

News From Home 19

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Governor Schwarzenegger arrived promptly for his elocution lesson, fairly modestly, by his standards, pulling up on a large Harley motorcycle sandwiched between a couple of black security SUVs. He was dressed casually in what looked like Colombian revolutionary army fatigues, but the bandoliers over his shoulder were specially adapted for carrying cigars. He was in good humour, and seemed determined to be a model student. As we proceeded with our task, I was unable to suppress images from 'My Fair Lady' from flashing through my mind, so I thought it better to just roll with it – I took perverse pleasure in casting Arnold in the Audrey Hepburn role, as we rattled off 'The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain', first as a mere recital, and then, as he warmed to the task, I made him sing it. Having an ego the size of one of the larger moons of Saturn, this did not faze or embarrass our noble Governor in the least, but his singing voice left a bit to be desired. As a teaching tool, I taped his performance, purportedly to play back to him at a future date, so he can measure his progress; but it's also a great piece of blackmail material, if I need to call up a favour in the future. From the first lesson, I would say Arnold has no ear at all for nuance of accent, and is probably a hopeless case, but we will see....meanwhile, the agreed fee is not insubstantial. Our pool man Georgio, an old pal of Arnold's, and someone with even less of an ear for language, was impressed. He happened to come by at the end of the lesson, and Arnold couldn't resist showing off a few 'How now brown cows' for him. Georgio said that after only one lesson, his accent was undetectable, and I must be a genius.

Georgio meanwhile, is not in the best of spirits. I came across him yesterday, listlessly trying to scoop the same leaf out of the pool over and over again. He has broken up with our childminder/petwalker Mavis, and has been mooching around the Barracuda club, often the worse for wear. I asked Mavis what went wrong, and she cited a third party. "There were three of us in that relationship – me, Georgio, and Georgio's reflection in the mirror. That lad can stare at himself all day!" Mavis is renting the guesthouse over at Brandi and Keanu's. and I'm not sure where Georgio is resting his weary head.

Wetherstock, meanwhile, has decided that the Governor is the Antichrist; she waded through hundreds of his pictures, until she found a still from 'Total Recall' that fit her theory – it was a shot of Arnold frowning deeply. Wetherstock decided that there on his forehead, hidden in the frown, was the number '666', and she had drawn over the appropriate lines with red marker for emphasis. I told her that it didn't look anything like 666 to me; she gave me a steely look, and said that of course it wasn't in Arabic numerals, it was in Aramaic, what was I expecting? My Aramaic is a bit rusty, so I suppose she could be on to something. It just looked like a couple of squiggles to me. Wetherstock really is becoming weirder by the day, and if she wasn't such a whiz about the house, I'd be glad not to have to deal with her. I dropped by her room the other night, and rather sneakily peeped in through the back window before entering. There she was, in the centre of a ring of about fifty candles, stark naked (not a becoming sight – she is about 65, and thin as an ironing board) – she appeared to be dancing with a portrait of her beloved Cedric held in her hands – a waltz was playing on the stereo – and she was deeply engaged in conversation with the picture. This, of course, discouraged me from going in and talking about the squid for tomorrow's lunch.

Wanda Lee Trewell stopped by, as she does, with her latest fundraiser for the Misplaced Daughters of the Revolution. She is selling tea towels with the likenesses of Iraq's Most Wanted – rather like those playing cards they issued to the troops. She, and some of her sisters in the organization are convinced that many of Saddam's uncaptured top brass could make it to the States, where they will cause mayhem and

sedition. This is bad news for anyone looking even vaguely Middle Eastern (Latinos and East Europeans may qualify), and bearing a moustache. In fact, all 24 faces on the tea towel could be the same person, so necessary was it under the old regime to identify as closely as possible with the wily dictator. I purchased two of these cultural essentials, thinking it unnecessary to get into world politics with Wanda, she coming from a very small town in The South that famously was on the point of lynching four Swedish exchange students back in the 50s, in the belief that they were working for Fidel Castro. Mr. Trewell, meanwhile, has started a flourishing sideline as a stand-up comedian. We all went down to see him in his debut performance at the Comedy Store last week, and he was an unlikely hit. Billed as 'Trewell and Eldridge (Funeral Directors)' they appear on stage in full undertaker's black garb, with the nice horror film touch of the black ribbon around the top hat, and the black gloves and tails. I suppose the appeal lies in the contrast between the jokes, which are upbeat and really quite good, and the mournful delivery. Eldridge works mostly as the straight man, feeding the lines to Trewell, who has an impeccably funereal sense of timing; if timing is everything in comedy, then these two have discovered a new snail's pace for it, as befits the look and the professional associations. It is curious to witness Mr. Trewell in a spotlight – there is still something hard to see about him, not so much his usual camouflage, more a kind of black hole quality, as if he is sucking in all the available light, as if matter is bending around him. The lighting engineer at the club was complaining that he needed to run the lights twice as bright on this pair than on anyone else on the bill. It is also curious to detect something else about him on a stage – given that he cannot hide in a corner and blend in, but is forced, like some laboratory lizard that would rather be hiding under a rock, but is exposed, for scientific purposes, to the full glare of inspection – in such a harsh visual environment, do I detect the faintest traces of charisma emanating from Mr. Trewell?

Hashimoto has been cleaning up our defaced Japanese lantern, but all his attempts have been only partially successful. The paint penetrated deep into the porous cedar wood, and paint stripper has only managed to take off the surface layer. He has attempted some sanding, but the coarser grades are tearing the wood grain. The

current look of the darned thing is that weather-beaten and sun-faded appearance of the more statuesque elements of a minigolf course, one that's been long-neglected by the painter's brush. Which gives me an idea...

Unfortunately, our temporary lease on the garden next door has run out, and we have had to move our menagerie back to our own crowded premises. This was copious work for myself and Mavis, helped as we were in a hindering kind of way by Mr. Alphonso. He regaled us with colourful stories about John Wayne, and did a fair job of entertaining the Psitticads, at one point looking very Long John Silver, with a macaw on each shoulder, and a Cockatoo on the head. Mr. A did divulge to us, while trying to balance birdseed on his nose for the parrots to peck off, that his wild times were over with Sandy Briggs, the somewhat loose wife of Colonel Briggs, who was now back from his golfing trip - and hopefully none the wiser. Mr. A commented, rather ungallantly I thought, that she was a woman of surfaces, all come-ons and Readers Digest intellectual depths, and in the sack disappointing. "She talk like sex-bomb - but she was like dried prune! Like Don Quixote's horse!" said Mr. A. I asked him what he was expecting from a 65-year old, and he said he was now setting his sights on something a bit younger - specifically the 50-something nurse who was temporarily replacing Anita, his housekeeper of long standing, who was taking a sabbatical in disgust at the antics of this formerly respectable senior citizen, and who could blame her. "She is every inch a woman - and she has proper rump, boyo, like the Duchess of Cornwall - she could ride in your English Grand National and not come a cropper at Beecher's Brook!" Mr. A was ecstatic at the Charles and Camilla wedding, ordered every conceivable souvenir edition from England, and has the pictures stuck up all over his house. I think it's time to intercept his Viagra shipments and start feeding him the placebos.

I was round, later that same evening, at Mr. Alphonso's, sharing a pot of tea and a hand of Cribbage, when there was a knock at the door. It was too late for Jehovah's Witnesses, and too early for FedEx. I opened the door cautiously, and there, in full dress uniform, and decidedly the worse for drink, was Colonel Briggs, demanding to see

“That damned adulterer”. I tried to stall him at the door, but he shoved past me, and confronted Mr. A in the living room.

“Contepomi, you are a cad, sir, an underhand, lowdown, cheating sidewinder, and I demand satisfaction!”

Mr. A was struck speechless for several seconds, his jaw working silently, but no sound issuing forth. He then said what was probably the wrong thing.

“You can keep her, boyo. She is too old for me.”

Colonel Briggs was swaying quite a bit. It looked like he had come straight from some regimental reunion., and his splendid dress uniform was slightly off-kilter, and several buttons were undone. His face was flushed, and his eyes small and dark. He didn't seem to hear what Mr. A said.

“Oh, and Contepomi – the next time you're sneaking around in another man's boudoir, don't leave your bedpan behind as a calling card. It's got your name on the bottom.” He sighed. “So what's it to be, you old fool? Your choice of weapons.”

A duel? Surely not...didn't that sort of stuff go out with the Civil War? But Briggs seemed the type, if anyone was, to keep with tradition, and his state was most agitated. Given his wife's local reputation, this must have happened before...and yet it's possible she had always gotten away with it, not all her lovers leaving behind medical paraphernalia as a calling card.

“If you want to fight me – I understand”, said Mr. A, lowering his eyes in a melodramatic gesture of vulnerability – “I would feel the same. But I am cripple – how do you fight a cripple?”

At this, Briggs looked confused. Colonel Dwight F. Briggs, medals gleaming on paunchy but still-firm chest, crew-cut, hollow-cheeked, firm-jawed, ramrod-backed, yet soft-mouthed; there was almost the mouth of a woman there, expressive in the middle of all those brutal features, and it was the mouth now that betrayed him, working and twitching independent of the dark, glowering eye sockets and the compressed brow. The mouth spoke silently of confusion, indecision, even weakness.

“I – I suppose there would have to be some – some levelling of the playing field’, he said with difficulty. “Damn at all, Contepomi, but if I have to, I’ll come down to your level, if it makes you happy. I’ll fight you wheelchair to wheelchair!”

Mr. A said that he had a perfectly serviceable spare that he would be happy to lend the Colonel, and he suggested, as a choice of weapons, that they fight with sabres, as he also had a pair of those knocking around. Colonel Briggs suggested the morning after next, at dawn, on the piece of flat ground near the YMCA swimming pool, up in the Santa Monica Mountains. This was agreed upon, and Mr. A nominated me as his second. Briggs stormed out, but his storm cloud seemed a little punctured, and the effect was noticeably lacking in menace. I now had 36 hours to talk my friend out of this antiquated folly.