

## News From Home 8

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I crawl in late and dog-tired from a road trip – but wake up early and refreshed – a little jet-lagged – and finding myself first up, and dawn with her ‘rose-tinted hands lighting the East’, I slip on the sweatpants and Pavarotti in the Park t-shirt and head into the garden. What I see as the sun tips over the horizon makes no sense at all, and I almost swoon in disbelief. I wait for the dream to end, but I am awake. I rub my eyes, but they play no tricks. I bang myself sharply on the side of the head (It used to work with our television), but the scene is the same. There, back in its accustomed spot, is the Japanese garden ornament! It defies belief! “Isn’t it great?” says a voice behind me. I spin round to see Mrs. RT, who has crept up behind me, curlers gleaming in the half-light, beaming with undisguised joy. “I found it at Statues At Liberty – you know, the architectural antiquary. Isn’t it perfect? Just like our old one – except it’s beautifully weathered!” Well it should be beautifully weathered, having spent a week in the Pacific Ocean. For it is, I kid you not, one and the same ornament that I plotted for months to destroy. It’s back – but how? There is no doubt, as I examine it closely. I know every chip, every nuance, every subtle striation of the concrete-pourer’s art. And now, in addition, I see and smell the effects of a lengthy saltwater bath. Yet the questions remain – how – and who? I’ll get to the bottom of this, but meanwhile, the fight has gone right out of me. I shall learn to live with the monster and love it, besides – I noticed that as well as small offerings of rice and flowers, occasionally folding money has been wedged into the openings. I shall

appropriate this tribute as a small revenge, and as a means of clawing back a little of Hashimoto's recent pay rise.

I call in on Georgio, who is my prime suspect, but he seems genuinely as confused as I, and if ever there was a human incapable of subtle shades of deceit, it is he. My next suspect is a dredger....I ask Georgio, by the by, if there is a meeting place for the fraternity of poolmen and women, and if so, did he know the late Mrs. Wasserman's pool-person, and did he have any gossip? Well, it turns out that the Barracuda Bar is the place, rather like Jeeves' Ganymede Club, where employers' weaknesses and kindnesses are discussed, and the trials and rewards of the chlorinated life are laundered, dissected and filed. And yes, he knew Ray, who did for Mrs. W, who said that she was an accident waiting to happen – heavy on the G&Ts, wobbly on her feet any time after 2PM, and generally disappointed with life from 1966 onward. Ray was stunned, of course, - he was the one who found her – and felt guilty at not being surprised. Georgio, with typical Slovakian agricultural insight, remarked that the great miller in the sky eventually grinds us all into bread, and we never know if we'll be plain or wholewheat.

Strung up the lanterns for the wedding – they run all the way from the front to the back of the property – and the effect at night is magical! Honourable No. One Son said that it gave the feeling of being on a Disney cruise ship – I'm not sure that was entirely complimentary. A few more fairy lights and we'll be all set for the big day...I've been put in charge of the disco, and been warned to keep it accessible to all – no tricky stuff, no opera, nothing before 1930. That leaves out most of my favourites, but I'll knuckle under to the task.

I shouldn't have told Hashimoto about the wedding – he's been cutting the lawn on his knees, blade by blade, terrified that the bride may trip on some stray wisp of Marathon Mix Number 4. He has treated the disappearance and reappearance of the Japanese shrine as some inscrutable sort of Western joke. Although I gave him the best

explanations I could, he just chuckled and smiled to himself – I really don't know what to think.

Took Mr. Alphonso on a field trip. This was a treat I'd been planning for months – off to the Huntington Botanical Gardens in Pasadena to view a rare specimen. Our tranquility was destroyed by Anita, who for some reason insisted on coming, along with her two nephews and niece, all nice kids, but demanding, at a time when I wanted a bit of one on one with my old friend. Nevertheless, I wangled about 20 minutes, while Anita was extracting Prickly Pear thorns from the boys' fingers, to wheel Mr. A over to the sub-tropicals. I told him to close his eyes and no peeking, and parked him squarely in front of – a Gaucho Tree! These remarkable plants can grow simply huge – not so much in height as in diameter – the trunks bulge and split, and often a hollow chamber is created in the middle, which could sleep an entire military junta, if required. Mr. A, I'm glad to say, was astonished; had no idea a specimen existed in the area, reminded him of happy days on the Pampas, sheltering from storms inside the trunk; remembering landscapes composed solely of these trees dotted every half-mile or so across the horizon; and generally just delighted with the experience. I managed to wheel Mr. A well under the canopy of the tree, finding easy going over the smoothly bulging and contiguous roots, and there he dismounted, and we ate our picnic right there on the blanket, and the kids had a spectacular game of hide and seek.

Mr. A says he knows of a Toucan that needs rescuing, would I like to take it on? With three parrots already, another bird was far from my thoughts – but they are lovable beasts, and Mr. A says he'll help – like Peter Sellars, he says he's good with birds. Incidentally, Akbar and the boys have started on the top coat of Mr. A's house, and I must say I'm less than impressed so far. If they had such a thing, I would say it looks like a branch of Sainsbury's in Austria, - or perhaps a tax office run by Julie Andrews dressed as a nun. Akbar told me very pointedly that Mr. A had picked his colour out of the catalogue, made his mind up and was not going to change, unlike some other people. So I shouldn't go putting ideas into his head, should I? As he delivered this mild threat, Akbar was smiling, and pressing his new business card into my hand, but I got

the drift all right. I might very quietly suggest a hint more green and a hint less grey – I am, after all, the one who will spend the most time looking at it, and suburban life should avoid reminders of life's mediocrities – so away, dull hues of bank, dentist's waiting room, school corridor, accounts ledger! At least dream of country, corncrake, weathered stile, among the pylons, smog and mini-malls. Who said that Suburbia is where they cut down all the trees, and then name the streets after them?