

## News From Home 18

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I am disappointed that my traditional role as Mr. Alphonso's 'pusher' has been usurped by his new flame, the 60-ish, vixen-ish, Sandy Briggs, wife of frequently absentee Colonel Briggs, and surely the most scandalous woman in our small community. Indeed, it is as the pusher of his wheelchair that Mrs. Briggs first got into close proximity to my old friend, and made her fateful overtures. Both are members of our local Garden Society, and at this time of year, there are many open days, visiting interesting and outstanding gardens in the area. Thus, on several weekends this month, they have cemented their relationship, and I have been marginalised. I really cannot abide that woman – Her skin has been stretched and lifted so often over her bones that there is little more than a millimeter now to mask the skull. She makes Nancy Reagan look youthful, plump, and generous of heart. These garden tours attract upwards of a hundred keen amateur horticulturalists, plus a few folk on day release from the Old Peoples' Home or the Mental Institution; and I was particularly delighted this year, as our own garden at the 'Trellises' was included on the tour! Hashimoto has been scrambling for days to get every errant leaf and grass blade pointing in the right direction, pruning with the eye for detail of a royal wedding hair stylist. It is only when strangers are poring over your cymbidiums that you suddenly see it all from their point of view, and you want to run before them, sweeping and smoothing. Just in time, we managed to install the new Japanese lantern; Hashimoto found a real charmer, beautifully carved and finished by a friend of his, and set on a pole, rather like a birdhouse.

It is remarkable what a mess a hundred-odd middle-aged genteel folk, plus a few advanced cases of senile dementia and some genuine nutcases can make just passing through one's abode, and of course you have to look out for the cleptos (mostly the neighbours), intent on stealing everything that isn't nailed down, including cuttings of your plants. But we got our own back on the concession stand, hastily erected and manned by the stoic Honourable Sons Numbers One and Three; they sold lemonade, home-made out of the tin, a small selection of 'My Old Flame' candles – 'Spring at Kew' being very popular, (rhododendrons, tree blossoms, grasses, hint of tea shop and aviation fuel from the Heathrow flight path); and a selection of useless, unfertile seeds I've been amassing from around the world – strange huge things from Africa and Australia that probably need a forest fire to germinate.

I took Georgio, our pool man, and his beau, our very own Mavis, (our child-minder and zookeeper), to the latest in trendy restaurants; called "The Table of Contents", this luxurious eatery was started by a disgruntled Mills and Boon authoress, who had tired of purple covers and ripped bodices, but being of a literary bent, she wanted to theme a restaurant in that direction. The Alphabet Soup, for instance, not only continues the usual practice of pasta letters floating on the top of a tomato-based broth, but the letters are joined – quite how, I can't imagine – does some sous-chef in the back glue them together? – to form the names of literary giants. I was thrilled to find THACKERAY bobbing there below expectant spoon, and Mrs. RT got the rather arresting ASS, not a novelist I'd read; after trawling the depths for a second or two, she brought up G and R, so I presume this was meant to be Gunter. Mavis got the watery EAU, before discovering JAN and STEN, and Georgio was confused by CHARLE SICKENS, and had to have the whole ruse explained to him, upon which he remarked, with typical Slovakian rural wit, that good fences make sheep good pole-vaulters. The significance of this was lost on the company. Mavis was amused no end to discover CUNT TOLSTOY, and said that was what she used to call him at school. Mrs. RT's not-so-subtle manipulation of T S ELIOT into TOILETS was unfortunately seen by the whole table, and lost some of its intent. My 'BronteBurger' was a trifle overcooked, Mrs. RT's 'Pot-Boiler' had been stewing for far too long, Mavis had the 'Salad Days', and Georgio

settled for the Salmon 'Rushdie', which was worthy but controversial. All dishes accompanied by Wilde Rice, the Veggie Plato, and a Pynchon of salt. The desert menu was, of course, a case of 'All's Well That Ends Well'.

The Governor and his wife were in town last Sunday – I spotted them having brunch at our local French eatery, 'Aaaah! Bistro!' As I strolled by with leashes in hand (I was exercising my neighbours' German Shepherds, Rex and Sheba) Arnold summoned me over, broke off whatever top line discussion he was having with the Chinese Ambassador, pulled me down with famously irresistible force until my ear was level with his mouth, and whispered, "I need your help – I'll be round later!" With the merest twitch of a bicep, he then propelled me towards the exit, and turned back to matters of pressing international importance. I spent an uncomfortable afternoon wondering how I could possibly be of assistance, and what it was going to cost me. At around 4PM a very modest fleet of Hummers pulled up chez moi, two to be precise, and Arnold strode purposefully in. Before he could speak, I pressed a small gift into his hand – a candle from Mavis' brother's range, 'My Old Flame'. This he had concocted specially for the Governor, and called it 'Arnold', hoping for some marketable seal of approval. Steroid-laden sweat seemed to be the main ingredient. Arnie took a sniff, and liked it immediately. "Not for girlie-men!" he exclaimed. Then down to business. "You know how serious I am about running for President", he said. "But the wife says, I won't make it in 2008 with this accent." His iron fingers gripped my puny arm tightly, and his face loomed closer. "I need elocution lessons. You are English. You guys speak the right way, like Petula Clark. Like David Hockney. You must teach me!" I was shocked... but then I thought of the entertainment value and the stories to regale dinner guests with for decades to come, and I hurriedly agreed. I asked if there was a fee involved. Arnold looked a little impatient. "The State deficit is bad", he said, "We can give only small honorarium." I suggested that Arnold could speed up the trials of his old pals at Enron, and claw back some of the hundreds of millions they had defrauded from the people of

California, and there might be enough change there for a tuition fee. He said he would check into it. We arranged a weekly lesson.

Tranquility is the default here at the Trellises. Peace reigns, usually. Children trot off obediently to school at 7, gardeners rake and snip, friendly tradesmen ply their wares as the sun climbs up into the unvarying blue heaven; the drab mockingbird sings sweetly her mating calls, territorial warnings, and imitative cell phone and alarm clock noises; folks hereabouts are early to bed, restaurants seem to be closed by 8:30p.m., and there is blessed silence all night, broken only by the steady crunching of coyote jaws on bones of stray pet. But I did a silly thing the other day. I miscalculated the bonhomie and sense of laissez-faire that I had assumed filled the hearts of every citizen of our little town. It was one of those patriotic holidays – July 4th, Presidents Day, John Wayne Day – I forget which – and as the stars and stripes went up around the neighbourhood, I thought to myself, “But they are all the same! We need some variety here!” I went to the attic, and broke out the old Scottish Saltire, which I keep for emergencies (Scotland winning the World Cup), and hung it over the front porch. Next morning, I found the charred remains still hanging limply from the flagpole. Not only that – some fiend had climbed the fence into the back garden, and painted the new Japanese ornament red white and blue! I found Hashimoto, who had already discovered the crime, on his knees behind the woodshed, kneeling in such a position that his stomach was resting on the garden shears, Fearing suicide, I rushed up and dragged him to his feet. “Terrible loss of face”, he cried between sobs. I told him it wasn’t his fault, and after he had calmed down a little, he said that obviously a lantern was not worth killing oneself for, but it was important to practice, in case honour really was at stake at some point in the future. He said it was good to feel the cold point of a blade there against one’s skin on a misty morning – it reminded one of the joys of being alive.

I must find who has committed this small atrocity, and plan a small revenge.