

News From Home 12

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It's gone again! The Japanese shrine/lantern/garden ornament...I came out of the French windows this morning, heading for a favourite reading spot, a little iron bench behind the azaleas, just out of range of the cordless 'phone - and as I passed the place where it should have been - it wasn't! Not a trace. No footprints, no signs of struggle, just an octagonal patch of dead grass, and a lack of ornament. I am puzzled in the extreme. Who could be bothered to remove it, is my first question - and having gone to the trouble, why? I never liked the darned thing to begin with, but now that it's gone, I rather miss it - how perverse we humans are! And I don't think it was me doing it in my sleep, but of course I have no way of really knowing that. Hashimoto arrives early, and I point out the obvious to him, and invite his comments and interpretation. He smiles and nods sagely, and then pulls down a rake and starts going at the dead leaves. This is too inscrutable to bear. "Hashimoto" I said, "I appreciate that some things are beyond words, but if you know something about this, you must give me a clue." He paused in his sweeping, looked me square in the eye (possibly for the first time ever), and explained that it was an oriental thing, an Eastern thing, and why should I expect any different, with an Oriental holy object and all? He said he didn't think I was ready for it, but he was going to level with me - the shrine was STILL THERE, even though we couldn't see it. It hadn't gone anywhere; it had merely oscillated onto another plane of existence for a while, so there was nowhere else to go to look for it. It would stay there for a spell, and then probably come back. Or not. He said that his own cousin had once done the same thing in Yokohama, disappeared for a few days and then come back as if nothing had happened, and AS IF NO TIME HAD ELAPSED! The date on his watch was from three days earlier! This was all a bit much to

swallow, so I made my excuses and drifted away to my bench to contemplate for a moment. Perhaps it was the same people who do the crop circles, leaving no trace of effort, no signs of manufacture – why it almost makes you believe in aliens...

We have decided to hire a housekeeper. Mrs. RT is far too busy these days raising a family and juggling a job or two to have time for all things domestic. We interviewed someone who seems perfect for the job, by the name of Witherstock – she would not allow us to use a first name, or even Mrs., Miss or Ms. – she explained that her family had been in service for hundreds of years; indeed, there was a Witherstock who was page-boy to Sir Percy of Rutland at the Battle of Crecy. She said she knew how to run a household and keep things all shipshape, and was sure she could give satisfaction. She looks a little sour, and occasionally has that faraway look of someone dreaming of lost love or better times, but already she has reorganized the kitchen. Mrs. RT was shocked and somewhat put out to find her silverware moved to a different drawer, her tea towels put into the airing cupboard, and her favourite dinner service taken off the dresser and put into storage. I said she should be patient and allow Witherstock time to get her bearings and stamp her personality on the house. She does, after all, seem a model of efficiency.

I was not looking forward to the next task. Witherstock has to live somewhere, and the only room left is the guest house, which means I have to tell Georgio his couple of days lodging which turned into six months is at an end, and he has to move on. He seems surprisingly upbeat when he answers my knock on the patio door, and as I slowly, painfully, home in on the punch line, his frown of concentration turns into a rare smile, and he raises his hands to stop me in mid-sentence. He says he was planning to move anyway, at some time in the next few days, and today was as good as any. He would call Mavis and get a key to her apartment. Now I know they had been canoodling a bit, and I shouldn't have been surprised, but somehow I had never taken Mavis for a girl capable of monogamous moments, and certainly not cohabitation. But was that not a slight twinkle in Georgio's eye, a bit of a roll in the top-heavy gait? Georgio expressed his new mood best himself, when he said, with Slovakian agricultural insight, that he'd been too long milking a chicken, and now it was time to get eggs from a cow.

Georgio occasionally surprises me by declaring his friendship. “You are best pal man could have”, he said, careful not to waste too many articles definite or otherwise, “I owe you big time – come, we go hockey now”. I had forgotten that Georgio had promised to take me to see the LA Kings play, and to get me backstage into the locker room. Our seats were front row, just inches away from players being mangled against the glass, and the result was all that could be desired. The locker room afterwards smelt very bad – I suppose all that padding doesn’t get washed more than once a season. It was great to meet my hero, Ziggy Palffy, but the big surprise was the presence of the new Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who had popped in with his pal, Chuck Norris. I was shocked to see Norris, who exudes manliness on endless B-Macho flicks and fitness machine infomercials, weigh in at about 5 feet 6 inches. At least Arnie was about my size, but looked unexceptional in a room full of large hockey players. “Nice to meet you, have a nice day”, he said as Georgio introduced me, as if reading a script of a parody of one of his own films. I ventured to ask him if he had any plans to get back some of the millions Enron screwed out of the State, seeing as he was palsy with the old CEO. To his credit, the smile never left his lips, and he said, “There’s good guys and bad guys, but we’re going to win this one”, and then he circulated without leaving the centre of the room, having said nothing in that meaningful way actors turned politicians can. I rather liked him, and I can see the attraction of promoting the fictional hero to the real job, in the hope that he might become what he pretends to. I collected a few autographs with Honourable Number Three Son for about ten minutes, and was then surprised when Arnie came back over to me. He apologized for not recognizing me at first, and said that his son was signed up to play on my soccer team, and we’d be seeing a lot more of each other! Well, I do coach an under 12 team, and I was aware of Arnie’s son playing in the league, but I hadn’t yet received the roster of players for the new season, so I was slightly at a loss for words.... seeing more of each other! I don’t know if I like the sound of that – and will Arnie be one of those hands-on kinds of parents? And do I not have enough body-builders in my life?

It’s that festive time of year once again, and I have been busy stringing up Christmas lights. I am onto my third set already – the first two lasted barely 24 hours before partially burning out, leaving a blotchy and pathetic impression for the neighbours to witness, for – and make no mistake – this is a competition. He Who Is Holiest has the most nodding reindeer, inflatable

Santas and massed ropes of lights sucking megawatts from the grid. That will teach me to get my seasonal goodies from The Friendly Store (Where quality costs less – and the smile is free!) Set number three is holding, barely, and will have to do – a couple of dozen reluctant bulbs that flicker unconvincingly, like the sign to the Bates Motel...

After last year's fiasco in the present department, when we all gave each other the same digital camera (special offer online – all of which self-destructed within two months) – we have agreed this year to exchange home-made gifts; and after a satisfying Yuletide feast with all the trimmings, including five types of vegetables from my very own allotment (the curly kale was a real winner!) – we sat around the fire and unwrapped. Honourable Number Three Son gave me a thoughtful and artistic wall-hanging made from pieces of knotted string; Honourable Number One Son presented a collage/portrait, nicely framed, of all his girlfriends of the last few years, each picture numbered and named, with the opening and closing dates of the liaison added. Mrs. R.T., bless her, had knitted me a remarkable sweater, on the large side, just the way I like it, and in the most creative colour – I don't think this is a green that exists in nature. For my part, I decided to give vegetables. I really was chuffed with our crop this year, and what could be healthier than carrots, organic and fresh from the ground? We are always looking to take in a few waifs and strays at this reflective and meaningful time of year, so we were glad to have Georgio and Mavis drop in for a Tia Maria, and of course Mr. Alphonso came over a regaled us with stories, real or imagined, about his colourful life on the Pampas and in Golden Era Hollywood. By about 9:30 the party wound down, the young folk went off to a friend's house to keep the spirit alive, and Mrs. R.T. and I retired to reflect on a successful day.