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“Your Christmas letter sounds as though you don’t work”, said my friend Solomon. “My wife thought you were some rich Brit enjoying life in some laid-back village in Germany and also extensively travelling. Wonder if there is a need to mention in passing that a part of your travel is work related?”

Dear Solomon’s wife: alas, we are not rich, though we do enjoy life in our laid-back German village. My travel is almost all for work. I will be happy to send you details if you wish. It might help you fall asleep at night.

In this issue of our annual letter, you will learn why Gandalf and co. have long, white beards, why the Catholic Church appoints bishops to ruins, how to compete culinarily with foodies, why you must learn Italian to feed babies, and how to get rid of moths in your carpet. You can read on, safe in the knowledge that I have abjured from writing about either Trump or Brexit (though I could say plenty about both).

For those Germans who refer to a dictionary as they plough through this letter, I’ve added a handy glossary of unfamiliar words at the end. Who said I don’t think of my readers?

January

ROME, ITALY, 3 JANUARY – We were wrong. Evelyn and I had predicted a boy, but Emily Zoe is a girl. She chose to arrive almost immediately after we had left Rome for Germany. She was 2 days early: it’s not obvious that she gets her sense of timing from either her father or her father’s father. Her mother’s mother, perhaps? Ingrid likes to pack her suitcase a week before she departs on a trip.

Immediately after the birth, Julia looked as if she had just delivered not a baby but a rather undemanding lecture presentation. She makes everything seem so easy.

Formerly known as *Krümelchen* (Little Crumb), Emily has now garnered the nickname *Räupchen Nimmersatt*, the Very Hungry Caterpillar. Healthy appetite, and a healthy voice: she is practising sleeping during the day and keeping her parents up at night.

ROME (again) – The pram company could ship the chassis of its latest model to Italy, but the body only to Germany. I wonder about their business model. No matter: we are flexible customers. I checked the body (still in its cardboard box) as hold baggage and took the flight to Rome.



Oliver and Julia with Emily: welcome to the world!

A public transport strike when I arrived at the Termini station, so no buses or metro, and the queue for taxis snaked into the distance. No choice but to walk the 3 km to the office, scattering Chinese tourists off the pavement as I shifted the box from one hand to the other. I wonder if the pram company might consider solving this problem by delivering the chassis along with the body?

BASILICA OF SAN GIOVANNI IN LATERANO, ROME – Evelyn

and I had never seen so many old men dressed in white: dozens of bishops and cardinals celebrating the consecration of two bishops: of Buruni (a ruined city in Tunisia) and Gabi (a long-abandoned town in Italy).

Why, you ask, should the Church see fit to appoint bishops to ruins? Because clerics above a certain layer in the Catholic hierarchy need to have a bishop’s title even if they are not responsible for a flock. Solution: put them in charge of a defunct diocese. Ruins are ideal – especially those in areas that have been under Muslim control for centuries and that lack any pesky parishioners to shepherd. The church has thousands of such titles to bestow on deserving functionaries. Very similar to the British aristocracy: the Earl of Wessex’s fief has also been defunct for nearly 1000 years.

But Mother Church is not all stuck in the past. Massive columns block the view of the altar from the side-aisles in the basilica. Those sad souls who find themselves seated in the aisles must guess when to stand, sit or kneel, taking cues from glimpses of their more privileged brethren in the nave. The Church has installed video screens in the aisles – they even pan and zoom to show what is going on up front. Heavenly bliss: no longer do you have to turn up early to bag a prime seat. Now you can wander in late, plonk yourself on an aisle seat, and see all the action without craning your neck. You can even sneak out halfway through to grab a *gelato*. Beats me why anyone wants to sit in the nave. Maybe they should consider live-streaming services so you can avoid having to turn up altogether?

MÜLLENBERG, GERMANY – Being long-distance grandparents does have its privileges. We get treated to live video chats in which we can watch Emily’s nappy being changed. How could previous generations of grandparents possibly have managed without modern technology?

February

MÜLLENBERG – When Indonesians travel, they feel obliged to bring with them some *oleh-oleh*: gifts for their hosts. So when our friend Isye arrived, we were grateful recipients of a pile of batik tablecloths and nightdresses, spices and knickknacks.

Isye was here to help her son and his wife, who have been studying in Germany, move back home to Java. The idea was that they could fill her now-empty suitcases with their stuff,



Pram, constructed



Grandparenthood: All the pleasure, none of the responsibility

saving on excess baggage or shipping charges. Her sisters had come along too to provide additional luggage capacity.

But relatives and friends back in Indonesia naturally expect their own *oleh-oleh* from Germany – and Isye has a large family and many friends. And she is very good at shopping in her own right, snapping up bargain after bargain of items supposedly unobtainable back home. The empty cases quickly filled with new acquisitions. Her son and daughter-in-law had to buy new cases: I think I counted 14 luggage items in all.

LEVERKUSEN, GERMANY – “Bring a dish to share”, said Silvia, my Italian teacher. The participants in my weekly Italian course are all cooks and gourmets: we spend a significant amount of time each Thursday morning talking about how to prepare everything from *antipasti* to *dolce*. All except me, that is: as someone who eats to live rather than lives to eat, I am at a distinct disadvantage. When Silvia invited us to her house to celebrate the end of the course, what to cook? It was clearly useless trying to compete with the foodies, so I settled on the humble spud: *patate arrosto* (roast potatoes) from the garden. A perfect complement to my fellow students’ intricately constructed *aperitivi*, trays of aubergines and sundried



Like great-grandmother, like great-granddaughter

tomatoes, and exotically topped pizza. Just to make sure they appreciated the quality of my contribution, I took along a bottle of honey wine too. Alcohol makes even my cooking taste better.

March

LUDLOW, ENGLAND – One of the first duties of any baby is to go and meet the relatives. Emily brought her parents, and her grandparents, along to meet her great-grandmother and sundry great aunts and uncles and cousins of varying degrees.

Another duty of babies is to cause problems for

their parents. Emily needed changing, but this was not the first such event of the day, and Mum and Dad had run out of clean clothes. Fortunately, grandfathers know their duty too: Emily was quickly clad in a brand-new outfit from the clothes-shop next door.

April

KÜRTEEN, GERMANY – A local artist wanted to have teams of people roll a heavy stone all the way from Kürteen to Berlin. He had carved the word “peace” in various languages on the stone.

Alas, the Arabic was written backwards: it said “M.A.L.A.S.” (in Arabic script) rather than “Salam”. The Farsi and Urdu (which are also written in Arabic script) were backwards too.

I got in touch with the artist. Too late to change anything: the stone set off towards Berlin (it got there in October). I wonder if anyone else noticed?

May

BERGISCH GLADBACH, GERMANY – Evelyn called from Cologne station. She was on her way to Berlin but had lost her wallet. Was it at home? Yes – on her desk. She returned to Bergisch Gladbach, where I met her with the wallet. The ticket machine refused to accept our bank cards, so she took the train back to Cologne to get a ticket there. From where she phoned me:

“Look in your wallet!” Sure enough, her bank card was in there, and she had mine. We had somehow swapped cards trying to persuade the machine in Bergisch Gladbach to sell us a ticket.

Sometimes you just have to admit defeat. She cancelled the trip. We can’t even get a train in Germany; how can either of us travel the globe?

ROME, ITALY – There are few things where the interests of small children and their parents diverge more than in the realm of finger-paint. Two-year-olds regard disregard the “finger” part: they plunge a whole fist into the pot of paint (the smaller the child, the more fist can be inserted into the pot), then blotch bright, primary colours everywhere except on the paper proffered. At 4 months, Emily was still too young for finger-paint, but Oliver did daub a couple of devil’s horns on her forehead. Italians love small children; a small child with a painted face attracts even more attention than usual.

TAFARIA CASTLE, KENYA – Did mediaeval European castles have hot-water bottles? Tafaria Castle, a fantasyland hotel built to resemble a mediaeval fortress, does. It’s just 6° south of the Equator, but at 2320 metres above sea level, it gets chilly at night. The hot-water bottle – replete with a tartan cover – that the staff bring to your room in the evening is quite welcome. Evelyn, a lover of warm climes, would feel at home here.

I had assumed the castle was built by some crazy Brit, but no, it was erected in 2012 by Kenyan hoteliers. If Europe can do exotically themed resorts, then Africa can return the compliment.

MÜLLENBERG – The breakfast debate on the terrace: should we take Alicia, our young American friend, for a walk, or go to Cologne to see the cathedral? Then the Sieglindes made up their collective minds for us: they decided to swarm. (All our hives are named after Wagnerian heroines – except for Wotan, who slipped through because he’s Ruler of the Gods.) The Siggis settled in a tree across the fence. We got out the ladder, branch lopper and buckets and went to fetch them.

Catching a swarm is easy: knock hard on the branch where the bees have clustered, and they will fall into the bucket you have placed underneath them. Quickly put a wire grid over the bucket to stop the queen from escaping.

Reality will always deviate from this happy theory. The swarm settles too high in the tree; the branch is too sturdy for knocking to have any effect; the bees fall on the ground next to the bucket; the queen remains stubbornly in the tree along with thousands of acolytes and has to be brushed off into the bucket. Bees do not enjoy being brushed. And annoyed bees like to sting.

We now have a new policy: a swarm gets named after the person who helped capture it (or in Alicia's case, watched from a safe distance). The Alicias are now safely ensconced in a new hive, next to where they came from.

MÜLLENBERG – Moths have taken up residence in the carpets and sofa in our living room. A pity about the carpets, but I'm glad about the sofa, which we acquired third-hand from Evelyn's parents via her sister. It has long lost any firmness it might once have had; sitting on it is akin to sitting in a bucket.

Evelyn, who grew up with the sofa and likes sitting in buckets, put up strong resistance. She repeatedly vacuumed the sofa. She treated it with lavender. She hand-picked moth eggs from the deepest crevices. To no avail: moths still flutter around our living room; larvae still munch through upholstery and floor coverings alike.

Evelyn has finally given in: she has agreed to a new carpet and – wonders shall never cease – a new sofa. We are poring through the Ikea catalogue to find one sufficiently bucket-like. Moths are your friends.

June

MUNICH AIRPORT, GERMANY – Evelyn and I waited for Sheila (my mother) and Annabelle (my sister) in the arrivals hall. I had arranged with Annabelle that we would meet them at the airport then take them to join their cruise ship in Passau, on the Danube. A secret from Sheila, of course.

But Sheila picked up on a stray comment during a phone call with Evelyn, then asked Annabelle directly whether we would be there. Annabelle has prodigious talents, but lying convincingly is not one of them. So when she and Sheila emerged from the baggage area, I was the only one who thought it was a surprise.

Moral: mothers know everything. And what they don't know, they find out very quickly.

MELK ABBEY, AUSTRIA – The monks who built this baroque masterpiece certainly knew how to live. But I wonder if the peasants who toiled in the fields below the abbey, and whose tithes paid for it, appreciated the opulence that their drudgery was enabling? Maybe they would have preferred an extra crust of bread instead of being hoodwinked, or forced, into contributing to yet another golden ornament in the church on the hill? The glaring inequality of today's world is nothing new.

ZOGENWEILER, GERMANY – A visit to meet Vivienne, the family's latest addition. And to see Yumiko and Sven's most recent home improvement. Pop into the smallest room in their house, seat yourself on the throne and it plays "God save the Queen".

LUXEMBOURG – Oliver is trying to introduce Emily to as many countries as possible before her first birthday. Happy to help, we took her on a quick round trip, dipping briefly into both France and Belgium before meeting Julia back in Luxembourg.

My rule is that you have to (a) cross the border (airports don't count) and (b) have a pee. Only then can you say that you have been to a particular country. I can confirm that Emily has

fulfilled the first condition for both France and Belgium. I am unable to confirm the second: we did not think to inspect her diaper in either country.

July

MÜLLENBERG – Dumbledore, Gandalf, Saruman... all elderly men with long, white beards. I have discovered their secret: as my beard turns grey, the hairs get thinner and more flexible.

When I pass the shaver over my chin, the strong, still-brown hairs get trimmed while the grey ones bend away, evading the cutting head. Result: straggly, whiter facial hair. Give me a couple of years, and I'll qualify as a wizard.

I could try the trick suggested by a 64-year-old Dutchman who wanted to legally change his age to 44. Like him, I have a body like a Greek god, and I too would like to be regarded as attractive. Maybe I can find a shaver that trims the grey hairs but leaves the brown ones?

MÜLLENBERG – How do you feed a 6-month old? Easy: just say "A, piccolina, che bellissima!" to her, and Emily will beam with delight. Shove a spoonful in while her mouth is still open. When praised with the equivalent in English, she merely grins. In German, she grimaces and turns away. At least she doesn't burst into tears. Learn a couple of Italian phrases, and you too can feed a baby.

MÜLLENBERG – "Think of something to keep Rolf busy on Saturday", said our friend Christa. She wanted her husband out of the way so she could set up a surprise 60th birthday party. We asked him to help trim our cherry tree. All went well until the last branch: as I cut it, the ladder twisted away from under my feet. The chainsaw dropped to the ground; I cheated gravity by grabbing a branch. Lucky Rolf was not underneath: a party without the birthday boy would not have been quite as much fun.

COLOGNE-KALK, GERMANY – "I hope it won't be too cold", said Evelyn as we headed towards the wedding of a Yezidi refugee friend. "I have a jacket with me in case they have air-conditioning." Like much of Europe, Germany was enduring drought and Mediterranean temperatures: our garden was transformed into a Sahelian ochre scrub.

There was no aircon. Six hundred people were packed into the wedding venue. Those with foresight had brought their own fans. Those without foresight had torn pieces of cardboard into plate-sized chunks, which they were furiously flapping in front of their faces. Those, like us, with neither foresight nor a handy source of cardboard, tried to manoeuvre ourselves into the draught created by our neighbours without intruding too overtly into their personal space.

Evelyn reported that the women's toilet was full of young women fixing their makeup. Yezidi society does not give young people much chance to meet members of the opposite sex, so weddings are one of the few chances to attract a mate.

Outside was someone selling toys for children: dolls for the girls, and plastic Kalashnikovs for the boys. Something to practise with in case they ever have to go back to Iraq?



Getting to know grandma

August

MÜLLENBERG – Evelyn likes butterflies. And thistles. And the butterflies like thistles too – so it’s a three-way match made in heaven. She takes the fluffy thistle seeds – they look like dandelion seeds – to other parts of our garden to propagate them. Thistles are gradually replacing stinging nettles as our dominant weed. In our garden, this counts as progress.

I like butterflies, too – as long as they’re fluttering around the thistles. But when they are bored with slurping nectar, they flit over to my vegetable patch and lay neat arrays of yellow eggs on my cabbages. Every morning I scrape the previous day’s eggs off the underside of the leaves. This is a battle I am doomed to lose: a single caterpillar can turn a luxuriant cabbage plant into a bare skeleton overnight.

Maybe I’ll just give up on cabbages and grow thistles instead. How do you cook them?

AMPLEFORTH, YORKSHIRE, UK – A packed church for my aunt Yvonne’s funeral. A remarkable woman: she went on a sponsored glider flight to raise money for research on motor neurone disease, the ailment that would kill her. She raised over £18,000 even though she was already paralysed from the neck down. We could all learn from her optimism and generosity.

THIRSK, YORKSHIRE, UK – He was the world’s most famous vet, but my mother had never heard of James Herriot, never seen the TV series nor read the books. So she had little interest in the museum devoted to Alf Wight (Herriot’s real name), who lived and worked in Thirsk. She zipped through both floors of the museum and was soon chafing for a sit-down in a coffee-shop. Meanwhile, Evelyn was lingering over an extensive display of castration equipment. Should I be concerned?

September

MÜLLENBERG – I don’t understand why the whole world is not covered with tomatoes. They have taken over our garden: bushes bearing hundreds of tiny fruits overwhelm my leeks, strangle the maize, and even put up a fair fight against the stinging nettles and thistles. Yes, they are delicious; I just wish there weren’t so many of them. If you don’t hear from us next year, it will be because all the seeds that have fallen on the ground have germinated, and the bushes have smothered us too.

ROME, ITALY – Babysitting is hard work for both baby and sitter. Emily has quickly progressed from all-fives (using her nose as a temporary support), to a more conventional all-fours crawl. Evelyn has reverted from bipedalism to bottom scooting. Unless she learns to walk again when she comes home, we’re definitely going to have to buy a new carpet for the living room.

MÜLLENBERG – Several of my relatives have formed a virtual cycling league. A website allows you to select a team of nine riders from the 170 or so that take part in the Vuelta a España and follow them as they pedal across Spain’s corrugated landscape. You earn points depending on how your team has fared that day. My brother-in-law Russell (cycling pseudonym “Rusty”), a real cyclist rather than a mere voyeur, rashly promised to fly to Germany and buy me a beer if my team came first. He knows that I know nothing about cycling and came bottom of the league we had run for the Tour de France.

After leading for the whole Vuelta, my team (“Groupe Distancée”) was pipped at the post. Rusty’s outfit came second from last. My pride is restored, but I remain beerless.

LERWICK, SHETLAND, UK – “I like the cover”, said Sir John Scott at the launch of *Shetland’s sheep*, our book on, well, sheep in Shetland. “That’s Noss!” he said (Noss is an island he owns), “so those are my sheep!” Maybe we should have asked his

permission (and the permission of the sheep) to put them on the cover?

Sir John was one of the people we interviewed back in 2012. It had taken 6 years and a further visit to Shetland in 2016 for us to finish the book. It has sections on history, management, breeding, shearing and knitting. There’s a page on sheep psychology and even a knit-your-own sheep pattern by my mother, who acted as Senior Knitting Consultant.

You can get your copy in three ways: buy it on

Amazon (amazon.co.uk/dp/095637011X) and we’ll post it to you; pass by here in Müllenberg; or (best of all) drop into Anderson’s in Lerwick town centre to buy a copy. All proceeds go to charity, including to Glocal LifeLearn, the NGO that Oliver and Julia founded to support schoolchildren in Uganda.

UNST, SHETLAND – Top thing to visit in Unst? The Boat Museum in Haroldswick? Bobby’s Bus Shelter at Baltasound, which is furnished with a sofa, bookcase and an ever-changing décor? The replica Viking ship, reputedly abandoned on the beach when the crew that had sailed it from Norway mutinied? None of the above – though all these make the trip to Britain’s northernmost isle worthwhile. Unst’s top destination has to be the private museum opposite the airfield in Baltasound: a vast collection of vintage farm equipment, household items, models, tools and toys. Not signposted, not in any guidebook, and open only when the owner feels like it. Planning a trip to Unst? Let me know and I’ll put you in touch with him.

AYWICK, YELL, SHETLAND – There must be a substantial number of nonagenarians on Yell, Shetland’s second-most northerly island. Judging by the rack of birthday cards in Mary’s Shop, that is. If anyone ever does turn 100 in Aywick, their friends



Selling books at Shetland Wool Week



Want a book on sheep to go with your yoghurt?



and neighbours can pop into Mary's and choose from among 16 different "Happy 100th birthday" cards.

Mary's shop is housed in an unassuming metal shed. Inside is a warren of rooms, packed with everything you could possibly need on a remote island. Even branch loppers. Even though I don't think Yell has a single tree.

WHALSAY, SHETLAND – JWJ General Merchants announced that we would be signing copies of our "literary masterpiece" for eager customers. But JWJ's heating had failed, and the owner seated us at a table next to the dairy cooler. Cold air tumbling out of the cabinet quickly lowered our body temperatures to match that of the milk and yoghurt. We could scarcely hold a pen to sign copies of the book. Not that we needed to: Whalsay makes its money from fishing, not crofting, and we sold just a single copy.

October

NAIROBI – My late breakfast was interrupted by chanting and singing from the floor above. A bride, a Kenyan gorgeous in white, was accompanied down the hotel steps by her bridesmaids and a team of gyrating, ululating, fly-whisk-wielding women. Two motorbike outriders revved their engines to add to the noise. The outriders and the bride's Rolls-Royce made their way out of the hotel compound, followed by a group of bemused-looking Europeans in a bus.

Men played no role in this event, and I failed to spot the groom. I asked the waitress. "He's from London", she explained. "The wedding is for the bride. The honeymoon is for the groom."

TEMPELHOFER FELD, BERLIN, GERMANY – It takes just a few seconds to go from one end of a runway to the other if you are in a plane. A little longer if you are on foot, dragging a suitcase behind you. How much tarmac is needed to get a plane into the air? Answer: 2.13 kilometres.

The Tempelhofer Feld was the main airfield used by the Western Allies to supply the city during the Berlin Airlift in 1948–9. It's now a public park – the world's biggest. Mowing the grass was the job of sheep belonging to a member of the shepherds' association that Evelyn works for.

A flock of sheep is hardly a novelty in Müllenberg, but it's a big thing in the middle of Berlin. Good publicity for the shepherds, and Evelyn was there to hand out information and sell refreshments. Rather than head home to an empty house when I arrived at Frankfurt from Nairobi, I had decided to surprise her and took the train to Berlin instead.

I eventually found the sheep at the far end of the runway: a flock of 100 Schwarzkopfs, surrounded by double that number of gawping Berliners. But no sign of Evelyn, so I sent her a selfie with the sheep. It took her a couple of minutes for her to realize that I was in Berlin. She even sold me some refreshments after she had recovered from the shock.

November

MÜLLENBERG – "It is so nice to have input from a seasoned expert!", wrote Maria, a young vet who had come to visit us for some tips on working internationally.

"Seasoned expert"? Evelyn laughed. "With lots of spices", I said. "Old", she said.

KÜRTEEN – Evelyn and I were grateful recipients of no less than three cards on a single day. The first was an award from the Kürten district to recognize our work with refugees. This card entitles us to €20 worth of shopping from our local supermarket – but only on our birthdays. Reduced price hire of a meeting room in the town hall – but only on Sunday lunchtimes. And a free shampoo for our non-existent dog.

The second card was a piece of Bergisches slate, emblazoned with the coat of arms of Kürten. This was the third prize in the raffle draw at the awards ceremony. It doesn't fit into my wallet but will come in handy as a paperweight.

The third card: an Ikea Family Card – which arrived at the same time as our new Ikea sofa. This card gives me discounts on BLOMDUFT scented candles, HEMNES dressing tables, and SKUBB storage cases for wrapping paper. Best of all, it gives me a free coffee in the Ikea restaurant.

December

NOIDA, DELHI, INDIA – One of the ironies of development work is that I often find myself staying at posh hotels in capital cities, rather than more modest lodgings in the countryside. The Jaypee Greens Golf & Spa Resort is the poshest so far: the lobby is vast, the décor plush, the restaurants exclusive, my room (sorry, suite) spacious, the bath sunken. I've never understood why my clients have to book such luxurious places: after all they are development organizations. Shouldn't they be trying to spend their funds on fighting poverty?

NOIDA – Delhi chokes under a lethal smog, partly of its own making as traffic and industry churn out smoke and dust. The surrounding farmers make things much worse: the smoke from burning stubble hangs over the city. Delhi has the worst air pollution of any city in the world.

Godrej Properties has the solution. A full-page advertisement on the front page of *The Times of India* announces "oxy-rich homes" in a new development southwest of the city. It promises "10X enriched air quality" with centrally treated fresh air, air purification plants ("plants" as in vegetation, not equipment), "oxy-rich zones in lobbies and clubhouse", and "natural air cleaners" (i.e., beeswax candles). Homes start at 73 lakh rupees! Hurry now to avail the launch offer.

NOIDA – "You're coming home tomorrow? Scheisse! Scheisse! Scheisse!"

Evelyn usually looks forward to seeing me after a trip. But when she gets the dates wrong, it throws her planning out. Instead of finishing our tax returns, she has to pick me up. I offered to get the bus home. No, she insisted on fetching me from the airport. Good to know where her priorities lie.

A very happy Diwali, Maulid, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Chūnjié, Tsagaan sar, Têt and Norooz. May your house be oxy-rich, your diocese be free of irksome parishioners, your Arabic written the right way round, and your wallet remain in your pocket. And may your loved ones at least pretend to be pleased when you come home unexpectedly.

If you have any wrapping paper left over after the festive season, let me know and I'll see if Ikea still has any SKUBBs in stock. Hurry: this offer is available for a limited time only.

Paul and Evelyn

Glossary

Acolyte – *Diener*

Daub – *besmieren*

Fly whisk – *Wedel*

Gyrate – *sich drehen*

Mutiny – *meutern*

Nonagenarian – *90-Jährige*

Scheisse – I'll let you look that one up