mr. A had given his house a name as well as a street number, but it was hard to imagine anything looking less like ‘The Old Ranch House’ than the Deco pile next door, especially in its new livery of grey/green – ‘The Old Submarine Pen’ might be closer to the look. I guess we are all entitled to our dreams...at least, at the Trellises, there is some trellis.