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AS USUAL, you have a choice: you can skip to the end to pick up your annual greetings, then move on to other, less longwinded festive missives. Or you can plough through the next four pages of closely set type. Where you will discover, among other things, why we have been drowning in champagne, how to avoid getting swallowed by a snake, and why I want to grow a ponytail.

January

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, UK – I live in continual amazement at the contents of Evelyn’s handbag. Its capacious depths harbour just about anything you might possibly need. An antidote for superglue, for example. While repairing a toilet seat in my parents’ house, I managed to spill superglue over my hands. Evelyn immediately pulled out a tube of hand cream and applied it liberally before my hands adhered permanently to the seat. I know I shouldn’t be surprised that she knew the correct antidote – but I was. I must remember to take her (plus handbag) along next time I do some sanitary repair work.

STUTTGART, GERMANY – “Arabella! Arabella!” The man in the red jacket with gold brocade slithered across the icy ground, peering under caravans and between containers. When we got inside the circus tent, we realized why he had been anxious. Arabella was one of a troupe of dogs performing a waltz. Fortunately she had made it back from her unauthorized walkies in time for her act.

Our Jordanian friend Abed, who volunteers every year in the circus, had invited us to a show. He gave us prime seats, and in the interval took us into the artists’ area where we watched acrobats working on their stunts. One young Chinese woman was standing on tiptoe on two lightbulbs. Later in the ring, we saw her doing the same, but now with two colleagues standing on her shoulders.



None of the fancy uniforms fitted her – so Evelyn has decided not to run away to the circus

February

STOKE PRIOR – I’ve decided I’m getting quite good at being a plumber’s mate. My nephew Matthew has just qualified as an electrician, so is obviously handier with a screwdriver than I am. He has an impressive array of tools too, though no superglue antidote. I must introduce him to the contents of Evelyn’s handbag.



Founding members of Glocal LifeLearn. Pity the one fourth from left

MÜLLENBERG, KÜRTEEN, GERMANY – Oliver, Julia and their friends have founded an organization called Glocal LifeLearn (glocal-lifelearn.org) to support small educational initiatives in the developing world. For example, they are paying school fees for some poor children in Uganda, and have bought books for a school in Costa Rica. They held the first meeting in our house. Highly efficient: in just two days they had founded the organization, hammered out goals, objectives and working procedures, elected officials, chosen a name and designed a logo. I was roped in as a founding member: they needed seven people but had only six.

The Egyptian revolution has held us enthralled. Among the many things to admire, one thing impressed me most: after the protests had succeeded and Mubarak had left, people came out to clean up the streets. A journalist interviewed a young woman who was sweeping up debris. “Why are you doing this?” asked the reporter. “Because this is my country”, she said. With people like her, and the millions who protested peacefully day after day, Egypt has shown the world what a great civilization it is.

March

MÜLLENBERG – No one can accuse us for lack of planning: our long list of repairs and home improvements is neatly prioritized into categories like “urgent”, “high priority” and “when we win the lottery”. But my latest project wasn’t anywhere on the list – as Evelyn has never tired of reminding me. Fed up with staring at a computer screen, I decided to widen the path beside the garage. I started digging out earth. But one thing leads to another: Evelyn recalled that I wanted to build a rack for firewood along the garage wall. That meant shifting another couple of tons of soil. Before I knew it, I was building a herbal spiral to take the extra soil, replacing the stone steps along the side of the house, installing concrete plant boxes along the path, and building a greenhouse behind the garage. None of which were on our priority list.

Our neighbour Ulli took pity on me and laid the path and steps. I kept him supplied with gravel and paving stones. But all the exertion was too much. Ooh, me back!



One day this will be a herbal spiral

UETLIBERG, SWITZERLAND –I can definitely recommend the train trip from Cologne to this mountaintop hotel. The views along the Rhine are pretty enough, and a stunning panorama of Zurich and the Alps greets you at the top. But the reason for giving German and Swiss railways all five stars is that the backache I picked up from shovelling gravel had disappeared. Several hours of a gentle rocking motion cured me. Or was it the lack of a computer screen to stare at?

WALLENDORF, RHINELAND-PALATINATE, GERMANY – Herding sheep looks easy when done by a professional. But Evelyn and I were newbie shepherds, the newborn lambs were newbie sheep, and the older ones were eager to explore the woods on either side of the path. “If you carry the lambs, let their hind legs trail on the ground”, said Günther, the shepherd, “Their mothers don’t understand if their babies suddenly start to fly.”



How not to carry a baby

April

MÜLLENBERG – We uncorked a bottle of champagne when Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled Tunisia, and another when Hosni Mubarak resigned in Egypt. When the protests in Libya started, I bought another bottle to put in the fridge. But Gaddafi has made Ben Ali look like a hero, and Mubarak seem statesmanlike. Gaddafi’s bottle is still in the fridge.

May

MÜLLENBERG – My bad back has made guests even more welcome. We put them to work chopping firewood to keep us warm in winter. August, Oliver’s former boss in Lesotho, set about this with gusto: he converted a large pile of logs into matchwood in impressively few minutes.

August’s idea of a holiday is not chopping firewood, but touring Europe talking about his work. He is building a training centre

on conservation agriculture in Lesotho (growingnations.co.za). Oliver and Julia arranged for him to give a talk at the university in Marburg. Regine, Evelyn’s sister, got him to give a presentation at the university in Bochum. He says that his next year’s holiday will be riding a motorbike from Lesotho to Kenya. Sounds more fun than chopping wood for us.

MÜLLENBERG – “Parsnips can be difficult” said my mother when I called her for advice. Fine, but that doesn’t help me much: my parsnip seeds still show no interest in germinating. Why is this a problem? Because roast parsnips have the same effect on Evelyn as do hunks with ponytails, or soppy romance films set in Cornwall: she goes all wobbly at the knees. Chances for a romantic trip to Cornwall don’t come up that often, and I fear I will never grow a ponytail or develop the requisite musculature to sweep her off her feet. So parsnips it has to be. You can’t buy them in Germany, so I’ve imported seed from Britain and sown it in our garden. Can’t wait until harvest time to see whether they have the desired effect.

June

STRASBOURG, FRANCE – In lieu of parsnips, perhaps a trip to romantic Strasbourg would help? But we ended up in a youth hostel in Kehl, on the German side of the Rhine, sharing a dorm room with another couple. Time for subterfuge: we went to bed early, and when our roommates came in, we greeted them with an extended bout of artificial snoring. They turned tail and left the room to confer. They decided to get their things and find another, quieter room. But then we gave in: we began to snigger instead of snore. Note to selves: more discipline next time.

MÜLLENBERG – I didn’t realize that snakes had a reverse gear. The grass snake was perhaps an inhabitant of the composter I had bought for Evelyn instead of a diamond ring for our silver wedding last year. And this snake was ambitious: it had grabbed a toad several sizes too big, and was dragging it backwards to a more convivial place to swallow it. But the toad was reluctant to become lunch, it had blown itself full with air, making it even harder to swallow. The snake eventually realized it had bitten off more than it could chew (OK, OK, I know snakes can’t chew), or maybe it got tired of us spectators gawping at this gripping predation sequence. It let go, switched to forward gear, and slithered away into the long grass. The toad waited several minutes to be sure the danger of being swallowed was over before deflating and hopping off in the opposite direction. Perhaps wiser, and definitely older than the snake had planned.

July

MÜLLENBERG – “Does our son still have all his limbs?” my sister Elizabeth wanted to know. During his week’s stay with us, we had let John loose with sundry power tools, blowtorches, and other heavy equipment. By the end of the week, we had built the firewood rack by the garage and filled it with several cubic metres of logs we had sawn and split. Useful lad, is John. Only hope I can persuade him to volunteer for more slave labour next year.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND, USA – I was surprised the green cardboard robot didn’t collapse: Baltimore was enduring a 35° heatwave, and it must have felt even hotter if you are taped inside a pile of cardboard boxes.

During the annual manga convention, the centre of Baltimore was overrun by over 30,000 fans of this Japanese comic genre.

A superhero in a blue muscle shirt and white helmet needed two lackeys to carry his polystyrene angel wings. Shapely young women in miniskirts, shocking-pink hair and furry cat’s ears mingled with shaven-headed young men in bodypaint and leather skirts. Weapons were *de rigueur*: swords, spears, shields,



I wonder how they go to the loo?

truncheons, laser guns, chains, hammers... all made from paper, wood or polystyrene to avoid incurring the ire of the staff guarding the entrance to the convention centre.

On my way to work each morning, I had to negotiate my way through huddles of gaudily costumed anime characters adjusting their weapons and fiddling with their ears and horns. They all seemed to be aged between 18 and 30: no oldies and no children. Are they not allowed to dress up in cardboard boxes?

August

MÜLLENBERG – My friend Alan, an ex-Egypt volunteer, is expert at steering his mobility scooter into the tightest spots. He drove it into the restaurant, heaved himself into a chair, and I got the chance to drive it outside again to park it out of the way. Trickier than it sounds. I collided with the next table and nearly ran over a waitress and three other diners in my attempts to manoeuvre it outside. I need more practice. Hope to get it next year when I see him again. The next meeting of our ex-Egypt group may be in the Shetlands – a remote group of islands north of Scotland. We're planning our holiday there already.

September

MARBURG – Oliver and Julia are proud owners of shiny new bachelor's degrees in geography. And they have moved to Lund, in Sweden, to start their master's degrees. Evelyn and I helped them scrub and repaint their flat in Marburg, and they abandoned their house plants, loaded up their car with the remainder of their worldly goods, and headed north. Scrub Shetland – we're now planning our next summer holiday in Sweden.



Farewell to the houseplants

STOKE PRIOR, 6 SEP 2011 – My father died this morning after a long illness, which he and my mother bore with tremendous courage and patience. I arrived in Stoke Prior just in time to see him before he died. People say I'm like him. I see that as a huge compliment.

Our family has a tradition of turning on our car hazard lights as we drive away. It's a way of saying goodbye, and saves us from winding down the windows and waving. We asked people at his funeral to do the same. My father would have enjoyed that.

My father was a big fan of steam locomotives: he made dozens of beautiful scale models in between his vacuum-cleaning and lawn-mowing duties. As we lowered his coffin into the ground, I blew a farewell whistle that sounded like the Royal Hudson, a Canadian locomotive he was particularly fond of.

Afterwards, one of the mourners came up to me. "I'm not familiar with Catholic funerals", he said. "What was the significance of the whistle?"

MÜLLENBERG – It's at times like this that the differences between the male and female psyche come to the fore. I waited in our new car while Evelyn picked up some rolls for breakfast the next day. When I spotted her coming, I backed the car out of the parking space – straight into a concrete plant pot. The plant pot survived without a dent, but our paintwork had collected a series of gashes. Evelyn showed little interest in the damage to the car, or the state of her husband's mood: she was more interested in identifying the owner of the concrete pot in order to report that it had escaped without a mark. Women? I've given up trying to understand them.



Oh gosh, are you OK? Everything all right? You poor little plant pot?

October

BAMAHO, MALI – Sounds exotic, but was anything but. In eight days in Mali, I had time to leave the hotel just three times: once to go to a restaurant round the corner, once to check in at the Air France office next door, and once to get in the bus to go back to the airport. I really must plan my trips better.

LINDLAR, GERMANY – Forget that holiday in Sweden: Oliver and Julia are back in Marburg. They found the course in Lund too low-level; Julia is now studying for her master's in Marburg, while Oliver has enrolled for a master's in resource management in nearby Giessen.

That means that Oliver is into all things recycling. He came to see us one weekend, and took us on a trip to a waste dump that has been repurposed as a tourist attraction. Only in Germany...



The future of German vacations: a trip to a waste dump

MÜLLENBERG – We finally got to drink the bottle of bubbly we had bought in anticipation of Muammar Gaddafi’s fall. But after eight months of bitter fighting, it did not taste as good as it would have done back in February.

November

CRESCENT ISLAND, LAKE NAIVASHA, KENYA – What was the fish doing in the grass, surrounded by a herd of zebra and giraffe? The guide picked it up: it would come in useful later, he said. We got back on the boat and navigated through the flocks of pelicans and flamingos until we saw a fish-eagle in a tree on the shore. “Get your cameras ready: it’s very fast”, said the guide. He whistled, and threw the fish into the water. The eagle seemed to know the routine: it glided down and plucked the fish from the centre of the ripples. A lot faster than my camera: I got a blurry shot of lake and trees, but not a fish or eagle to be seen.



Anyone seen that fish I left here?

ROME, ITALY – It took Evelyn and me almost a week to work out that we did not have to drag our shopping up all 131 steps to the flat where we were staying. We had considered installing one of those electric hoists that adorn Italian balconies and allow you to winch sacks of potatoes and crates of beer up, and bags of rubbish down. No: our solution was another Italian workaround: eat out morning, noon and night. No shopping to heave up the stairs, and much better food than we could ever cook ourselves.

Yes, while in Rome we raised a glass of *prosecco* to celebrate the ousting of Silvio Berlusconi. Now, if only the Syrians and

Yemenis can get rid of their dictators before the end of the year...

December

MARBURG – Oliver’s professors liked his bachelor’s thesis (on the best locations for biogas plants in Alsace): they’ve asked him to turn it into a journal article. And Julia has won an award for hers (on wind speeds in the Andes). We are pleased and proud, and we pretend to understand what they have written.



The future of development communication

MÜLLENBERG – First frost: it’s parsnip-harvesting time. Alas, only two survived the battle against weeds, misguided weederers, and our garden voles. Before I dug it up, one of the roots looked encouragingly huge. But the voles had bored a tunnel the size of the Gotthard straight through it, so our monster parsnip turned out to be a mere two centimetres long. Maybe I should revive the ponytail-and-biceps idea?

A very happy Diwali, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Tabaski, Eid Ghorban, Idul Adha, Tét and Norooz. Please send us parsnips for Christmas. We’ll have lots of logs ready for chopping should you plan to visit. And try not to superglue yourself to a toilet seat in 2012.

Paul, Evelyn, Oliver and Julia