

News From Home 25

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It was like the first page of a Ross Macdonald novel; a morning of thick sea fog and drizzle covering Los Angeles, with promise of confusion, betrayals, and a conclusion to make you wish you'd never taken that case to begin with. At least it afforded some relief from the California heat, and lent an air of muted charm to our suburban retreat, The Trellises.

I came across McSweeney in the garden. He was doing some rather intricate sloping bits on the miniature golf course. He stood erect to survey his work, and gave up a grunt of satisfaction.

"Now I'm a fair hand at most jobs", he said, leaning on a shovel, "I can do plastering smooth as a baby's bottom, my electric work is first rate, I can plumb with the best of them – but concrete – ah, concrete is truly in the blood, and has been the trump card of the McSweeney tribe down through the ages." At this juncture, he undid the string that was holding up his ancient brown corduroy breeks, and used it to tie back a wayward vine. This left his movement somewhat restricted, as he had to use one hand to prevent the trousers from creeping down below the 'builders' cleavage. "Blast and confusion", he said, "but would you happen to have any more string about the place? I won't stoop so low as to use one of your English belts, but unless I see – ah – there it is", and he plunged into the undergrowth with pruning knife at the ready, and came back several minutes later with a long strip of bark. "Even your American willows will do the trick", he said. "Your farmer, ploughboy, journeyman, ditch-digger, knife-sharpener, all use the

willow bark for just about everything, especially for holding up the trousers. My Great Uncle Aiden was a one for the willow – did I tell you ever that he was probably the first man to fly?” I nodded furiously, but to no effect. “ Back in the late 1800s, he built himself a glider out of woven willow and canvas, and tied it all together with strips of bark. He then glued feathers onto the beast, hauled it up to the top of the cliffs of Croaghaun, all of 2,000 feet, and launched himself off”.

Here he paused at some length, and searched his various pockets for his pipe. He filled it carefully, and lit it. He puffed with head cocked to one side, as if half-expecting a prompt. I provided one.

“And how went the flight?” I ventured. “Did he truly glide?”

“That is a matter of speculation”, said the other. “Some say yes, some say no. It all comes down to how we interpret the word ‘glide’”. He took a long draw on the foul pipe. “Down, he certainly went. Along, he did go somewhat. It all seems to hang on this – did he go more along than down? In other words, did his flight path achieve better than a 45 degree angle out towards the sea? Witnesses were divided over this question. Indeed, quite a fight broke out among the spectators that afternoon”.

Another pause for riddling and tamping. “So what became of your uncle? Was there a safe landing?” I asked.

“Alas, he crashed, like Icarus, with no small force into the ocean. He had allowed for this eventuality, and had figured that the craft would float like a coracle, being constructed in basically the same way, and I’m sure it would have done...but he underestimated the weight of his mascot, his poor hound Bruiser, advanced in years, and overfed for most of them, whom he insisted accompany him on the flight – he was of course the first dog to fly! He also underestimated the size of the surf that day, and a couple of mighty waves washed over him, and sucked him under. His body, and

Bruiser's, were recovered soon after. The whole county turned out for the funeral. A true Irish hero. Some said he was mad, but I prefer to say 'touched'."

He patted the willow bark around his middle. "So. Fine stuff it is. And 100 per cent reliable. The last thing I need is the strides tumbling down around my ankles – especially as I eschew your British underwear of any description." I must have looked shocked. "Yes, yes, nothing underneath. Surely you are aware of the health benefits? The free circulation of air around the marital parts works wonders, and helps me to satisfy the substantial appetites of Mrs. McSweeney. Indeed, she hungers in all directions, and the veritable earthquake of her footstep is feared in every all-you-can-eat buffet in town. When she and her mother are looking for a light lunch, bankruptcy may be in the horoscope of any establishment that fails to get the 'closed' sign up in time."

I tried to steer the conversation back in a direction that might lead to a resumption of work. "And the concrete is going to plan?"

"It is, it is. On a fine soft morning like this" – he tilted his head up and opened his mouth to taste the rain – "the drying process will naturally be slower, preventing cracks. I am never happier than when working with the concrete. My forbears all did a bit, and some worked on enduring monuments – the Brooklyn Bridge, the M1 Motorway in England, your own Pasadena Freeway just down the road – to name a few...in fact' – here he lowered his voice and leaned into me – "I'll tell you a secret. When it's time for a McSweeney to pass on – I mean, his time on this earth is done – we don't bother with all those funeral costs." He winked conspiratorially. "We prefer the old Cement Overcoat, if you know what I mean. Late at night. A simple ceremony. And preserved forever in the very fabric of the city."

He washed the concrete off his tools reflectively. "You know, I've been meaning to ask you." He gaze fixed on mine. "When my time comes, and should I outlive Mrs. McSweeney, which seems unlikely – she is a supremely tenacious woman – then I might look to you to make the necessary arrangements." I tried to suppress my look of

alarm, but he read it, “Dear love, there is nothing to it at all. Why, you could bury me here – I would be proud to be a part of this recreational idyll. My spirit, my very shape, could be incorporated into a hole, lending a theme – it could be called ‘McSweeney’s Last Stand’ or McSweeney’s Lament’ or some such poetical fancy. Jaysus, I could even arrange to die with mouth agape, which, when concreted over, would make an ideal hole!”

I said I found the idea a little shocking, but that if he so wished, I would do my best to accommodate his remains.

The Governor, for so he is dubbed, stopped in for his regular elocution lesson. I was saddened to see that he was still limping, several months after his skiing accident, but at least he was off the crutches.

“I had an argument with a tree”, he said, “and this time the tree won – but I’ll be baaack!!”

I find these moments when Arnold parodies himself to be rather endearing, and I can, for the moment, forgive the political lapses. He asked me if I had seen the Simpsons movie. “They drew me very bad”, he said, “and they had me talking with this stupid accent...tell me honestly, do I really sound like that?”

I assured the Governor that he had made great strides, his accent had softened to a degree, but there was still much work to be done. I reminded him that the film had at least depicted him as the future President of the United States.

“At least they have vision”, cried Arnold. “They know it’s just a matter of time.” I said that his cause would be helped if he was more consistent. It was all very well him driving a fleet of eco-conscious, hydrogen-fuelled Hummers, but at the same time he was blocking legislation which would clamp down on polluting energy companies, because they were his political donors. I knew I was asking for it, for Arnold then gave me one of

his one-size-fits-all political speeches, learned word for word from a speech by Margaret Thatcher (which I had taught him in the first place), designed to be pulled out at any tricky moment, or basically any time he didn't know the answer:

“At this precise moment in time, could I just say, without fear of contradiction, that it is only by working in the general interest, that is to say, by bringing an even hand to bear on the matter, and it's a matter I do not take lightly, that we can work towards universal freedom and justice for all, in a true and Democratic way, that stands above any party or political agenda.”

That put a stop to further questions, and we got down to work. I thought the Governor might enjoy practicing some presidential phrases, and indeed, he warmed quickly to the task. We ran through 'In this great Democracy of ours', 'Spreading freedom around the world', 'A symbol of all that's good and great about this country' and 'my Press Secretary will deal with that question later'. Georgio, our pool man, popped in at the end of the lesson to greet his old friend and bodybuilding companion, and was mightily impressed. He said that he was saying things the people wanted to hear, and that he didn't see how anyone could *not* vote for him.

Our newlyweds, Brandi and Keanu, are still under the spell of the Vietnamese mystic, Wa Cha Meol Sun, and held a gathering in honour of the great man at their large and tasteless home the other day. They asked if I would attend. I declined, after my experience being bounced off a window or two by his heavies at the last meeting. Mrs. RT said it was ridiculous that I couldn't go along and support the cause, even if I just sat at the back and stayed out of trouble. Reluctantly, and only for a quiet life, I agreed. They sent over a white robe, with a hood, like one of those very snazzy bathrobes from Bahamian beach resorts, and said I should wear it, but first I had to bathe, and then no perfume, and no underwear. This was all getting to be a bit much, but a withering look from Mrs. RT convinced me that I had better comply. At least, I thought, the hood would come in handy, in case any of those bouncers remembered me. Suitably cleansed, I wandered across the street at the appointed hour, and joined a throng similarly dressed

at the door. Inside, the place was nearly jammed with acolytes – business was always good for Mr. Sun. Brandi and Keanu had redecorated again, which they seemed to do about every six months, and their latest look was very white; the impression was of a yacht, one of those huge motor boats, the veritable floating gin palace, about the size of the Titanic, with lots of inbuilt white leather couches, and white carpet, and white painted walls and trim. Add the guests in white robes, and there was danger of snow-blindness – I squinted a bit, and pulled the hood farther down over my eyes. We all sat on the floor, and the meeting got under way.

Mr. Sun's English was unintelligible to me, but everyone else in the room seemed transfixed, and would shout responses at certain times, as if the whole thing was scripted. In a very short time, the affair became deeply tedious, and feeling left out of the fun, my mind drifted off into fanciful reverie. I imagined the whole room as the lounge of an ocean liner, tilting dramatically, and then sliding into the murky depths, but instead of slipping into water, we were sinking into the fires of Hell, and all the white-robed figures were clambering up the Mount Everest of the floor, to get away from the flames. I could feel the heat now rising from below, burning and burning...

I was brought sharply back to reality by the increased commotion in the room – people were jumping to their feet and shouting louder and louder responses. I was also aware of an acute discomfort in the lower abdomen, and figured that this must be a consequence of the excellent lunch I had had with Mr. Alphonso, at one of our favourite eateries, the Khyber Pass Tandoori Grill; I had rashly plumped for the extra hot vindaloo special, and was now paying the price, it seemed, with a burning sensation spreading....

At this point in a similar narrative, Samuel Pepys would probably have switched to Latin, to conceal some delicate anatomical matter, or a bit of good old rumpy-pumpy with the barmaid, from the inquisitive eyes of a manservant, or, heavens forfend, his wife! Classical scholars, on the other hand, were obviously made of stronger stuff, and as men of the world would have no problem with the most salacious material, should they

happen to break into his house and unlock his desk drawer...treading lighter on the classics, suffice it to say, gentle reader, that I suffered an accident, and a brown stain was now spreading over the lower half of my garment, and a profoundly offensive effluvium was certainly reaching my senses, and would soon fill the room. I'm sure I saw Dr. Sun's nose twitch – it was time to retreat.