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Here is our humble contribution to the much-maligned Christmas letter genre. In it, you can learn where to sit at a funeral, why I've been replaced by a plastic spoon, what to do if you find a homeless bumblebee, and why you should speak German at home. Worth reading on?

January

ZISCHENDORF, GERMANY – As I browsed in the bookshop just before Christmas last year, Evelyn suddenly decided we had something urgent to do. She swept me out of the shop and into the street. It was only at Christmas that she told me why: I was looking at the very same book that she had already bought as a present for me.

In vain: I had already ordered the book online. As we opened the presents under the tree, we discovered two identical books – one for her, one for me.

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – The Catholic Church likes to keep its congregations fit: stand, sit, kneel, stand, kneel, sit. Get up at the wrong time, and you risk attracting stares and distracting the priest from transubstantiating wafers and wine into something more ethereal.

So one of the rules of going to a funeral is “sit as close to the back as you can”. Then you can copy the people in front as they fall to their knees. Alas, the church was nearly full, and the usher directed me right to the front. I thereby became a leader rather than a follower in these ecclesiastical gymnastics.

You also have to know the words and tunes to the hymns, and when to pull out your wallet (“We have to fix Joseph: he fell over onto the Baby Jesus”, said the priest, explaining how the offertory would be used to repair the Nativity scene.)

But sitting at the front has its advantages. I had the best view of the horrified reaction of a teenage boy whom the priest asked to serve at the altar. He remained stubbornly glued to his seat. “He was raised as a Protestant”, explained his aunt later.

February

COLOGNE, GERMANY – The world's largest Gothic cathedral is built on the remains of at least three earlier churches, and on the ruins of Roman houses below that. Take a tour of the archaeological dig beneath the cathedral, and the guide will show you how the foundations go down 16 metres – enough to support the huge weight of the masonry above.

Evelyn now wants me to do something similar under our house: “a cellar would be great”, she says. And perhaps I can construct a hypocaust for central heating while I'm at it? That will take some heavy earth-moving. I wonder if we can persuade some archaeologists that our house sits atop a unique Roman villa that needs to be dug up?

MÜLLENBERG, GERMANY – Valentine's Day: I sensed Evelyn slipping out of bed early in the morning. I turned over: she had obviously gone to make some coffee. But an hour later, still no coffee, no Evelyn, no Valentine's morning cuddle. Perhaps she had gone to buy rolls for breakfast? Flowers for me? No: the car was still in the driveway. I went downstairs to find her doing callisthenics in front of the television. Regine, her sister, had told her about morning exercises on TV. “Want to join in?” asked Evelyn. From now on, 14 February is Curse-the-Sister-in-Law Day.



The yacht behind my left shoulder is ours

March

BERGISCH GLADBACH – My Chinese course has been cancelled: too few participants to carry on for another year. So I spent a couple of afternoons learning how to say “good morning” in Japanese instead.

Every language makes life difficult for foreigners. English has maddening spelling; German and French force you to learn the gender of every noun – and then to make the articles and adjectives agree with them. Written Arabic is different from spoken Arabic, and it does not show the vowels. It's like having to guess whether “pt” should be “pat”, “pit” or “pot”.

Chinese grammar is simple, but the language is tonal and has oodles of words that are pronounced exactly the same: you have to guess what is meant from the context. And you have to learn huge numbers of characters that bear no relationship to how a word is pronounced.

Japanese, I discovered, is even more perverse. It has not one but four writing systems – and only one of them (*rōmaji*, or Roman letters) is actually an alphabet. *Hiragana* and *katakana* are syllabaries – each letter denotes a syllable (a consonant followed by a vowel). The 46 *hiragana* characters are used to write Japanese words; the 48 *katakana* are used to write words of foreign origin. Then there's *kanji*, or Chinese script, with somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 common characters. A single sentence can contain all four writing systems.

Like English speakers, the Japanese have never got round to simplifying their orthography. Reforming English spelling is well-nigh impossible because of pronunciation differences and the many countries that use the language. But who else – apart from the Japanese themselves – speaks Japanese?

“Good morning”? おはよう. That's in *hiragana*, and it sounds like “Ohio”.

MÜLLENBERG – Seen a homeless bumblebee? Evelyn has built a hotel for them in our garden. It's a 40 cm cube of plywood, with an entrance painted blue (bumblebees like the colour), and filled with an inviting mixture of sawdust, wood shavings, wool, dried grass and moss. Number of bumblebees that have checked in so far? Nil. They prefer the warren of vole runs that undermine our

lawn. No idea how many bumblebees we inadvertently slaughter whenever a tunnel collapses beneath our feet. Still, the hotel is cosy enough for me to retire to whenever Evelyn finally evicts me from the house.

April

STOKE PRIOR, HEREFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND – “This will be no good”, said my mother, uncorking a demijohn of decade-old home-made wine and pouring it down the sink. She was trying to clear out clutter from her house, and the wine seemed a good place to start. It smelled good, though: Evelyn managed to stop her before she had emptied the whole gallon. A quick organoleptic test confirmed that it was eminently drinkable. We packed eight intact demijohns in the car to bring back to Germany. When they’re empty, we plan to brew our own concoction. Elderflower wine, anyone?

ST DAVID’S, WALES – The landlady of our bed-and-breakfast was loquacious. Young people spend all their time on social media, she said; they tell the whole world about their private lives. “I don’t need Facebook”, she said.

“She’s right”, said Julia: from the landlady’s half-hour monologue we learned far more than would be possible by browsing her timeline or thumbing through her photo album.



Windswept at the White Horse of Uffington

ELEMENTAITA, KENYA – There are two sorts of lake in the Rift Valley: alkaline and freshwater. Lake Elementaita is alkaline: no irrigation, no greenhouses growing flowers for export, no town on the shore. Lake Naivasha is fresh, so has lots of all of these, and the pollution problems that go with them.

Salty water means relatively little wildlife at Elementaita. The only animals visible were a couple of dikdiks – tiny, shy antelopes that are small enough to creep under the electric fence around the hotel. At least in Naivasha you have a chance of seeing hippos on the lawn.

May

SHENFIELD, ENGLAND – What seemed a steep hill when I was a child is now merely a minor rise. The houses have been extended, and big gardens have been subdivided and new houses built in the gaps. The houses now seem too big for the narrow plots they sit on. And whole streets are locked in a silent but grim contest: who can tend the neatest lawn and maintain the tidiest flowerbed? If I lived there, I’d be tempted to let my front garden grow wild, just to annoy the neighbours.

June

MÜLLENBERG – The Wotans have escaped! The swarm settled on the trunk of a small tree over the fence. We donned



The naughty step is about halfway up

protective gear and brushed as many bees as possible into a bucket. It took three tries and five stings before we managed to capture the queen – after which all the other bees tamely joined her in the bucket. The bees ended up in a new hive right next door to the one they had just deserted. The ones left in the old hive are still all called Wotan. The new hiveful are now all named Isolde.

MONACO – A family tradition continues: to say that you have been to a country, you have to go through customs, and you must have a pee. No customs between France and Monaco, but we queued up for the loo all the same. Strangely, my sister Annabelle has not been to Monaco, even though she was with us while we were there. She claims that being thrown out of the casino for taking photos should count. The jury is still out.

ANTIBES, FRANCE – The ancient steps leading down off the town wall have been smoothed by generations of Greeks, Romans, barbarians, French – and now, tourists. Evelyn slipped and bounced down four steps, fracturing her elbow in the process. She was bundled into an ambulance that happened to be nearby, and she spent the rest of our holiday in hospital instead of on the beach. She now has two nails and two wire loops holding her elbow together. At least she learned a smattering of French medical vocabulary while in hospital.

French medical care, by the way, is excellent. Total cost to us for 5 days in hospital plus complex operation? €90. Something to ponder, Mr Farage, when you call for the UK to withdraw from the European Union?

ANTIBES – “Football is a game where 23 men run around a field for 90 minutes, and in the end the Germans win.” I rashly promised a black-red-gold ice cream to my family if Germany beat France in the World Cup. The Germans won, of course. The ice-cream seller didn’t care: “Je suis Portugais”, he said.

July

MÜLLENBERG – Bees do not like mowers or strimmers. I trimmed the grass around the hives, and out they poured in a defensive frenzy. Two stings: one on each arm. Evelyn and I now have only one fully functional arm between us.

Bee stings are painful, but they wear off in a few days. Broken elbows take longer. Evelyn’s cast has been removed and the stitches are out, and I am ferrying her back and forth to the physiotherapist as she still cannot drive. Progress is visible, though: she can now bend her elbow enough to put her thumb in her mouth. Come wintertime, I am confident she will be able to chop wood and shovel snow.

MÜLLENBERG – Dear European Union: An Indonesian friend wishes to visit Europe. To get a Schengen visa, she needs an invitation from us. Among the supporting information you require are a bank statement proving we have enough money, several years of tax returns showing our income, evidence of our mortgage to attest that we own our house, an electricity bill

proving that we actually live here, and a residence permit verifying that we ourselves are not illegal immigrants.

To submit this information, you required us to visit our local immigration office, which is 20 km away and open only two days a week. When we finally obtained the official invitation certificate, we had to send it by snailmail to Indonesia. It took two months to get there, although we sent it by registered airmail. You submitted my friend to a demeaning interview in Jakarta (60 km from her home), after which you rejected her application because the original invitation certificate had not arrived – the scan we had also sent was not good enough.

Might we humbly suggest that there are less laborious ways to enable tourists to come here? You might start off by eliminating the need for a hardcopy certificate that can get lost or delayed in the mail. Stop that nonsense about wanting to see our electricity bills and mortgage certificate. Oh, and try to make it look as if you actually welcome people who want to spend money here.

August

MÜLLENBERG – A visit from my brother, Laurence, and his wife, Tracey. They pretended to be interested in our bees; we pretended to be interested in cars. They recently won a prize for the “cleanest, shiniest” car in their car club. I can understand why: their red sports car was spotless, but Laurence still buffed it up while it was in our driveway. Such a shame we could not convince him to clean our car instead. We’re considering starting a club for dented, dirty Toyota Corollas. We’ll see how



Just imagine Evelyn draped over the bonnet of one of these. Just imagine the owner's face if she tried.

many Facebook “likes” we manage to gather.

MÜLLENBERG – Dear Indian Consulate: I have been invited to your delightful country to give a course that I hope will in a small way help some of its citizens climb out of poverty. In order to obtain a visa, I am required to complete a form in which I must state my mother’s birthplace, confirm that I have never been a member of the Pakistani armed forces, and give my religion (no space for “atheist” or “mind your own business” available). You also require me to submit my own permanent residency certificate – but neglect to mention that this has to be newer than 3 months old – requiring me to visit my local town hall. You then ask me to pay the princely sum of €524 for the visa, plus service charges. That’s €87 for each night I plan to spend in India: about twice what my hotel room cost. Might I humbly suggest that you rethink your visa policy?

DELHI, INDIA – The Green Park is aptly named: it is one of the few verdant areas in this dusty city. In the mornings and evenings, when the air is cool, it is full of walkers (like me), joggers, young couples and families. A sweaty young man does



Look what a year of marriage does to you

pull-ups on one of the bars scattered around the park, next to a sari-clad grandmother stretching her arms. Yoga devotees have spread sheets out on the grass to sit on. An improbably old man sits in an improbably convoluted lotus position: legs crossed, body creased forward, his forehead on the ground.

Go up some steps, and you are suddenly alone in a jungle: trees, dense undergrowth, bird calls. The whole of northern India must have been like this once. Walk along the track, and you come across a trio of cows, and then you are in a village. Round the corner, and you find yourself in an upmarket area with restaurants and art galleries. Go through a gate, and you are in a ruined complex of Mughal buildings: a mosque, tombs and seminary, all overlooking a large water reservoir.

MÜLLENBERG – I arrived back home from India to find a large plastic spoon on my pillow. “You’ve been replaced!” announced Evelyn. Rubbing skin cream on her back is a post-shower task I normally undertake. At a pinch she can do it herself – but not with a broken arm. The spoon, it seems, is a perfect surrogate: it is fast and efficient, she says; it doesn’t answer back, and there is no danger of straying hands.

I now fear that a future spoon – version 2.0, perhaps – will have additional features: a module that tells stupid jokes, and an English-editing app. If that happens, I will have been fully supplanted.

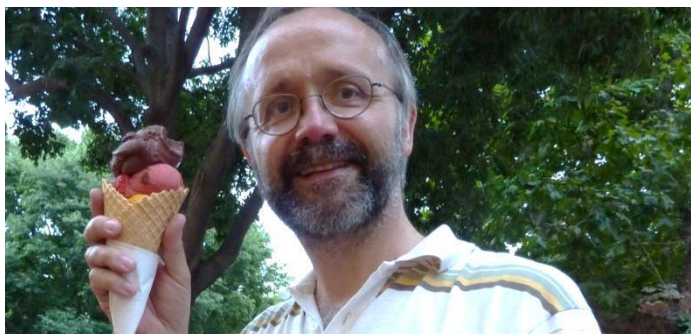
MÜLLENBERG – Mundy’s Law of Honey states that however many jars of honey you steal from your bees, you will have still more friends and relatives who want one. We harvested 14.5 kilograms – it would have been more if the bees hadn’t been so swarmy earlier in the year. The Corollary to Mundy’s Law states that the number of stings received equals the number of jars obtained. The current score: Paul 26, Evelyn 17. They say that after 30 stings you don’t notice them as much. I’ll let you know next year if this is true.

September

BERGISCHE GLADBACH – A large advertisement on a street corner proclaimed the virtues of “Vi Spring” beds. Evelyn went into the shop below to ask whether they stocked wedge-shaped pillows to make it easier for her to sleep with her broken arm.

The shop assistant was confused. “Not the sort of thing we have”, she said, “this is an undertaker’s.” An establishment catering for a more permanent form of repose than the one Evelyn had in mind. That explained the subdued décor and lack of sleep-related furniture on display.

MÜLLENBERG – Ulli, our neighbour, hired a cherry-picker so he could fix his roof. He offered to do our roof too, and manoeuvred the basket over the fence. A sudden shout: he had extended the boom too far and the cherry picker had tipped over. Ulli was trapped in the basket, enmeshed in the frame of a roof we were installing on our porch. The situation was



Can I get a German passport now?

desperate: he even threw his beer bottle out in an attempt to lighten the basket and rebalance the equipment.

A half-empty beer bottle did not do the trick, so I fetched a ladder so he could climb out. As he did so, the cherry picker tipped back, the boom rose in the air, the ladder fell over, and Ulli landed on the ground. No damage done except to the beer – I did not discover it in the flower bed until the next day.

MÜLLENBERG – Glad that the people of Scotland decided to stay in the UK. I was bemused by the arguments used by both sides: primarily focusing on the economy, whereas nationality is surely mainly about emotion. What is clear is that the English will have to pay a little more attention to the feelings of their fellow-citizens if the UK is to survive.

October

RÖSRATH, GERMANY – My birthday present for Evelyn: dancing lessons. “The man leads”, said our instructor as I twirled Evelyn across the dancefloor. This is news to her: she is having to break the habits of the last 30 years. Our marriage would have looked very different if I had known this simple truth before.

“The man leads”, says Evelyn, “but he is supposed to stay in time to the music.” Now, there is an even bigger challenge than trying to get her to do what I want...

MÜLLENBERG – The insulation on the house is nearly finished. Ulli, the neighbour, has acted as foreman and shown me what to do. All this year we have been up and down ladders and scaffolding, sticking blocks of polystyrene on the walls and then gluing on tiles that look like bricks. Ulli even took it upon himself to do all the grouting. “I want it to look good”, he said. Do I understand he thinks little of my ability to wield a pointing trowel?

The insulation has worked. I would be lying if I said that Evelyn now flounces around in a bikini, but at least the house is now warmer inside, and we are burning less wood in our stove. We would even save money if it wasn't for the fact that we already get most of our wood for free: every month or so I go to Cologne to pick up used pallets from a friend's business.

MÜLLENBERG – I'm mystified by the following that right-wing outfits like the UK Independence Party attract. This bunch of xenophobes complain about the number of immigrants in the UK, but seem to forget about the millions of Brits (yes, like me) who live, and are warmly welcomed, elsewhere in the EU. Including 400,000 in France and 300,000 in Spain – many of them there to retire and take advantage of generous health services. Can you try to be a little less hypocritical, Mr Farage?

I ventured to my mother that if Britain were to leave the European Union, I might consider taking German citizenship. “Don't you dare! – you're English!” came the stern reply. It's nice to feel like a 10-year-old again.

November

FRASCATI, ITALY – Oliver has an internship with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in Rome, and Julia has a job with the European Space Agency in nearby Frascati. Good enough reason for us to plan a visit. Alas, by the time we had decided when to travel, they were booked solid: one set of friends after another had promised to visit them. Our stay has now been pushed back to February next year.

Meanwhile, I've started Italian lessons. I can now say “buon giorno” and “due cappuccini per favore”. I hope I haven't forgotten everything by the time we actually visit Frascati.

NAIROBI, KENYA – Bump! A car backed into our minibus, just yards from the hotel we were heading for. Not much damage, but enough to cause a big traffic jam in a crowded part of the city. Nairobi is finally improving its roads: it is building bypasses and flyovers, widening roads and putting up street lights. But there's still a long way to go before traffic flows as freely as in, er, London...

December

ARUSHA NATIONAL PARK, TANZANIA – Unlike dikdiks, baboons are not shy animals. A female advertises that she is in heat by displaying her bright-red, swollen rump to a male. We came across one happy couple mating in the middle of the road. Neither of them looked pleased to be interrupted. Perhaps baboons are only human after all.

MÜLLENBERG – “I wonder whose shawl that is?” said Evelyn as she and Regine drew close. The lost garment was hanging from a bush on Evelyn's regular walking route. Someone had hung it up off the ground. It was only when they got close that they realized that it was Evelyn's.

MÜLLENBERG – The ruling party in Bavaria says that immigrants to Germany should speak German at home. This idea has been greeted with bafflement by the vast majority of people here. And given rise to a welter of jokes: maybe Bavarians should also start speaking German at home too, instead of their own dialect?

Even though we don't live in Bavaria, we intend to take the recommendation seriously. No more English – or any other foreign language for that matter – in this house! And you will get next year's annual letter in German. It will be twice as long and contain substantially less irony and humour.

At least we have the guide we need: those books we bought each other last Christmas. Entitled *How to be German in 50 easy steps*, they tell you what to take to a party (potato salad), how to love your car, and what to do on Sundays (nothing, especially not mowing the lawn).

圣诞快乐 (*shèngdàn kuàilè*) in Chinese, ハッピークリスマス (*happikurisumasu*) in Japanese or, you've guessed it, “buon Natale” in Italian.

A very happy Diwali, Maulid, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Tsagaan sar, Têt and Norooz. Don't forget to speak German at home. And guys, remember that it's you who is supposed to lead. Just make sure you stay in time to the music, and you should have no problems for the next year.

Paul and Evelyn