

## News From Home 21

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Governor Schwarzenegger knocked on the front door promptly at six, bang on time for his elocution lesson. I ushered him in, but he signalled to me to follow him outside. He had a mischievous gleam in his eye, like a schoolboy with a stink bomb. I trailed after him up the front path, out to the street where a single desert-camouflage HumV was parked – modest cavalcade, I thought, compared to Arnold’s usual style. Modest, I thought, until I glanced to left and right, and saw that they had blocked off both ends of the street.

“Well, what do you think?” said the Governor, positively beaming now with self-satisfaction.

“Nice paint job”, I said, because it was.

“Not the paint”, he said, and opened up the engine compartment. I peered inside.

“It’s very clean”, I said. Credit where it is due.

“I make it easy for you”, said Arnold. He opened one of several dozen hatches in the rear of the vehicle. There was a large metal cylinder inside. It looked a bit like one of those suitcase-sized tactical nuclear weapons.

“Is it a bomb of some kind?” I ventured, feeling more and more like Lady Barnett. Arnold tut-tutted, and shook his head. He brought his face close to mine, fixed me with that famous Terminator stare, and said, “Hy-dro-gen.” He spaced out the syllables just like that, and then said it once more, even more slowly, “Hy – dro – gen!”

I must have looked baffled for a second, but then the penny dropped, and as I nodded in recognition, Arnold laughed. “I took your advice”, he said. “This is California. We care about the environment, ya? I had it converted last week.” I told the Governor that this was a great move, and the environmental lobby was bound to notice, and if he could just manage something a little more conciliatory with the unions, he would do well in the upcoming election, which was costing the taxpayer millions anyway. He promised to think about it, and gave me his usual piece of learned-by-rote, one-size-fits-all political rhetoric, vague enough to fit any occasion. I decided that the first thing we should work on in today’s lesson was the word Hydrogen. I made up a little rhyme, ‘My Hydrogen Hummer is Heavy but Harmless’, which Arnold loved, and which he repeated for Georgio at the end of the lesson. Georgio’s jaw dropped in disbelief, and he said that Arnold had learned more in a few short weeks than he had in thirty years of living in the US. I pointed out to Georgio that he spent most days speaking 90% Slovakian, speaking it to his family, friends, body-builders, until recently his wife, and the Slovakian pool man mafia. English was just an occasional necessity. He admitted it was true, but then turned the tables, and asked, why did I still have an English accent? Why had I not allowed myself to be assimilated into the great American culture? I let the matter drop.

Georgio has been very droopy since Mavis dumped him, and, word has it, he has been courting his ex, Martina. She seems amused by this, and is playing as hard to get as it is possible to be while grinning from ear to ear. I fear, should they get back together again, that her hold over him will be even more absolute. He always complained about her wearing the trousers, but I think he liked it, and she tolerated the vanity of an ex-Mr. Slovakia far more than Mavis. On this very topic Georgio remarked, with unique and fairly untranslatable agricultural insight, that the eagle might wander far from its nest, but the egg only did if stolen by a weasel.

Mavis, our child-minder and zookeeper, is back on the circuit. Mrs. RT and I returned late one evening to find a trail of clothing around the house – the sequence was confusing, and did not point to an amorous termination in any particular room. Mavis met us in the hallway wearing my bathrobe, and explained that she had grabbed it as the nearest thing to wear while she was doing her laundry – the trail of clothes must have dropped from the basket as she was heading for the utility room. This explanation satisfied me, but Mrs. RT insisted on sniffing our bed sheets, and indeed, asked Witherstock to change them.

Witherstock now runs and hides under the table when the Governor comes around, so convinced is she that he is the Antichrist. She has taken to rolling rather than folding the towels in the bathroom;

is it an illusion, or does the way they are now folded, rolled clockwise with the tails pointing upwards, resemble the number, six? – and three towels to a shelf being 666? I am beginning to see signs everywhere...

Mavis is doing great business at this time of year with her brother's line of candles, 'My Old Flame'. For Halloween, he came up with the classic, 'Crypt Of The Dead' which, in addition to the usual seasonal spices, pumpkin, clove, cinnamon, etc., has the added thrill of the unmistakable undertone of rotting flesh. Mavis said, "Ee, I know what you're thinking – did he use real bodies?" She reassured me that they used extract from the Corpse Lily, that giant of the plant world, which attracts insects to its very occasional blooms by imitating the smell of putrefaction. Hugely popular with the teenage crowd.

I have underestimated our youth in the past, thinking of them as uneducated surfing morons, but they surprised me before, with their embracing of eighteenth century culture and dress, and they are confounding my expectations again. After a Shakespeare season at our local repertory cinema, the Aero, last week, the kids have taken to the sixteenth century now in a big way. Doublet and hose are all the rage for men, and the girls are going for the Elizabeth the First look, in more lightweight

materials, of course. Quotes from The Bard may be heard on every street corner, and impromptu performances of scenes from The Plays may be seen in school playgrounds, the local Starbucks, or peoples' front gardens. And they say California kids have no culture...

Brandi and Keanu, our newlyweds, besides doing great business in the world of spore elimination, have become followers of the famous Vietnamese mystic, Wa-Cha-Meol-Sun. A cross between a guru and a motivational speaker, Dr. Sun is renowned for his savage confrontational style, designed to get quickly to the root of the Western ego, drive out the demons, and free the self for higher purposes. Oh, and that will be \$10,000 please...at B and K's insistence, I went along to a rally at the Staples Centre, and the place was jammed. No rock concert ever had the crowd so eager to please. An endless stream of acolytes headed for the stage, where Dr. Sun seemed to poke them in the eyes and shove them backwards, where they were caught at the last minute by some sinister-looking assistants, and led off back stage, no doubt to have their wallets amputated. B and K looked large-eyed and grinned idiotically at every cheap platitude that dripped from the good doctor. I found the whole thing quite surreal, especially as I was feeling rather light-headed. I must explain that I had gone to the dentist that afternoon for a root canal, and he'd given me something pretty powerful for the pain, and I still felt woozy, not to mention very happy. Becoming bored with the event, I'm afraid I began expressing myself. I got to my feet, and started shouting "Rubbish!" at every pause in the doctor's delivery. You didn't really notice the bouncers until they were surrounding you – unsmiling, dressed in black Versace/Ninja, absolutely no sense of humour. I was frog-marched to the exit, unable to free an arm to wave to Brandi, who was shaking her head with an I-told-you-so look. They bounced my head on the plate glass a couple of times before throwing me out. Apparently, I was wandering the streets of downtown Los Angeles for over two hours, singing at the top of my voice, before Brandi and Keanu scooped me up and drove me home. That was some painkiller...

Over a quiet game of Piquet, Mr. Alphonso and I reflected on the extraordinary events of the previous morning. After the duel ended, Colonel Briggs was rushed in Sanchez'

car to the Emergency Department, where his severed nose was reattached, in a long and delicate procedure. He is apparently doing well, and when the stitches come out, he will have a scar, but at least he'll also have a nose. I asked Mr. A about his choice of tactics, and he sighed, and said it was necessary to be dramatic, in order to avoid further bloodshed, and in order to defuse Briggs' animosity. Mr. A explained that, during his Gaucho days back in Argentina, there were often fights amongst those macho characters, marooned in each other's company for months at a time out on the Pampas. The outcome, if it did not end with a fatal stomach wound or a cut throat, was often decided by the severing of a body part, sometimes an ear, sometimes a nose. This was humiliation for the loser, but shame was more the intention; when some hothead was scarred in this way, every time he set eyes on the one who bested him, he would feel ashamed, and would not want to continue the feuding to its murderous conclusion. This had been Mr. A's premeditated aim, to douse Brigg's fury. "I knew he would never give up, boyo", said Mr. A., "so I bring the ice," He calculated that even a reattached nose would make the Colonel self-conscious enough. Mr. A. said that he found the whole thing quite exhilarating, was nervous at the beginning, but soon felt pretty invincible, and just bided his time. He said that his regular dose of Viagra seemed to help his fighting skills, or perhaps it was all in the mind...I asked him if he had any side effects from Viagra? He mentioned that his bowels were sometimes loosened, even to the point of liquid, and that could be embarrassing, especially during the carnal act, but it was worth it. I noticed that Anita, when she brought in the tea tray, was a trifle over-made up, and smelled of a potpourri of perfume counter free samples. He slapped her affectionately on the rump, and she merely giggled.

I asked Hashimoto if he had heard about the duel, and he said he had, and he thought it was an honourable way to settle differences, if occasionally bloody. He said he had once been over to Japan, in the days when he was a Kendo 4<sup>th</sup> Dan, and it was his habit to train at the Dojo of the Tokyo Police, who were known for practicing a fairly rough brand of Martial Art. He had witnessed a duel there, again illegally fought, between two unappeasable adversaries, armed with razor-sharp Japanese swords, who

were determined to fight to the death; the fight was stopped, however, when someone lost an arm.

Hashimoto's latest passion is for Topiary; he says it is the Western equivalent of the Way of the Warrior, requiring a sharp weapon, an unerring eye, and the patience of a saint. He has started on our front hedge, and the results so far are inconclusive; there are shapes, but what they represent I am not sure. Hashimoto says it is early days, and it is bad luck to reveal what the shapes represent before they become self-explanatory. I have annoyed the dickens out of him recently; I turned our rather sad-looking Japanese lantern into a mini-golf hole. I made a little door at the bottom that opens and closes, attached to a motor; when timed correctly, the ball passes through, goes down a tunnel, and emerges on the other side on a small green, where it can be putted. Bad timing or aim causes the ball to hit the door or hit the side channel, in which case it trickles down the less fortuitous tunnel, to putting hell. Honourable Sons #1 and 3 think it is the bee's knees.

Hashimoto said this was not the correct use for a sacred object, and I asked if it could not be a dual-purpose thing, and wasn't mini golf rather a Zen pastime? Did it not require the wielding of an exacting weapon, a keen eye, a sense of oneness with the hole, and the patience of a saint? He grunted, and admitted there was some truth to it, and perhaps Western culture was more useful and inward looking than he had supposed.