

News From Home 13

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It is always with keen anticipation that we begin the Under 12 soccer season – as coach of Honourable Number 3 Son's team (of all the dads, I have the best European accent), I look forward to helping our squad of 14 players blend into a cohesive, skillful, hard tackling unit over the next four months. At our first practice, I recognize a few familiar faces from previous teams, a few kids from our street, and an All-Star or two. As I stick labels on the lads, to help with name recognition, I am struck by the rather unusual name Wolfgang, as I pin it to the chest of a pleasant-looking blond kid, somewhat tall for his age. Practice gets under way, and we slowly and painfully get the rust out of our game after a long off-season. I am thinking we have the makings of a reasonable side, and we start to scrimmage a little, when a thunder of engines and a screeching of tyres makes every head turn, and play grinds to a halt, as a procession of five HumVs, accompanied by four CHP motorcycle outriders, makes its way down the long, sloping approach road to our soccer field. The kids' jaws are agape, as, respectably suited as befits his new position, our Governor steps out of the middle vehicle, and, lighting up a Romeo y Julietta, strides over to our frozen little squad. "I was just passing, so I thought I'd drop off Wolfgang's shin-pads", said Arnold. "Hello boys, nice to see you, it's going to be a fantastic season, ya? Lots of fantastic players, a fantastic pitch, and", he looks over at me in an intimidating way, "a nice coach!" He tells us to carry on as normal, but he'd like to stay and watch. They circle the Hummers, drivers and security agents and cops get on their phones and walkie-talkies, and suddenly the field seems crowded. At one point, Arnie comes over to me, and says, sotto voce, that Wolfie likes to play striker, preferably at old-fashioned centre forward. I say,

quietly fuming at this point, that I'll see what I can do. Practice is a farce from this point on; most kids being too distracted by the pomp and the hype of it all to concentrate. One thing I do learn from the practice – young Wolfie is a bit of a ball-hog. I have a few painful and sadistic extra drills for selfish players...

I have never before gone to a restaurant attracted by the name alone; but I thought I would chance it in the case of The Ironic Grill, a new establishment opened by a former food critic of the Los Angeles Times. It was doing fabulous business with the glitterati the night we went – myself, Mrs. RT, and young Brandi and Keanu, the newlyweds. The attraction, I suppose, is that things are not what they seem – take a few extracts from the menu:

T-Bone Steak Viennois – tasty is hardly the word for this extraordinary feat of imagination from chef Louis.

Risotto al Funghi – Never have we dreamed up anything quite like this before.

An Honourable Lamb – Feeling lean and hungry?

And the comments from the waiters (All out of work actors steeped in Becket and Stoppard):

“How is the Bouillabaisse?”

“Oh, magnificent – need you ask?”

“And how about the Stuffed Chicken Breast?”

“You'll be amazed, Sir.”

“And the Truite aux Almondes?”

“One of Chef’s best efforts, Sir.”

Working on the principal that irony says the opposite of what it means, I decided to search for the least favourable description in the menu, and came up with:

Sea Bass Reginald – a shy and unassuming little dish, that may underwhelm in its presentation, but yet is no mean fish.

This I ordered, but pointed out to the waiter that this wasn’t really irony, but rather a deliberate understatement to achieve emphasis, or litotes. “My, but that jacket does suit you, Sir”, the cheeky lad replied, and shuffled off. While waiting for our food, I took the opportunity to take in my surroundings; it was then that I deduced, from the fluted columns, faux-crumbling pediments, and hastily painted-over view of the Acropolis, that in its previous incarnation, the restaurant was undoubtedly Greek, and almost certainly called the Ionic Grill. I popped outside for air at one point and noticed the clumsy conversion job on the neon sign. When the Sea Bass arrived, I must say, it was exquisite; everyone else’s food was mediocre, indeed, seemed rather crudely thrown together. From the dessert menu I then chose something called Bitter-Sweet. Again, I had to point out to the waiter that this was only irony in the debased modern sense – really it was a compressed paradox, or oxymoron. The waiter rolled his eyes, and went to speak to the manager, probably to have me thrown out in some cruel, Pinteresque manner. He came back to say that desserts were on the house. “Bitter-Sweet” was exactly as described – a delicious Belgian chocolate concoction in such a tiny portion as to leave one angry and frustrated. All in all, a bizarre experience. At least the bill was reasonable – or was it? Although main courses were a paltry eight or nine dollars, starters, basket of rolls and desserts were all over twenty each.

Mr. Trewell’s wife, Wanda Lee, stopped in the other morning. When I came back from the supermarket, I found her looking very at home on our lounge sofa, She had come by to tell us about her Sock Drive; her charitable organization, the Misplaced Daughters Of The Confederacy, were collecting odd socks for the poor and needy, and she was sure we must

have some. Well, of course, odd socks are always a problem, unless you buy several hundred all the same, and even then, you'll be down to your last pair in a couple of months. Where do they go? I fancy they sneak out of the house at night, using a leech-like motion, and head for some huge central pile, a kind of sock singles bar, where they writhe and twist in amongst each other, searching for an exact matching soul mate. I handed Wanda Lee a large carrier bag of oddities, and she squealed with delight in a *Gone-With-The-Wind* sort of way. I wondered if Rhett Butler had ever tried a bag of old socks on Scarlett? Wanda Lee has one of those very sexy southern accents – indeed, if she shed about a hundred pounds, she would be quite a package – but mostly she confines herself to the small talk of an undertaker's wife. A sample:

"I'm afraid our coffee maker's broken, Mrs. Trewell, or I'd offer you a cup."

"My sincerest condolences to you all."

"How are the children doing?"

"As well as can be expected, really."

"Did you hear about the increase in car tax?"

"Yes, we must shoulder life's burdens with a smile." Etc.

After some chitchat not unlike the above, I finally realized that Mr. Trewell was also in the room, sitting on the ottoman in the corner, perfectly disguised as would be a warbler upon a willow. Only his cough alerted me to his presence, and just in time, before I sat on him. I congratulated him on his costume in the Mayor's Day Parade, and suggested next year he should be the Invisible Man – no make-up necessary. He then shocked me deeply by telling me a joke! – In the driest, most detached delivery possible. It ran thus:

If Donatella Versace married the Invisible Man, would she be – Donatella Nobody?

I think I laughed because it was ridiculous, being told a joke by a mortician. Mr. Trewell has hidden depths. I thought of countering with the one about Una Stubbs marrying Idi Amin, but I fancied it would be culturally too obscure. Later that night I had a strange dream of homeless men in a shelter, deeply humiliated by their odd footwear, sitting in a circle frantically swapping socks, trying in vain to find two the same.

Witherstock has moved into the guesthouse, and has the place looking tremendously spic and span. She has personalized it with a few mementos and photographs; one struck me particularly, of a noble but debauched-looking gentleman from the 1950s, leaning on a 4 litre supercharged Bentley. I asked Witherstock if this was a relative? She said, Heavens, no – it was a former employer, the Earl of Derby, surely she had mentioned him in her C.V? There was a small scandal at the time, but there was no truth in the allegations about his Lordship and certain acts with gentlemen friends, and she should know, being his housekeeper. I felt a little embarrassed asking, and moved on to another portrait, of a good-looking young man of about twenty-five, with dark, slightly thinning hair, glasses, and the makings of a handlebar moustache. This, I was told, after something of a pause, was Cedric – a Government Under-Secretary for Transport, and obviously the love of Witherstock's life - tragically killed in the sixth month of their engagement. Had she turned her heart to stone since that fateful day, denying herself all pleasure, and devoting herself to the service of others? From her long silences, I guessed that this was not the time to pry.

There was a postcard in the mail today. A view of Sydney Harbour, Australia. In front of the Opera House, about halfway up the long flight of approach steps, and casting a convincing shadow, was my Japanese garden ornament. It seemed none the worse for wear, having travelled eight thousand miles. Also in the foreground, fishing rods dangling into the bay were two garden gnomes, with red gnome hats and little red gnome waistcoats. The message on the back was non-committal – “Wish you were here” written, no doubt, with the wrong hand – a heavy left-leaning slope. The postmark was Sydney, Australia, and the date was plausible. This will require further investigation.