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People hate mass-mailed Christmas letters, says the BBC (see <http://tinyurl.com/7ywwz6>). So if you'd prefer not to plough through all four pages of this one, let me know and I'll send you a simple email instead saying "Happy Christmas – love Paul, Evelyn and Oliver". But then you'll miss out on why you should convert to the Greek Orthodox Church, why Evelyn is popular in Uganda, how to attract attention in Tehran, and what you can buy for 900 million Zimbabwe dollars. Read on to find out all this and more.

### January

MÜLLENBERG, GERMANY – New sports? We have taken up climbing. With the comfort and safety of indoor climbing walls, of course: no gusty winds, narrow ledges full of bird droppings or dive-bombing seagulls for us, thank you all the same. The chief purpose of our visits to the climbing hall is to prove to Oliver that his ancient parents do not yet have both feet in the grave. Evelyn clammers up the wall like Edmund Hillary. So why is she afraid of even gentle gradients when we go walking in the mountains?

BAKAU, GAMBIA – I really should check things out better before I go for a haircut. The "Harry Potter Video Rental and Barbing Salon" had a boombox blasting out reggae, two electric hair clippers on the counter, but no scissors. "Harry" happily clipped off swathes of my hair, until clippers and music suddenly died: a power cut. Harry went outside to wait for the power to come back on, while I, shorn on one side, gazed dubiously at the locks of hair on the floor: I hadn't realized my hair was that long. The reggae eventually restarted and by the time Harry had finished, I had less than a centimetre of hair left on my head, and my beard looked as patchy as Yasser Arafat's. "Do come back again!" Harry said. But I don't think I will need to visit a barber for at least another 6 months. Next time I need a trim in Gambia I'll pretend to check the videos first, instead of sitting straight down in the chair.

GEORGETOWN, GAMBIA – I followed the noise of drumming and the plume of dust rising into the night sky: a naming ceremony for a newborn girl, with dancers celebrating feverishly by pounding the dusty ground in the family compound. No young boys present, though: they had all just been circumcised, and had to spend 3 months away from home, living rough with elders in a wood on the edge of town, in preparation for adulthood.

This sleepy town, on an island halfway up the River Gambia, used to be a British slaving post. The slaves were held in an underground prison where the only drinking water came from a hole in the floor which was connected to the nearby river. Trading posts like this used to dot West Africa's coast and rivers. Georgetown's buildings are slowly crumbling: the town has lost its importance as trade has moved to the roads. And few of the sun-seeking British tourists on Gambia's beaches make it this far upcountry, or want to be reminded of this shameful chapter in our history.

### February

MOROTO, UGANDA – Opinions vary as to the best time of the day to travel in these parts. Some say you should travel by day: then you can see the bandits as they jump out of their ambush. Others say it's safer at night: the bandits are all asleep then. Day or night, most people drive as fast as the rutted roads will allow, leaving villages gasping in clouds of dust as they pass through.

Evelyn now has a Karamojong name: "Rupe", which means "Sudden Storm with Wind". Apparently this is a good thing in this dry corner of Uganda. Perhaps the rain keeps the dust down, and the bandits indoors?

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA – The plane was an hour late taking off, so passengers started queuing for the loo. Then the reason for the delay became apparent: a VIP boarded: the Patriarch of the Ethiopian



*Season's greetings from Paul, Evelyn, Julia and Oliver*

Orthodox Church, resplendent in white, along with an entourage of black-clad archbishops and pinstriped heavies. "We're either going to be very safe, or we're a prime terrorist target", mused Evelyn, who was seated two rows back. The presence of the ecclesiastical worthies meant censorship: no video entertainment during the flight to avoid the risk of sullyng their eyes and ears with earthly materialism.

### March

MÜLLENBERG – "A cat with no tail?" I looked bleakly out at our snow-covered garden. Then a second "cat" appeared, and another: three baby wild boars had got into the garden and were running up and down the fence at the back, trying to find their way out. Mummy Boar's trotter prints were in the snow by the garage, but Mummy herself was nowhere to be seen. Grabbing sticks to fend her off should she appear, we levered up the fence and chased the three little piggies back and forth until they found the gap underneath. It was only as they sprinted across the field beyond that we realized that all three could have fitted very nicely in our freezer. Looks like another trip to the supermarket before we can put suckling pig on the menu.

MÜLLENBERG – It's amazing how many of our friends have bad backs. We have had nine fir trees in our garden felled, and now the wood has to be split into blocks, to be dried so it can be fed to our insatiable heating stove. So far none of our visitors has taken up our very reasonable offer of a free meal in return for a couple of hours' chopping. At this rate it will take Oliver and me a couple of years to split all the wood with an axe. But at least we keep warm by doing so.

COLOGNE, GERMANY – Evelyn's one-day course at the "Handywomen's House" taught her how to wire a plug, change a light bulb and brandish a power drill. Why attend? Not to learn to do these things herself, but to criticize my work. And I was distressed to learn that the course participants did not have to down tools between 13:00 and 15:00 – official Quiet Time in siesta-loving Germany. Next time I want to do household repairs at lunchtime, I'll say I'm teaching a course.

### May

MÜLLENBERG – Our garden is large; the lawn, rank; our mower, puny. After several months of battling to keep the grass short and watching visitors walk across the green desert to gaze at the meadow over the fence, I have given up. I now mow winding pathways across the lawn, leaving the rest of the grass to grow long and the moles to do their work in peace.

I don't think my mother approves. Silence on the other end of the phone when I told her of this strategy. She finally found her voice: "I prefer pretty flowers". But there *are* pretty flowers: buttercups, daisies, dandelions, clover, stinging nettles...

Our vegetable patch is an efficient slug-breeding system. The slugs first munch their way through the goodies in the compost pile before

slithering onto my onion plants for dessert. We rescue frogs from the rainwater drain and put them onto the compost heap to snack on slugs, but they are so clearly outnumbered that they immediately hop away.

BOHN, GERMANY – A Tanzanian participant arrived for Evelyn’s conference wearing just a Maasai blanket, and carrying a small case, which held just a large laptop, and a second blanket. His sandals, made from tyres and with a decorative spike, stopped admiring traffic in town. On a visit to Munich, one of his sponsors disappeared for a while and returned with a big bag of new clothes. “What will I do with these?” our Maasai friend asked us, “I don’t wear these things.” He eventually took them back to Tanzania to give to people from his village who want to study in the city.

## June

TEHRAN, IRAN – It’s Ertahal, a five-day public holiday to commemorate the death of Imam Khomeini. Tehran is decked in mourning: the ayatollah scowls down at passers-by from innumerable posters. Iranians celebrate what they call the “Ertaholiday” by joining traffic jams in the forlorn hope of reaching an unoccupied picnic spot in the mountains, leaving Khomeini to glower on empty streets in the city.

“The government wants all of us to go to heaven, even if we don’t want to,” said my Iranian colleague. Restrictions on public morality range from dress codes (women must wear veils that cover their hair) to rules on office seating (the deputy minister has ordered our office to put men and women into separate rooms to prevent mixing). Squads of religious police raid offices to enforce compliance. Iranians divide their lives into public and private spheres: they follow the rules in public, but ignore them behind closed doors. In government offices (like ours), the women wear a dreary black chador that covers their head and shoulders. In private sector offices, women often work without headscarves, but keep one in their desks and phone each other to warn their friends when a raid is imminent.

LISBON, PORTUGAL – Are biofuels a good thing? Evelyn gave a talk to a non-government group here. It depends who you ask, she said. Western governments and consumers want to reduce dependency on imported oil and cut greenhouse gas emissions. But if farmers plant biofuels, they produce less food, pushing up the price of food. And in many areas big companies have taken over large tracts of “waste” land to plant crops like jatropha, a shrub that produces an oil-rich bean. Problem is, the land is not really waste: pastoralists are seeing their traditional grazing lands fenced off and planted with jatropha. Biofuels are probably here to stay, but surely there’s a better way to introduce them so they benefit rather than harm the poor?

HARARE, ZIMBABWE, SUNDAY – 2,900,000,000 Zimbabwe dollars to the US dollar. So when I changed some money I ended up with ZW\$ 185 billion, all in crisp, new ZW\$ 5 billion notes. If the Central Bank had not chopped three zeroes off the currency recently, I would almost be a quadrillionaire.

TUESDAY – Today the hotel will exchange 4.4 billion Zimbabwe dollars for a greenback. One supermarket aisle is filled with bags of “soy-veg mix”. Nothing else, though: most of the rest of the shelves are empty. You can still buy eggs, though, for a mere ZW\$ 900 million.

WEDNESDAY – Today the going rate is 6.2 billion. The government-owned *Herald* newspaper is full of news about how opposition is intimidating government supporters, how the British want to invade, and how greedy businesspeople are hoarding goods and emptying shelves. The only truth it’s possible to find in the whole paper is on the sports pages: at least they don’t lie about football scores.

SATURDAY – We picked up “Lucy”, a tomato trader, on our way back into Harare after visiting some rock paintings near Harare. Every day, she buys tomatoes from the farmers in her village, and in the evenings, she straps her baby daughter to her back, says goodbye to her other young children, and carries the heavy bag of tomatoes to the road to wait for a ride into town. When she gets to the city centre, she finds a place on the pavement under a streetlamp, sets down her daughter, and starts selling to passers-by. After selling as many tomatoes as she can, she goes to buy food, then looks for a shared taxi to take her back home, where she prepares a meal for her children.

A fairly common story in much of Africa, but in Zimbabwe, Lucy is breaking the law. Farmers are allowed to sell their produce in town, she says, but traders like her have to sell from their own houses. But who wants to buy tomatoes in her village, where everyone grows them? So Lucy takes a risk every day. If the police catch her, they confiscate her tomatoes, fine her, and detain her for the night. So if she sees a police lorry coming towards her place on the pavement, she grabs her daughter and her bag of tomatoes, and runs.

So who will Lucy vote for in the election on 27 June? “ZANU-PF”, she says. ZANU-PF is the party of President Robert Mugabe, and is responsible for beatings and lootings, for intimidation and political violence in the run-up to the elections. Lucy says that party thugs have already killed two people in her village. Villagers are forced to attend party rallies and chant pro-Mugabe slogans. ZANU-PF youths go from door to door to find and beat people they suspect to be opposition supporters. People are told to make a note of the serial numbers on their ballot papers so their vote can be “audited”. But with five small children to feed, Lucy cannot risk voting for the opposition. “Dying is not a good idea”, she says.

SUNDAY – My last day in Harare; the black market rate has hit 16 billion. At the airport, an official asked me how much Zimbabwe currency I had with me. “25 billion”, I said. “You’re only allowed to take out 5 billion”, he replied. I told him that was worth less than 30 US cents, but he insisted that I divest myself of my extra cash. So I went back through customs and security and bought two small chocolate bars in a shop in the check-in area. I made my way back to his desk and presented him with one. Poor guy, I figured, having to enforce such a stupid rule for such an illegitimate government: he will need all the energy he can get.

NAIROBI, KENYA – The cleric settled down beside me in front of the TV in the guesthouse lobby to watch the Germany–Turkey football game. A jovial Greek Cypriot, he introduced himself as Seraphim, the Orthodox archbishop of Johannesburg (you can check him out at [www.orthodoxjohannesburg.org.za](http://www.orthodoxjohannesburg.org.za)). He was in Nairobi to attend a church council meeting to discuss the Zimbabwe crisis, among other things. Our conversation during the game alternated between theology and football. A typical snippet: “And according to Emmanuel Kant... that was a dirty foul!”

I pointed out that during breaks in the action, the camera picked out pretty young women in the crowd. I asked what was the Church’s teaching on this. “We should not refuse the opportunity to admire the beauty that God has put upon the Earth”, said the Archbishop. An admirable philosophy: I think I’m going to convert to Orthodoxy.

## July

M4 MOTORWAY, UK – The gearbox started making grinding noises and top gear lost power, so I switched down a gear and steered into the slow lane. Other cars were actually overtaking us: something that had never happened before. We limped on to Herefordshire, where my mother located a repair shop that replaced the gearbox for a mere £300. In Germany they would have charged us at least double that. Lesson: if your gearbox is about to fail, come to the UK.

BRISTOL, UK – It’s hard to believe it’s 30 years since I graduated with my bachelor’s. Evelyn and I attended a reunion at the university, where the chief attraction was to see my “wouldn’t-be” girlfriends again (I would, they wouldn’t). They all seem to be more successful than me: they have firm, well-paying jobs, and don’t drive Skodas with dodgy gearboxes. Recognizing the women among my fellow students is fairly easy: they still look pretty much the same as 30 years ago. But I don’t recognize the men – they have all cut their hair or gone bald. Can the same be true of me?



*Do I really look 30 years older?*

YARMOUTH, ISLE OF WIGHT, UK – It's 28 years since Alan and I were in Egypt together, but we still talk about the same thing: the state of our bowels. We walk along the pebble beach here and reminisce about diarrhoea and dysentery. Our wives are nonplussed: did nothing else happen in Asyut except amoebic dysentery and giardiasis?

MÜLLENBERG – Evelyn has taken up what I can only describe as “weediculture”. She rejoices as thistles and brambles thrive in the meadow that used to be our lawn. She harvests nettles and dumps them in a tub of water to rot. “Lots of nitrogen”, she enthuses as she stirs the stinking brew. She has bought books on how to turn weeds into cures for gout and incontinence, and how to prepare meals from nettles and dandelion. If you don't get this letter at the end of the year, it probably means I've succumbed to one of her culinary experiments. If you do get it, I'm still alive and have bought a new mower.

Other people's vegetable patches are a riot of tomatoes and turnips, beans and broccoli. The only things that grow in ours are the potatoes that the previous owner planted and forgot to harvest. My onions are tiny, my garlic invisible, and only one carrot germinated. When I weed, Evelyn accuses me of hacking her chives and uprooting her marigolds. The row of beans I planted yielded a single, stunted plant, which triumphantly bore a solitary pod. Looks like we'll have to subsist on dandelion-and-nettle soup in our old age.

## August

HALLE, GERMANY – A queue of Evelyn's cousins lined up in the museum gift shop for an impromptu book-signing session. The signer was another cousin, Wolfhard Schlosser. A professor of astronomy, he had deciphered the archaeological artefact we had all come to admire. The “Nebra sky disk” is a Bronze Age copper plate, 3600 years old, and the earliest depiction of the sun, moon and stars anywhere in the world. Treasure hunters had dug up the disk near the town of Nebra and tried to sell it illegally, but were caught in a police sting operation in Basle. The disk is now the centrepiece of the museum in Halle. Wolfhard had discovered it is a solar calendar showing the equinoxes, solstices and planting times. So after he had shown us around the museum, it was only fitting that we get him to sign the books we had bought about the disk.

QUEDLINBURG, GERMANY – Many of former East Germany's cities are crumbling. Block upon block of once-stately buildings stand empty and covered with graffiti, abandoned as people move west in search of work. Local governments here get a *Solidaritätszuschlag*, or solidarity fee, a hefty annual sum that former West Germany pays to restore the fortunes of the East. Some have invested in white elephants, but Quedlinburg, perhaps the most picturesque of German mediaeval towns, has spent its *Soli* wisely: instead of tearing down the dilapidated buildings, it has restored its half-timbered houses and attracts tourists from West German cities where romantic twisting alleys have long given way to sterile motorway junctions.

ALTENAU, GERMANY – Evelyn got stuck admiring mint plants by the entrance of Germany's largest herb garden. She was overtaken by a horde of senior citizens, so I sat on a bench among the lavender to wait for her. One old biddy mistook me for a statue – part of the garden exhibit. At least it confirmed my self-image as the strong, silent type. And maybe I can earn a living as a living statue if the development communication business falters.

MÜLLENBERG – Our car's steering creaked every time we reversed out of the garage, so we took it to the repair shop. The mechanic found that the Herefordshire garage had dented the axle, screwed a bolt in the wrong way round, and omitted to replace the protective panels underneath. Putting all this stuff right cost us €600. Lesson: come to Germany if your gearbox is about to fail.

VILNIUS, LITHUANIA – Cranes are everywhere here: unlike East Germany, Lithuania is experiencing a building boom. The old city is being restored, though, avoiding some of the post-war planning errors that blighted so many European cities. Lithuania needs to do more to make things comfortable for foreigners, though: Evelyn said that few people speak English or German. And the airport staff in Riga need to get better at counting: there was one passenger too many on the plane

back to Cologne, so they had to recount five times and ask all the passengers to re-embark before they discovered the error.

## September

PARIS, FRANCE – Oliver is trying to learn French. He dropped the language as soon as he could at school, but while we were in South Africa last year he met a stunningly beautiful Frenchwoman in a backpackers' lodge. Only two slight problems: she was a bit married, and a bit pregnant. But Oliver was smitten: he asked her husband where he found such a wonderful woman. “Euuuh, la France eez full of zeese beautifull women” said the husband. So Oliver's interest in learning the language was reawakened. Just don't tell his girlfriend: Julia is from Franconia (northern Bavaria), not France.

SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL – Hundreds of high-rises scrape the sky in this concrete jungle. Evelyn's congress was held on the fifth floor of one. This is the tropics, but she and other delegates were permanently cold: the air-conditioning was turned right down, and everyone was shivering. At least they could get warm by going down one floor to the shopping mall downstairs. Nothing like some retail exercise to get the blood flowing again.

NAIROBI, KENYA – Development agencies are finally cottoning on to the fact that if farmers are to make money, they have to be able to sell their produce. Organizing them so they can sell direct to retailers is one way – but bypassing the traders isn't always a good idea. The traders have lots of market knowhow, provide credit, and take on the risks of rutted roads and rotting tomatoes. It can be a lot better to get farmers and traders to work together to sort and grade produce, improve quality and guarantee deliveries. This was the third writeshop I've done on this theme: we had participants describing how to market tamarind in Indonesia, coffee in the Philippines, beans in Nicaragua, and poppies in Afghanistan. Poppies? Er, no: that should be lettuces: off-season vegetables can produce just as much income for farmers as opium – and they're legal too. All I have to do now is edit the book we all wrote. Along with all the other books I have to finish, I should be busy until the middle of next year.

## October

CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA – The taxi driver didn't seem at all typical: an elderly white gentleman in a suit and tie, with an impeccable Oxford accent and Bach on his car radio. “I'm retired from the Foreign Service”, he told me as we drove along. He used to be the South African ambassador to Italy, and now runs his own business – which includes a taxi service. I've been driven by a former general before (in Tehran: many retired military personnel seem to buy a taxi with their pension), but never before by a former ambassador. I'll be disappointed if my next driver isn't at least a retired Cabinet minister.

MAPHUTSENG, LESOTHO – One more thing to add to my résumé: demolishing houses. I was helping my friend August Basson design training courses, when one of his assistants asked me if I could help fetch some stone. They were constructing a shed for the generator (no mains electricity here), and had run out of building stone. So I jumped in the clapped-out Land Rover and we headed off to cannibalize a nearby ruined house. We pushed and levered the decaying walls till they fell down – most of the mud used as mortar had already washed out – then selected the best brick-shaped stones and loaded them onto the Land Rover.

If you want to give a Christmas present to a worthwhile cause, then I can heartily recommend August's organization, Growing Nations, for



*On the way back from Robben Island, Cape Town*

Oliver worked last year. Growing Nations promotes “conservation agriculture”, one of the few ways that small-scale farmers in Lesotho can grow enough food to eat, and that stops the massive soil erosion that afflicts Lesotho. They are building a new training centre in Maphutseng and need all the help they can get – so please give generously if you choose to do so. See <http://tinyurl.com/5nstss> and <http://tinyurl.com/5wezpf> for more.

## November

MOPTI, MALI – Air Algérie lost my suitcase, so I had to buy some new clothes in the market. Shirts were no problem: with the assistance of my colleague Maria, who the stallholder thought was my wife, I haggled the price down to just over half the initial asking price. By this time the stallholder and I had established a rapport, so haggling over underpants didn’t take as long. But socks were a problem: my stallholder friend didn’t sell them, and his neighbour had only one pair: from Ethiopian Airlines – the sort you get for free to keep your feet warm on long flights. Maria and I said we’d come back again tomorrow. But as we walked back to the hotel, we were overtaken by two lads on motorbike, bearing three pairs of socks for me. That’s the sort of quality service that European retailers can only dream of.

The six-man band drummed on dry gourds and performed acrobatics for our final evening’s entertainment. Cost of hiring them? €80. Meanwhile, the Governor of Mopti chatted with the senior members of our team – supposedly about conservation policy in the Inner Niger Delta wetlands. Cost of hiring him to come to the closing ceremony and attend the final dinner? €400. What did he really spend the evening talking about? No, not the environment, but the delights of polygamy.

SENDEGUE, MALI – The Inner Niger Delta, a vast swampland between Ségou and Tombouctou that forms when the Niger floods each year, is the winter home to millions of migratory birds from frigid Europe. We hired a boat so we could chase the elusive purple heron. Vast beds of floating reeds teem with tiny fish – which the Bozo villagers will later catch. Drowned houses or dried reeds, abandoned by their inhabitants during the floods, stand like sentinels in the water. When the water recedes, the Bambara farmers will be back to plant crops, and the Peul will return to graze their cattle on the dried grass. But for now this is a paradise for birds: swarms of sparrows, eagles diving for fish, kingfishers skimming over the water, and yellow bulbuls, perched like flowers in the reeds. And herons: white ones standing like statues in the reedbeds; greys, shyer and further away; and purples, startled by the boat’s engine, lifting off and flying to safety in the distance.



*A cowboy in the Inner Niger Delta*

DJENNÉ, MALI – “*Entrée interdite aux non-musulmans*” – no entry for non-Muslims – said the signs outside the mosque. So we went round to a side entrance, where the son of the imam let us in. “We put up the signs after some tourists came in and drank alcohol and smoked dope”, he explained. The CFA 5000 (€8) entrance fee was worth it: the Djenné mosque is the world’s largest mud-brick building. Outside, the pointed ramparts seem to compete in striving towards heaven. Inside, the high ceiling is supported by a hundred massive, square, mud-brick pillars, each wider than the spaces between them, producing a labyrinth of verticals cut by swathes of light. Inside, quiet, cool and still; outside, the heat and bustle of market day, with stalls selling everything from calabashes to clothes.

KOULIKORO, MALI – Here’s how to make biofuels in a way that actually helps the poor. My friend Hugo has built a factory and organized smallholders to grow jatropha. By the time the factory is finished, it should supply 5% of Mali’s fuel needs, saving foreign exchange and enabling thousands of farmers to earn much more than they can get from growing sorghum alone. For more, see [www.malibiocarburant.com](http://www.malibiocarburant.com).

## December

KALK BAY, SOUTH AFRICA – “Whale! Whale!” We had been on the lookout the whole week. We had scrutinized rocks, boats and patches of floating seaweed, but all the whales seemed to have departed for their summer feeding grounds in the Antarctic. But during a break near the end of the writeshop, I spotted a dark shape moving towards the harbour wall, and alerted Evelyn and the other participants. Yes, it was not one whale but two: a mother and calf, nestling alongside her. The mother flapped her tail and spouted a fountain of water in the air, oblivious to our applause, before diving out of sight. We returned to work reinvigorated by the sight of these massive, docile creatures that are so free of human control.

CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA – Germans like to have their trains and planes run on time, so discontented mutterings began when another delay was announced for the Lufthansa flight Evelyn was about to board. Help for the beleaguered ground staff was at hand, though: the passengers included a choir, who gave an impromptu performance at the boarding gate. Smiles and warm feelings all round. I wonder if they got an upgrade to business class?

TEHRAN, IRAN – “Yee-haw! Moo! Neigh!” Iranians seem to think my broad-brimmed, leather South African bush hat makes me a cowboy. A group of young men followed me down the street whinnying and mooing, with the occasional “Yip!” thrown in. The waiters in my hotel were impressed too. They gathered around my breakfast table to admire my hat. I asked one if he wanted to try it on, and he beamed. I took photos of all three waiters wearing the hat and pretending to be John Wayne.

MARBURG, GERMANY – Oliver overslept this morning: he woke up at 08:00 instead of the usual 03:15. Five hours late is not a good time to be delivering breakfast rolls and croissants to grumpy German households. Oliver took on a delivery job with a bakery a couple of months ago to supplement the meagre student allowance from his stingy parents. He quickly discovered that getting up at 03:15 every morning makes it hard to have a vibrant night life and induces somnolence during lectures. He resigned after discovering that after paying for his petrol, he was earning well below the minimum wage. Fortunately he stayed on the job until the end of December – just in time to harvest Christmas bonuses from grateful customers.

MÜLLENBERG – The League for Pastoral Peoples, the organization that Evelyn helps run, has come out with two new products: camel milk ice cream, and paper made from camel dung. The ice cream, or “desert dessert”, is delicious, and the League’s Christmas card, made from the paper, is brown and smells faintly of, well, camel. Let Evelyn know if you want to order a packet of cards.

Climbing the Brocken, a mountain in eastern Germany in August, I must have twisted my left knee. It was still hurting a bit when Evelyn and I went to play badminton. My legs had other ideas, though: my right knee gave way too. The doctor referred me to an orthopaedist, who sent me off to Cologne for a scan. I came back with an impressive-looking set of photographs that show I had torn the meniscus in both knees. I’ve been hobbling around like an old man ever since (“You *are* an old man”, says Oliver). The operation is scheduled for next April. The medics assure me that my knees will be OK afterwards. But I think I’ll avoid climbing mountains again. Maybe walls too. Any ideas for a new hobby I can take up next year?

A very happy Diwali, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Tabaski, Eid Ghorban, Idul Adha, Tet and Norooz. Yee-haw!

Paul, “Sudden Storm” and Oliver